

Religious Identity Construction among Muslim Adolescents in Islamic Schools: A Qualitative Exploration of Peer Interactions

 Abdelrahim Fathy Ismai^{1*}, Fawz Saad Al-Qahtani², Afaf Abdelah Othman², Ahlam Abdelaziem Hamed Ahmed³, Alaaeldin Ahmed Hamid¹, Ahmed Zakaria Hegazy¹

¹Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, King Faisal University, Al Ahsa 31982, Saudi Arabia

²College of Education, Najran University, Najran, Saudi Arabia

³College of Sciences and Humanities in Jubail, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Jubail, Saudi Arabia

 afismail@kfu.edu.sa*

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Abstract

Religious identity among Muslim adolescents is commonly examined through the roles of family, religious education, and school influences. However, less attention has been given to how religious identity is constructed through everyday peer interactions within Islamic schools. This study explored this issue using six focus group discussions with 34 Muslim adolescents (17 males and 17 females; mean age = 15.47 years, SD = 0.51) enrolled in two Islamic secondary schools in Egypt. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. First, Peer Interactions as a Source of Religious Influence and Learning highlighted the role of friendships, religious discussions, and peer influence on religious attitudes and practices. Second, Negotiating Religious Meanings within Peer Groups showed how students were exposed to different viewpoints, discussed religious questions, and managed disagreement within their peer networks. Third, Religious Identity Between Institutional Expectations and Everyday Realities reflected students' experiences of navigating the gap between religious ideals, social media influences, everyday experiences, and perceptions of institutional rigidity. Fourth, The Islamic School as a Context for Religious Identity Construction illustrated the role of religious guidance, school culture, and the opportunities and limitations provided by the school environment. The findings suggest that religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents is shaped through peer interactions. Institutional expectations, school culture, digital environments, and everyday social experiences emerged as contextual factors that influence these interactions. Peer groups emerged not only as sources of influence but also as spaces in which religious meanings are discussed, interpreted, and negotiated.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical period for identity development. During this stage, young people seek to understand who they are and where they belong within their social environments. For Muslim adolescents, this process also involves developing a religious identity through interactions with family, educational institutions, religious communities, and broader social contexts rather than in isolation (De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Batool & Ghayas, 2021). Religious identity includes religious beliefs, practices, and a sense of belonging to a religious community. It develops through a gradual process in which adolescents interpret religious values, internalize beliefs, and integrate them into their self-concepts while negotiating personal

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experiences, social expectations, and religious commitments (Batool & Ghayas, 2021; Faradhillah, 2024). Rather than being a fixed outcome of religious teaching, religious identity is shaped through ongoing exploration, interpretation, and negotiation of religious meanings within different social contexts (De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Donlic, 2023; Zulfiqar, 2022). Family, religious education, and community institutions remain important sources of religious learning, but adolescents also actively make sense of religious beliefs through their own experiences and social relationships (Gozali, 2025; Ulum & Asy'arie, 2024).

Peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescence as young people spend more time with friends and classmates. Through friendships, discussions, shared activities, and everyday interactions, adolescents exchange ideas, develop common understandings about values and social expectations, and shape different aspects of their identities. From a social constructionist perspective, identity is continuously shaped through interaction with others rather than acquired only from authority figures (Zulfiqar, 2022). Previous research has shown that peer groups provide opportunities for social learning, acceptance, belonging, and identity formation (Shen et al., 2023). Studies conducted in Islamic educational settings have also highlighted the importance of peer interactions in supporting students' engagement in Islamic learning, religiosity, and participation in shared values (Munjiat et al., 2025; Nada et al., 2025; Ardianti et al., 2025). Beyond reinforcing accepted religious values, peer interactions provide opportunities for adolescents to discuss religious questions, exchange viewpoints, compare experiences, and negotiate different understandings of religious beliefs and practices (Donlic, 2023; Zulfiqar, 2022).

Despite these contributions, important questions remain about how religious identity is constructed through peer interactions in everyday school life. Most previous studies have emphasized family, religious education, or institutional influences on religious identity (Islam & Al-Asyhar, 2019; Gozali, 2025; Ainun et al., 2025; Sari & Indrasari, 2026), while giving less attention to how adolescents themselves construct, interpret, and negotiate religious meanings through their interactions with peers. Although peer influence has been widely recognized, limited research has examined peer interactions as social spaces where religious meanings are discussed, interpreted, and negotiated within Islamic school settings (Donlic, 2023; Zulfiqar, 2022).

Islamic secondary schools in Egypt provide an appropriate context for examining religious identity construction because religious values are integrated into teaching, school activities, and everyday school life. In these schools, students learn through formal religious instruction while also interacting with classmates in ways that shape how religious ideas are discussed and understood. Previous research has shown that Islamic school environments support religious learning and provide opportunities for students to engage with shared religious values and social experiences (Sari & Indrasari, 2026; Rosady, 2025; Makalao et al., 2025). At the same time, regular peer interactions create opportunities for students to discuss, interpret, and negotiate religious meanings in their everyday school lives. This combination of formal religious education and everyday peer interactions makes Islamic secondary schools in Egypt a relevant setting for examining how religious identity is constructed among Muslim adolescents.

To address this gap, the present study explores how Muslim adolescents construct their religious identities through peer interactions in Islamic secondary schools in Egypt. The study focuses on how peer interactions influence religious learning, the negotiation of religious meanings, and the development of religious identity within the school context. Accordingly, the following research question guided the study: How do peer interactions within Islamic schools contribute to the construction of religious identity among Muslim adolescents?

METHODS

Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how Muslim adolescents construct their religious identities through peer interactions within Islamic schools. Focus group discussions were used as the primary method of data collection. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and accounts of everyday peer interactions rather than measure or quantify them.

The study did not seek to determine the prevalence of particular forms of peer interaction. Instead, it explored how students described these interactions and how they related them to their understanding of religious identity. Qualitative research is well suited to exploring participants' perspectives and understanding social experiences within their natural contexts (McAlister et al., 2017).

Focus group discussions were selected because the study examined a social process that develops through interaction with others. They allowed participants to discuss peer relationships, religious conversations, shared experiences, and the ways these interactions contributed to the construction of their religious identities. An overview of the research design is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the Research Design

Component	Description
Research Design	Qualitative
Participants	Muslim adolescents (Grade 10 students)
Setting	Islamic secondary schools
Data Collection	Focus group discussions
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis
Trustworthiness	Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability
Ethical Considerations	Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation

Participants

The study involved six focus group discussions conducted in two Islamic secondary schools in Egypt. Three groups were conducted in a boys' school and three in a girls' school. To protect participants' privacy and maintain institutional confidentiality, the names of the schools are not reported. This precaution was considered particularly important given the study's focus on religious identity and religious experiences.

The participants were first-year secondary school students (Grade 10) aged between 15 and 16 years. This age group was selected because adolescence is a period in which peer relationships become increasingly important, making it particularly relevant to the study's focus on peer interactions and religious identity construction.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 34)

Variable	Category	n
Gender	Male	17
	Female	17
School Type	Islamic Boys' School	17
	Islamic Girls' School	17
Age Range	15–16 years	
Mean Age	15.47 years (SD = 0.51)	
Focus Groups	6 groups	34

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The recruitment process began with a small number of students who met the study criteria. These students were invited to

recommend classmates who might also be interested in participating. Recommended students were not included automatically but were approached individually, informed about the purpose of the study, and invited to participate on a voluntary basis. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw at any time without any consequences. To encourage a range of perspectives and reduce peer-selection bias, participants were recruited across six focus groups from both boys' and girls' schools rather than from a single friendship group. Each focus group included between five and seven participants. In total, the study involved 34 students (17 males and 17 females) distributed across six focus groups. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at King Faisal University (Approval No. KFU-2026-ETHICS4843). Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the administrations of the two participating schools. According to the procedures of the participating schools and the requirements of the Research Ethics Committee, approval from the school administrations together with students' informed consent was sufficient for conducting the study.

Participants received information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the nature of their participation. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could decline to participate or withdraw at any stage without any penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the focus group discussions, including consent for audio recording.

The focus group discussions were conducted separately for male and female students. All sessions were facilitated by members of the research team. The facilitators had no teaching, administrative, or supervisory relationship with the participants, and no teachers or school administrators were present during the discussions. This helped reduce potential power dynamics and encouraged students to express their views openly during the discussions.

All data were treated confidentially. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and participant codes (e.g., Student 1, Student 2) were used when reporting quotations. The names of the participating schools were not disclosed to protect institutional confidentiality. Audio recordings, transcripts, and demographic information were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. The data were used solely for the purposes of this study.

Instruments

Development of the Focus Group Guide

The main instrument used in this study was a focus group discussion guide developed to explore how Muslim adolescents construct religious identity through peer interactions in Islamic school settings. The guide was developed based on the research questions and the literature reviewed in the study. Particular attention was given to issues related to religious identity, peer relationships, religious discussions, shared understandings of religious practices, and the role of the school environment in shaping students' experiences.

The focus group guide was organized around four domains that reflected the objectives of the study: Understanding and describing religious identity; Peer Interactions and Everyday Practices; Religious discussions and the negotiation of religious meanings; and The role of the Islamic school environment in shaping religious identity.

A pilot focus group discussion was conducted with five students who were not included in the main study sample. The pilot session was used to review the clarity of the questions, the order in which they were presented, and the suitability of the discussion process for students in

this age group. The pilot also helped determine an appropriate duration for the focus group sessions, which was estimated at approximately 70 minutes.

Based on the pilot session, several revisions were made to the guide. These included simplifying the wording of some questions, adjusting their sequence, and adding follow-up prompts to help participants explain their views and provide examples from their experiences. Table 3 presents the domains of the focus group guide.

Table 3. Focus Group Guide Domains

Domain	Focus of Discussion
Peer Interactions and Everyday Practices	Friendships, peer relationships, everyday social practices, and interactions that influence students' perceptions of their religious identities
Religious Discussions and Meaning Negotiation	Conversations about religious beliefs, practices, expectations, and how students discuss, interpret, and negotiate religious meanings within peer groups
Understanding Religious Identity	How students understand, describe, and express their religious identities
Islamic School Environment	Students' perceptions of how the culture and daily life of the Islamic school shape religious identity through peer interactions

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through six focus group discussions conducted during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The discussions were held in person at the participating schools rather than online. Three focus groups were conducted with male students and three with female students. Because the two schools were gender-segregated, the discussions were organized separately for male and female participants.

Each focus group session lasted approximately 70 minutes and was facilitated by the researchers. All discussions were conducted in Arabic to allow participants to express their ideas and experiences using the language they normally use in everyday conversations. The discussions were guided by the four domains included in the focus group guide: understanding religious identity, peer interactions and everyday practices, religious discussions and meaning negotiation, and the role of the Islamic school environment. These domains served as reference points during the discussions while allowing participants to introduce issues and experiences that they considered relevant.

All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' prior consent. Following each session, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed several times before formal coding began in order to develop familiarity with the content and to identify recurring ideas. The focus group discussions were conducted and transcribed in Arabic. For reporting purposes, the participant quotations presented in this paper were translated into English by the research team. The translations aimed to preserve the original meaning of the participants' statements while ensuring clarity and readability in English.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to become familiar with the data. The researchers then conducted manual open coding by assigning initial codes to segments of text that reflected participants' experiences, views, and descriptions related to religious identity and peer interactions. Similar codes were compared and grouped into broader categories. These categories were reviewed and refined through discussion among the research team before being developed into broader themes that represented recurring patterns in the data. Examples from the coding process are presented in Table 4 to illustrate how participant statements were transformed into initial codes, broader categories, and final themes.

Coding was conducted collaboratively by the research team. The researchers independently reviewed portions of the transcripts and compared their initial codes. Differences in coding and interpretation were discussed until agreement was reached. Categories and

themes were then reviewed several times to ensure that they reflected the participants' accounts rather than the research questions (McAlister et al., 2017).

Table 4. Illustrative Examples of the Development of Codes, Categories, and Themes

Illustrative Participant Statement	Initial Code	Category	Theme
"My friends encourage me to pray and remind me when I forget."	Peer encouragement	Religious learning through peer interactions	Peer Interactions as a Source of Religious Influence and Learning
"We sometimes discuss religious questions and have different opinions."	Religious discussion and disagreement	Negotiating religious meanings	Negotiating Religious Meanings within Peer Groups
"The school encourages us to follow religious values through daily activities."	School religious guidance	School support for religious identity	The Islamic School as a Context for Religious Identity Construction
"Sometimes social media and daily life make it difficult to follow everything we learn at school."	Tension between religious ideals and everyday experiences	Navigating religious expectations	Religious Identity Between Institutional Expectations and Everyday Realities

Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently. After each focus group discussion, the researchers reviewed the transcript, examined newly identified codes, and compared them with those from previous discussions. This process allowed the researchers to refine categories throughout the analysis and monitor the emergence of new themes.

The number of focus groups was determined according to the principle of data saturation. Saturation was assessed by examining whether new codes and categories continued to emerge after each discussion. By the fourth focus group, most codes related to peer interactions, religious identity, and school experiences had already been identified, and only a small number of additional codes emerged. The fifth and sixth focus groups mainly confirmed and enriched the existing categories and themes rather than producing substantially new findings. Based on this pattern, the researchers concluded that an adequate level of data saturation had been achieved.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several procedures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Data were collected through six focus group discussions involving both male and female students. This allowed the researchers to compare perspectives across different groups and examine whether similar patterns appeared across the discussions. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently. After each focus group discussion, the researchers reviewed the transcripts, discussed emerging codes, and compared them with findings from previous discussions. This process supported the ongoing refinement of categories and themes and helped monitor data saturation throughout the study. Coding was conducted collaboratively by the research team. Portions of the transcripts were reviewed independently, and the researchers compared coding decisions before discussing any differences until agreement was reached. This process helped improve consistency in coding and theme development.

During the analysis, recurring patterns were examined across all focus groups. Statements that differed from the main patterns were also reviewed before the categories and themes were finalized. This helped ensure that the findings reflected the range of participants' experiences rather than only the most common views. A clear record of the analysis process was maintained throughout the study, including the development and refinement of codes, categories, and themes. This helped maintain a clear link between the original data and the final themes and increased the transparency of the analysis.

RESULTS

Analysis of the focus group discussions identified four interrelated themes related to religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents in Islamic schools. The findings showed that peer interactions played a central role in religious identity construction through religious learning, discussion, and the negotiation of religious meanings. The analysis also identified broader social and school contexts that shaped these peer interactions and influenced students' religious experiences. The themes identified were Peer Interactions as a Source of Religious Influence and Learning, Negotiating Religious Meanings within Peer Groups, Religious Identity Between Institutional Expectations and Everyday Realities, and The Islamic School as a Context for Religious Identity Construction. The findings for each theme are presented below.

Theme 1: Peer Interactions as a Source of Religious Influence and Learning

Participants consistently described peer interactions as an important part of their religious experiences. Friends and classmates were often described as sources of religious learning, advice, support, and discussion. These interactions usually occurred in everyday situations, such as during breaks, after classes, or while talking with friends. Participants explained that these conversations helped them understand religious issues, reflect on different ideas, and think about how religion related to their daily lives. Three subthemes were identified within this theme: learning through everyday peer interactions, religious discussions among friends, and peer influence on religious attitudes and practices.

Learning Through Everyday Peer Interactions

Participants reported that many of their religious understandings developed through everyday interactions with friends and classmates. These interactions included conversations during breaks, discussions after classes, and informal exchanges about religious issues and daily experiences. Students often described peers as people from whom they could learn practical perspectives about religion, particularly when discussing situations they encountered in everyday life. Illustrative quotations:

Student 5: "Sometimes I understand an issue better after talking about it with my friends."

Student 12: "Students often share experiences with each other, and this helps us think about things differently."

Student 19: "Many discussions happen outside the classroom, especially when students are talking together during the day."

Student 28: "Friends sometimes explain things in a way that feels closer to our daily experiences."

These statements suggest that peer interactions supported religious learning beyond formal classroom instruction. Participants described learning through everyday conversations that helped them understand religious issues in relation to their own experiences. Rather than simply receiving information, students used these interactions to interpret religious ideas together and connect them with everyday life.

Religious Discussions Among Friends

Religious discussions were mentioned in all focus groups. Participants described conversations about religious practices, moral issues, current events, and questions related to everyday life. Some students reported that these discussions occurred spontaneously, while

others described them as responses to situations they encountered at school or online. Students also indicated that these discussions often included different viewpoints. Illustrative quotations:

Student 8: “Students often talk about religious topics when something happens that raises questions.”

Student 14: “Sometimes a discussion starts with a simple question and then everyone shares their opinion.”

Student 23: “We do not always agree, but we usually discuss different views.”

Student 30: “Many conversations happen between students even when teachers are not involved.”

These discussions show that peer interaction provided opportunities for students to ask questions, exchange different viewpoints, and consider alternative ways of understanding religious issues. Participants described these conversations as part of the process through which they reflected on their own religious views and responded to the views of others.

Peer Influence on Religious Attitudes and Practices

Participants frequently referred to the influence of peers on their religious attitudes and everyday practices. Friends encouraged particular behaviors, reminded one another about religious obligations, and discussed appropriate conduct in everyday situations. At the same time, participants recognized that peer influence was not always the same and could vary across different friendship groups. Illustrative quotations:

Student 3: “Sometimes friends remind each other about things they should or should not do.”

Student 16: “Being around certain friends can affect how students think about religious issues.”

Student 25: “Students often notice what their friends are doing and may be influenced by it.”

Student 34: “Different groups of friends can have different expectations about behavior.”

These statements indicate that peer influence extended beyond discussion to everyday religious attitudes and practices. Participants described observing one another, encouraging behaviors, and responding to group expectations. Together, these interactions contributed to how students understood and practiced their religious identity in their daily school lives. Participants across all focus groups consistently described peer interactions as part of their everyday religious experiences. Friendships, informal conversations, and shared experiences were not only sources of information but also opportunities to discuss religious questions, reflect on different viewpoints, and shape religious attitudes and practices. These findings suggest that peer interactions formed an important part of religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents within Islamic schools.

Theme 2: Negotiating Religious Meanings within Peer Groups

Participants described peer groups as settings in which religious ideas, practices, and viewpoints were discussed, questioned, and compared. Across the focus group discussions, students explained that interactions with friends allowed them to exchange opinions, consider different perspectives, and respond to different understandings of religious issues. These discussions extended beyond formal religious topics and included everyday behavior, social relationships, media content, and contemporary issues. Three subthemes were identified within

this theme: exposure to different religious viewpoints, discussing and questioning religious issues, and managing disagreement within peer groups.

Exposure to Different Religious Viewpoints

Participants reported that interactions with peers exposed them to different perspectives on religious matters. Students explained that classmates did not always interpret religious teachings in the same way and that discussions often revealed a variety of viewpoints. Differences in family backgrounds, personal experiences, social media use, and individual interests were mentioned as reasons for these different perspectives. Illustrative quotations:

Student 6: "Not everyone understands religious issues in the same way, even if they attend the same school."

Student 13: "Students sometimes have different opinions because they hear different things at home or online."

Student 22: "When people talk together, you realize that there are several ways students think about the same issue."

Student 31: "Some students are influenced by what they read or watch, while others rely more on what they learn in school."

These statements show that peer interactions exposed students to different ways of understanding religious issues. Rather than assuming that all students shared the same views, participants described becoming aware of different interpretations through everyday conversations with classmates. This exposure encouraged them to compare different viewpoints when thinking about religious issues.

Discussing and Questioning Religious Issues

Participants frequently referred to discussions in which students raised questions about religious topics or sought clarification from their peers. These conversations often began when students encountered issues they considered unclear or when they were exposed to different opinions. Several participants explained that they first discussed these questions with friends before asking teachers, parents, or other people. Illustrative quotations:

Student 4: "If a student has a question, they often talk about it with friends first."

Student 17: "Sometimes students discuss an issue among themselves before asking a teacher."

Student 24: "There are topics that students are curious about, and they often start by talking to each other."

Student 29: "People sometimes ask questions because they hear different opinions and want to understand the issue better."

These quotations suggest that peer discussions provided an accessible space for students to explore religious questions before seeking formal guidance. Participants described asking questions, exchanging ideas, and trying to understand different opinions together. This process supported reflection on religious issues through interaction with peers.

Managing Disagreement Within Peer Groups

Differences in opinion were reported in all focus groups. Participants described situations in which students disagreed about religious issues, social practices, or interpretations of particular topics. These disagreements were usually discussed within friendship groups and did not necessarily result in conflict. Illustrative quotations:

Student 8: “Students do not always agree, especially when discussing issues that have different opinions around them.”

Student 15: “Sometimes everyone keeps their own view, and the discussion just ends there.”

Student 27: “There are cases where students change their opinion after hearing different arguments.”

Student 33: “People often continue discussing an issue even when they do not reach the same conclusion.”

These statements show that disagreement was a normal part of peer interaction. Participants described different ways of responding to disagreement, including maintaining their own views, reconsidering their opinions, or continuing discussions without reaching agreement. These interactions allowed students to reflect on different perspectives while developing their own understanding of religious issues. Across the focus group discussions, participants consistently described peer interactions as spaces where religious ideas were discussed, questioned, compared, and interpreted. Rather than simply exchanging information, students used these discussions to consider different viewpoints, reflect on their own understanding, and respond to the views of others. These findings suggest that negotiating religious meanings through everyday peer interactions formed an important part of religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents in Islamic schools.

Theme 3: Religious Identity Between Institutional Expectations and Everyday Realities

Participants described a broader social and school context that shaped their everyday religious experiences and the peer interactions through which religious identity was constructed. While the school was viewed as an important source of religious guidance, students also referred to social media, family members, public figures, and everyday experiences as influences on how they understood religious issues. These experiences formed the context in which discussions with friends and classmates took place. Four subthemes were identified within this theme: the gap between religious ideals and everyday practice, social media and alternative sources of religious understanding, balancing school expectations and everyday experiences, and perceptions of religious rules and institutional rigidity.

The Gap Between Religious Ideals and Everyday Practice

A common issue raised by participants was the difference between the religious values presented in school and the situations they encountered outside the classroom. Students frequently referred to examples from daily life in which religious teachings appeared clear and consistent, while real-life situations seemed more complex. Participants noted that they sometimes observed behaviors among peers, relatives, and members of the wider community that differed from the values emphasized in school. Illustrative quotations:

Student 4: “In school, things often seem very clear. Outside school, people deal with situations differently, and sometimes it becomes difficult to know what should be followed.”

Student 11: “We learn about certain values in class, but when we look around us, not everyone acts according to those values.”

Student 15: “Some things seem easy when we study them, but when you see what happens around you, the situation becomes different.”

Student 27: “Sometimes students hear one thing at school and see something else outside school.”

These statements describe the context in which students experienced differences between religious ideals and everyday life. Participants explained that these differences often became topics of discussion with friends, providing opportunities to think about how religious values could be understood and practiced in everyday situations.

Social Media and Alternative Sources of Religious Understanding

Participants frequently referred to social media as part of their everyday religious experiences. Students reported encountering religious content through videos, online discussions, social media accounts, and public figures. References to these sources appeared in nearly all focus groups. Some participants indicated that they followed religious content online regularly, while others described social media as a place where different religious viewpoints could be encountered. Illustrative quotations:

Student 7: "Sometimes I learn about religious issues from social media before I hear about them at school."

Student 18: "Online, you can find many different opinions about the same topic."

Student 21: "Students often share videos or clips with each other and then discuss them."

Student 30: "Sometimes people follow speakers online more than they follow what is discussed in class."

These statements show that social media introduced students to different religious ideas and viewpoints. Participants explained that these ideas often became part of conversations with friends, creating opportunities to compare different perspectives through everyday peer interactions.

Balancing School Expectations and Everyday Experiences

Participants described situations in which they navigated different expectations related to religion. Discussions included references to school rules, peer relationships, family expectations, and experiences outside school. Students frequently mentioned that they encountered situations that required personal decisions about how to respond to different viewpoints and expectations. Illustrative quotations:

Student 9: "There are things that seem simple when explained in class, but when you face them in real life, they become more complicated."

Student 22: "Sometimes students try to follow what the school expects, but they are also influenced by their friends."

Student 13: "You hear different opinions from different people, and sometimes you have to decide what makes sense to you."

Student 31: "Students are affected by what happens at school, but also by what happens outside it."

These quotations show that students encountered different expectations in their daily lives. Participants described discussing these experiences with friends as they tried to understand different viewpoints and decide how to respond to them.

Perceptions of Religious Rules and Institutional Rigidity

A number of participants referred to what they viewed as rigid approaches to certain religious expectations and school regulations. These comments appeared more frequently in discussions about school rules, religious activities, and expected forms of behavior. Some

students stated that they understood the purpose of these expectations but felt that certain issues were sometimes presented without sufficient discussion or consideration of changing circumstances. Illustrative quotations:

Student 6: “Sometimes the rules are presented as fixed, and students are expected to follow them without asking questions.”

Student 17: “There are topics that students want to discuss, but they do not always feel comfortable raising them.”

Student 24: “Some students feel that there should be more opportunities to talk about current issues.”

Student 33: “Not all students see things in the same way, but sometimes there is little room for discussion.”

These statements describe participants' views of the school environment. Some students explained that questions they did not raise in formal settings were later discussed with friends, allowing different opinions to be shared and considered through peer interaction. Across the focus group discussions, participants described school expectations, social media, family influences, and everyday experiences as the broader context in which peer interactions took place. Rather than acting independently, these factors shaped the situations that students later discussed, interpreted, and negotiated with their friends while constructing their religious identities.

Theme 4: The Islamic School as a Context for Religious Identity Construction

Participants frequently described the Islamic school as the setting in which many of their everyday peer interactions took place. The school provided religious instruction, daily routines, and shared activities, while also creating opportunities for students to discuss religious issues, exchange ideas, and learn from one another. Participants explained that their religious experiences were shaped not only by teachers and formal lessons but also by their interactions with classmates throughout the school day. Three subthemes were identified within this theme: the school as a source of religious guidance, religious culture beyond the classroom, and opportunities and limitations within the school environment.

The School as a Source of Religious Guidance

Participants commonly described the school as an important source of religious learning and guidance. Students referred to religious lessons, school activities, assemblies, and interactions with teachers as regular parts of their educational experiences. Both male and female participants explained that religious values were consistently present throughout the school day. Illustrative quotations:

Student 2: “The school plays an important role because religion is part of many activities, not only the lessons.”

Student 10: “Students hear religious messages in different situations throughout the school day.”

Student 18: “Teachers often remind students about values and behavior, not only academic subjects.”

Student 26: “Religion is present in many parts of school life.”

These statements show that the school provided a shared religious environment for students. Participants described this environment as the background for many of their everyday conversations and interactions with classmates about religious issues.

Religious Culture Beyond the Classroom

Participants explained that religious experiences within the school extended beyond formal instruction. They referred to daily interactions, school activities, peer discussions, and shared experiences as important parts of school life. Many students described continuing religious conversations during breaks, extracurricular activities, and other informal situations. Illustrative quotations:

Student 7: “Students continue talking about different issues even after the lesson ends.”

Student 14: “Many discussions happen during breaks or when students are sitting together.”

Student 21: “School activities sometimes create opportunities for students to exchange ideas.”

Student 29: “What students learn from each other can be as important as what happens in class.”

These quotations show that religious learning extended beyond formal classroom instruction. Participants described everyday interactions with classmates as an important part of the school environment, where religious ideas continued to be discussed, explained, and interpreted through peer interaction.

Opportunities and Limitations Within the School Environment

Participants described different experiences regarding opportunities to discuss religious questions and contemporary issues within the school environment. While some students felt that schools provided opportunities for discussion and guidance, others believed that some topics received limited attention or could not be discussed in depth. Comments related to school regulations, expectations, and accepted forms of discussion appeared in both boys' and girls' groups. Illustrative quotations:

Student 5: “There are topics students would like to discuss more, but they do not always have the opportunity.”

Student 16: “Some questions remain among students because they are not always raised in class.”

Student 24: “Students sometimes discuss issues among themselves because there is not enough time during lessons.”

Student 32: “There are topics that students feel more comfortable discussing with friends than in formal settings.”

These statements suggest that students sometimes turned to peer discussions when opportunities for formal discussion were limited. Participants described friendships as an accessible space for continuing conversations about religious questions that were not always addressed during lessons. Across the focus group discussions, participants consistently described the Islamic school as the setting in which everyday peer interactions occurred. Religious instruction, school culture, and daily routines provided the context, while interactions with classmates created opportunities to discuss religious ideas, exchange different viewpoints, and support the ongoing construction of religious identity.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that peer interactions play an important role in religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents in Islamic schools. Across the focus group

discussions, participants consistently described conversations with friends, shared experiences, and discussions about religious issues as part of their everyday religious lives. These interactions provided opportunities to learn from others, exchange different viewpoints, discuss religious questions, and reflect on everyday religious experiences.

This finding extends previous research that has mainly emphasized the roles of family, religious education, and formal religious institutions in religious identity development (Islam et al., 2019; Gozali, 2025; Ainun et al., 2025). While these influences remain important, the present findings suggest that peer interactions also contribute to religious identity construction by providing everyday opportunities for discussion, interpretation, and shared learning among adolescents. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies that describe religious identity as a social and developmental process rather than a direct outcome of formal religious instruction alone (De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Batool & Ghayas, 2021). It also supports research highlighting the importance of peer relationships in adolescent identity development and religious learning (Shen et al., 2023; Nada et al., 2025; Munjiat et al., 2025).

Another important finding is that peer interactions were not limited to friendship or social support. Participants described peer groups as spaces where religious issues were discussed, questioned, and interpreted. Students explained that they often exchanged views about religious practices, contemporary issues, and everyday situations before seeking guidance from more formal sources. This finding suggests that peer interactions contributed to religious identity construction not only by reinforcing existing beliefs but also by providing opportunities to discuss different viewpoints and consider alternative understandings of religious issues. Rather than simply accepting religious ideas, participants described engaging with these ideas through discussion with their peers. This finding adds to previous studies that have emphasized the roles of families, teachers, religious curricula, and school environments in religious identity development (Gozali, 2025; Ulum & Asy'arie, 2024). The present study suggests that peer groups also play an active role by providing opportunities for discussion, explanation, and interpretation in everyday school life.

The findings also showed that peer interactions exposed students to different religious viewpoints. Participants explained that classmates did not always share the same understandings of religious issues and that differences in family backgrounds, personal experiences, and social media exposure contributed to these different perspectives. As a result, discussions among peers often involved comparing opinions rather than simply reinforcing shared beliefs. These findings suggest that peer interactions provided opportunities for adolescents to consider different viewpoints while developing their own understanding of religious issues. Rather than presenting religious identity as fixed or uniform, participants described a process in which ideas were discussed, questioned, and compared through everyday conversations with friends. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies describing religious identity as a dynamic process shaped through social interaction and everyday experiences (Donlic, 2023; Zulfiqar, 2022).

Social media also appeared as part of the broader context in which peer interactions took place. Participants referred to religious content encountered through online videos, social media platforms, and digital discussions. Rather than describing these digital experiences as separate from peer relationships, students explained that they often shared this content with friends and discussed different viewpoints together. In this way, social media became one of the sources that introduced new topics into everyday peer discussions. Similar observations have been reported in studies describing social media as an important part of contemporary Muslim adolescents' religious experiences (Ikasatya & Apriliyani, 2026; Kamilia, 2025; Hanafi et al., 2026).

An additional finding concerns the way participants described disagreement within peer groups. Students explained that differences in opinion were a common part of discussions about

religious issues and everyday experiences. In many cases, these discussions continued without requiring everyone to reach the same conclusion. Instead, participants described listening to different viewpoints, explaining their own opinions, and continuing the discussion even when disagreement remained. This finding suggests that peer interactions provided opportunities for adolescents to discuss and compare different religious perspectives rather than simply adopting a single shared view. These discussions appear to have supported reflection on religious issues through everyday interaction with classmates.

Taken together, these findings suggest that peer interactions formed an important part of religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents in Islamic schools. Through everyday conversations, shared experiences, and discussions about religious issues, participants described opportunities to learn from others, compare different viewpoints, and develop their own understanding of religious issues. These findings highlight the contribution of peer interactions alongside formal religious education and other social influences.

The findings also highlight the role of Islamic schools as the context in which many of these peer interactions occurred. Participants described their schools as environments where religious values were present in lessons, school activities, and daily routines. At the same time, students explained that many conversations about religious issues continued beyond formal instruction through everyday interactions with classmates. This finding suggests that the contribution of Islamic schools extends beyond formal religious teaching. The school environment provides opportunities for students to meet, exchange ideas, and discuss religious issues with their peers as part of everyday school life. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies that have described Islamic schools as important settings for religious learning and identity development among Muslim adolescents (Rosady, 2025; Makalao et al., 2025; Ulum & Asy'arie, 2024).

Participants also described situations in which religious questions continued to be discussed among peers outside formal classroom activities. Some issues were introduced through everyday experiences or social media, while others emerged from students' own questions and observations. These findings suggest that formal religious education and everyday peer interactions complemented one another rather than operating as separate influences on religious identity construction. Similar patterns were observed across the male and female focus groups. Participants in both groups described peer interactions, everyday discussions, and shared experiences as important elements in religious identity construction. Although participants used different examples from their own experiences, no clear differences were identified in the overall patterns that emerged from the analysis.

Implications

Several implications can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, the findings suggest that peer interactions are an important part of religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents in Islamic schools. This highlights the value of providing opportunities for students to discuss religious questions, exchange viewpoints, and learn from one another within appropriate educational settings. Second, the findings suggest that religious learning may be strengthened by connecting classroom instruction with the everyday experiences discussed among peers. Providing opportunities for students to relate religious ideas to situations they encounter in daily life may help make religious learning more meaningful. Third, the findings show that social media has become one of the sources that introduces religious topics into peer discussions. This highlights the importance of helping adolescents evaluate online religious content, compare different sources, and discuss digital information critically.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study was conducted in two Islamic secondary schools in Egypt. As a result, the findings reflect the experiences of students within these particular settings and may not represent the experiences of adolescents in other educational, cultural, or national contexts. Second, the study relied on focus group discussions as the primary source of data. Although this approach provided rich accounts of participants' experiences, some students may have been influenced by the group setting when discussing religious issues and personal experiences. Third, the study focused on first-year secondary school students (Grade 10). Religious identity development may differ across age groups and educational stages. Future studies may examine similar issues among younger or older adolescents. Fourth, the study explored students' perceptions and experiences rather than observing peer interactions directly. As a result, the findings are based on participants' accounts of their experiences and interpretations of those experiences. Finally, the study focused on Islamic school settings. Further research may examine religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents in different types of schools and educational environments to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how peer interactions contribute to the construction of religious identity among Muslim adolescents in Islamic schools. The findings suggest that peer interactions provide opportunities for adolescents to discuss religious questions, exchange viewpoints, and interpret religious issues through everyday conversations and shared experiences. School experiences, social media, family influences, and everyday life formed the broader context in which these interactions took place. The findings also showed that students encountered different religious viewpoints and negotiated religious meanings through discussion rather than simply adopting a single perspective. Overall, the study suggests that religious identity construction among Muslim adolescents is an ongoing social process in which peer interactions play an important role alongside formal religious education.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

A.F.I. conceived and designed the study, developed the research instruments, supervised data collection, analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. A.A.O., F.S.A.-Q., A.A.H.A., A.A.H., and A.Z.H. contributed to data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, manuscript review, and editing. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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