

Thought Paper No. 7

Language and the Malay Muslim Identity: The Investigation Continues¹

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In the first part of this thought paper,⁴ we showed that, based on a survey conducted on 830 Brunei Malays, Bruneians are becoming increasingly anglophonic. This is especially true of the young Bruneians, who have indicated a preference to using English or at the very least, dual Malay-English, for their day-to-day interactions. One of the reasons offered for this language shift has been explained in terms of the country's education system. With the introduction of the *Dwibahasa* in the early 1980s, followed by the even more English-heavy SPN21 in 2009, Bruneians are now more adept in English, so much so that English is even considered as a first language by some.⁵ Depending on where one situates himself on the socio-linguacultural continuum, this linguistic development will elicit varied reactions. To those who are familiar with the link between English and economics, specifically of the positive correlation between a population's English proficiency and a country's economic performance,⁶ this news would be lauded as a sign of prosperity and development. On the other hand, to those who view language through the cultural prism, the dominance of English would be seen as imperialism all over again, albeit a linguistic one.⁷ Indeed, concerns over the weakening and contamination of Malay as a consequence of English have always been a staple feature of the local newspapers. In 2010, the then Director of Language and Literature Bureau lamented over the deteriorating quality of Malay among Bruneian students.⁸ In 2012, a dire warning was issued on the probable impending death

¹ How to Cite: Salbrina Sharbawi & Zayani Zainal Abidin. "Language and the Muslim Identity: The Investigation Continues. Thought Paper Series No. 7." Journal of Islamic Governance, (2021). islamicgovernance.org/tp7

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⁴ Salbrina, S. and Zayani, Z.A., 'Language and the Malay Muslim Identity: An insight into Brunei'. Thought Paper Series No. 6." Journal of Islamic Governance, (2021). islamicgovernance.org/tp6

⁵ Salbrina, S., 'An English-centric monolingual Brunei? Predictions and reality.' Asian Englishes, 2(3), 2020, pp. 257-281.

⁶ McCormick, C. 2013, 'Countries with better English have better economics', Harvard Business Review. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2013/11/countries-with-better-english-have-better-economies> [Accessed 8 February 2021]

⁷ Phillipson, R., Linguistic imperialism. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1992

⁸ Shahminan, F., 'Bilingual education cited for poor Malay language proficiency among students,' Brunei Times, 26 April 2010.

of Malay due to Bruneians' rampant code-mixing practices.¹ More recently, it was reported that "Malay is losing its grip"² with fewer than half of the surveyed secondary school students admitting to using the language at home. Najib Noorashid,³ however, disputed these claims as mere exaggerations and asserted the non-existence of a zero-sum game between English and Malay because the "emergence of bilingual Malay speakers does not necessarily cause the decline of Malay".⁴ That may indeed be the case, but would the same be true if the increase in the number of those who proclaim to be English-centric or who acquired English as their first language surpasses those who are mono- and bilingual Malays? Although this is an area worthwhile to investigate, the focus of the present paper, however, is on the dynamics between language and identity, specifically that of religious identity.

That language and religion, and by extension, religious identity, are in a symbiotic relationship was demonstrated in a study on Lebanese Christians⁵ who were shown to highlight their religious identity through the increased use of French. This information was not lost on the Lebanese Muslims who also placed a strong association between French and the Christian faith. Another evidence of language and religion serving as markers of identity can be seen during the process of separation of the Indian sub-continent in the 20th century. The initial partition into India and Pakistan was made along religious lines while the subsequent split of Pakistan into two to create Bangladesh was achieved along linguistic lines.⁶ Allison Skerrett⁷ investigated the relevance of language in the development of religious identity in her case study of a Caribbean-Chinese youth who had grown up in a multilingual home. Her subject spoke Cantonese as a child but became dominantly English as he grew older. Skerrett established that her subject's development of the Christian identity was tied to his primary language, which he had picked up through formal education, and that his poor grasp of Cantonese was consequential in him having limited knowledge on his maternal religious belief – Buddhism. In Nigeria, the development of the Muslim identity among young adults is found to be connected to Arabic;⁸ that the knowledge of Arabic is not only synonymous with the Muslim identity, but also enhances one's knowledge of the religion.

Going back to the situation in Brunei, what we have is a Muslim-majority community whose religious identity is defined and largely shaped by the Malay language. This is evident in the

¹ Kamit, R., 'Bahasa rojak affecting Malay language,' *Brunei Times*, 22 April 2012.

² Kon, J., 'Malay language losing its grip,' *Borneo Bulletin*, 26 August 2017.

³ Noorashid, N., *A study on attitudes towards the Malay language and its vitality in Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei. 2018

⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 370.

⁵ Joseph, J., *Language and identity: national, ethnic, religious*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004

⁶ Mukerjee, S., 'Reading language and religion together,' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 220, 2013, pp.1-6.

⁷ Skerrett, A., 'The role of language in religious identity making: A case of a Caribbean Chinese youth,' *Literacy research: Theory, method, and practice*, 66(1), 2017, pp. 325-340.

⁸ Salami, O., 'Islamic religious education, identity and the Arabic language among university students in southwestern Nigeria,' in Pandharipande, R.V., David, M.K., & Ebsworth, M.E. (eds.) *Language Maintenance, Revival and Shift in the Sociology of Religion*. Singapore: Multilingual Matters, 2019, pp. 170-183.

education curriculum, both mainstream and religious; in Islamic events and gatherings notably, those organised by the state; in public talks which discuss Islam or any aspects related to Islam; and even in commentary translations of the Qur'an that are regularly broadcast on TV and radio. Previously, we posited a series of questions on matters pertaining to language and identity in Brunei, including one on the plausibility of English-centricity influencing a person's notions of Muslim self-identity. We acknowledge that the term 'being Muslim' is subject to different interpretations with some ascribing it to a system of religious beliefs while for others, it is an expression of the cultural self.¹ In this study, we define the Muslim identity as the percept and expression of oneself as being a Muslim whilst the aspects of religious attitudes and practices are subsumed under the term 'religiosity'.²

In order to begin to answer the questions expressed in our previous paper,³ we carried out a preliminary survey on a sample of Bruneian youth⁴ comprising UBD⁵ undergraduates. With the aim of investigating the association, if any, between language preference and one's self-reported salient identity, we fielded a questionnaire using SurveyMonkey Audience⁶ to UBD students making sure to highlight that the survey is intended only for Brunei Malay Muslims. We decided not to include converts in this round of investigation as our focus is solely on the interactions between Malay-English and Islam.

The questions of the survey were divided into four parts: the first sought the informants' background details such as their gender, ages, and ethnicity. The second contained language-related questions which, in addition to asking for their first language spoken as a child, also included inquiries on their language use and preference in different settings, their self-reported language proficiencies, as well as their beliefs on the importance of Malay and English. These items were then objectively coded to generate a language-leaning score and a mean value was calculated for each respondent.⁷ Based on the mean, the respondents were then divided into two groups: those on the higher end are categorised as Malay-leaning while those on the lower end are English-leaning. The third section of the survey focused on religious identity with the questions seeking the informants' avowed perception of their Muslim selfhood. Similar to the language questions, these too are indexed to produce a Muslim identity score, with a low value indicating a strong inclination towards the Muslim identity. The fourth section narrows the investigation further to explore notions of religiosity, which included ten objectively constructed

¹ Enneli, P., Modood, T., & Bradley, H., *Young Turks and Kurds: A set of "Invisible" disadvantaged groups*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 2005

² Also 'religious salience'. See González, A. L., 'Measuring Religiosity in a Majority Muslim Context: Gender, Religious Salience, and Religious Experience Among Kuwaiti College Students—A Research Note' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50(2), pp. 339-350, 2011.

³ Salbrina & Zayani, *Language and the Malay Muslim Identity: An insight into Brunei.* Pg. 8.

⁴ The definition of 'youth' in this study is in line with that proposed by the United Nations (<https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/youth-0/>), which defined 'youth' as those aged between 15 and 24.

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⁶ www.surveymonkey.com/mp/audience

⁷ The responses are coded as follows: English = 1; Both Malay and English = 3; Malay = 5

statements on a Likert scale to measure the informants' frequency of performing religious practices, including those that are obligatory and *sunnah*. The scale items were assigned weights ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being always and 5 being never.

Of the 207 responses received, only 195 were eventually analysed based on their language-learning scores with 95 categorised as being English-leaning and 99 Malay-leaning. The background information of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

<i>Variable</i>	English-leaning Numbers (and Percentages)	Malay-leaning Numbers (and Percentages)
Gender		
Female	62 (31.8%)	69 (35.4%)
Male	34 (17.4%)	30 (15.4%)
Faculty		
FASS	29 (14.9%)	27 (13.8%)
APB	3 (1.5%)	4 (2.1%)
SBE	10 (5.1%)	15 (7.7%)
FIT	7 (3.6%)	5 (2.6%)
FOS	34 (17.4%)	28 (14.4%)
IHS	13 (6.7%)	20 (10.3%)
Age		
<i>M</i>	21.7 years	21.9 years
<i>SD</i>	1.6 years	1.9 years
Minimum	19 years	19 years
Maximum	26 years	28 years
First language		
Malay	89 (45.6%)	99 (50.8%)
English	7 (3.6%)	0

Table 1. Background information of respondents

The data on the subjects' conceived Muslim identity was obtained from the following questions and tasks:

- Indicating their agreement to the statement "I think of myself a Muslim" on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 'Very much' to 'Not at all';
- Ranking their ethnic (Malay), national (Bruneian), and religious (Muslim) identities from the most important to the least;¹
- Indicating how they identify as a Muslim by choosing from a set of four choices: openly; within the Muslim community; shared with family and friends only; and privately.
- Indicating how important Islam is to their identity from a set of five choices ranging from 'very important' to 'not at all important'.

¹ Only their ranking of the Muslim identity was taken into consideration in calculating the Muslim identity score.

As mentioned above, their responses were then indexed in order to obtain the mean Muslim identity scores for each subject as well as for each group. The results for the latter are shown in Table 2.

Muslim identity score		
English-leaning (N = 95)	M = 1.55	SD = 0.71
Malay-leaning (N = 99)	M = 1.25	SD = 0.36

Table 2. The mean identity scores and standard deviation values of the two groups

An independent *t*-test was then carried out to compare the Muslim identity scores of these two groups and the results revealed a highly significant value, $t(192) = 3.9, p < 0.05$. This indicates that the Malay-leaning group identify more as Muslims than the English-leaning one.

We decided to have a look at two other questions related to identity but were not included in the index score calculations because, as they were gender-specific questions, each had a different number of choices and therefore, scoring system. The females were asked about *hijab*-wearing, and the choice presented to them were: 'yes,' 'sometimes,' or 'no.' The males, on the other hand, were asked about keeping a beard, and their choices were the binary 'yes' or 'no.' The reason for the inclusion of these two questions arises from the normative expectations associated with defining and maintaining the Muslim identity for men and women,¹ particularly in a Muslim-majority society.² The respondents who selected 'yes' were then asked to explain their reasons for doing so. This is because in this modern day and time, the wearing of a *hijab* and the keeping of a beard may not be a reinforcement of the Muslim identity, but rather an act of keeping up with the current fashion trends.^{3,4,5,6} So, someone who maintains a beard may not necessarily be doing it out of *sunnah* but to be trendy. The results for these questions are shown as Figures 1

¹ Salami, Islamic religious education, identity and the Arabic language among university students in southwestern Nigeria. Pg.172

² It is acknowledged that while the wearing of *hijab* is deemed obligatory for women when in front of non-mahram men i.e., in the public space, keeping a beard is *sunnah* and seen as a reflection of Allah's Messenger, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This is also another reason for why these two items were not indexed as part of the Muslim identity score, particularly since the focus of this investigation is language-related, and not gender.

³ Lim, A., 2020, 3 key takeaways on Malaysia's modest fashion ecommerce trends. Janio: Asia's Logistics Simplified 2020. Available at: <https://janio.asia/articles/3-key-takeaways-on-malaysias-modest-fashion-ecommerce-trends/> [Accessed 11 February 2021]

⁴ Nistor, L., 'Hijab(istas) – as fashion phenomenon. A review,' Social Analysis, (7), 2017, pp. 59-67.

⁵ Ingram, K., 2020, 'Try something different': Beards help define men's fashion trends. Saltwire Network. Available at: <https://www.saltwire.com/lifestyles/regional-lifestyles/try-something-different-beards-help-define-mens-fashion-trends-492244/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

⁶ Delisle, R., 2018, The beard trend will never die, experts say. Global News. Available at: <https://globalnews.ca/content/4323744/the-beard-trend-will-never-die-experts-say/> [Accessed 10 February 2021]

and 2 while the findings on their explanations for donning the *hijab* and keeping a beard are shown as Figures 3 and 4.

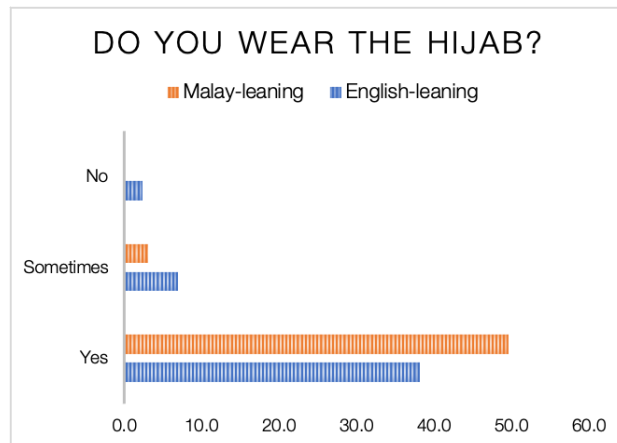


Figure 1. Female responses to the *hijab* question

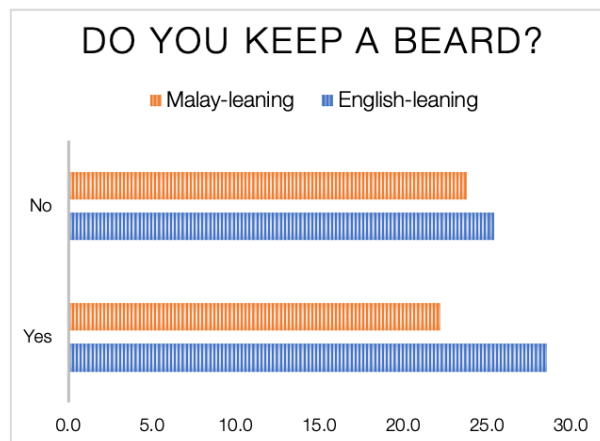


Figure 2. Male responses to the beard question

For the females, we observe that the Malay-leaning respondents are more likely to cover up using the *hijab* than their English-leaning peers, with none of the former choosing ‘no’ whilst 3 English-leaning females indicated that they do not wear the *hijab* at all. The explanations for the ones who answered ‘yes’ indicate that for their choices are largely faith-driven and this is true of both groups. There are, however, considerably more respondents from the English-leaning group who claimed that their wearing of the *hijab* is to meet the expectations of their families (see Figure 3). One subject from the Malay-leaning group qualified her answer by stating that her choice of wearing the *hijab* is because “I loved [sic] my dad very much since I believe that as a muslimah daughter, if one don't wore [sic] *hijab* and cover her aurat her dad will carry the sins and it make [sic] him nearer to *Neraka*¹ as he have [sic] the responsibility as a father.”

The differences between the two groups in their *hijab*-wearing explanations are, however, not significant, $X^2(2, N = 115) = 3.1, p = 0.21$.

¹ Hell

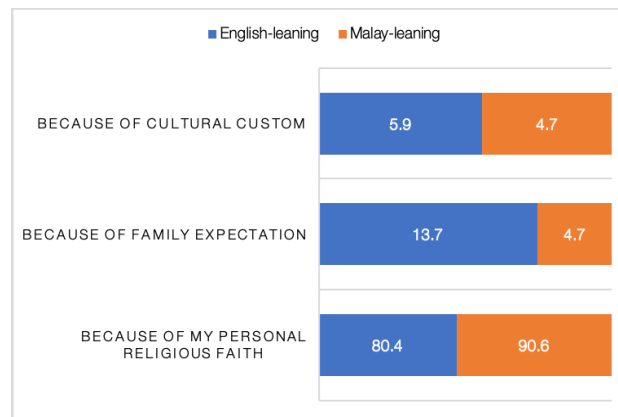


Figure 3. Reasons for wearing the *hijab*

As for the males, the result reveals that the English-leaning subjects are more likely to sport a beard than the Malay-leaning ones, but the difference is found to be small and not significant $X^2(1, N = 63) = 0.14, p = 0.71$. Their reasons for maintaining a beard, however, are found to be varied with a majority of those with English-leaning tendencies citing ‘personal preference’ over ‘religious reasons.’ The pattern is reversed with the Malay-leaning males, who indicated their awareness of the *sunnah* decree of this practice. The difference between the two groups of males in their choice of explanations is found to be highly significant $X^2(1, N = 31) = 7.0, p < 0.05$.

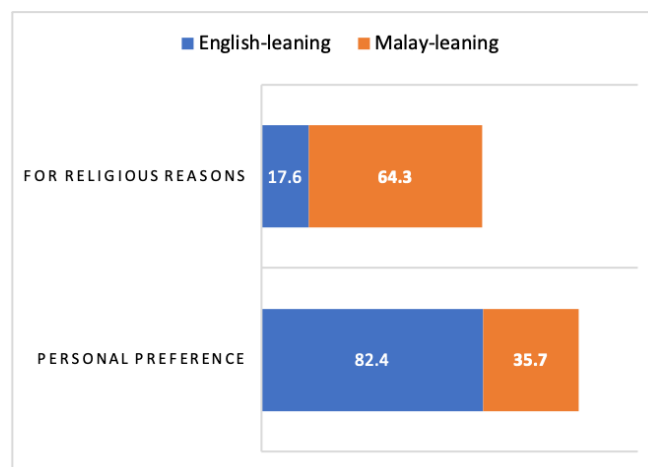


Figure 4. Reasons for keeping a beard

The next section of the survey explored the Bruneian youth’s religious practices and acts of worship. The following ten statements were presented to the respondents

- i. Perform the daily obligatory *solat*.
- ii. Read the Qur’an in your free time.
- iii. Cite *bismillah* before an activity (e.g., before eating).
- iv. Perform the *sunnah* prayer (e.g., *dhuha*, *hajat*, *tahajjud*).
- v. Fast during Ramadan.
- vi. Perform the *sunnah* fast (e.g., on Mondays and Thursdays).
- vii. Read Islamic religious books.

- viii. Listen to religious lectures (on TV, podcasts, or online, e.g., on Instagram).
- ix. Ask for Allah’s forgiveness after committing a sin.
- x. Make *d’uā* to Allah with problems in your life.

The subjects were given a set of 5 choices which were coded as follows: 1 - ‘always’, 2 - ‘often,’ 3 - ‘sometimes’, 4 - ‘rarely’, and 5 - ‘never’. The mean was then calculated for each statement and the results, including the standard deviation and mode, are presented in Table 3.

There are some notable differences between the two groups, among which is praying five times a day. Most of the Malay-leaning subjects answered ‘always’ to this statement while those in the English-leaning group gravitated towards ‘sometimes.’ Other differences are observed when it comes to non-obligatory acts such as the *sunnah* fast and citing *bismillah* before eating. Overall, it appears that the Malay-leaning group performs more of the religious acts than their English-leaning peers. To validate this observation, the average mean scores for the two groups were tested using the independent samples *t*-test. The result returned a highly significant finding ($t(192) = 3.49, p < 0.05$) between the English-leaning individuals ($M = 95, SD = 0.38$) and the Malay-leaning ones ($M = 99, SD = 0.2$). The effect size for this analysis ($d = 0.89$) was found to exceed Jacob Cohen’s¹ benchmark for a large effect ($d = 0.80$).

Statement	English-leaning N = 95			Malay-leaning N = 99		
	Mean (M)	SD	Mode	Mean (M)	SD	Mode
i Perform the daily obligatory <i>solat</i>	2.64	1.21	3	2.15	1.07	1
ii Read the Qur’an in your free time	3.51	0.97	4	3.37	0.78	3
iii Cite <i>bismillah</i> before an activity	1.91	0.94	2	1.69	0.72	1
iv Perform the <i>sunnah</i> prayer	3.76	0.89	4	3.55	0.64	4
v Fast during Ramadan	1.09	0.39	1	1.07	0.23	1
vi Perform the <i>sunnah</i> fast	4.21	0.82	5	4.04	0.87	4
vii Read Islamic religious books	3.83	0.79	4	3.57	0.77	4
viii Listen to religious lectures	3.42	1.09	3	3.04	0.92	3
ix Ask for Allah’s forgiveness after committing a sin	2.11	1.10	1	1.79	0.80	1

¹ Cohen, J., Statistical power analysis for behavioral sciences. Academic Press. 2013.

x	Make <i>du'ā</i> to Allah with problems in your life	2.05	1.19	1	1.61	0.79	1
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Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the religiosity variable by language-leaning tendencies

The findings of this study indicate that there is an association between one's language preference or dominant language with his religious identity and acts of religiosity. While preliminary, the data shows that a Bruneian Malay who has a predisposition to using more English than Malay in his daily spoken interactions shows less of an inclination to identifying as a Muslim. Consequently, as a result of his detachment to the Muslim identity, there is also a fewer display of religious impulses. However, since the sample is limited to UBD students, the generalisability is thus constrained and a more comprehensive study involving a larger sample size and subjects of different ages is called for. It would be interesting to see if a similar observation is made with different aged respondents because that would provide further confirmation of a link between preferred language and the religious identity among Brunei Malay Muslims. Including age as a dependent variable would also shed some light on whether what we are observing here is indeed a language-related issue or simply a complex identity formation process that is uniquely Bruneian. It is likely that once the current English-leaning subjects are older, the saliency of their Muslim identity would be more evident, thus debunking the postulation of a language effect. After all, identity is fluid and non-static¹ and the construction of an individual identity is an evolving process and people have been shown to show less attachment to particular identities as they mature. That does not, however, explain why the relatively similar-aged Brunei Malays in this present study, who differ only in their most used language, have different conceptions of the Muslim identity and ultimately, different levels of engagement in religious acts.

Thus, we are inclined to believe, for now, that what we are witnessing here is a by-product of the axiomatic association of Islam with the Malay language. As we noted earlier, anything pertaining to Islam in Brunei is conducted almost exclusively in Malay. In another time and another era, this would have been an unquestionable practice. But in today's globalised world, in which English exists in every precipice of our lives, it may be worthwhile to revisit this almost-exclusive usage of Malay for anything Islam-related in Brunei. We assert that this is not a call to abandon Malay in favour of English as we too have insisted in another study² on the need to promote and preserve the Malay language. Rather, what we are suggesting now is, to infuse English, in addition to Malay, as a vehicle for the promotion and transmission of Islam, a call that has also been made following a study on the community of Muslim minorities in the UK.³

In the education sector, this may come in the form of introducing an Islamic subject taught in English at the secondary level. Additionally, tertiary Islamic modules with English as the medium

¹ Peek, L., 'Becoming Muslim: The development of a religious identity,' *Sociology of Religion*, 66(3), pp.215-242, 2005.

² Salbrina, S., & Hasharina, H. (forthcoming) 'The Malays of Brunei: An investigation of their family language policies'.

³ Rosowsky, A., 'The role of liturgical literacy in UK Muslim communities', in Omoniyi, T., & Fishman, J.A. (eds.) *Explorations in the sociology of language and religion*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006, pp. 309-324.

of instruction could also be offered in UBD and possibly other institutes of higher education. In the public sector, religious talks conducted by English-speaking Muslim scholars could be offered more regularly and widely to entice the participation of young Bruneians. If one required evidence to see if this approach would bear fruition, look no further than the recently-organised motivational talk by Ustadha Yasmin Mogahed¹ which saw the venue changed a few times in order to accommodate the growing number of attendees. A quick glance through the photos and videos taken of the said event^{2,3} revealed that a substantial number of the 300-strong audience comprised those who fall in the youth category.

With a Bruneian populace that is increasingly anglophonic, there is a need to devise the approach on how we reach out to our impressionable English-speaking Muslim youth in order to ensure that the Muslim identity remains steadfast. As religious identities are “achieved identities”⁴ that can either “be affirmed or denied”,⁵ it is foreseen that by also allowing English in the Islamic sphere in Brunei, the saliency of the religious identity can be enhanced through group membership and increased youth participation in religious activities and rituals.

¹ Damit, R., 2019, ‘Renowned author Yasmin Mogahed to speak at UBD tomorrow.’ The Bruneian News. Available at <https://www.thebruneian.news/renowned-author-yasmin-mogahed-to-speak-at-ubd-tomorrow/> [Accessed 12 February 2021]

² Qalby Event. ‘qalby.eventbn’ [Instagram]. 19 October 2019. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3x9sDdBzLT/>

³ Damit, R., 2019, ‘Full-house for Yasmin Mogahed’s talk’. The Bruneian News. Available at <https://www.thebruneian.news/full-house-for-yasmin-mogaheds-talk/> [Accessed 12 February 2021]

⁴ Hammond, P. E., ‘Religion and the persistence of identity,’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27(1), pp.1-11. 1988.

⁵ Peek, *Becoming Muslim: The development of a religious identity*. Pg.236