No place like home: Exploring social belonging for older immigrant Muslim women

by

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Abstract

Older adults who lack a secure sense of social belonging may experience loneliness, isolation, and feelings of being ostracized in their communities. However, little attention has been paid to the experiences of immigrant Muslim older (IMO) women and their sense of belongingness in the literature. This qualitative descriptive photo-elicitation study aimed to address this gap by exploring how immigrant Muslim older women in Edmonton, Alberta cultivated social belonging. To guide the coding and conceptualization of belongingness, an integrative framework on belongingness was utilized. The research project, of which this thesis is a part of, focused on social connectedness of IMO women. For this thesis, 14 participants were selected and thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts and images captured during the study. The findings suggest that a sense of belonging is influenced by feelings of loneliness and loss, as well as opportunities for community engagement, and social competencies related to maintaining family relationships. Additionally, the findings indicate the importance of IMO women's perceptions and reflections on aging experiences in shaping a sense of belonging for IMO women. These findings not only provide insight into the intricate and ever-changing nature of belongingness but also emphasize the need for structural support to benefit both IMO women and the communities they reside in.

Keywords: older immigrant Muslim women, belongingness, social support, community engagement

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Alesia Au. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Muslim Women in Canada: Understanding and Mobilizing for Social Connectedness in Older Age”, No. Pr00100343, July 27th, 2020.

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Chapter I: Introduction and Purpose

For this research project, I explored the experiences of social belonging of immigrant Muslim older (IMO) women in Edmonton, Alberta. Immigrant Muslim older women experience discrimination due to their age, religion, race and gender (Salma & Salami, 2020). Understanding belonging in this population is critical as feelings of belonging mitigates feelings of loneliness, isolation, and lack of integration (Koehn et al., 2020). Feeling a sense of belonging is an essential part of healthy ageing in a post-migratory context (Nielsen et al., 2017). By looking at what has helped IMO women feel belongingness, and where they have lacked support to feel like they belong, we may better understand the complexities of how they've attended to their emotional and social needs in a post-migration context.

Background

A sense of belonging encompasses the subjective experience of strong attachment to social groups, physical spaces, and personal and shared encounters, and is an essential human requirement that serves as a predictor of physical, mental, social, economic, and behavioral wellbeing (Allen et al., 2021). For IMO women, creating a sense of belonging post-migration can be challenging. Being migrants who have lived years in other places, their identity is changeable, multiple, and fluid (Wood & Martin, 2019). The dynamic and individualized process of deciphering what "home" is creates complexity in identity formation and has an impact on general wellbeing. The difficulty in making a new home in a different country includes the process of being able to feel socially accepted and build community level attachments (McCoy et al., 2016). This group has historically been subjected to ageism, compounded by gender, race, and religious discrimination (Salma & Salami, 2020). This combination of discriminations has been referred to as the triple jeopardy framework, which states that simultaneously facing three

dimensions of risk factors (age, gender, race) places individuals at risk for poorer quality of life (Phillips et al., 2010). Limited social support due to this positionality can negatively impact women's sense of belonging in Canada (Salma et al., 2018). Inadequate support also negatively impacts productivity, strains social connections, and increases susceptibility to mental, physical, and social health problems (World Health Organization Office Europe, 2018).

Without a secure sense of belonging, individuals can experience loneliness, isolation, and feel ostracized in society (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2015). Lack of belonging amplifies other mental and physical health inequities experienced by older adults (Ajrouch & Abdulrahim, 2014, Fullen et al., 2021). The loss of social networks in their countries of origin leaves IMO women struggling to cultivate a sense of belonging in a foreign place. This situation creates concern on how IMO women may partake in healthy ageing in Canada. The World Health Organization (WHO) define healthy ageing as the process of developing and maintaining functional ability to enable wellbeing in older age (World Health Organization, 2020). Functional ability refers to one's intrinsic capacity within a given environment to do what one values. Such activities include being able to meet basic needs, learn, make their own decisions, maintain mobility, engage in relationships, and contribute to society.

When it comes to cultivating belongingness, the process represents more than an individual's ability to construct their own connections. Belongingness captures the individual's sense of attachment to where they are located, but also reflects the extent an individual feels accepted by other inhabitants of society (Banting & Soroka, 2012). This is referred to as the *two-way street* in which the Canadian public and government share responsibility with immigrants in a reciprocal way to ensure successful integration into society (Joppke & Seidle, 2012). It is inevitable that as immigrants 'fit in', the receiving society needs to change to incorporate

newcomers (Wilkinson, 2013). This requires the receiving society to provide resources that will allow immigrants and their families to integrate fully. Wilkinson (2013) asserted that it is also the responsibility of the receiving society to acknowledge that integration is non-linear and works in multiple dimensions. For example, while an individual can be economically integrated and receive income support, they may lack social belonging to the community they live in. In another example, an individual can have the language skills to participate in Canadian life but can now recognize negative remarks in politics and media, which heightens their sense of un-belonging (Ejberts & Ghorashi, 2017).

For those who migrate with family members, especially those originating from collectivistic countries, these relationships are invaluable as close family ties provide support and alleviate loneliness (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2015). However, competing priorities within family structures and intergenerational stressors may surmount conflict in families if there are no other supports outside the family context (Böcker & Hunter, 2022). The reality is that belongingness and integration in a post-migration society are not only the responsibility of immigrants, as the receiving society and its governments must provide instruments and resources that allow immigrants to feel that they can belong (Joppke & Seidle, 2012). With the growing population of refugees and migrants over the years, the pressure on settlement non-profit agencies, cultural groups, and community organizations to support integration and inclusion, despite limited resources, has led to gaps in service provision (Ashcroft et al., 2021). Understanding the ways in which a sense of belonging is fostered and supported is critical to adapting existing services to suit IMO women. This includes exploring the means in which sense of attachment, life satisfaction, social support, and self-esteem can be sustained (Abdullah, 2015; Al-Khandari, 2011; Joshanloo & Daemi, 2015; Reitza et al., 2017). This project will contribute to research,

practice, and advocacy work by exploring what belonging means and how to foster belonging for IMO women.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this thesis project was to understand IMO women's experiences of belonging in Edmonton, Alberta. The thesis project was part of a larger SSHRC-funded (Study ID: Pr00100343) project that aims to comprehensively map Muslim women's social connectedness in older age.

Research Questions

1) How do IMO women cultivate a sense of social belonging in relation to their family, friends, and communities?
2) What factors in their lives enhances or diminishes dimensions of belonging?

Chapter II: Literature Review

An initial search of the literature about IMO women shows little to no evidence available on their experiences of social belonging in older age post-migration. This gap in evidence highlights the underrepresented nature and invisibility of this population in gerontological knowledge. I present below the available evidence on this population and identify knowledge gaps specific to our understanding of belongingness.

Immigrant Muslim Older Women

According to the census in 2017, 3.2% of the Canadian population identified as Muslim (Statistics Canada, 2017). This percentage is projected to increase significantly with the next census. Muslims have been identified as an ethnic group with specific cultural attributes (Ajrouch, 2017; Salma et al., 2017). In some cases, religious affiliation has been identified as synonymous with ethnicity. Muslim women, however, are a highly varied and diverse population and thus, they can not be homogenized (Khan, 2022). Muslim women, despite following the same religion (Islam), practice different schools of thought and belong to diverse ethno-cultural societies which greatly influences their way of living and their construction of identity. Some cultural attributes of the Muslim faith depicted in the literature include the importance of family, nutritional or dietary restrictions, and how women practice modesty (Ajrouch, 2017; Al-Heeti, 2007; Hasnain & Rana, 2010). What remains neglected is that despite shared experiences, there are differences in attitudes and behaviors among Muslim women due to their historical and social contexts, economic status, and ancestry (Ajrouch, 2017). Beyond religious affiliation, Ozyurt (2013) insisted that no two members of the same social or ethnic group will bring forth the same cultural attributes in each situation, which further points to the unjust notions of homogenizing minority experiences in research. Furthermore, Muslim women remain invisible in ageing

research, and currently, their ageing experiences have been depicted as blended with that of older adults born in the host society (Ajrouch, 2017).

Women in Muslim communities are defined through traditional gender roles, modest clothing, and conformity to cultural expectations (Fijac & Sonn, 2004). Also, their socially constructed identities are contextualized by where they have migrated from and where they have migrated to (Predelli, 2004). Western Muslim women experience hypocrisy from the larger society in the form of racism for being too traditional, as well as from their own communities for being too Western (Fijac & Sonn, 2004). Specific to the visual representation of Muslim women in the Western context, the hijab is a symbol of identity that has been linked to protectiveness and life satisfaction but also has enabled discriminatory treatment (Droogsma, 2007; Jasperse et al., 2012). Past terrorist incidents have entrenched a negative image and fear of Muslims in the Western world that all Muslims are a threat (Iqbal, 2010). This is often referred to as Islamophobia, which is the religious discrimination directed towards Muslims by non-Muslim societies. Islamophobia promotes discrimination against religion and race, hate crimes, microaggressions, community profiling, ongoing security practices implemented by the government, and a lack of respect for the civil rights of Muslim Canadians (McCoy et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2007). Belongingness is problematized when acts of religious discrimination generate a less hospitable environment for newcomers, especially those who practice or have cultural roots in the Muslim faith (McCoy et al., 2016). Perceived discrimination is linked to lower life satisfaction, psychological distress and negative mental health outcomes in ethnic minorities, immigrants, and Muslim populations (Jasperse et al., 2012). IMO women also face discrimination based on their older age. Ageism is defined as a complex and often negative perception of old age that exists culturally, in social networks, and individually (Iversen et al.,

2009). Specific to older immigrants, ageism results in their exclusion from society, which is reflected in immigration policies, economic difficulties, limited access to services, and how they are portrayed as a social problem or burden to society (Dolberg et al., 2018).

Beyond religion, gender and age, discrimination based on factors such as race, and migration also shape IMO women's lives. Experiences of racism and xenophobia are the heart of anti-immigrant sentiments (Suleman et al., 2018). The authors define xenophobia as hostile attitudes and behaviour that reject and exclude persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners. Racism assigns one ethnic group over the other in a position of power and privilege on the premise that phenotypic differences in appearance and skin colour enables them (Suleman et al., 2018). Acts of xenophobia and racism have direct implications on an individual's mental health outcomes and perpetuates barriers in accessing basic health services. As well, experiences of xenophobia can exacerbate the trauma and hardships that migrants have experienced in their home country such as persecution, violence, war, and isolation (Williams et al., 2003; Suleman et al., 2018).

As these discriminatory implications of gender, religion, migration history, ethnicity, and age all collide, as does for IMO women, it requires increased sensitivity and awareness of the unique challenges they experience. Unfortunately, there is tension in integration processes in Canada, particularly between migrants and the receiving Canadian society. Haque (2014) claimed that the growing presence of non-official languages in Canada and the concentration of ethnic communities in suburban areas have created anxieties of the host society towards immigrants. The author argues that although these anxieties are not often overtly discussed in public as it would appear offensive, they showcase the discomfort of the host society towards migrants and perpetuate xenophobia. Another consideration in the Canadian context relates to the

inconsistencies across provincial governments with attending to immigration, settlement, and integration (Joppke & Seidle, 2012). Some provinces are more engaged than others with longer-term integration process for immigrants, specifically regarding support for income, education, and social services. The inconsistencies may leave immigrants feel disadvantaged if they feel they are not getting the support they had been expecting.

However, despite the challenging experiences of discrimination and exclusion, resilience amongst immigrant women has been identified as an important part of the ability to overcome the cultural shock often experienced upon migrating to a new environment (Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2020; Bansel et al., 2016; Woldeyes, 2018). Their resilience is dynamic as it involves the interactions between an individual and their social and physical environment, and thus is fundamental for cultivating social cohesion and inclusion post-migration (Jain et al., 2014; Lenette et al., 2012). In a study about African migrant women, it was identified that resiliency was cultivated through their resourcefulness, entrepreneurship, social networking, religiosity, determination, and optimism (Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2020). The literature reflects the complexity of how these protective factors are crucial to the existence, survival, and belongingness of younger migrant women in a new context. However, there remains a need to explore what protective factors exist for older migrant women who may not have the same means of connectivity, economic opportunity, or mobility.

Belongingness in the Literature

In Western migration studies, the concept of belonging generally refers to nationhood and locality, more specifically to how an individual experiences integration into the post-migratory context (Painter, 2013). However, the ways in which an individual cultivates a sense of belonging is multifaceted and complex (Halse, 2018; Painter, 2013). This is a result of how

belongingness has been referenced in the literature as a self-identified relationship or affiliation. An individual can belong to a country, a community, an ethno-cultural heritage, an organization, a location, their family, or their social groups (Albert, 2021; Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018; Painter, 2013). Because of the range of relationships, there is a lack of consistency in investigating and reporting about belongingness (Painter, 2013). To further complicate the representation of belongingness in the literature, there are other terms that have been used synonymously. Some examples include *social integration, sense of connection, sense of community, sense of place, sense of home, and sense of attachment.*

Furthermore, belongingness is problematized when acts of discrimination generate a less hospitable environment for newcomers, especially those who practice or have cultural roots in the Muslim faith (McCoy et al., 2016). Perceived discrimination is linked to lower life satisfaction, psychological distress and negative mental health outcomes in ethnic minorities, immigrants, and Muslim populations (Jasperse et al., 2012). Unfortunately, there is tension in integration processes in Canada, particularly between migrants and the receiving Canadian society. Haque (2014) claimed that the growing presence of non-official languages in Canada and the concentration of ethnic communities in suburban areas have created anxieties of the host society towards immigrants. The author argues that although these anxieties are not often overtly discussed in public as it would appear offensive, they showcase the discomfort of the host society towards migrants and perpetuate xenophobia. Another consideration in the Canadian context relates to the inconsistencies across provincial governments with attending to immigration, settlement, and integration (Joppke & Seidle, 2012). Some provinces are more engaged than others with longer-term integration process for immigrants, specifically regarding

support for income, education, and social services. The inconsistencies may leave immigrants feel disadvantaged if they feel they are not getting the support they had been expecting.

The affective experience of any sense of belonging includes identification, connectedness, attachment, feeling at home, and the feeling of fitting in (Halse 2018; Wahl & Lang, 2003). Bennett (2014) found that a sense of belonging is built in the multiplicity of social relationships spanning from an individual's past, present, future with the places in which they have been. The author specifically argued that the interplay between mind, place, and people are the cornerstones of belongingness. This is how belongingness extends beyond social connection, as it is influenced by an individual's own attitudes, values, and cognitive interpretations (Mellor et al., 2008; Sigmon et al., 2002). In short, to belong is to feel accepted and included in socially constructed relationships embedded in place and time, with the goal to connect to something beyond themselves.

The Importance of Belonging in Older Immigrants

Belongingness is important in enabling connections within and beyond the immediate family and to allow for a sense of inclusion in society (Ajrouch, 2017; de Jong Gierveld et al., 2015; Koehn et al., 2020). When older adults experience social exclusion or feel they do not belong, their access to the institutions, systems, and communities to receive resources becomes limited and inequitable (Walsh et al., 2017; Koehn et al., 2020). These resources include income, health management, and social support. This predicament places immigrant older adults at risk for negative health outcomes as they experience social isolation and loneliness (Koehn et al., 2020). Thus, a strong sense of belonging combats loneliness and the negative health outcomes brought up by social exclusion, language problems, small social networks, and cultural differences (Momeni et al., 2011). In a study assessing mental health predictors amongst refugees

in Canada, the authors found that a sense of belonging in Canada was a significant predictor of mental health, and feelings of belonging to an ethnic enclave was important for migrants during the first few years of resettlement (Beiser & Hou, 2017). The authors also found that social networks were fundamental for women to cope with language challenges, attend to familial and educational needs, and participate in society.

As belongingness is embedded in social relations, how it is experienced from one person to another is complex and diverse. For example, there is debate about whether belonging to an ethnocultural group can serve as a protective function or a disadvantage (Beiser & Hou, 2017). Although belongingness may reduce the impact of perceived discrimination with the provision of social and psychological resources, it may also increase vulnerability to discrimination (Beiser & Hou, 2017). Wessendorf (2019) spoke to how migrants may feel the need to live in areas characterized by visible diversity to avoid racism. The author found that belongingness added to self-esteem, as migrants gathered with groups of the same faith and the same language. It is unclear how belongingness has and will continue to affect their livelihood, as the literature lacks a cohesive understanding of the multiplicity of belongingness specific to IMO women.

Cultivating Belongingness amongst Older Muslim Immigrants

Belongingness is formed by connecting the subjective self, collective agency, and structural positioning (Vasta, 2013). This means that it is possible to exhibit a larger scale sense of belonging that span transnationally or in multiple locations at once; this allows immigrant identities to be uniquely multi-layered, fluid, and dynamic (McCoy et al., 2016; Dobrowolsky & Tatsoglou, 2013; Kristiansen et al., 2015). For older immigrants, being able to build a sense of belonging in a foreign land goes beyond developing attachment to a physical location (Liu & Gallois, 2021). Older migrants are challenged with needing to continually reintegrate with their

conceptions of people and place over time because of major changes in their personal, social, cultural, transnational, and physical environments. Time is a factor towards belongingness experiences that is underrepresented in the narratives of older migrants; specifically, considerations of the duration of time since migration, and the age of the individual during the migration (Kristiansen et al., 2015; Torres, 2012). Salma & Salami (2020) identified that long-term immigrants who had been in Canada for most of their lives were more able to develop strategies to increase their social participation by volunteering and participating in local and transnational communities.

Alongside their ageing experiences, older Muslim migrants can feel loneliness in different ways in attribution to their migration histories, countries of origin, varied education, and socioeconomic status (Ahmad & Khan, 2016; Ajrouch & Fakhoury, 2013; Salma & Salami, 2020). The layering of these factors points to how the structural positioning of older migrants plays into belongingness. Structural factors refer to the social, economic, and institutional conditions that influence the experiences and outcomes of individuals who have migrated (Castañeda et al., 2015). These factors can significantly shape the opportunities and challenges faced by IMO women and impact their overall well-being. The gradual loss of independence in managing daily tasks due to their functional decline forces older immigrants to depend on their families or social services (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2002; Kristiansen et al., 2015; Roberto & Blieszner, 2015). As families have competing priorities such as young children, elderly migrants considered themselves as burdens, and are afraid that they will be neglected (Hachem et al., 2022). What becomes apparent is the gap in service provision that adequately supports older migrants in aging well in a manner that is sensitive to their cultural and religious needs. Finally, the spatial aspects of belonging is especially important for older adults because they spend more

time at home compared to younger generations who have more mobility (Wahl & Oswald, 2010). The influence of different forms of integration (e.g., economic, social, cultural, linguistic) in tandem with transnational connectivity remains unexplored in older migrant research (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017).

Summary of Literature Review

The experiences of IMO women cannot be homogenized, and similarly, services and support cannot be a one size fits all model. There is work to be done on community and societal levels to co-create belongingness, especially when exclusionary treatment creates a norm in which IMO women feel they cannot belong despite their desire to. What the literature is missing is rich research that can contextualize the intersections of aging, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and ethnocultural heritage of IMO women in Canada. Furthermore, the literature has yet to explore the diversity in IMO women's experiences of social belongingness. If their invisibility in the literature is maintained, the policies and services that impact their livelihoods will continue to exclude their unique needs and fail to support them appropriately.

Chapter III: Methods

Design

To address the research questions, a qualitative descriptive deisgn was used. Data was drawn from a primary study on social connectedness amongst IMO women, which used photo-elicitation and interviews. The primary study is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research (SSHRC) federally funded project led by my thesis supervisor Dr. Salma. The primary research study is titled *Muslim Women in Canada: Understanding and Mobilizing for Social Connectedness in Older Age* (Study ID Pr00100343). The aim of this thesis was to investigate participants' experiences of various aspects of belonging, including their social and cultural competencies for forming connections, the available opportunities for experiencing a sense of belonging, the motivations behind seeking belonging, and their perceptions of belongingness since their settlement in Canada.

Theoretical Framework

Integrative Framework for Belonging

An integrative framework was used to guide my conceptualization of what comprises belonging. This framework depicts the dimensions that enforce or diminish an individual's sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; see Figure 1). Belongingness can be observed by these four dimensions: the social and cultural skills and abilities for connecting, the opportunities available for belongingness to occur, the motivations to belong, and the perceptions of belongingness. The ways in which I assessed the dataset for belongingness aligns with Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework of belongingness. Belongingness is observable in how individuals talk about their experiences of "home" and living between cultures, namely their experience in

belonging to where they were before and where they have migrated to currently (Tatsoglou, 2013).

As the core of this framework, belonging is defined as the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical spaces, and individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021). In alignment with social belonging, social connectedness is the core tenet that captures the relationship to people and groups and expands to include individual experiences of connecting to life events and to places (Allen et al., 2021). As well, there are spatial and temporal elements to the social and physical environments in which attachments are made (Allen et al., 2021; Charton-Vachet & Lombart, 2015). It is important to note that there are two ways in which belongingness can be measured, as a *trait* and as a *state* (Allen et al., 2021). While the *trait* of belongingness refers to belongingness as a core psychological need, the *state* of belongingness focuses on the situation-specific circumstances that allow the feeling of belongingness (Schall et al., 2016; Trampe et al., 2015). It is important to capture both mechanisms of belongingness to better understand how belongingness changes over time and what enables someone to be aware of and embody their ability to belong (Allen et al., 2021)..

Qualitative Description Methodology

Qualitative description methodology seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Caeli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Merriam, 1998). The end-result is a comprehensive summary of the events in the context and language of how these events were described in the data (Sandelowski, 2000). The words, events and participant-derived meanings are what researchers focus on to present findings that reflect the research question. Sandelowski (2000) emphasized that rather than adhering to the paradigms of qualitative methodology such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography,

qualitative description is a separate method of inquiry which carries its own attributes of how sampling occurs and how inferences from the data are drawn.

A fundamental principle of the research design are that researchers do not construct a highly abstract rendering of the data (Sandelowski, 2000). This allows for the presentation of the facts of the data in everyday language instead of re-presenting the events for the purpose of reading into, between, and over the data as in other methodologies (i.e., hermeneutic phenomenology, grounded theory). This is not to say that this methodology avoids interpretation. It is important to acknowledge that interpretation is inevitable as descriptions created by the researcher are dependent on their own perceptions, inclinations, sensitivities, and sensibilities (Sandelowski, 2000). The interpretation in qualitative description methodology is considered *low inference* as the researcher is not required to describe the data in terms of a conceptual, philosophical, or other highly abstract framework or system (Sandelowski, 2000). Maxwell (1992) suggested that low inference descriptions must accurately convey events in their proper sequence (descriptive validity), and the meanings participants have attached to the events (interpretive validity). Specific to this study, interpretive validity would relate to correlating that descriptions reflect the manner in which participant's attached explanations to their images and clear links can be made from the data to the analysis. Thus, it is more likely to result in easier consensus among researchers of the 'facts' of the case.

Sandelowski's approach towards qualitative description methodology suited the aims of this research study as its naturalistic orientation focuses the inquiry on something in its natural state, or as it is, to the extent that is possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This methodology invites researchers to prioritize an inductive analysis to establish meaning and solid findings that will answer the research question within the dataset. It is not a requirement to have an a priori

commitment to a theoretical view, nor a selection of specific variables to study. However, in accordance with this methodology, when approaching the data set, I may begin with a theory about the target phenomenon or a framework to collect and analyze my data, but I am not required to commit towards staying within the theory of framework (Sandelowski, 2010). As I have outlined the framework that helped me conceptualize belongingness, these became important tools to consider during my analysis to ensure that I captured findings related to my research question. Moreover, the absence of strict adherence to the framework provides the opportunity to investigate codes that may not be completely encompassed by the predefined framework, as long as they are supported by the available dataset. Finally, the philosophical orientation of Qualitative Description methodology best aligns with my own assumptions in relation to my research question and my understandings of my roles as a researcher.

Ontological Assumptions

Ontology refers to the beliefs an individual has about the nature of reality and what can be known about it (Creswell, 2013). As qualitative description methodology follows naturalistic perspectives, relativist ontological assumptions are apparent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The ontological position of relativism is best reflected as the view in which reality is entirely dependent on human interpretation and knowledge. In Qualitative Description research, the researcher embraces that there are multiple realities embedded in how different individuals present their perspectives in their own words. Thus, language and literal description is integral to this approach. What is considered ‘real’ or ‘true’ is shaped by time, context, and how our knowledge is generated and communicated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). There is no way to prioritize the meanings and ‘how real’ one narrative is compared to another, as reality is subjective and will vary from one person to the next. This ontological assumption validates all experiences,

which may serve well for the population of this study whose perspectives remain unheard in the literature.

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology refers to an individual's assumptions about what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified (Creswell, 2013). Epistemological assumptions relate to what it means to know and involves asking what the nature of the relationship between the would-be knower is (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The epistemological position of qualitative research is subjectivism, which assumes that the world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it (Grix, 2018). Subjectivism accepts that an individual's understanding of reality relies entirely on and their awareness of it (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Knowledge of reality from a naturalistic perspective is socially constructed. This construction is not only held by the participants but also by the researchers, and it is therefore recognized that an objective reality that cannot be discovered or replicated by others (Bradshaw et al., 2017). It is in this approach that *knowledge* becomes *knowledges* that encompass social, cultural, moral, ideological, and political domains (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Our knowledges are a product of how we come to understand it, and there is no foundation providing a singular underlying reality that will produce such knowledges.

Axiological Assumptions

Axiology refers to how the researcher's own values and position play a role in the research study itself. Creswell (2013) pointed to how researchers attend to their assumptions by admitting the value-laden nature of the information gathered in qualitative research and actively reporting about their values and biases. Although the literature does not speak about the axiological assumptions of Qualitative Description research, the reality of myself as a qualitative

researcher and as an individual who does not identify as an IMO woman places me as an outsider in relation to the participants whose voices are captured in the dataset.

According to Dwyer & Buckle (2009), understanding the positionality of the researcher necessitates considering how research is conducted with participants who identify with a group based on their shared experience, gender, ethnicity, race, amongst other factors. The authors argue that researchers are in fact not true outsiders nor are they true insiders, but rather they fill a third space – a space in between that defies this dichotomy. There is complexity behind how a researcher's positionality changes over time as they deepen their understanding about a research topic by reading literature, gain from the interactions and shared stories from participants, and immerse themselves in the communities from which they are studying (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Personal Reflexivity

Essentialist assumptions may lead to stereotypic labels if I categorized individuals based on their culture, race, gender, or religion and assume that those with the same attributes will have the same tendencies (Bastian & Haslam, 2008; Zagefka et al., 2013). By doing so, I would have committed injustice to the participants of the dataset by homogenizing their experiences. I am a second-generation immigrant woman who is working as a registered nurse in Canada. My parents emigrated from Hong Kong prior to my birth as family-sponsored migrants. I was raised under the Catholic faith but now identify as an atheist. In reflection of my own positionality, I came across narratives in the dataset that have similar sentiments as the stories shared by my own parents who are aging immigrants and maneuvering their own post-migratory sense of belonging. What remained important was that I recognized that despite my research in the literature and the similarities I may come across, I may never come to a complete understanding of the experiences of the IMO women in this dataset. These transcripts and data share only a

glimpse into their lives and how they viewed their livelihood in that point in time. Despite this, my positionality allows me to have deeper knowledge of the experiences that are shared in the transcripts (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). By maintaining a personal research journal to record my thoughts, feelings, and reflections throughout my process of engaging with the data, I sought to be mindful of my own influence of the production of knowledges within the research and attempted to maintain the low inference attribute of Qualitative Design methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Methodological Assumptions

Methodological assumptions refer to how researchers approach their investigation about what can be known and ensuring it fits the purposes of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Within qualitative description methodology, the phenomenon of interest is explored with a purposive sample with the research question focusing on the meaning of the experience (Parse, 2001; Bradshaw et al., 2017). The descriptions are then analyzed and synthesized from the perspective of a chosen theoretical framework without straying too far from the literal description. Finally, with regards to the belongingness framework that serves as the guide for this study, Warner (2008) suggests that researchers should initially take into account the constructs within the chosen framework that are relevant to the phenomenon being assessed. They should then continuously examine whether the research methods and constructs of the framework effectively capture the real-life experiences of individuals.

Primary Study Setting

The setting of the study is located during the COVID-19 pandemic in Edmonton, Alberta. Data collection commenced in early 2020 and was collected until the end of 2022 during the sixth wave of the pandemic. Three separate mosques were chosen as participant recruitment sites

because of: a) their long-standing community connections with Muslim congregations in South, North, and West Edmonton, b) the mix of ethnocultural communities amongst these congregations, and c) the availability of community collaborators involved in the research.

Primary Study Population and Identification of Cohort

The study participants that were interviewed were community-dwelling women: (a) who were 55 years of age or older, and (b) who self-identified as Muslim. The justification for this age limit was attributed to how non-Western cultures perceive older age to occur around this age in comparison to the retirement age of 65 years of age in Canada. The self-identification of Muslim faith was decided on to capture differences across and within ethnocultural groups (Arab, African, and South Asian), Muslim sects, and migration categories.

Primary Study Sampling and Recruitment

The study participants were recruited with convenience and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is defined as the selection of data cases on the basis that they will be able to provide rich information about the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). One recruitment strategy was to hire community liaisons to identify, recruit, and retain potential participants from the same community. The liaison connected with participants by speaking in their own languages and selected who to invite to participate in the study if they met the inclusion criteria. Patton (2002) described convenience sampling as the recruitment of a sample because it is accessible to the researcher. Another recruitment strategy that was more passive involved participants who were self-selected as they responded to a recruitment poster that invited women that fit the study criteria to contact the research team to participate.

Primary Study Data Collection

Data collection occurred via photo elicitation and narrative interviews. Photo elicitation interviewing uses photographs within the context of an interview to foster conversation around a certain area of interest (Harper, 2002). It has been used in qualitative research as a way in which researchers can expand on their questions and participants may contextualize parts of their lives (Pink, 2013). Photo elicitation also has been helpful to facilitate a richer understanding by creating room for different layers of meaning to surface, which may evoke deep emotions, memories, and ideas from participants (Glaw et al., 2017). As per the aims of the primary study on social connectedness, participants were asked to select 10 to 20 photographs that spoke to their social connections and shared these photographs during the interview as prompts about their experiences.

With the ongoing pandemic, all participant interviews were completed virtually to accommodate public health safety measures. With the assistance of interpreters, interviews were conducted in English, Arabic and Urdu. All Arabic and Urdu interviews were translated and transcribed into English. All interviews were conducted by Dr. Salma who is an experienced qualitative interviewer and identifies as a bicultural Arabic-speaking Muslim woman. Interviews lasted from 2 to 3 hours on average. Participants were asked to share their experiences of social connectedness, the types of social connections they valued and maintained, and their perceived barriers and facilitators to social connectedness. Interviews were initiated in an open-ended way to encourage narrative explorations about their social connectedness.

Secondary Data Selection

Qualitative description often uses purposive sampling with maximum variation sampling. Thus, I sought to explore the common and unique manifestations of the phenomenon of interest

(belongingness) across a broad range of phenomenally and/or demographically varied cases (Sandelowski, 1995). By doing so, I can enable a rich description that captures the uniqueness of all participants. I read all transcripts that have been collected for the primary study to gain an impression of the overall dataset. Upon this review, I observed how participants noted the meaningfulness of familial arrangements within their narratives of social connections, which created unique manifestations of social belonging. I then grouped all participants based on their living arrangements in terms of who participants lived with and noted details of their family context and closest social connections. Then, I selected a total of 14 specific cases, with 3 to 4 participants under each living arrangement category to best depict variations across multiple contexts (Table 1). Especially with the heterogeneity of IMO women, this data selection was an appropriate way to understand the differences in their post-migratory journeys in Canada. The focus of the analysis was iteratively discussed with my supervisor to ensure that the cases chosen for my study were relevant and appropriate for my research question.

Data Management

All data accessed for the purposes of this thesis project will have been obtained from participants under the authorization for research-related purposes only, which has been reflected in the informed consent of the original study. The pre-existing dataset of interview recordings, transcripts, and digital photos have been stored in a secure local server solely for access by authorized members of the research team led by Dr. Salma. The server can only be accessed directly through the Citrix interface and University of Alberta credential log in with access granted by Dr. Salma.

To enforce anonymity at the data analysis stage, all data in the original study were de-identified and have attached unique identifiers for the research team to use. In alignment with

existing ethical considerations in the original project, I only provide de-identified versions of the data for any dissemination efforts. Any coding logs and analysis notes were completed with accurate documentation and stored within the secure local server to ensure data is not misplaced or accessed inappropriately.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of my analysis, I worked from the operational definition of belongingness as an individual's network of strong, self-identified attachments grounded in the people closest to them, such as who they define to be "family". The rationale behind this decision was based on the initial overview of all the transcripts. It was observed that a crucial structural factor influencing the participants was their social environment, particularly their social support systems and intergenerational relationships. It was also found that the social environment of belonging encompassed all the constructs of the framework, and these constructs aligned well with the dataset. I analyzed the verbatim transcribed data and the photo content that speak to any four of the dimensions of belongingness in the context of their physical space (past or current), their links to the community, and their affiliation to their culture.

Thematic analysis was used to highlight factors and influences as they shape belonging and how participants have constructed their experiences of belongingness. Codes emerged inductively from the data and themes were matched to the different dimensions of the framework. Thematic analysis is defined as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis method allows for a relatively low level of interpretation of the dataset which is congruent with Qualitative Design methodology in which the goal is to stay at the surface level of the meanings that participants self-produce in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As well, thematic

analysis of the photos that participants have taken assisted with understanding how they make meaning of their experiences of belonging and the ways that broader social factors have shaped their experiences (Langmann & Pick, 2018). The photos that participants have taken were analyzed concurrently with the transcripts within the dataset. This is important as in photo-elicitation interviews, the interview and subsequent interaction is an initial co-produced analytic version of the meanings of the photograph and is essential to creating a complete understanding of the motives and perceptions of participants (Jenkings et al., 2008). With the use of codes and themes, the final report from thematic analysis serves as the re-presentation of data that contains a straight descriptive summary of the information elicited from the study participants.

My analysis was guided by Braunn and Clarke (2006)'s procedure for thematic analysis. The first step was to familiarize myself with the data set by reading it and rereading it while jotting down my initial ideas. I also reviewed all photos in the dataset in accordance with the participants they belong to. Next, I generated initial codes that point to interesting features across the data set and develop a coding framework to apply to the data set (Table 2). Codes are the most basic element or segment of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon of interest and will appear interesting to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the development of the coding framework, I selected the 14 participants that would be focused on for the purposes of this thesis, then applied the coding framework to the data set. Slight modifications were made to the codes over time with reading the transcripts multiple times. I also categorized the photos taken based on participant descriptors in a table to highlight what appears to be important to participants. To code the photo's content, I recorded the participant's meaning of the photo and the reason that the participant took the photo. Following the initial codes, I searched for themes by collating the codes and gathering all

data relevant to each identified theme. Themes are defined as a coherent integration of pieces of data that captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents meaning or patterns within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). Once themes were established, they were reviewed by checking if they work in relation to the coded extracts and the entirety of the data set. This was done by generating a thematic map that visually displayed themes, codes, their relationships and descriptions of each theme, their criteria, exemplars and counter examples, and other details that will be helpful in addressing the entire data set. With each review of the data, the ongoing analysis proceeded non-linearly with tracing back and forth between transcripts and photos to the specifics of each theme to eventually generate clearer definitions and names. Finally, I selected vivid examples in the data and developed a final analysis of the selected extracts.

Rigor

Rigor in research involves ensuring the quality of the data and the research process itself so that the research can be considered useful and accurate. Lincoln & Guba (1985) refer to rigor as trustworthiness, which includes the criterion of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Morse et al. (2002) move beyond these criteria and speak to verification strategies that ensure reliability and validity is embedded while the research is conducted rather than a post-hoc evaluation after the research has been completed. I incorporated the following strategies presented by Morse et al. (2002) into my data analysis to ensure that the research will be relevant and useful: investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, sampling adequacy, and theoretical thinking. These strategies also resonate with the orientation of qualitative description methodology as I describe below.

Investigator responsiveness refers to the ability that the researcher remains open, uses sensitivity and insight to relinquish any ideas that are poorly supported despite initial excitement or potential when first conducting the study. An example of this was recognizing although it was exciting to analyze nationhood and sentiments related to Canada as a place to call home, many more participants expressed the importance of their families in their lives and how this construct, which depicts social belongingness, was better supported in the study. *Methodological coherence* pays attention to congruence between the research question and the methods being implemented. The question and/or methods may need to be modified if the data ends up presenting differently than expected. The research question was refined from an initially broad exploratory question on belonging. This was done to better capture what specific aspects of social belongingness would be investigated, namely the dimensions identified in Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework. *Sampling adequacy* is evidenced by saturation and replication which means that there needs to be enough data to account for all aspects of the phenomenon of interest. That is why as part of the data selection process, maximum variation in purposive sampling was beneficial in ensuring that replication may occur to indicate the completeness of the analysis. Finally, *theoretical thinking* refers to the incorporation of macro-micro perspectives with the analyzed data, by checking and rechecking data to form a solid foundation. With each iteration of codes that were assembled into themes, recognition of how the codes apply across participant narratives to describe familial contexts and larger community settings was done in an incremental way to avoid cognitive leaps that would not be well supported by the data.

Besides these verification strategies embedded in the research process, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criterion of trustworthiness were attended to in this research. The strategies to uphold trustworthiness that were used in this research include maintaining an audit trail

throughout data analysis, purposeful sampling, maintaining a reflexive journal, and providing a rich description of the data. It is important to consider that I did not complete any of the primary interviews and was not in a position where I could ask follow-up questions to participants. To address this circumstance, I participated in team discussions with primary data collectors and other research team members who are actively involved in communities of older immigrants. In effort to cultivate contextual insights that may benefit my work, I participated in primary data collection with similar populations and engaged in community networking.

Ethical Considerations

The Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) requires researchers to uphold the responsibility of meeting high scientific and ethical standards that respect and protect the participants involved (TCPS2, 2018). The three core principles of the TCPS assisted the researcher to conduct research in an ethical approach: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice.

Respect for Persons

Respect for persons entails the dual moral obligation to respect autonomy and to protect those with diminished autonomy (TCPS2, 2018). It is important to understand that decisions related to research participation may be related to an individual's connections to family, to community, and to their cultural, social, linguistic, religious groups (TCPS2, 2018). For example, a woman may feel dependent on her spouse or family for approval or permission to share their experiences. These connections can serve to guide or control what an individual chooses to do as they may believe that their participation (or lack of participation) may alienate them from the groups and communities they belong to. Similarly, participant stories in the transcripts may reflect how these women may only speak to certain experiences as their

autonomy may be tied to the beliefs and expectations of others. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that participants are aware of the voluntary nature of the research and adjust to the preferences of participants in how they want to participate (e.g., what photos can be shared, attendance to advisory meetings, how they want to answer questions).

Concern for Welfare

Concern for welfare refers to the acknowledgement that a person's quality of life consists of their physical, social, economic, and individual circumstances (TCPS2, 2018). Although there may be benefits from the knowledge gained from the research, participants may also suffer from stigmatization, discrimination, or damage to reputation (TCPS2, 2018). It would be unethical to depict participants in a way that is negligent towards their cultural, religious, and gendered differences. I sought to maintain the ethical standard by ensuring that sensitive responses are confidential and anonymized, and that the analysis I complete reports multiple perspectives in the data in a way that is transparent and accurate.

I also considered the risks of photo elicitation towards participant confidentiality and privacy as images may identify participants (Bugos et al., 2014). Prior to the interviews, participants were instructed to provide pictures that represented their social connection. Participants were informed that any photos containing identifiable faces or sensitive aspects would be excluded from dissemination, or specific photos may not be analyzed by male members of the research team. An example specific to this research lies in how Muslim women participants may include sensitive photos of their uncovered hair that the public can not open to access. The photos shown as examples were specifically chosen as they were not identifiable, and written descriptions of other types of images were used to best protect the participants. As

well, analysis was done on secure computers at the University of Alberta with all files secured in the research team's hard drive.

Justice

Justice refers to the obligation of the researcher to treat people fairly and equitably (TCPS2, 2018). As discussed in the literature review, IMO women have been excluded from research opportunities as to date there are no studies that can speak their stories in the literature. This research study exemplifies justice and non-discriminatory research by being aware and respecting the diversity amongst IMO women in relation to their ethnocultural background, religious affiliation, or age. As this research sought to focus on the unique experiences of IMO women, I report multiple perspectives on the dimensions that define belongingness, and practiced reflexivity during my analysis to better understand my influence on the production of knowledge in this research.

Chapter IV: Findings

The sample consisted of 14 women, with 78% (n=11) of the participants over 60 years old. The majority of the participants identified as South/East Asian (71%; n=10), born in Pakistan (65%; n=9), and are family reunification migrants (57%; n=8), with the highest level of education of post-secondary school (57%; n=8). Other countries that participants originated from included India, Kuwait, Palestine, and Sierra Leone. Almost all participants have lived in Canada for at least 5 years (93%, n=13), with 71% (n=7) of participants living in Canada over 10 years. Urdu was the language most spoken amongst the sample (57%; n=8), and half of the participants rated having excellent English. As pre-determined during the data selection process, the participants are evenly spread across the living arrangement categories including spouse and children together, spouse only, children only, and alone. Most of the participant's family income were less than $40,000 (65%; n=9). See Table 3 for detailed demographic characteristics of the participants.

In this sample of IMO women, belonging was conceptualized as a dynamic feeling and experience that (1) is strung between their anticipation and experiences of loss and loneliness, (2) involves opportunities to engage with peers and in local communities, (3) centers on maintaining family relationships, and (4) is shaped by perceptions of their aging experiences. All four of these elements are entwined in the systems and environments that encase IMO women, and this was found to be evident in their thoughts, reflections, and images of everyday lives. See Figure 2 for a diagram that depicts the number of participants who spoke to these dimensions of belonging for IMO women.

Avoiding Loneliness and Loss is the Motivation to Belong

This theme captures the thought processes and motivations that drove participants' actions and decisions to enforce their connections. Within this study, motivations for social belonging referred to the need to connect with and resist the loss of attachments. Amongst IMO, it appears that the need to belong is dependent on their social context, and the structuring of their social connections, inclusive of family, friends, and the wider community. All participants who lived with others (i.e., spouse, children, or both) all voiced their desire to avoid being isolated and lonely. One participant voiced her understanding about loneliness and its intrinsic manifestations which enabled her to create protective mechanisms by engaging in social interaction:

> *"So being alone is not the problem, the problem is if my inner self is alone, then there is problem. I have to keep myself alive. I have to bring that aroma in myself. So I had kept the friendships for a long time and now I'm enjoying those friendships. Someone will call me, someone will ask me to come and drop by, and someone will come and drop by. So this is how we see that keeping our inner self is most important thing. - P24*

Figure 3: Empty Perfume Bottle (P24)

To contextualize this picture, the participant shared that she had thrown out this empty perfume bottle, but her granddaughter had wanted to keep it. Relating herself to the perfume bottle, she shares that:

> *"when your inner self is happy, the outer doesn't matter. Even if the bottle is dead, for a while they will enjoy it". - P24*

After some prompting, she talked about her happy memories with her husband who passed away a decade ago, and to keep her "aroma" alive, she prioritized friendships. From what this participant is saying, it was an inner drive to avoid loneliness that was essential to her ability to sustain her social connections with friends around her.

Beyond the notion of avoiding loneliness, participants shared how loneliness was experienced in different ways. Regardless of whether participants lived with others or lived alone, what determined their loneliness was whether they had the means to connect with others. To depict this contrast, one participant (P9) who lived alone reported she did not feel lonely as she had neighbors who she could depend on. Meanwhile, a participant who lived with some family members felt extreme loneliness due to circumstances of language barriers and being

physically isolated from the rest of her family. This quote depicts her familial situation as she immigrated to Canada with two children, and had to leave her other two children behind:

> *"even before [COVID-19], she was feeling lonely because also, there are two of her childrens are not here. The one that's in especially in Afghanistan, she is worried about him, because of the, you know, because of the situation, fighting, everything. The situation right now in Afghanistan, it makes her worry a lot." - P16*

The quote reveals that the participant was experiencing a sense of isolation and distress. This was because she was unable to offer support to her family members who lived far away, which made her feel even lonelier. Beyond this example, other participants could not always attend to their feelings of loneliness, as sometimes being able to act while feeling excluded was difficult. The desire to be included is highlighted in the following quote:

> *"I wish that seniors, you know, can take part, but not everybody's able to. I realize that. Because they themselves are really alone and the people that I connect with. What I feel is just to be in communication with, you know, with the people around you, and just lift them" - P21*

This participant alludes to the need for communication and connection to lift those around her that may not have the means or ability to feel like they are being included. This is also highlighted in the following quote that enforces this understanding of social connections being a way to protect themselves and enact personal strength:

> *"she's saying that social connections are very important, that keep a sense of support, a sense of belonging and you can share your happiness and sadness with them because sometimes you feel lonely and you can't share these things to other people and they are kind of support to her and other than that she said that they prevent you from*

hopelessness. You might feel hopeless sometime if you don't have support and she says that Islam also teaches us to have good bonding with people, stay strong together." - P20

For some participants, past experiences of observing someone pass away in their family or community reinforced their connections as they were motivated by their fears of dying alone and their desire to cope with perceived or anticipated loss. A participant shared that a community member passed away and nobody knew until much later as nobody regularly checked in on him. This quote displays her reflection of the incident and how it was a lesson for how she should be living her life:

"I'm worried about if I die alone... The thing is the blessings are there. We've to ask for it. It could be that no one knew and next day somebody is going to call him that why he's not picking up the phone. So that's how we should be fearing of death all the time. Fearing doesn't mean to feel fear, fearing means it'll makes you act properly." - P24

On the topic of losing someone, this was not solely understood in relation to death. Throughout the migration journey, there were stories about the family and friends the participants had left behind. There were different ways that participants navigated their relationships to construct a sense of belonging each time they had to leave their loved ones. The following quote highlights a participant's aversion towards experiencing what she interprets as a "loss" if she were to move in with her son and thus move away from the friends she has made locally:

"I told him I will never leave Edmonton, I have friends here, he said 'what friends, friends?!'. I told him I can never leave my friends, those are my family now, I lost my family in Jordan and in Kuwait, I also will lose? I don't have the stomach to handle much loss, I made many acquaintances here, I'm happy with them, even if I don't see them we

stay connected on WhatsApp, when there's something you'll find us coming together, immediately together, we all supported one another. When one of us has a wedding, baby shower, shower, you'll find us all around her, thank God" - P6

Here, we see the importance of friendships to enable support. However, there are experiences of loss that this participant has endured, specifically losing her family during her migratory journey, which have enabled the participant to feel strongly about the possibility of losing more social connections.

Amongst all participants who have different living arrangements, they emphasize the importance of perceived support whether it be from friends, family, or both. What we can gather across the participants' narratives is that perceived social support, whether it be at the family or peer level, is required to combat feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. The motivations that drive participants to construct their belonging is related to the ways they conceptualize isolation and loss. Motivations were the intrinsic guide for participants on meaningful ways to be connected to others.

Opportunities for Choosing Family: Beyond Nuclear Family Relationships

Within this study, opportunities for social belonging depended on the availability of circumstances for meaningful connections, namely the groups, people, places, times, and spaces that participants were embedded in. Spatial opportunities for social belonging appeared to be a concept noted across all transcripts, as participants often shared the places in which they frequented or engaged with their social connections. Most of the participants spoke to how despite their current dwelling in Edmonton, with several of them spending over a decade in the city and being well-established, their lives were linked to their pre-migration contexts. They continued to have social and emotional connections to the places and people they left behind. For

some of the participants, being able to travel was a method in which they could maintain the connections they made during different stages of their lives to people important to them. As well, participants shared that the use of information and communication technology (ICT) was a way to connect with people in faraway places. However, in the pandemic context, local connections became more important for those who in the past had relied more heavily on transnational connections. Additionally, some participants also experienced difficulties in maintaining connections prior to the pandemic due to financial constraints, health problems, or family responsibilities.

All participants, regardless of who they lived with, spoke about the people they chose to engage with regularly as people who were locally available to connect with them. Their considerations on who to engage with was related to several issues: (1) who they lived with or lived close to, (2) who had the time and ability to spend time, (3) who they could relate with and communicate to, and (4) who understood them. Oftentimes, these locally placed connections in a post-migratory setting were ties that allowed participants to expand their concept of family to those outside of their nuclear family structure. To highlight this concept of chosen family, one participant and her husband, while their children lived in the same city, shared their long-standing relationships and deep bond with a group of friends, who all communicate in Urdu:

> *"[our friends] all grew up together like over here for the last 30, 40 years, right? So we understand each other's temperament. If there's a new person in the group need explanation, then we know. So we know where to keep her, you know? We all discuss and, "Okay, we'll invite her, but just keep quite casual with her. Don't discuss your personal things," and that type of thing, until she understands and everything, you know?*

Because most of our husbands are friends too, for the last 30, 40 years. So they're like brothers to each other. They share their things." - P4

The last part of this quote explicitly refers to the dynamic of selecting social connections cultivated outside of the family to resemble a familial relationship. This participant shared pictures that depicted these opportunities for consoling each other's health-related hardships, sharing food and space to connect, and traversing their life courses together. Another participant who lived alone, found her chosen family in her own neighbourhood and described how she could relate to them despite the diversity in ethnocultural backgrounds, because they were all older adults:

"Bella is a senior. Bunny is my – on the south side, she's a senior. The one next door to me, B. and A., they are seniors. [Laughs] So, you know, I live in a senior neighborhood. The children now are grown up and gone, so it's seniors only, and so we take care of each other. And every once in a while, I cook extra food [to share],– or if I get extra food from others [who share with me]" -P9

How age influences their relationships was not exclusive to relationships with peers and friends. The opportunity to engage across generations in a familial role was observed with participants who had their own grandchildren close by, or engaged with young children in their communities. Another participant, although living alone, shared her experiences of taking on a grandmother-role within the community as it was important to her and her community:

"I have some people from my community, here my neighbor from Guinee, sometimes, I want [to] help them with their children. They said, 'oh can you come and stay with my child? I am just going to the market', I can go because they call me grandma., (laughing)." -P30

Participants actively sought opportunities to cultivate and maintain their relationships with family members, peers, and community members. Participants shared images of gathering with family and friends, whether they were intimate gatherings in the backyard, or large celebrations in the mosque. Participants have recognized how important social connectivity is for them personally, such as this participant who shared how she acted on her need to communicate:

> *"They are very close friends of mine. Each one of them has a special place. I have made a kind of a chart that I would call these numbers weekly, these monthly, and these in three months. This includes my neighbours. This includes my colleagues, my former colleagues. It includes everyone, whoever was ever in touch with me. I'm a person who adheres. I don't give up on relationships and friendships." - P19*

Participants shared how meaningful it was for them to exchange in check-ins, share emotional burdens through consolatory chatter, and use their own cooking as a mechanism to connect and care for others. One participant framed a situation where social support was obvious to provide when a friend was in need:

> *"one friend's husband passed away, so, you know, everybody was with her. They never left her alone for the first six months. We'll make sure everybody's there with her in the evening, and go there and visit her, and we all used to go visit her. So, you know, we try to support each other this way. One friend was sick in the hospital and, you know, we all used to make sure that like, okay, everybody cook and then we'll go and visit them. Don't crowd, overcrowded, but don't leave them alone too. Take the food and, you know, look out for the kids if they need something at home". - P4*

The last part of this quote highlights as well how these women attend to their environments by being considerate of what others around them need. Beyond friend groups,

participants engaged with their own ethnocultural communities by volunteering their time to cook, teach, organize events, and/or engage in community gatherings. This was not only meaningful as they felt a sense of contribution to their communities, but enabled a sense of purpose as highlighted in the following quote:

> *"all the community members, what I do is I cook. I used to cook the whole four, you know, portions, meaning like, you know, a four-course meal. Like sweets, and an appetizer, and I used to send it, you know, in the tiffin carriers to people of Allah. These are people who are well to do, but more so the underprivileged people, people who are lonely, people who are single mothers, people from battered families, people from abusive families. And I will call them, and I will take them to Eid prayers in my car. And because they will have children with them and I can take three, you know, people, because I have a 5 seater. And whoever is on my priority list. It's word of mouth, if you want to give your name as a reference, you can sure do that. But if you can give me her number, I can call. So I have – I call them my community daughters. I have the whole list." (P21)*

Even with the language used here with "community daughters", we see this expansion of familial roles to the community setting. Like this participant, others showcased how they formulated strong connections beyond their family and engaged in their local communities which can be highlighted by this participant who touches on observations about being alone:

> *So that's old, all my old friends, because after our children gone, nobody here, we are alone. So we create a group, a potluck group, and once a month every time we go – we all make some things and every – and at every people's place, you know? About once a month. - P11*

Participants shared how they would engage with members of the same ethnocultural community as them, and some participants would seek encounters with other seniors in their neighborhoods. Ultimately, utilizing their social skills, time, and resources to organize consistent gatherings with friends locally was important. Not only does this dynamic create opportunities that allow women to create a space for belonging in their webs of connections, but it allows for them to feel a sense of belonging in their communities by expanding their concept of familial roles beyond the nuclear family context.

Competencies Pertinent to Social Engagement in the Family

Within this study, competencies referred to a set of skills and abilities that were necessary for social connection, and enabled an individual to relate with others, and align themselves with cultural values. Social skills included being aware of oneself and the relationships made with others, being able to regulate emotions and behaviours, and participate in verbal and non-verbal communication such as acts of service. Especially in a family setting, the ability for the participants to sustain good relations with their children and other family members was shared to be important to them. It is through these connections that they can establish a web to belong amidst the people that ground their daily interactions.

Participants who lived with or regularly visited their children shared images of gathering with family and described their work to support their family. The belief in the power of actions was clearly demonstrated by participants through their utilization of skills such as cooking food for others, becoming a caregiver for grandchildren or spouses during times of declining health, and making efforts to travel and maintain connections whenever possible. For participants whose family members were living in different countries, travelling was an important part of being able to connect and enabled a sense of belonging that was attached to different places around the

world. For example, this participant shared the considerations she needed to make as she lives with her spouse after all her children grew up and moved away to start their own families:

> *"last winter we go to Umrah [which is a form of pilgrimage to Mecca] for four weeks, at least we spent, and then I went to – September and October my youngest daughter's place, then my sister's place. I traveled more" - P11*

For the participants that live with or near their children, learning ways to adapt their livelihood and sense of place to fit with their children was a skill practiced to foster positive family dynamics. Their awareness manifested in different ways, from choosing to cook to contribute to the family, to adjusting living arrangements that would best suit a good relationship. A participant who lives with her children highlights how she felt the need to adjust her approach by using her cooking as a mechanism to support her family:

> *"your son and your daughter-in-law is working the whole day. At least cook a simple meal, that when they come home from work there's hot food on the table. So they expect, you know, as if there is a big staff like you had in Pakistan, or I had in Kenya, who's going to be bringing hot pakoras on the table. You know, that hot chapatis on the table, they're just not there." - P3*

This quote shows her recognition and ability to provide food to the family, which she felt was her responsibility. Another participant who lives alone shared her insights on navigating living arrangements that would suit her own interests while being cognizant of her daughter's life:

> *"I can't live without my daughter and my son-in-law so I had to move with them even though there is a separate home in Edmonton at a distance of 15 minutes but I can't live in a different city. We separated willingly because I didn't want to live with them and*

used to meet at their place. I used to visit them every day in a taxi. I used to take care of her younger daughter because my daughter had a job of massage therapist. She used to work and had a huge number of clients. So I got the house in Edmonton, and despite of the distance my children used to visit me and sometimes I used to meet them at their place. I have good relations with everyone its God's mercy." - P15

Contributions to the nuclear family through caregiving and sharing wisdom, resources and energy appeared to be a fundamental commitment for participants. A participant highlighted how the intergenerational dynamic not only worked to serve her own interests in being engaged, but she felt that she could fruitfully benefit her family:

"it's not just I enjoy [my grandchildren's] company. I want to teach them everything I can do for them. Because the parents over here are so busy, after work they're so tired, they don't, you know, actually spend quality time. They do, but not that much. So since I have time, and I have energy, and I like doing that, so they do gardening with me." - P4

A sense of obligation and inherent support was observed by participants to have been received and given in their own families, especially if family members lived in the same household or lived close by in the same city. A participant shared pictures almost exclusively of her children and grandchildren, in family gatherings and important family events. This participant's spouse passed away and she now lives with her children. She described the importance of having her children look out for her as an opportunity for her to feel engaged:

"I have three, four families here in Edmonton. My two daughters live here, and my cousin live here, and my sister... I have five kids…"

[Question: So do you feel like you're lonely sometimes? Because it seems like you're not getting out as much as you want.]

"Yeah… but my daughters, every time they look after me, they are on the phone, or they are texting me, and they look after me" - P26

This participant shows the importance of receiving support from family members, and her gratitude for these relationships. However, living arrangements with family members did not necessarily mean that relationships were positive or healthy. One participant shared extensively about the domestic violence and financial abuse endured from her husband, and the complicated relationships she has with her children which deterred a sense of support from her family. This quote highlights how she selected where to dedicate her energy:

"[My husband] doesn't do anything. So, I must act because he's sitting at home and there bound to be problems. And indeed we had a lot of problem between us, which forced me to reach out to the community, go out with friends, meet this, meet that, religion courses, when I go to the mosque, this one does religious course, and this one does this, this one does that. So I was glad to meet new people" -P6

Her social skills enabled her to recognize the limits of the relationships with her family, and thus her efforts were directed towards the ethnocultural religious community she is a part of.

In general, we can observe that the participants are involved in a give-and-take dynamic of providing and receiving support from the people in their lives. There is complexity behind the nature of the relationships they have with family members, and participant's perception of their own familial responsibility played a large role in the actions they take. As well, their ability to recognize the nature of their relationships with others, such as family members, not only helps them maintain social connections, but also enables them to participate in relationships in a meaningful way.

Perceptions and Reflections on Aging Experiences

Within this study, participants' perceptions refer to the subjective feelings and cognitions on whether they belongs or fit in with those around them. These perceptions were formed over an accumulation of life experiences which includes memories from the past, and the competencies, motivations, and opportunities that are situated in the present and future. For IMO women, their position on whether they feel that they belong to their social context correlates with their own self-understanding in a post-migratory setting as aging immigrant Muslim women. Irrespective of their living arrangements with family members, many participants shared that they felt it was important to be able to find where they can fit in and feel included. Some participants described this experience as an ongoing struggle even prior to migrating to Canada, as they have felt experiences of exclusion related to their ethnicity or religious practices. One participant who lives alone shared the reason why she does not go to the mosque despite being a Muslim:

> *[The mosque] belongs to the Afghani people. No, [I don't miss the mosque] Because we're – and we never did [attend], in Pakistan. No, because after a while it had become very political… I hate to tell you that way... There were groups. 'I am from Lahore.' 'I am from Karachi.' 'I am from Fiji.' 'I am from Somalia.' 'I'm from such and such place.' I did not like that. We were all Muslims. We should have stayed the same way, like we did before. - P9*

In this excerpt, the participant refers to the heterogeneity amongst IMO women. Across the participants, many reflected on how their lives have changed over time, with migrating, having children, engaging in their careers, and being involved in their communities. One attribute that was repeatedly discussed was how they interpreted their lives changing as they got older. For example, a participant described her experience of ageist microaggressions:

"Sometimes, sometimes I feel like I left out. The other – really, the other generation, they're together, and then old people, they sit on one side. I know that's one I feel really, really bad, you know? ...Especially when I go to mosque – mosque programs and everything, yeah."

[Question: What are some other things you find different as you're growing older with your social life?]

"There is certain loneliness. Because not like before, we are very active and this one and that one. We help each other. Now nobody asks for help. Nobody would talk. Nobody would – I don't know. I'm left out of things, you know. I phone every time my friends, but some got – nobody's coming before. If I invite them to come, or for chai and this one, they come. But now no more. Nobody wants to, you know? I don't know why it's happening but its happening." - P11

This participant shared her feelings of loneliness that she perceives to result from growing older, and its manifestation of un-belonging in a religious community within a mosque. Another participant shared her perspective on how IMO women are treated, and shares her perception on what actions need to be taken:

"There's a human, there's a lady, there's a feminine person very much alive, you know, inside that wrinkled shroud. So that needs to be addressed. Somebody needs to look into [Laughs] our eyes and talk, you know, like intelligent talk, whatever our level of intelligence is. But we need that. And when we are – when we are with these relations, which are indeed a blessing from Allah… I belong to the aging Muslim population. And what seemed distant ten years ago, it has just reached me. I wouldn't say that it's around the corner. No, it is inside me. I've embraced that. So I am concerned about the problems,

especially communication, especially socialization, socializing, of ladies of my age. I find myself in similar situations, that I had like sometimes like heard of" - P19

These quotes highlight how participants are reflecting on the depiction of IMO women in general, and the concerns they have when IMO women are not respected or feel included. These concerns also address whether IMO women have the resources to identify where to get support and ways to attend to their needs if they are feeling excluded. For example, this participant mentioned the lack of understanding on how the familial context shapes how IMO women receive support:

"I find that some of us are really, really lonely, and they silently scream for attention, but there's nobody to do anything. You know, and they have no means of any kind of social association, no conversation. No relationships are available for them. I might be one of them. [Laughs] And of course, we are looking at outside of the family… If family was everything, then what was the need to conduct all this, right? And most options are not available to all of us. Sometimes it is our own lacking in identifying the means, and sometimes there are issues from outside family, your immediate family, home restrictions, maybe." - P19

Participants also shared the circumstances that inhibit important connections, which related to their observations on the emotional and physical availability of family members, the isolation experienced from COVID-19 social distancing, their own declining health status and bodily changes as they age, and the perception that they were burdening others with their needs. This is why participants voiced the importance of communicating with others who understand what they are going through.

Figure 4: Chai and samosa (P19)

The participant who shared the above picture, shared the importance chai (interpreted as: sharing tea) as a chance to have heart-to-heart talks freely and happily when gathered with other ladies. Chai was an opportunity to listen, give suggestions as a form of help, and discuss problems specific to them as IMO women. Like this participant, others shared various pictures of gatherings with friends and recalled pertinent memories associated with these pictures. These stories evoked emotions from sadness for not being able to gather during the pandemic, to joy from the sense of belonging they felt by being around those who were going through the same life stages as them. These impactful emotions, memories and experiences were not only reminiscent of their experiences but their understandings of whether they could recreate these experiences as time went on.

With constructing their belonging, many participants described their gratitude for the transitions they have endured in their life course, and the wisdom they have accumulated. They emphasized the practices they embodied to create the feeling of belonging. This participant shared her understanding of what she feels is important, and the thoughts that enable her ability to lead social activities in her community:

> *"[as I am] Aging, I'm more mature. I'm more capable of making better decisions. I can enjoy without being worried about what's behind me, about the kids. I can enjoy it. Don't waste what you have around you." P29*

Generally, participants felt a sense of empowerment related to attending to their own interests and activities that give them a sense of fulfillment. These sentiments reflected their religious values embedded in the Islam faith that also combat cognitions related to isolation and uselessness. One participant voiced how she believed people could help each other out and become socially active to benefit themselves and others around them:

> *"it's not about giving, it's about the ability to do something, and you don't have ability you are not held accountable… we can ask 'can I help you' or the person taking care of something we can ask and it happens in this world no one keeps you behind. Although we say that there [is] discrimination. Yes there is. I don't deny that but on that other hand there is humanity in our heart…, and the thing is maybe I'm sick in this room for a long time if I don't call my friends oh I'm sick. No one is going to help me." P24*

As we see from this quote, their understanding of recognizing the needs of those around them and feeling that they are in a place where they can ask for the help, are important mechanisms for meaningful connections. For some participants, they shared their gratitude for being busy. Participants shared pictures of their own community service and ways that they've engaged in their social connections to feel pride, productivity, and importance for the work that they had done in their lives. The desire to enable their independence as they go about their day-to-day lives serves as not only a sense of advocacy for themselves but allowed them to curate a depiction of IMO women as leaders in their communities. This participant shares her belief that IMO women are also:

> *"Active citizens, not just in our own community. It's in the whole society. Active citizenship is very, very, very important. Because this is what builds the society and keeps it healthy. And use the human resources that we have around us, instead of just each one*

keeping their knowledge and expertise and talents that they have. If they don't share it, what's the use of it?" (P29)

Overall, the perceptions of the ways in which IMO women can feel like they fit in was dependent on how they believed society depicted them, and their cognitions on what they could do to create meaning in their lives as they continue to age. Their ability to create meaning was grounded in their social interactions, their feelings, and how they observed their own growth throughout the life course.

Chapter V: Discussion

Through this examination of the experiences of IMO women in Edmonton, the complexity of how social belonging is constructed and maintained is evidenced. As belongingness is perceived as conceptually vague, the use of Allen et al.'s framework (2021) was adapted to frame the ways in which each participant's competencies, motivations, opportunities, and perceptions of their social connections coincide to shape a sense of belongingness that is situated spatially and temporally.

The Complexity of Belongingness

As per existing literature, the concept of belonging is nonlinear and can either increase, disappear, or flourish throughout an individual's life course (George & Selimos, 2019). Our study confirms Allen et al.'s (2021) argument that belongingness is a dynamic and emergent construct, and we extend beyond the framework to describe how belongingness is embedded in the experiences of each person. Throughout the findings, we saw how migration, gender, religion, and age shape the positionality of immigrant Muslim older women. We can also examine the impact of social structure, kinship, and family dynamics, as well as their perceptions of social connectivity. Although intersectionality is often used to study vulnerability and experiences of oppression, it can also be used to study resilience and to identify how older women from diverse backgrounds can have agency and resist oppression in various ways (Collins, 2015; Cho et al., 2013). Similarly, the narratives of the women in this study provide insight on the multiple social identities that intersect to shape their experiences and outcomes related to both the vulnerability they experience and their attempts to reconcile and determine their own resilience. As depicted in the findings about the perceptions of belonging, a participant alluded to how IMO women of different ethnic backgrounds are perceived as superior or inferior in the larger Muslim

community, perhaps speak to racist experiences within Muslim communities (Ajrouch, 2017). In contrast, other participants felt that as they aged, the values bound to their religious practices enabled them to take on leadership roles in the community to actively volunteer and show kindness to others. Despite shared concerns about loneliness, many participants shared their attempts to maintain a positive outlook on their lives, which has been evidenced as a contributing factor for successful aging due to its potential to embrace challenges with less worries and offset physical and health limitations (Lucchese et al., 2022). As well, the participants observed their maintenance of connections that they had to their heritage culture while finding ways to become involved in a post-migratory context, which allowed them to achieve a greater level of wellbeing and life-satisfaction (Berry & Hou, 2016).

Although Allen et al. (2021) emphasized that it was unclear if belongingness could be conceptualized as the opposite of loneliness and isolation, low and high belonging represent different sides of the same conceptual continuum (Mellor et al., 2008; Koehn et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2021) and having low levels of belongingness is associated with experiences of loneliness and isolation. This could be seen amongst the participants in this study as seeking connections were motivated by their fears of dying alone and desires of maintaining select attachments. At times, a feeling of belongingness was what helped them cope and become adaptable with change. Some participants displayed trait-like belonging, which means they demonstrated generally high or low levels of belonging with relatively little variability across time and different situations (Trampe et al., 2015). However, other participants displayed state-like belonging, which means that their sense of belonging could change much like emotions as frequently as several times a day and depend on their awareness and perceptions of environmental context and social cues (Schall et al., 2016).

Despite the thematic similarities amongst this sample of IMO women, respective to each aspect of belonging (i.e., competencies, motivations, opportunities, and perceptions), the interplay of these aspects was not the same from person to person, as they each experienced different enablers and barriers for each of the components. Although participants were selected for analysis based on who they lived with, it was found that who they lived with was not a determinant of how they experienced belonging but was a part of the context in which IMO women engaged with to cultivate their sense of belonging. Instead, each aspect of belonging was linked to their experiences accumulated across their life course and their social support structures. Positive reinforcements for feeling like they belong can help people use their abilities to contribute to that sense of belonging. This includes their beliefs about doing things that make them feel fulfilled, balancing family needs with personal goals, and feeling like they have important social connections. However, even if someone really wants to belong and has the skills to communicate and be socially engaged, they might not be able to do so if opportunities are not available. For examples, COVID-19 social distancing, their own declining health status, and whether their family members were locally accessible to them were discussed as limitations to the opportunities for the participants to experience social belonging. Ultimately, it is the interplay of competencies, motivations, perceptions, and opportunities that ultimately form a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

Considerations of Aging Perceptions for IMO Women

Alongside the ties that the participants had to their social activities, this study points to how perceptions of aging have an impact on how IMO women depict their sense of belonging. Even with support systems in place and their settlement in Canada for an extended period of time, participants described the social contexts they are in are not always welcoming. For

example, participants struggled with exclusion related to age, especially in mosques, which is usually depicted as a place for shared religious beliefs and values. Participants identified the importance of finding where they fit in as IMO women, and shared about their experiences of un-belonging and loneliness. This is important as self-perceptions of aging can be influenced by social interactions (Hausknecht et al., 2020). Self-perceptions of aging play a large part in positively influencing an individual's physical and psychological outcomes through internalizing beliefs that are positive. If an older person is socially connected to others, and feels accepted in being a part of something larger than themselves (i.e., friendships, community, identity), this sense of belonging empowers them with 1) the feeling of security, 2) the ability to participate, 3) the recognition for their value by others, and 4) the experience of "fitting in" (Hagerty et al., 1992). For these participants, negative perceptions of aging may have played a role with feelings of loneliness, especially when they felt excluded or invisible to other members in the community. This is known as *social loss*, in which individuals receive less respect and feel lonelier (Blawert & Wurm, 2021).

An optimistic focus on development opportunities in older age is suggested to lead individuals to harness better adjustment capacity, and the ability to readily accept and integrate change (Blawert & Wurm, 2021). Thus, there is a need to combat ageist assumptions about IMO women, otherwise they may embody negative beliefs about their own aging. The participants in this study shared their stories of hard work, and desires to contribute fruitfully to the lives of those around them. By showcasing examples of IMO women being community leaders and their resiliency, we not only change the narratives about IMO women, but enable IMO women to speak up about their experiences and encourage one another to participate in embracing the changes they have gone through while aging.

Contributions to the Literature on Social Belonging for IMO women

Family members formulated important social connections amongst participants, whether they lived with their family members or family was located transnationally. These connections were important for IMO women to provide and receive social support consistently. Studies show that older immigrants' social inclusion in family support is influenced by cultural values such as interdependence, harmony, and sacrifice, reflecting vertical collectivism. (Ahmad et al., 2022; de Jong Gierveld et al., 2015). In this study, it was observed that IMO women prioritized family bonds. This aligns with the concept of familism, as proposed by de Jong Gierveld et al. (2015), which places greater value on relationships within the family as compared to those outside of it.

However, micro-level support was not enough to attend to the needs of participants. As observed in this study, if there was a lack of support from family members, participants were driven to create connections beyond the family context, as they reached out to ethnic or faith-based supports to attend to their needs. We observed heterogeneity in how participants have created and sustained social roles and networks that include and extend beyond their family structures. While there were benefits with the social connections embedded in family interactions, the family context was also seen as a stressor due to contradictions in the relationships between parents and their adult offspring that are driven by differences in values, expectations, and cultural norms. This phenomenon is known as “intergenerational ambivalence”, which is a concept that refers to the simultaneous experience of positive and negative feelings towards family members across generations (Connidis, 2015). This concept is often observed in relationships between adult children and their aging parents, where the older generation is dependent on the younger generation for care and support, and the younger generation may feel burdened by the responsibility of caregiving. This is important in the context

of belongingness as this ambivalence becomes difficult to manage if there are fewer resources or supports beyond the family structure available (Connidis, 2015). Unmanaged intergenerational ambivalence can result in complicated emotions and strained relationships. However, when properly addressed, it can lead to positive outcomes, including greater intergenerational understanding and appreciation for one another.

In a study assessing the role of family and cultural values on social connectedness and loneliness amongst ethnic minority elders, it was found that loneliness was experienced if familial expectations created an inability to form meaningful relationships (Diaz et al., 2019). As we saw in our findings, loneliness was a key factor in how IMO women manifested the motivations and perceptions of belongingness. If IMO women are experiencing structural barriers to community-level support, intergenerational power dynamics are strained, and conflict may increase as the responsibility for their needs lies on their adult children who may be experiencing stress related to other aspects of their lives. These circumstances place IMO women at risk of aging out of place, which Sadarangani & Jun (2015) describe as the physical and emotional experience of aging in a foreign environment.

Chapter VI: Implications and Conclusion

Implications for Policy and Practice in Nursing

To feel like someone belongs in a specific space and time is a dynamic experience that captures local and transnational connectivity. Being able to belong in a post-migratory context is in part a responsibility of the host society to enable inclusivity and resources for IMO women. It is important to approach immigrant Muslim older women as a heterogeneous group facing unique challenges and provide them with services that are accessible and relevant, especially when they are new to the community and struggling with isolation, loss, and adjusting to a new home. Treating IMO women as if they all experience the same problems further perpetuates their invisibility and undermines their life experiences. Providing support to immigrant Muslim older women is crucial for them to take on leadership roles that allow to care for their ethnocultural communities in a manner that is meaningful to the community. As we observed how IMO women felt a responsibility to assist others in their families and communities, supporting their endeavors not only benefits the community but fulfills their desire for a sense of purpose. Social participation is an important factor in successful aging, and having altruistic attitudes towards the community can predict positive emotional well-being in older age. (Grewal et al., 2006; Kahana et al., 2013). Older adults reap psychological and social benefits from volunteering and community engagement, which manifest as life satisfaction, positive mood, and increased levels of self-rated health (Douglas et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2022).

Nurses and other health care professionals must recognize the value of community-based strategies in combination with family-centered approaches to maximize social inclusion and belonging. Opportunities for civic engagement can be embedded in local cultural communities to strengthen social connections beyond family structures. Intergenerational programming may

strengthen and maintain social connections in older age and become mechanisms for IMO women to give and receive support. Finally, ethnic and faith-based communities need to be well-equipped with accessible services and programs that provide opportunities for culturally responsive recreational activities and community-level connections.

Belongingness as discussed earlier is constructed socially and has implications on how IMO women experience their wellbeing. As Joppke and Seidle (2012) emphasized, the ability to feel belongingness is a shared responsibility between IMO women and the larger society which contains formal services, its government, and the public. Nurses have the moral, ethical, professional, and social responsibility to understand and address inequitable relations, which allows them to provide competent and effective care (Kirkham & Anderson, 2010). If nurses are not placed in a position to critically question the circumstances related to social injustice, it would be unrealistic to expect fruitful change in how IMO women are cared for in our health systems. That is why this research will identify how (un)belongingness is a concern to which all nurses that work with IMO women in different contexts (e.g., acute care, community care, researchers) can identify common issues and engage with each other to critique the standard quo and cultivate an equitable society (Anderson et al., 2009; Kirkham & Anderson, 2010).

Implications for Education in Nursing

This research is significant as it educates nurses further about equitable health outcomes. Critical social justice as a focal point in research uncovers the day-to-day experiences of inequity and the structural factors responsible for the neglect of the social determinants of health (Anderson et al, 2009). It is through reporting qualitative research findings in which we can deconstruct how history and social positioning have shaped the lives of individuals, how inequity is perpetuated and how equity is fostered (Anderson et al., 2010).

Education for service providers such as nurses is fundamental towards improving institutional attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, and to influence public attitudes (Stewart et al., 2008; Yanicki et al., 2015). There is a need for service providers to understand the challenges that immigrants face and empathize with them to formulate trusting relationships and enable equitable access to care. As Canada continues to welcome immigrants and refugees, healthcare professionals, administrators, educators, and policy makers must ensure that the social, political, and economic dimensions of health are interwoven in the knowledge base for competent practice (Anderson et al., 2010). However, simply learning about the experiences of different ethnocultural groups does not address the social dimensions of health and healthcare. Instead, nurses must foster critical consciousness and critical questioning about the experiences of ethnocultural groups to interrupt essentialist assumptions that influence practice (Anderson et al., 2010; Rudner, 2021).

Implications for Research in Nursing

The value of this study lies in its ability to shed light on how immigrant Muslim older women participate in practices of belonging, providing important insights into this important aspect of their experiences. Because the eligibility criteria to participate in the original study was broad, we observed the experiences of IMO women with many of them being well-established in their communities. Some of the participants had higher English proficiency than others and took on community leader roles. This combats the narratives that depict IMO women as passive and oppressed due to their experiences of discrimination and exclusion (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2019; Padela et al., 2012; Jasperse et al., 2012), and touches upon the resilience cultivated by means of connectivity and leadership. All participants live in their respective communities and are not living in assisted living or care institutions, and thus the freedom to frequent community places

of worship and visit family members were important to them. However, the findings showed that IMO women may still experience struggles related to loneliness even if they have social support. This is important to highlight, as their experiences and perspectives may differ from IMO women who are newcomers, lack physical and social support, are separated from their family, have lower socioeconomic status and/or experience language and cultural barriers. Further exploration for IMO women who are experiencing these factors would be fruitful to pursue to conceptualize the systemic barriers that perpetuate isolation and exclusion.

Methodological Considerations

As discussed earlier, the locality of family support was supported as a fundamental consideration for social inclusion and support. Living arrangements was anticipated as a factor that would diversify the experiences of belongingness (Table 1). However, Ng and Northcott (2015) suggested that a better way to measure variations in self-reported loneliness would be to assess the time spent alone. Specifically, the amount of waking time spent alone at home and the quality of family relationships would be a better indicator of self-reported loneliness than the presence or absence of social embeddedness. Although the authors focused on loneliness, these considerations, if measured for a future iteration of this work on IMO women, may have a more accurate measure of the degree of connection that ties into their sense of belonging.

The semi-structured participant-driven photos were an important part of member-checking to ensure that participants could explain exactly what the photographs meant to them so that misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the photographs were minimized. As well, participants were able to think and reflect prior to the interview and to capture their ideas on what their social connections meant to them. Participants became creative in their pictures when capturing what they felt was missing in their lives (e.g. Empty Perfume Bottle), and their stories

allowed the researcher to capture meanings that would not be uncovered from looking at the photo in isolation. Participants often collected more than 20 photos and experienced difficulties in leaving some out of the interviews. While the limitation on pictures was in place to allow participants to discern which pictures were the most important to them, this prescriptive approach is a limitation as it excludes some of the stories that participants may have been wanting to share. Future research that enables exploration through a narrative or phenomenological approach without limit on the number of photos would enable analysis on the depth of participant narratives.

By nature of the analysis of data that was not collected by myself, exploration into belonging specifically is limited. This is a limitation as I did not complete any of the primary interviews and was not in a position where I could ask follow-up questions to participants. This was because data collection for the parent study had finished by the time participants were selected for this analysis. While I frequently worked with the main data collectors of the broader study and participated in collecting primary data from similar groups, conducting additional primary research on social belonging could help to identify any nuances or gaps that were not captured in this analysis. With the emphasis on social connectivity, the images and narratives may not directly align with how they feel they belong, which was not part of the requirements as they took pictures. Rather, participants felt compelled to showcase the positive aspects of their lives and the social connections they treasure. This also meant that participants included many pictures from across their own life course, which may not accurately capture their current experiences. Although this was invited as part of the life-course perspective in this study, it may be more fruitful to explore further what needs and interventions may be the most appropriate and relevant to help support their current lifestyle.

Knowledge Translation

Knowledge translation is an integral part of community-based research in which it is a dynamic process of synthesizing, disseminating, adapting, exchanging, and applying knowledge to enable effective services in their own contexts (Straus et al., 2009). Without effective knowledge translation considerations, the knowledge produced through this research is unethical as it will not be disseminated back appropriately to research participants. I intend to incorporate three knowledge translation activities into my research following my completion of my final draft of analysis: a conversation circle with the advisory committee, an oral presentation at a research conference, and the publication of my analysis in the Gerontologist.

The advisory committee consists of 6 to 10 Muslim older women who co-led the SSHRC research with monthly discussions to empower and create collaboration in the community. The purpose of the conversation circle will enable the advisory to actively provide input, criticism, and context. This will not only be a means to gain feedback about the accuracy of how I've described the participant experiences in my analysis, but also a means for collaborative brainstorming about existing resources in the local Edmonton context that are relevant to belongingness. I also look forward to presenting about my thesis project at the International Council of Nurses ICN2023 in Montreal this year. By sharing about the local context of Edmonton, Alberta, disseminating findings to the larger context of Canadian and international policy and research is important. As discussed earlier in the literature review, there is a discrepancy in provincial efforts towards migration and settlement. Only by highlighting the experiences specific to the Edmonton context, can we begin to reveal what changes need to be made to resemble equitable efforts for Canadian migrants. As well, engaging with peers and fellow scholars in the field of aging research may further contextualize how the knowledge

cultivated through this study may be utilized. Finally, the conversation circle and the conference will inform my publication of findings in the Gerontologist, a peer-reviewed journal.

Conclusion

As the topic of social belonging amongst IMO women has not previously been explored, this study shows the importance in uncovering IMO women view their own integration into their families, communities, and larger society. The mundane interactions in their day-to-day life not only speak to micro-level perspectives but help to uncover structural components in the meso- and macro-level that manifest in their experiences in their families and wider communities. The findings of this study highlight the diverse ways in which IMO women engage in practices of connection within their family dynamics. It also reveals their motivation to maintain relationships as a means to avoid loneliness. Furthermore, the study examines the opportunities that exist for these women to engage with connections beyond their immediate families and explores their perceptions of where they fit within their social networks as they age. While family dynamics play a crucial role in how women maintain their relationships, this study emphasizes the significance of addressing negative perceptions of aging and fostering community-level support systems that promote equal opportunities and a sense of inclusivity.

The information brought to light in this thesis may help guide public service professionals in social care and health care sectors, to critically question what changes need to be made to ensure that IMO women are supported and cared for in the communities they live in. Finding ways to fortify and enable community-based services that are responsive and accessible to them should not only be prioritized but should be organized in collaboration with IMO women. As we observed in the quotes, the responsibilities they carry with them to service their families and communities showcase their invaluable work which deserves reciprocal attention.

Figures

Figure 1

Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework of Belonging

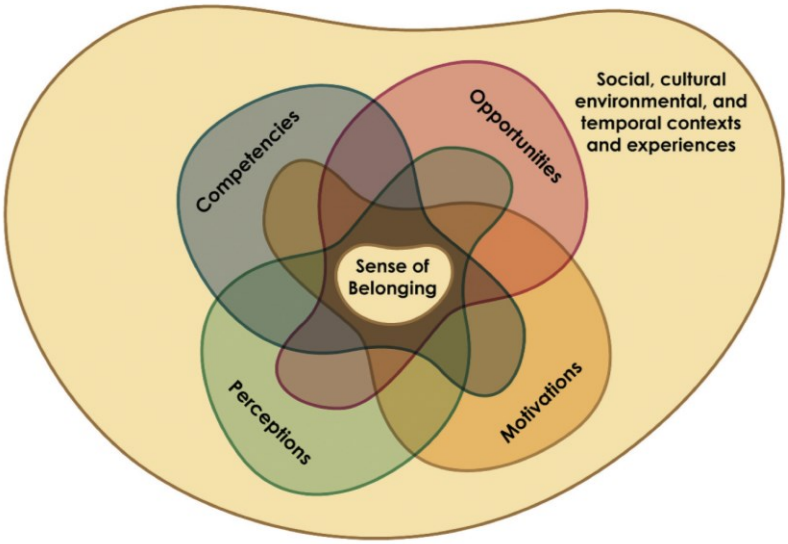
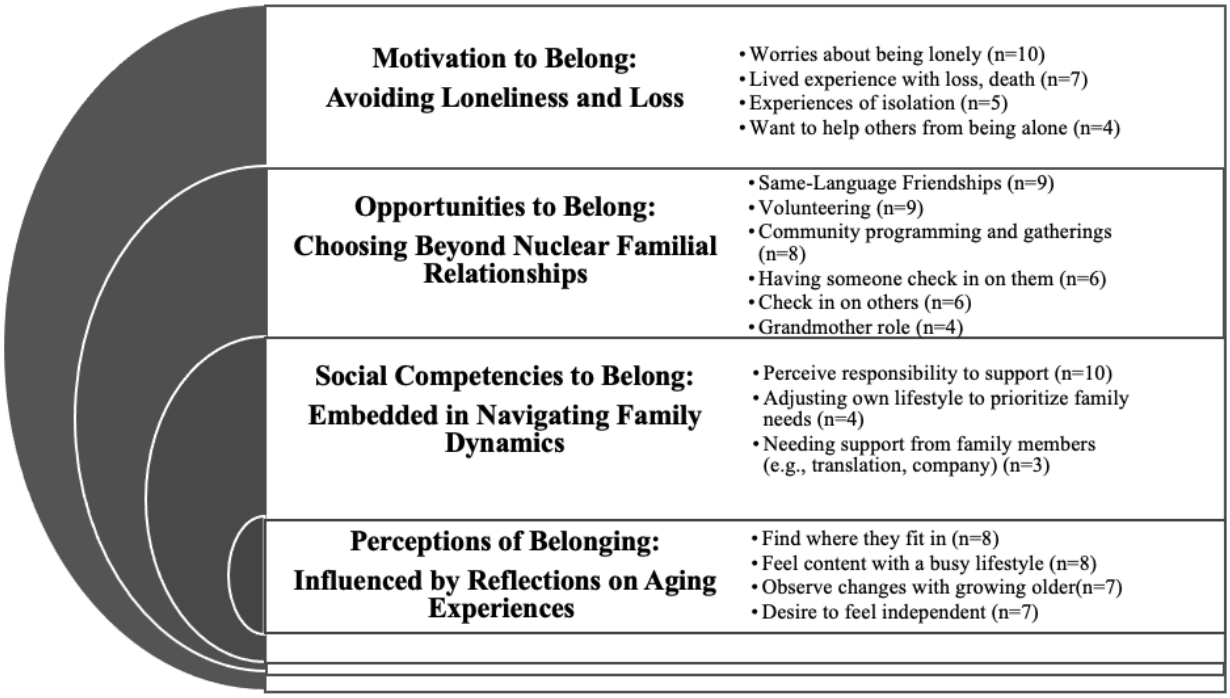


Figure 1. An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. Four interrelated components (i.e., Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions) dynamically interact and influence one another, shifting, evolving, and adapting as an individual traverses temporal, social, and environmental contexts and experiences.

Figure 2

Number of Participants to Dimensions of Belonging Amongst IMO Women



Tables

Table 1

Participant Profiles of Living Arrangements & Family Context

Living Arrangement	**Family Context**
Living with children, no spouse	**P3** - husband (arranged marriage) passed away feels greatly impacted by loss, feels close to siblings who live in different cities/countries **P16** - lives with younger sons in Canada, left the older sons behind (they didn't qualify to migrate); felt lonely before COVID-19 **P24** - feels lonely since husband passed away, even though children are living with her, maintains connections with friends transnationally **P26** - after husband passed away, her relationship with Pakistan is changed and is not eager to go visit; spends all her life with her kids
Living with children and spouse	**P6** - experienced domestic violence from husband, complicated relationships with children (local and transnational) **P19** - early life focused on job prospects; in Edmonton because of her sons living here **P20** - feels importance of having children/grandchildren understand where they come from, enjoys family gatherings despite health and financial issues
Living alone	**P9** - only immediate family alive are siblings (live in different cities), considers neighbours as family, does not go to mosque **P15** - distraught with husband's passing, daughter is in Edmonton but lives separate from her **P30** - sponsored her children here but now lives alone, complicated relationship with her children
Living with spouse	**P4** - feels connected with grandchildren, has not gone back to Pakistan in 20 years as family is living elsewhere. Feels satisfied and influenced by family **P11** - all children are in the US, had a son pass away in Edmonton. Feels left out at the mosque and isolated before COVID when children grew up and moved away **P21** - talked about seclusion from life due to ex-husband; with her second marriage she is a stepmother to an autistic son. Her children are the source of her energy **P29** - rich social activities in the community, doesn't believe in retirement. Got busy with grandchildren, maintains strong connections with family in Saudi Arabia

Table 2

Initial Version of Codes

Parent Code	Child Codes
Community social environment	• Cultivating strong attachments with neighbours over time • Poor relationship with neighbours • Finding community in Edmonton with those who speak the same language as you • Feeling at home at the mosque, frequenting the mosque • Home-making practices with plants and gardening • Engaging with ethnocultural or religious community • Volunteering as a method to be a part of the community and give back • Social isolation • Lack of opportunity to maintain daily activities due to COVID • Wanting to stay at home due to aging beliefs, mobility issues, transport dependence • Experiences of Islamophobia • Experiences of ageism in the mosque • Experiences of being a part of religious community • Experiences of being part of larger society outside of religious community • Wanting to give back to the community
Family relationships and social environment	• Importance of feeling purpose as a grandmother • Importance of feeling purpose as a mother • Intergenerational attachments as important • Setting aside personal needs for family • Cooking food as a service • Feeling lack of attachment with family after migrating to Canada (e.g. husband, ex-husband, domestic violence) • Traveling to visit where their children are living ever since settling in Canada • Traveling to visit family living back in country of origin ever since settling in Canada

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n=14)

Characteristics		Overall (n=14) n (%)
Age	55-59	7
	60-69	57
	70-79	21
	Missing Data	14
Country of Origin		
	Pakistan	65
	India	14
	Kuwait	7
	West Bank Jordan	7
	Sierra Leone	7
Ethnicity		
	South/East Asian	71
	Arab	14
	Africa	7
	Other	7
Category of Immigration		
	Family Reunification	57
	Economic Migrant	36
	Refugee	7
Time lived in Canada		
	Less than 5 years	0
	5 - 10 years	21
	More than 10 years	71
	Missing Data	7
Highest Education Level		
	Primary	7
	Secondary	29
	Post-Secondary	57
	Missing Data	7
Language spoken at home		
	Urdu	57
	Arabic	7
	English	14
	Dari	7
	Bi-lingual (i.e., Urdu and English/Arabic and English)	14

English/French Fluency		
	Excellent	50
	Good	21
	Average	14
	Minimal	7
	Missing Data	7
Living Arrangements		
	Spouse	29
	Children	29
	Spouse and Children	21
	Alone	21
Family Income		
	Less than $40,000	65
	$40,000 to $79,000	21
	$80,000 to $119,000	7
	$120,000 or more	0
	Missing Data	7

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