



# An Exploration of Integration Journeys, Identity, and Well-Being with Syrian Refugee Youth

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## ABSTRACT

Settlement in a new country is a complex social experience. The aim of this study is to explore via photovoice how integration is experienced and navigated in relation to family, peers/friendships, school, work, and community for Syrian refugee youth. We propose four themes through which we can understand the integration experiences of Syrian refugee youth: (a) integration as a chronological journey, (b) bridging or interweaving cultures, (d) managing exclusions, and (d) questioning the premise. Underpinning these four themes is a fifth that runs throughout: resilience in personal strength and external support. These themes provide a detailed explanation of the rhythmic process of integration and supportive factors that enhance resilience.

## KEYWORDS

youth; Syrian refugee; photovoice; narrative methods; integration; resilience

## RÉSUMÉ

L'installation dans un nouveau pays est une expérience sociale complexe. L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer, à l'aide de la méthode Photovoice, la manière dont l'intégration est vécue et appréhendée par rapport à la famille, aux pairs/amis, à l'école, au travail et à la communauté pour les jeunes réfugiés syriens. Nous proposons quatre thèmes à travers lesquels nous pouvons comprendre les expériences d'intégration des jeunes réfugiés syriens : (a) l'intégration en tant que parcours chronologique, (b) le rapprochement ou l'entrecroisement des cultures, (d) la réponse aux exclusions, et (d) la remise en question des prémisses. Ces quatre thèmes sont sous-tendus par un cinquième qui se retrouve tout au long de l'étude : la résilience fondée sur les forces personnelles et le soutien extérieur. Ces thèmes apportent une explication détaillée du processus rythmique d'intégration et des facteurs de soutien qui renforcent la résilience.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, the number of displaced people climbed to 120 million in 2024, with most of them originating from five countries including Syria (European Commission, 2024). In 2021, Canada resettled 130,125 refugees, which was a 19.15% increase from 2020 (World Bank, 2021). Of those, Canada received 44,620 Syrian refugees between November 2015 and January 2017 (Government

of Canada, 2017), 50% of whom were under the age of 18 (Government of Canada, 2019). Settlement in a new country is a complex social experience. Factors such as cultural background, features of the receiving country, access to the determinants of health, and a breadth of identity dimensions all influence a youth's sense of resilience to adapt. While a growing body of research has explored the settlement experiences of Syrian refugees, prioritized for research due

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to the large focus of this region through the Syrian conflicts (Al-Bazz et al., 2024; Cherubini, 2024; Hanley et al., 2024), there is room to centre the stories of particular groups of Syrian refugees, the case herein being a focus on youth.

Looking specifically at youth experiences, much less consideration has been given to integration. However, we do know that various domains of economic and social integration work as protective factors for refugee youth, reducing vulnerabilities (Barnová & Tamášová, 2018), strengthening resilience (Gyan et al., 2023), and promoting positive identity development (Nardon et al., 2021). The interplay between identity characteristics such as age, gender, and citizenship status; available resources at different levels (individual, family, and community); and oppressive forces impact youths' sense of resilience and ability to successfully integrate into a new society (Heimli et al., 2024; Raghallaigh, 2018). For example, support at school from teachers and peers contributes to strengthening resilience and results in positive integration outcomes (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). Conversely, experiences of discrimination and othering negatively impact integration in the new community (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). Definitions of concepts of identity, resilience, and integration can be found in Appendix (Table 1).

Syrian refugee youth shared their experiences of integration in Canada through photovoice to highlight issues in school, workplace, community, and home that were most important to them. In particular, this research project intended to explore how the interaction between identity and resilience in terms of protective and risk factors at different levels (individual, family, and community) either facilitate or impede refugee youths' integration experiences. Key overarching research questions were the follow-

ing: What protective factors and contexts of vulnerability shape the social integration experiences of Syrian refugee youth? How can supportive environments (community, school, and home) be enhanced to strengthen protective factors and support refugee youth in experiencing increased resilience?

The significance of this study lies in the fact that the design of the analysis allows for high involvement of Syrian refugee youths as active actors to determine how their stories of migration and integration are told. Although this approach of engaging youths in exploring social issues is highly valued, it is less applied in youth research generally (Kim, 2019).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Integration, as an outcome of a migration experience, is a multi-faceted concept that can be achieved only when all parties, government, community, and refugee people collaborate to create a welcoming and supportive environment. As a general concept related to migration, integration has received considerable attention. Refugee integration can be divided into two major branches: economic and social (Brell et al., 2020; Donato & Ferris, 2020). Economic integration involves access to language education, labour information, education from the receiving country, health capital, housing, and social ties with natives or well-established ethnic groups to enhance the integration process in this domain through employment (Brell et al., 2020; Fasani et al., 2022). Although social integration intercepts with economic integration in some domains such as education and social networks, the concept of social integration focuses on citizenship and political engagement (Alba & Foner, 2014). These opportunities and achievements can occur through three social patterns: bridges (with people from different backgrounds),

bonds (with familiar people based on ethnicity or shared values), and links (with local institutions and community) (A. Ager & Strang, 2008). Other components have been suggested to be considered when analyzing the concept of integration, including trust and safety (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019; Strang & Quinn, 2021).

While only one component of integration, the concept of identity, has been considered, the process of developing an identity gets intensified in the situation of refugee youth because they deal with multiple stages of building and reshaping identity. The transition from childhood to adolescence necessitates developing a stable and strong sense of oneself; this is compounded with a refugee identity that is shaped by war and migration. The conflict between different aspects of identity between home country and receiving country could arise during the resettlement experience, which may impact the integration process (Ziaian et al., 2021).

Interacting with identity is the concept of resilience. Researchers exploring resilience in refugee youth have studied the concept from multiple levels, beginning with individual, family, school, community, societal, global, and finally included time-related factors (Jafari et al., 2022). Discussing resilience from a personal level implies that certain personal attributes, characteristics and attitudes, self-regulation skills, and adaptive coping strategies enlarge youth refugees' ability to develop positive adaptive function to overcome war- and migration-related difficulties (Jafari et al., 2022). Similarly, different forms of support from family and friends (Marley & Mauki, 2019), peers and teachers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018), community leaders (Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017), and national structures and services (Berry & Sam, 2016) create a positive environment for youth to flourish and contribute to their

sense of resilience and, subsequently, belonging and integration. A youth's age at the time of migration contributes to shaping their resilience and ultimately helps them achieve successful integration experiences (Berry & Sam, 2016).

Regarding specific aspects of newcomer youth integration processes, language skills can improve or hamper educational attainment through one's ability to enroll in post-secondary education (Prokopenko, 2018), which is essential for social and economic integration (Arendt et al., 2020). Educational attainment plays a key role in youth refugee settlement over time (Shields & Lujan, 2019). Where language learning difficulties are present, long-term educational attainment takes longer, or overall educational achievement is lower (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). Teachers are perceived to be lacking skills to adapt specific curriculum content to accommodate refugees' linguistic level as they learn English (Guo et al., 2019; Rossiter et al., 2015). With the absence of parental support due to language barriers and lack of knowledge regarding the Canadian school system, refugee youth usually express dissatisfaction in their academic progress (Rossiter et al., 2015). Where literacy and educational attainment are low, downstream effects include low employment, poor housing conditions, and impacts on mental health and well-being (Shields & Lujan, 2019). For those who do progress through secondary education, obtaining resources for post-secondary education is an additional barrier (Shields & Lujan, 2019).

However, integration is about much more than language and includes access to employment. Next to barriers to educational attainment are consistently higher rates of unemployment in comparison with Canadian-born citizens (Statistics Canada, 2016). Securing a permanent and meaningful job after

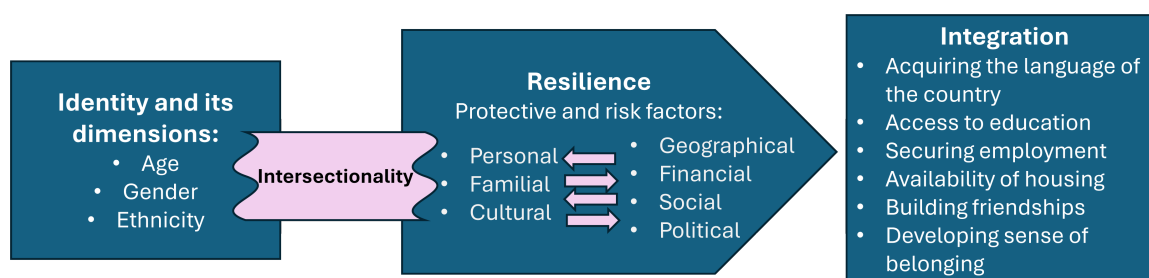
graduating from high school is a challenge for all Canadians and is made more difficult for refugees due to more limited social connections, lower English proficiency, and racism/xenophobia from employers (Hammarström, 1994; Johnson et al., 2015; Kunz, 2003; Lauer et al., 2012; Nichols et al., 2020). On average, it takes refugee youth an additional 10 years to achieve the same occupational outcomes as their Canadian-born peers (Statistics Canada, 2025; Stewart et al., 2015).

Besides barriers to finding secure and well-paying employment, refugee youth undergo considerable stress resulting from migration experiences upon arrival. Although newcomers' overall health appears to be better than the average Canadian's at arrival, newcomers' mental health deteriorates over time (Guruge & Butt, 2015). This could be explained by increased incidences of discrimination, social isolation, and low access to the social determinants of health (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). Therefore, the experience of integration for refugee youth into the receiving country is full of obstacles that affect their engagement in several community activities, which negatively impacts positive integration. To ensure a healthy transition into adulthood, youth need access to supportive factors, paths to overcoming barriers, and space to live out their resilience. This highlights the current deficit-focused nature of the limited research on youth refugee integration to date. What is needed, and covered herein, is a consideration of the strengths or aspects of resilience enacted by youth. This study explores protective factors that enhance the integration experience of Syrian refugee youth as well as highlighting fundamental aspects for optimizing resilience.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity is perceived as dynamic and flexible, reflecting an individual's history and narrative, which construct their perspectives (Holt, 2007; Kuus, 2007). This means the dynamic nature of identity, and dimensions such as age, gender, and ethnicity, allow for the formation and reformation of this identity (Burnett, 2013). In youth refugees' experiences, establishing identity in the context of forced migration is a continuous process, intensified greatly by age, gender, and ethnicity. That is, transitioning from being a citizen in the home country (perceived as stable) to a refugee in a transit country (perceived as unstable) and eventually obtaining citizenship in the receiving country (integration journey) bring multiple changes, as explored in this analysis. These changes are compounded by other dimensions of identity, such as gender and ethnicity (Ziaian et al., 2021). Myriad factors influence identity reshaping, including personal, familial, cultural, geographical, financial, social, and political aspects (D. E. Ager, 1999). According to the social-ecological framework proposed by Suárez-Orozco et al. (2018), the connectedness of these supportive elements constitutes protective factors that define resilience and, over time, foster it, helping to shield youth in the face of stressors and crises. However, lack of formal and information supports can also pose some risk factors that weaken resilience since both protective factors and risk factors compose the essence of resilience (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). In this analysis, resilience is viewed as a determinant of the experience of integration in the new country and can help predict whether the experience of integration, as an outcome, is perceived as successful or challenging (see Figure 1).

The complexity of uncovering this process can be understood through intersectionality,



**Figure 1**

*Theoretical Framework Linking the Study's Main Concepts*

which recognizes the interplay of various factors shaping human experiences and perpetuating discriminatory realities (Crenshaw, 1991). Employing intersectionality to understand how identity and its dimensions intersect with protective and risk factors to shape resilience, and ultimately influence the experiences of youth refugees' integration in the receiving country, lays the foundation for structured analysis that identifies different aspects of their journey.

Different aspects of youth identity interact with positive or negative circumstances in one's home, school, and community. For instance, families' expectations based on a youth's age and gender influence them to pursue a specific path, which eventually shapes their integration process. Also, discriminatory treatment based on gender or ethnicity impact a youth's psychological development and sense of resilience, which may inhibit the desire for integration in the new community. These interactions shape a youth's ability to adjust and respond in future situations by shaping the first building block for resilience to achieve a smooth integration in the new country. Through analyzing the integration experiences of youth refugees, we can gain insight into how identity and resilience intersect and facilitate or impede integration goals related to learning the language of the country, accessing education, securing employment, accessing

available housing, building friendships, and achieving sense of belonging (Lindo, 2005).

## METHODS

In this exploratory study, we utilized a qualitative approach to understand the experiences of refugee youth in depth. The research questions were addressed through creating space for youth to share their stories with the collaboration of co-researchers, Syrian refugee youth, who played different roles in this study from co-designing the process of data collection, co-creating the research sub-questions that guided the data collection, helping in recruiting participants, to participating in the focus groups and interviews. Our work primarily focused on creating a safe context, using unique methods and relationship building, for youth to tell honest stories of their struggles and their strengths. Youth did not reflect on policies for change or social systems requiring reform but shared more generally about their lived experiences.

## Design

This research project drew upon principles and processes of youth participatory action research (YPAR) to bring Syrian newcomer youth together to examine experiences of integration and resilience. The aim of using YPAR is to explore real-world problems



through active engagement by people experiencing injustice first-hand as well as to design recommendations to influence social change (Brydon-Miller, 1997). Besides YPAR, the study design incorporates two methodological approaches. The main methodology, photovoice, was used to explore what it is like to move to a new country and remake home (Roman et al., 2023). Utilizing photovoice in research allows for the taking or selecting of photographs to explore personal experiences (Roman et al., 2023). The resulting contents are visual materials and a description that explains the details of refugee youth's experiences of integration and resilience that offers insights in understanding and explaining the phenomenon of interest.

Youth place a high value on having a voice, for which narrative research, the second methodological approach for analysis, is perfectly suited. Using narrative methods creates an opportunity for youth to share their stories in safe and dynamic ways (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). Narrative research allows for sharing of personal experiences that reflect how refugee youth perceive living in the receiving country, as well as illustrating factors of progress or failure (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). Using narrative research to explore refugee youth experiences of integration and resilience allows us to uncover the challenges these youth go through when navigating various systems in the settlement journey (Atalay, 2021).

The research questions were explored through the examination of sub-questions that guided youth research participants in mapping out and storying their experiences since arriving in Canada. Through focused sub-questions, which were identified in collaboration with co-researchers, we invited participants to discuss their experiences in relation to schooling, peer relationships, and family relationships, as well as explore stress-

ful and challenging experiences, encounters, specific moments or events, successes, strategies of coping, and informal and formal supports in their lives. The combination of photovoice and narrative methodologies forms the foundation of the narrative-photovoice methodology (Simmonds et al., 2015). The conceptual underpinnings of the two approaches interrelate and intertwine since the overall methodology relies on two sources of information: primarily photographs and secondarily descriptions of the photographs (Simmonds et al., 2015).

### **Recruitment, Participants, and Procedures**

This study was a collaborative, community-based research process. The first step was to work with the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (MRCSSI) to recruit seven Syrian refugee youth from the London, Ontario, area as co-researchers (see Appendix, Table 2). These youth met for 10 hours in total over 5 weeks. These meetings allowed the researchers to support the youth co-researchers in learning about qualitative research. Particularly, the group focused on learning about participatory action research, narrative research, and the photovoice method. Syrian youth co-researchers were invited to explore concepts of integration, resilience, migration, and methods related to narrative development. They then worked with the lead researcher and the public education and community programs manager at MRCSSI to host three photovoice discussions to introduce the youth to narrative methods in a hands-on way. Then, the youth were invited to engage in a photovoice process to construct their stories of integration and resilience. We organized three focus groups of five to six participants to share their stories of resilience and integration within the migration con-

text. Each group explained their photos' meanings and shared their experiences of integration. Selected photos can provide a means to explore feelings and retrieve events triggered in capturing a specific scene (Wang & Burris, 1997). When photos are discussed in a group, respondents can reflect on a selected image and kindle dialogue about certain concepts from different perspectives (Darbyshire et al., 2005). This process encourages people to share stories and draw on their experiences to explore new possibilities and develop unique perspectives (Nykiforuk et al., 2011).

Lastly, eight additional youth participants were recruited for in-depth interviews, with a particular focus on Syrian refugee youth who were less connected to services and group activities. In total, we recruited 30 participants who shared their stories of integration in Canada. All Syrian youth were aged 15–22 and had lived in Canada for an average of 4 years and 6 months. Some participants engaged in multiple data collection activities; therefore, the total reflects participants, not times participating (see Appendix, Table 3). The goal of diversifying data collection methods was to ensure breadth of participation so that those interested or not interested in photovoice could participate, and those who preferred group or individual participation could also be involved. Photovoice interviews, traditional focus groups, and in-depth interviews were all audio-recorded for analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the Western University Research Ethics Board. The co-researchers were compensated \$100 per month for 2 months, and the participants received \$20 per participation. Syrian youth participation in this study counted towards volunteer hours through MRCSSI. Focus groups and interviews took an average of 45 minutes. Focus groups were

conducted in MRCSSI, but most interviews were conducted online as preferred by youth.

The narrative development was guided by a semi-structured interview; questions were developed with the assistance of co-researchers. Concurrently, participants had opportunities to manage, organize, and select specific narratives. This was possible because open-ended questions were asked, and youth were able to guide the direction of their contributions. Examples of questions guiding the data collection are: (a) How would you describe the experience of Syrian refugee youth in Canada? (b) Tell me about what you feel this picture shows about your journey of integration into Canada. (c) What prompted you to take this picture?

## DATA ANALYSIS

All data were collected and analyzed through the multiple phases of co-researcher meetings, focus groups, photovoice development, sharing of photos in focus groups, and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was applied as the overall guide of this analysis, capturing commonalities and differences in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This analysis involved an inductive approach, in which data are the jumping off point for understanding and themes are proposed based on participants' contributions and stories. The initial open coding process took place while data collection was ongoing to organize the large volume of qualitative data from multiple sources. The thematic analysis of visual material was based on how participants described the photos and what stood out for them in deciding to take such photos. For instance, youth might depict a path and a destination to describe their integration journey as these codes were repeated across multiple sources of data, photos, focus groups, and personal interviews. The open coding was built from the participants' word choice.

Then, the repetition of specific narratives led to theme building. For example, when the description of an integration journey was depicted as a path and destination or as little achievements such as improving one's language, we grouped these similar narratives under subthemes. From there, to create the final themes for this analysis, we kept listening carefully to how youth built their stories, what words they used, how they expressed their feelings in different situations, and how they interpreted their life circumstances. Photos were selected to be included in the final report based on the similarities of descriptions provided by youth, and these similarities were coded under the same subcodes—for example, integration is a pathway; integration has a starting point and destinations; integrations are small achievements.

This process of coding, reviewing, and creating final themes was undertaken manually by three coders, the authors of this study. The first author, who speaks both Arabic and English, has extensive research translation experience. The other two researchers are an associate professor and a program manager at MRCSSI. Coding was done on translated versions of the data so that all analyzed data could be read by all members of the research team. The first author translated the data with the help of two Syrian college students. Rather than producing a literal meaning of the text, we preserved the data's original meaning by undertaking a free translation technique that focuses on maintaining the cultural meanings of the spoken words in relation to their context (Al-Awawdeh, 2021). Through the coding process, the research team discussed both consistently occurring and novel insights subjectively perceived by the team members. These formed a foundation for proposing preliminary themes. These

themes were continually refined through the writing process.

Pseudonymized names were used to protect participants' identities. Participants' photos, meanings they associated with the photos, and quotes from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews have been integrated into the findings section to ensure rigour (Morse, 2015).

## FINDINGS

Two thirds of participants were female; 25% had a Kurdish background. The mean age of participants was 17 years, with a 5-year mean length of time spent in Canada. Most participants preferred to express themselves in Arabic, especially when explaining complex concepts around integration and resilience. We noticed that participants who started the conversation in English switched to Arabic when telling stories of their childhood, when they lived in Syria or a transit country. Of the eight participants we interviewed and obtained detailed information about their employment, three male participants were working and studying at the same time, while one male participant had graduated from high school and was working. No female participants mentioned having a job.

Youth told stories of integration that reflected a complex, circuitous, and multi-layered experience. Youth highlighted key moments of movement or change, sometimes clear steps forwards or backwards in finding belonging, other times with no clear directionality. This experiential process involved moments of feeling or being more Canadian, and moments or feelings of being very excluded. Resilience came through frequently in their narratives as they navigated everything from explicit racism, to living in two different cultures, to complex adolescent relationships, to practicalities of success in school and employment. Overall,



we propose four themes through which we can understand the integration experiences of Syrian refugee youth: (a) integration as a chronological journey, (b) bridging or interweaving of cultures, (c) managing of exclusions, and (d) questioning the premise. Underpinning these four themes is a fifth that runs throughout: Resilience in personal strength and external support. These themes provide a detailed explanation of the rhythmic process of integration and supportive factors that enhance resilience. Youth photos are integrated through the analysis and displayed with ascribed meanings. In moving next to particular findings, it is important to mention that while this is not a focused gender analysis, the impact of gender in shaping youth experiences of integration is noted.

### Integration as a Chronological Journey

The theme of integration as a chronological journey was common in the stories of youth in this study. Connected with the idea of settlement, there was a clear perception that settlement should be a straightforward journey of consistent progress: becoming more integrated, becoming more settled, becoming more connected, becoming more Canadian. In this way, youth focused on particular milestones of achievement, suggesting a perception of integration stories as collections of positive steps. Examples of shared achievements were improving language proficiency by moving through and out of ESL (English as a second language) levels, acquiring employment, and gaining independence. The photos shared by youth participants represent their milestones in Canada. Youth who had been in Canada for longer reflected a perception that those who were newer would follow their same step-wise path towards integration and perceived

success. This concept of a linear, chronological journey is depicted in [Figures 2–5](#).

Through these photos and associated stories, we see how youth conceptualize integration as a journey. Aspects of “finding” and “arriving” come through as components of an integration process. In [Figure 5](#), one begins to see questions that arise regarding the linearity of this journey. However, the experience is still presented by these youth as generally forward moving. In this chronological conceptualization, youth arrive at varying levels of integration through a gradual process. By owning tangible material or accessing intangible resources and mastering certain skills over time, refugee youth find a sense of belonging within Canadian cultural norms that leads to a higher level of integration. This is accomplished through transitioning from ESL classes to being engaged in regular classes with Canadian students. The feeling of being at the same level as the Canadian students and receiving the same education as their Canadian counterparts creates a sense of equality, which, as a result, helps in making them feel part of the school community. Graduating from high school sets them on an expedited pathway of integration. Likewise, starting college, achieving high grades, and getting a job have been linked to facilitating high levels of integration.

### Bridging or Interweaving Cultures

For youth, integration is not a simple process from being Syrian to becoming Canadian. Rather, youth are constantly living both identities together, expressing different forms of those identities in different ways in different social settings. Participants shared a common sense that they entered their journey with the goal to learn and explore their new country. However, the integration process is a personal journey of newcomer youth making sense of and giving coherence to



**Figure 2**

*An Open Door*

*"My experience was like a door that has been opened for me. I had hoped to study, succeed in my life. The door symbolizes paths or ways for the things that I like to do in life. [The interviewer and participants commented on the side the door opens]. It is that I stand in front of the world. The whole world is forward. Look, there are trees, and it is green outside. There are things that give me the hope to keep going. I took this photo when I was 16 years old" (Raghad, 22 years old)*

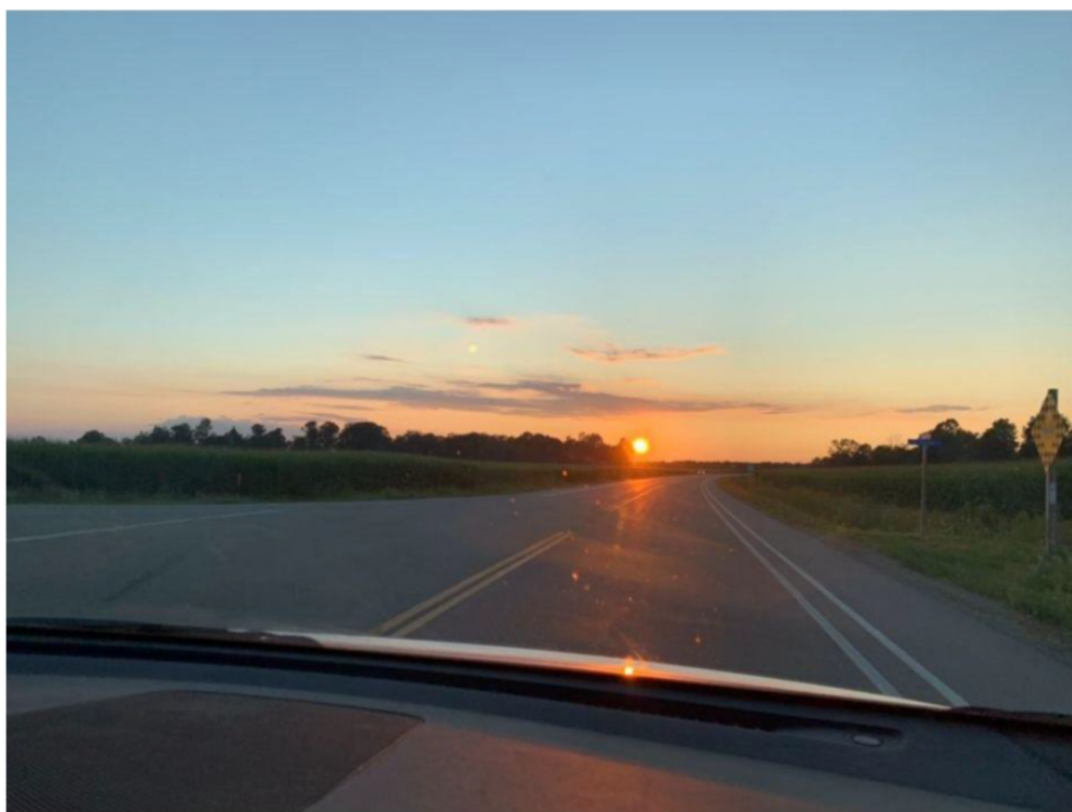
their experiences and identities upon arrival as refugees. For Syrian refugee youth, achieving co-existence means being able to dance between their Arabic culture and the Canadian culture. Youth wanted to feel safe in a context of Canadian values and principles while maintaining their family cultural ties and their Syrian-Arabic identity. This is reflected in the following quotes:

It took 5 months to be fluent in English and engaged in conversation, then they [Canadian peers] realized that, yeah, we have the same ideas, the

same goals. But I was scared that they may get an impression about me that I will never be able to change. Now, I am doing well, and we became friends with Canadians. (Safa, 18 years old)

They [Canadian peers] say to us that we are Muslim, so we are terrorists. So, after acquiring the language, I explain things for them, so they step back and with time I become part of them. I am just a normal person who escaped the war to build another peaceful life. (Najwa, 15 years old)

Moving to a new country and leaving one's homeland behind creates a sense of loss of separation from one's identity. Re-creating



**Figure 3**

*The Sunset*

*"In this picture, you can see the sun is far away, and the road is in front of the photo. From my experience, I wanted to arrive at some destinations, but they were far away from me. I kept going until I arrived, and I was still away from the sun. We were going to the beach when I took this picture. ... So, this photo represents my way and the difficulties that I have experienced till I arrive at where I want which is clear here in the second photo" (Yusra, 21 years old)*

a familiar home environment or finding commonalities helps to absorb the cultural shock induced by a migration experience and creates a sense of belonging to the new community. Youth spoke about wanting to belong where they now are while also staying connected to the home where they were from. Rahaf, 17 years old, took a picture of the sky in Canada and related it to what she knew in her home country, in an attempt to connect to home and emotionally integrate within her new place (Figure 6).

In speaking to his photo of a church (Figure 7), Adel expressed his openness to connect with different cultures to enhance social integration:

Although youth generally expressed a desire to bridge or interweave their Syrian and Canadian cultures, this was a multi-layered experience. Some youth were highly connected to religious and cultural practices that were not or could not be replicated in Canada. In this way, interweaving cultures came to some with a sense of loss, like something was missing within the new identity they were building. The most common form of this was the loss of the collective community celebrating the Muslim celebrations Ramadan and Eid. Eman, after living in Canada for six years, expressed:

I am someone who is very attached to my culture and the traditional Arabic lifestyle. We do not feel



**Figure 4**

#### *A Sandy Beach*

*"Then when you arrive, you are happy with things and start feeling comfortable in the community. If you see here in the first photo [Figure 3], it is empty, right? But in this photo, there are clouds, trees, and birds. There is life. In the first picture [Figure 3], it is just a road, empty and boring, but at the end of it is a great thing, the sun" (Yusra, 21 years old)*

it here, like Ramadan and Eid. I do not feel it, that is the only thing I probably dislike about living in Canada.

Eman noted that her feelings of loneliness had not been resolved despite the length of time she had been living in Canada. She said, "I still feel the sense of loneliness, but it is getting a bit better, but I still feel I do not belong here." The interviewer followed up by asking what could make her feel like she belongs. She answered, "Living our tradition during Ramadan and Eid and seeing things that represent our culture. Even when people meet with their small cluster [two families] to create a cultural atmosphere for them, it still does not feel normal."

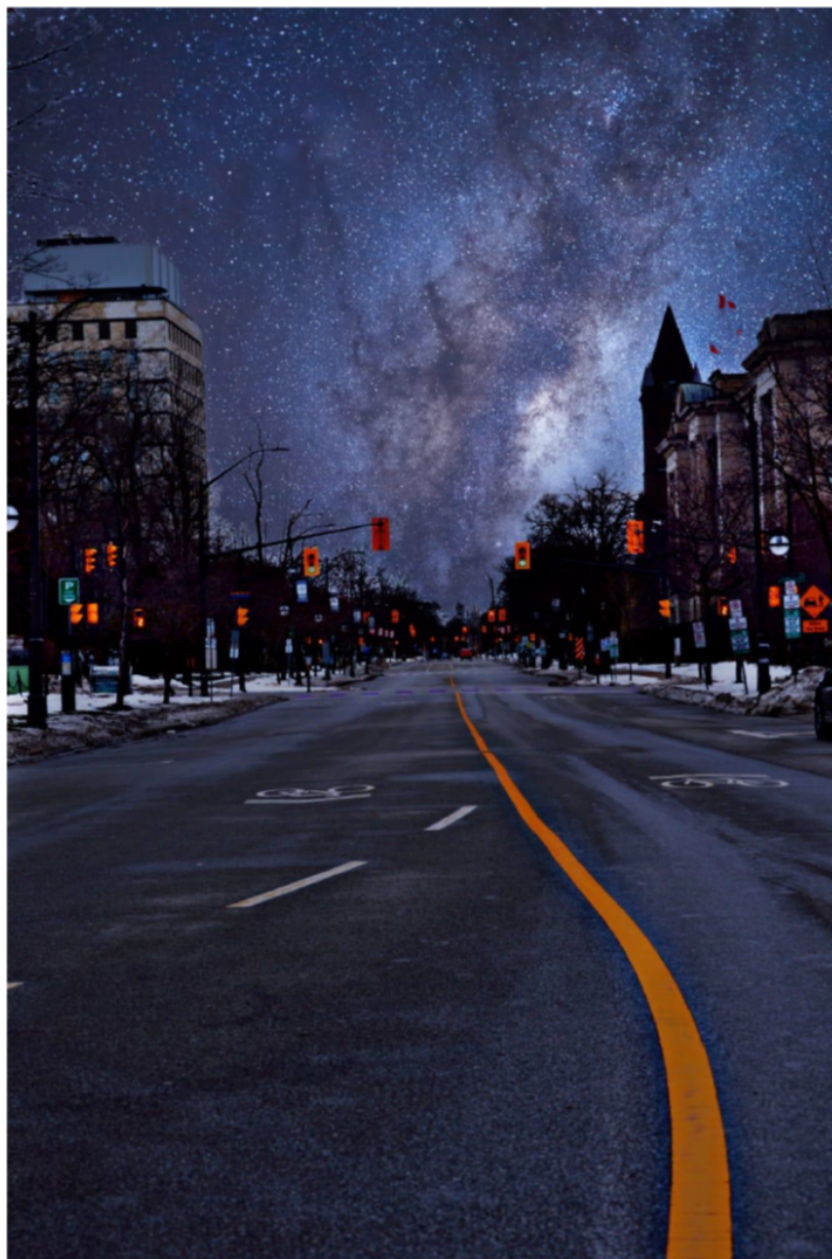
Bridging cultures included intergenerational complexities as different families approached Canadian cultural adaptations in different ways. Youth found themselves code-switching or living out different identities, for example, in school versus in the home.

Again, a simplistic narrative overlaid the integration experience—that it is a simple process of becoming Canadian. However, the reality for youth was a complex experience of tensions and contradictions, where they had to enact evolving and differing identities that shifted as much with social environments as with time.

### **Reckoning with Exclusions**

As noted, the linearity of an integration journey is altered when youth are confronted with explicit exclusion. For example, where language proficiency is presented as a straightforward, positive experience, presumably leading to enhanced social capital and therefore social support, there was a flipside to understanding English. Exchanging thoughts and ideas with Canadian students or strangers exposed youth to the consistent and grinding presence of xenophobia and Islamophobia as they found themselves more explicitly





**Figure 5**

*A Road in Downtown London, Ontario*

*"This picture depicts the hope I have. I took this one when I first came here [Canada] downtown. The road and the traffic lights mean a lot to me. There is an end to this road ... but when I go home and look at this picture, I see the road and see hope too. The traffic lights are obstacles, and it is going to turn red, but that does not mean you are going to stop all your life. Yes, it is an obstacle, but you are going to continue your life. There is no straight road without bumps. It is a long way, but I will arrive" (Adel, 19 years old)*

conscious of prejudice, racism, othering, and stereotyping. This realization confronted the presumptions youth had of integration as a straightforward journey and full integration as an inevitability. Full integration in this

group is defined as complete acceptance of one's origin and identity in the receiving country.

Therefore, as we spent time with participants and their narratives went deeper





**Figure 6**

*A Late Evening Sky*

*"This picture is close to my heart because it reminds me of the sky in my home country. In my country, the sky is clear. It does not snow or rain too often. So, in the evening, the sky shows lots of colours, very beautiful and fantastic colours. As if it was a panoramic scene. When I took this picture, it was in a place where I did not want to go, but when I looked at the sky, it felt beautiful and positive. It gave me a sense of harmony" (Rahaf, 17 years old)*

and became more personal, what we heard from many participants, particularly young women, was the idea of an endless pathway to unachievable integration. They expressed their disappointment in their integration journeys so far, which were circuitous rather

than straightforward. They talked about being labelled and targeted constantly as they are recognized by wearing a hijab as belonging to a certain racial and religious group. No degree of language acquisition altered this visible differentiation. In this



**Figure 7**

*The Large Gothic*

*"This picture depicts how I feel. When I took this picture, I didn't know that it is a church downtown. But then when I knew that this was a church, I loved it more because I like to be surrounded by different cultures" (Adel, 19 years old)*

regard, young women noted more frequent experiences of discrimination and harassment. Undergoing frequent abuses—such as being yelled at in public places to take the headcover off or being mocked for how they looked wearing a hijab in school—caused them to conclude that their integration journey was limited to narrow and superficial interactions with the people around them in either school, their workplace, or the community. This was reflected by Yara: "You talk with Canadians when it is necessary only." The rest of the participants agreed with her statement.

Integration is then a rhythmic experience, with moments of supreme comfort and belonging, shattered by moments of feeling overwhelmingly and hopelessly excluded.

Some participants had a sense that integration would only ever be superficial, with deep discrimination persisting. This was particularly confronting due to the racist murder of the Afzaal family, a Pakistani Canadian family, that occurred at the time of the study in the city where the study was taking place.

### Questioning the Premise

The fourth theme of integration we propose occurs at moments when youth fundamentally questioned the very idea of integrating. Related to the aforementioned issues, some participants spoke to giving up on the idea of integration outside their cultural group. They explained that as long as they were able to survive, perhaps there was no value or purpose in seeking Canadian integration.

These moments of questioning the very idea of integration occurred primarily in discussions about incidents of labelling, judgement, discrimination, and attack for who they are, how they look, or what they believe.

Resisting involvement in the Canadian community is intensified by experiences of discrimination and stereotyping. Discrimination from authority figures was particularly demoralizing, with young women sharing stories about experiences of being stereotyped by teachers. They noted both implicit and explicit discrimination in school. For example, participants noted how Muslim students were more likely to be accused of cheating in the absence of evidence. They also noted how students were singled out because of perceived cultural perspectives. Jameelah explained,

They do not ask other students except me. They pick on us in the same class, when the teacher talks about the gay community, they ask only Muslim girls who are covering their heads. And they ask Muslim boys. We said to them that we are not comfortable talking about these topics. ... These are the things they are picking on us, they want to trick us, they want us to say something, so they use it against us. I do not feel comfortable during these conversations. I understand it is a health matter, but do not pick on me because I am a Muslim girl, and I look Muslim because I cover my hair.

When participants felt hopeless about integration as a goal, they turned their focus to optimizing existence as much as possible within the Syrian or broader Muslim community. Where attempts to bridge cultures felt like failure, the response was to return to the perceived safer option of their culture of birth. For some, this translated into school environments where it was deemed safer to spend time with only other Muslim youth. This was a protective mechanism that led to less exposure to discrimination.

## Resilience in Personal Strength and External Support

Underpinning the complex and multi-faceted journey of integration are consistent stories of resilience. Whether in thriving or in suffering, Syrian youth participants were making the most of their internal and external resources. They observed the personal growth that they gained by handling a variety of tasks. Time management, multi-tasking, leadership, critical thinking, general knowledge acquisition, prioritization, and communication skills are some abilities youth refined when in the family's oldest sibling position. This was demonstrated in Khaled's story of becoming his father's driving instructor. Khaled smiled while expressing, "I taught my dad how to drive, instead of him teaching me how to drive."

Syrian youth acknowledged that their parents emigrated to Canada for the sake of offering them a brighter future. Therefore, they wanted to achieve the highest marks in school as a way to thank their parents. For all participants, older or younger, meeting family, cultural, and personal expectations was perceived as the righteousness that gave them a sense of worth and motivated them to accomplish more.

Several female participants recognized the tension between themselves and their Canadian classmates and used experiences of racism to motivate themselves to perform better in school to prove their abilities. They explained that their Canadian classmates thought newcomer youth did not understand things or that they were not as smart as they should be. This motivated participants to prove these classmates wrong. They pointed out that the impression their Canadian classmates had about the newcomers' abilities as weak was false, and it was only a matter of time until they learned the



language and could convey their ideas and express themselves clearly.

Throughout our time with the youth co-researchers and participants, the fatal hate attack on the Muslim family in London was emphasized. This incident disturbed youths' feelings of security and belonging and destroyed the sense of home they had been building in Canada. However, it also made them persevere in practising their freedom of religion. While some female youth locked themselves up for a longer period, and others left their houses less frequently as a response to the emotional distress and the fear that this incident left them with, the incident triggered other youth to more greatly express their Muslim identity. Several participants talked about the need to defend themselves and prove their existence by showing their identity as Muslim girls. Nuha, a 15-year-old girl, robustly stressed the significance of protecting one's identity in the face of hateful crimes; she added, "I wanna wear a skirt often with hijab on to show how Muslim I am."

In short, there is no singular pathway through which Syrian youth integrate, or not, into Canada. However, notable barriers are commonly shared, such as increased incidences of discrimination, racism, othering, and unmet family needs that can destabilize all journeys of integration and belonging in society. When refugee youth are able to enjoy positive integration experiences, they have the physical, mental, and social resources to accomplish their goals and show better settlement outcomes. Opposite that, when youth encounter frequent racism in the community and discrimination in school and the workplace, they question the value of integration entirely.

## DISCUSSION

The most common form of human narrative is chronological, advancing forwards in time, and this was true for Syrian youth in this study. Youth refugees' experience of integration has been described as complex. Youth spoke about experiences of achieving positive integration at times mixed with moments of failure or uncertainty. Their stories reflected feelings of belonging in their new society, yet also situations where they faced rejection and discrimination. Motivation for investing in their new community was driven by their ability to adapt and the presence of positive factors fostering their sense of resilience.

Throughout our conversations with refugee youth, they identified challenges during settlement that shaped their experiences of integration into Canada. These were related to adapting to the school system, finding secure employment, and experiencing discrimination. Previous studies echoed similar struggles by refugee youth during settlement in their new country ([Hassan et al., 2015](#); [Li & Que, 2016](#); [Nunn et al., 2017](#); [Reynolds & Bacon, 2018](#); [Rossiter et al., 2015](#); [Selimos & Daniel, 2017](#)). In the following section, issues related to financial resources, cultural identity, discrimination and racism, and workplace environment are discussed in relation to youth integration experiences and resilience.

Prejudice is a serious issue that refugee youth are facing in Canada ([Li & Que, 2016](#); [Rossiter et al., 2015](#)). Repeated incidents of discrimination and racism force youth to build relationships within the same ethnic group that they belong to in order to reduce exposure ([Beiser et al., 2015](#)). Making friends from the same ethnic group could lead to ethnic ghettoization, where, as a protective action, youth refugees create a limited social circle ([Shields & Lujan, 2019](#)).

On a community level, this delays integration and increases fragmentation within the community. From an economic perspective, this could lead to economic marginalization, which can occur through a certain mechanism wherein refugee youth struggle to build social networks to gain employment opportunities.

Limiting social integration limits youths' opportunities to build new identities that merge both their home culture and the new country culture—in this study, Canada. It has previously been found that the more youth balance this dichotomy of both cultures, the smoother the integration experience they will have (Sleijpen et al., 2016; Yohani et al., 2019). If this merging of two cultures is lost due to discrimination or lack of representation, integration becomes a difficult goal to achieve. To better enhance the experience of integration through cultural adjustment, schools can design culturally sensitive programs to form groups that bring refugee and citizen youth together to reduce the gap between the two cultures (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services—BRYCS, 2018). This requires schools and workplaces to actively confront Islamophobia.

Making refugee youth feel welcomed and engaged in the new country can also be achieved through workplace environments. A workplace's core values contribute to a youth's experiences of positive or negative integration. Workplaces that adopt a humanistic approach that is community oriented and responsive to workers' needs and perspectives are key in allowing youth to develop stronger ties with the new country. Colleagues' acts of compassion and empathy in the workplace have a positive impact on refugee youth feeling safe to build networks outside their cultural group (Shields & Lujan, 2019). Contrary to this, a workplace that does not support safe cultural integration

may leave no space for human touch in the services provided to refugee youth as workers and customers. Such an environment puts definite constraints on the process of integration and sense of belonging for youth (Shields & Lujan, 2019). Considering the workplace as another channel to influence positive integration in refugee youth experiences of connecting with their new community guarantees better integration outcomes (Marshall et al., 2016).

In terms of resilience, participants recognized several factors that helped them thrive in their journey. Supportive family, encouraging teachers, helpful friends, understanding mentors, and available tangible resources create a sense of empowerment for youth in both schools and workplaces (Marley & Mauki, 2019). Another factor brought up in almost every interview was interpersonal skills to overcome hardships. Having passion and setting practical goals gave youth the ability to deal with difficult situations and conquer adversity (Marley & Mauki, 2019). Moreover, family and cultural expectations as well as personal expectations that youth held for themselves played a pivotal role in shaping their experiences of integration and resilience. Because they aligned themselves with what was expected from them by their family and their cultural values, they felt they had guidance within themselves to make their goals clear and attainable. For example, firstborn youth may have certain responsibilities, such as contributing to the household budget, babysitting, following up with younger siblings on schoolwork, making medical appointments for family members, helping parents figure out how to pay bills and rent, providing translation and interpretation assistance to parents, and carrying out home chores. These responsibilities may encourage them to be persistent and diligent in different aspects of life.



A strong relationship between youth and their parents mitigates the negative impact of social isolation that participants reported experiencing in schools (Li & Que, 2016). They explained that several refugee parents did not have the opportunity to pursue education (Bloch & Hirsch, 2017), so they strongly encouraged and pushed their kids to receive education and maintain satisfying results in school. This can be also explained by looking at the essence of the refugee experience. One critical aspect of the refugee journey is that these youth had experienced intermittent education in their home country and the transit country (Morrice et al., 2020), creating a sense of deprivation from consistent education. Such previous experience is one factor that may motivate youth to do better in school after they have access to education in their new home (McWilliams & Wesley Bonet, 2016).

As much as the family structure helped youth to overcome various challenges while adjusting to the school environment and exploring relationships in the new community, teachers' support was also reported to allow for a positive integration process for youth (Li & Que, 2016). Teachers are situated in a position to assess their refugee youth students' needs and provide them with the needed support. Our youth participants reported being confused in their first year while navigating the school system. This may result in elevated anxiety and a lack of confidence in themselves (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). For some youth, struggles to understand the school system and extracurricular activities may turn them away from engaging in school and create social isolation (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). Teachers' support in this scenario is critical. Participants narrated detailed stories about how teachers' guidance and advice saved them from repeating the semester or taking subjects that did not fit with their

post-high school plans. General information about subject selection and required volunteer hours required to graduate from high school and get accepted in a specific program in post-secondary education determined their educational progress. Teachers who are well trained in refugee youth educational needs can successfully create a less stressful learning environment where youth can more successfully integrate into the school community (Wiseman & Galegher, 2019). However, it is important teachers receive adequate training in the specific educational and psychological needs of refugee youth, especially when youth performance in school determines the level of integration they will eventually achieve (Brewer, 2016; Guo et al., 2019). Extracurricular opportunities should be available for youth refugees to help them navigate the school system, so they do not end up studying subjects that prolong their stay in high school and preclude them from aiming to continue in post-secondary education.

Although forced migration is perceived and understood as one of the most difficult experiences that a person can live through, it also comes with benefits for those who survive it. In our study group, living as refugees and moving from one place to another within and outside their home country contributed to youths' intrapersonal skills and tendency to adapt in a new environment (Sleijpen et al., 2016). Although settlement is perceived as the final destination in the refugee journey, it is the start point of acquiring a new set of skills for youth to adjust to their new home (Nunn et al., 2017). This happens through helping parents and family members to navigate new systems and access essential services. Going through the pre-migration experience shows refugee youth the political and social factors that prevented them from enjoying a peaceful

life in their home country (Sleijpen et al., 2016). Then, moving to the receiving country and having the opportunity to build a new life expand their understanding of what goals they want to work towards and help them focus their efforts on getting better education and securing a well-paying job to lift their family out of their disadvantaged financial situation (Sleijpen et al., 2016). This adversity had great influence on shaping their identities; however, the availability of tangible and intangible resources for youth fosters their sense of resilience and facilitates successful integration.

The greater resilience youth experience, the more effective their integration becomes. Therefore, designing accessible programs related to education and employment for youth refugees can enhance their sense of resilience and thus the integration process. For example, scheduling meetings to discuss post-secondary plans and connecting students to scholarships, bursaries, or other forms of financial aid can be a major breakthrough for refugee youth, especially when they are expected to study and work at the same time. Approaches to empathy building and intercultural competency can be integrated into the school system, where both teachers and students learn about different cultures.

This study is a one-time analysis; the long-term interaction between supportive factors and risk factors can be better observed through a longitudinal study, which can track development in identity and changes in resilience that influence the integration experience. That being said, youth provided examples throughout this analysis of various points in time where their sense of identity and resilience was challenged by negative circumstances related to incidents in the family or broader community that hindered their integration. From this stance, it can be

inferred that both past and present situations continue to reshape youth sense of resilience and influence their ability to adapt to their new country. We believe that this study balances the existing body of knowledge dominated by Western theories pertaining to resilience and integration and youth's own understanding of these concepts as reflected by the implemented design.

## CONCLUSION

Through photography as a platform of discussion, youth co-researchers and participants were able to uncover the complex nature of integration for Syrian newcomers to Canada. Youth lived the dynamic tension of hurrying to integrate while integration was an endless process. Integration of Syrian youth refugees was not just a personal journey; it involved social pressure from friends and classmates in school as they strived to belong among English-speaking Canadians. Youth showed laudable resilience in navigating the complex and often competing pressures and responsibilities while also highlighting a diversity of experiences. The peer pressure of high school or post-secondary years becomes that much more accentuated when combined with pressures related to integration and settlement. Supports for English-language acquisition, employment, and anti-racism are all relevant to the stories participants shared. Future work should consider best modes to enact these supports for Muslim newcomer youth.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1**

*Main Concepts and Definitions*

Concept	Definition
Resilience	"The capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar, 2011, p. 17)
Integration	"The process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that follows immigration" (Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2016, p. 11)
Identity	"An individual's organized constellation of traits; attitudes; self-knowledge; cognitive structures; past, present, and future self-representations; social roles; relationships; and group affiliations" (Guenther et al., 2020, p. 2136)

**Table 2**

*Co-researchers demographic information*

No	Gender	Age	Duration in Canada	Role in the study
1	Female	22	5 years	Co-researcher
2	Female	21	6 years	Co-researcher
3	Female	16	5 years	Co-researcher
4	Female	15	6 years	Co-researcher
5	Male	19	1 year, 5 months	Co-researcher
6	Male	16	5 years, 4 months	Co-researcher
7	Male	15	6 years	Co-researcher

**Table 3***Recruiting Process and Procedures*

<b>Data collection step</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Procedures/purpose</b>
Step 1: Working closely with the co-researchers	7 Syrian refugee youth (4 female, 3 male; aged 15–22)	Co-researchers: Explore concepts of integration, resilience, and migration. Collaborate on designing the focus groups and individual interviews process and guidelines. Assist with recruiting participants. Take part in the data collection process as research participants and research facilitators.	Met for 5 weeks (10 hours total). Researchers support the youth co-researchers in learning about participatory action research, narrative research, and the photovoice method.
Step 2: Three photovoice discussions	9 Syrian refugee youth (5 female, 4 male; aged 15–22; includes some of the co-researchers)	Participate in the photovoice discussion.	Participants shared the photos they captured and explained how they relate to their migration experiences. Participants engaged in small group discussions and told stories about their experiences of living in a new country.

*Continued on next page*

Table 3

Continued

Data collection step	Number of participants	Role	Procedures/purpose
Step 3: Three focus groups	17 Syrian refugee youth (16 female, 1 male; aged 15–22; includes one of the co-researchers)	Explore the meaning of integration and resilience in the context of migration.	Participants engaged in conversa- tions to explore the meaning of their integration and resilience within the migration context.
Step 4: Individual interviews	8 Syrian refugee youth (3 female, 5 male; aged 15–22)	Explore the meaning of integration and resilience in the context of migration.	In-depth interviews, with a particular focus on Syrian refugee youth less connected to services and group activities.
Total number of participants	30		

*Note.* Some participants participated in multiple data collection activities; therefore, the total number reflects participants, not total times participating.



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