



## Article

# Renegotiating Identity and Agency in Everyday Oppression: Experiences of Forced Migrant Youth in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This study explored how forced migrant youth in transit renegotiated their identity and agency after fleeing their homes and sociocultural connections, and while enduring ongoing precarity in a new, oppressive sociopolitical environment in Malaysia. As Malaysia is a non-signatory state that denies legal status to forced migrants, youth face significant structural barriers that constrain their capacities to participate in society and explore their identity. Using an innovative Peer Mediated Storyboard Narrative method (PMSN), thirteen adolescents visually depicted and then explained how their experiences of forced migration affected their sense of self, belonging, and future. Participants were receiving non-formal education and services from a migrant-serving agency in Malaysia while awaiting UNHCR adjudication of their application for resettlement. Youths' transcribed narratives were the focus of analysis using constructivist grounded theory (CGT). Youth described a process whereby renegotiating identity was inextricably linked to (re)claiming agency, if only in situated ways, as they navigated oppression, discrimination, and rejection. Their renegotiation of identity involved (re)evaluating loss and opportunity, (re)constructing belonging, and working through prescribed identities. As youth renegotiated identities, they continuously sought to recreate agency, or a sense of ownership, over their experiences and stories. Their agency was situated within seemingly ordinary assertions of preserving and expanding their identities, forging spaces of belonging, and defining their own narratives rather than accepting prescribed identities. Perceived family support, duration of stay in Malaysia, and experiences as a girl or boy within their communities were key elements that shaped youths' negotiation. Far from being passive recipients of circumstance, forced migrant youth strategically navigated systemic oppression and actively strove to reconstruct their identity and ownership over their experiences.

**Keywords:** forced migration; adolescence; identity; agency; grounded theory

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## 1. Introduction

Despite unprecedented and growing numbers of forced migrant youth living in transit worldwide (IOM 2020), their perspectives remain underrepresented in research. Forced migrant youth in transit encompass those who have fled from their homes due to reasons such as armed conflict, environmental disasters, and persecution, and who live temporarily in various countries while awaiting resettlement, integration, or repatriation.

Forced migrants may be referred to as “refugees” in common parlance; however, the term ‘forced migrant’ is an umbrella term that does not signify official refugee status or other legal designations, although forced migrants may have applied to UNHCR for recognition as asylum seekers (UN 1951; UNHCR 2016). According to the UNHCR (2015), the average forced migrant is displaced for 17 years. Some may be able to benefit from the implementation of “durable solutions”, including repatriation, resettlement, or local integration, and are regarded as being “in transit” while waiting for a decision from UNHCR, as was the case of the youth in our research. However, others may not have these prospects, and their situation is defined as one of protracted displacement. Research has

ample highlighted the inadequacy and challenges generated by current, globally accepted definitions of refugee categories (Taetzsch 2016; UNHCR 2010).

Most forced migrant youth experience a range of injustices during their migration journey (Refugee Studies Centre 2012), and the vast majority live as temporary, often illegal, residents of non-Western countries (UNHCR 2015). Forced migrant youth in transit deal with high degrees of precarity, uncertainty, and threat, including financial insecurity and sociopolitical discrimination that can impact personal identity development (Evans et al. 2013).

Our study explored how forced migrant youth renegotiated their identities while living in transit in Malaysia. In our study, youth were anxiously awaiting adjudication of their family's (or in the case of one unaccompanied minor, his own) application to UNHCR for asylum and resettlement. As youth reflected who they were, their narratives conveyed how attributing meaning to their identities involved negotiating, and often contesting, significant oppression and rejection in Malaysia. Thus, our study evolved to understand how forced migrant youth reconstructed their identities and agency in tandem.

### *1.1. Forced Migrant Youth Experiences in Malaysia*

Malaysia is one of the top three migrant hosting countries in Southeast Asia, (Stange et al. 2019) with estimates totaling 177,000 United Nations-registered refugees and asylum-seekers and 2 to 4 million who are unregistered and undocumented (UNHCR 2020). Youth below the age of 18 comprise approximately 26 percent (46,450 persons) of the registered migrant population (UNHCR 2019), and many more are unregistered. Malaysia is not signatory to international conventions that protect refugee rights, there are no refugee camps in Malaysia, and the government chooses to deny legal status to all forced migrants (Razali et al. 2015). This approach to refugee policy has significant consequences for forced migrant youth: they live without access to health services, and face perpetual risks of deportation, imprisonment, and separation from caregivers and family due to detention for adult family members who work (Razali et al. 2015; UNHCR 2019). Not only do youth face these threats, but they also are barred from accessing a range of basic services, programs, and supports, including formal education, extracurricular activities, and opportunities for civic engagement, further reinforcing their marginalized status. In the absence of legal status as refugees, forced migrant youth in Malaysia live with immense ambiguity and instability, typically for several years.

When the legal status of forced migrant youth becomes ambiguous or denied altogether, as in the case of Malaysia, youth are at risk of becoming non-existent to systems as a whole (Ball and Moselle 2015; Bhabha 2014; Doná and Veale 2011). It is increasingly known that navigating prolonged illegality, social exclusion, and liminality can complicate how young migrants perceive themselves and their worth (Soberano et al. 2018; Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014), and limit their opportunities to explore and affirm their identities (Motti-Stefanidi 2015). Based on this research, we anticipated that forced migrant youth in transit in Malaysia would be similarly tasked with negotiating key questions about who they are and where they belong within a country context that illegitimizes their identities and existence.

### *1.2. Adolescent Identity Development*

Adolescence has long been regarded as a key period for identity formation (Erikson 1968; Marcia 1966; Luyckx et al. 2006). During adolescence, young people acquire the cognitive skills needed to reflect on who they are and where they belong, and to construct a narrative linking their past, present, and imagined future (Erikson 1968; Habermas and Bluck 2000). Our approach to conceptualizing identity was broadly informed by sociocultural and narrative identity theories (Bhatia 2017; Hammack and Cohler 2009; Kirschner 2015; McLean and Syed 2016). These theories describe identity as contextual, relational, multiple, and fluid, meaning that individuals construct and reconstruct their identities in multiple ways within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Kirschner

2015). Perhaps most relevant to our work is McLean and Syed's (2016) master narrative framework, as it illuminates how the individual and social context mutually inform one another during identity reconstruction. Their framework posits that institutional structures shape the types of opportunities and discourses that individuals access to make sense of who they are. Thus, constructing personal narratives involves negotiating acceptance or resistance of the dominant, cultural narratives within society (referred to as master narratives).

Forced migration likely disrupts the process of constructing an affirming personal identity narrative, perhaps especially for youth living in transit. Forced migrant youth often navigate paradoxical narratives that they are vulnerable, passive victims, and yet also a threat to security and a drain on societal resources (Bhabha 2014; Doná and Veale 2011; Ensor 2010; Morani et al. 2015). Research with undocumented adolescents and young adults in the United States shows that they engage with xenophobic policies and discourses that define them as 'illegals,' often managing shame and anxiety as they try to counteract negative ascriptions and construct alternative narratives about themselves (Ellis and Chen 2013; Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). Disparaging policies and discourses place pressure on forced migrant youth to negotiate and perform identities that will be perceived as worthy and capable of contributing to society (Bellino 2018; DeJaeghere et al. 2016; Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). Indeed, studies with forced migrant youth across continents has found that many youth try to legitimize their existence through the pursuit of higher education and professional achievement, when such opportunities are accessible (Bellino 2018; Ellis and Chen 2013; Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). Taken together, as youth encounter contexts that may accept, question, or contest their identities, they interact with and respond to the narratives ascribed to them (Kirschner 2015; McLean and Syed 2016). They may make choices about whether to accommodate or resist narratives, or both, in different measures, as well as create new understandings of who they are in varied ways (Bhatia 2017; Fincham 2012; Kirschner 2015; Van Liempt 2011).

### 1.3. Situated Agency

Central to identity is the concept of agency, or the power to effect change over one's life. As described, many individuals construct identity narratives in relation to structural systems that constrain their abilities to control their lives in desired ways. Thus, in identity narratives, "the potential for agency to manifest is strongly shaped by the opportunity structure in which individuals are located" (McLean and Syed 2016, p. 337). In migration studies, this notion of constrained agency is referred to as "situated agency" (Paret and Gleeson 2016; Choi et al. 2019). Choi et al. (2019) define situated agency as "a means of acknowledging the voices, subjectivities, and strategies of children and their parents in capitalizing on the opportunities geographical mobility has provided for self and family advancement" (p. 2). Their research on family migration contextualizes agency within broader socioeconomic inequalities and failing political structures that motivate family cross-border mobility. All youth, but especially forced migrant youth, experience limitations in their capacity to enact significant changes in their lives. This issue is compounded by the reality that youth are often excluded from decisions that affect them (Ansell 2009; James and James 2004). However, migrant youth may express agency through "mundane actions" (Choi et al. 2019, p. 3) that "contribute to the ongoingness of the world" (Ansell 2009, p. 202). Youth themselves may not perceive their actions as extraordinary, as their actions are aimed at managing the adversities of their everyday lives and may not lead to 'emancipatory' outcomes (Opfermann 2020; Paret and Gleeson 2016; Payne 2012). However, their quotidian interactions and navigation of hostile, precarious circumstances can be seen as agentic when contextualized within the power structures that these youth inhabit (Choi et al. 2019; Johnson and Gilligan 2020; Paret and Gleeson 2016). Research has explored how migrant youth express situated agency in varied ways, including through decision-making (e.g., about small-scale mobilities and finding work), rebuilding family relationships, and managing fear in precarity (Doná 2014; Johnson and Gilligan 2020; Lam and Yeoh 2018).

### 1.4. Our Study

Despite advances in understanding the identity development of young forced migrants (e.g., [Ellis and Chen 2013](#); [Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014](#)), the lived experiences of forced migrant adolescents (below age 18) residing in non-Western nations are under-represented within identity scholarship and migration studies ([Arnett 2015](#); [Bhatia 2017](#); [Reynolds and Zontini 2016](#); [Robertson et al. 2017](#)). There has been no known research to date on the experiences of forced migrant youth in Malaysia, where policies of social exclusion and illegality position youth and their families on the fringes of society. Forced migrants who are entering their adolescence in Malaysia confront questions about identity and belonging in a country that limits their freedom of movement and the contexts in which they can explore core developmental processes, by denying access to formal schooling programs and services offered by the state to legal residents. Our study aimed to explore how forced migrant adolescents renegotiated their identity and agency following precipitous disconnections from their home communities and supports, and while navigating this precarious, hostile environment in Malaysia.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample and Recruitment

The Human Research Ethics Board of the University of Victoria approved the study. Data for the current study were drawn from a larger research project with 52 forced migrant youth that explored how these youth make sense of their identity, belonging, and future aspirations. An overview of the overall project and methods has been published elsewhere ([Ball 2020](#)). A subsample of 13 youth participants, aged 12 to 16 years, were selected for the current study because their data sets were the most complete.

All 52 participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method from a migrant-serving agency in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Eligibility for participation included being a forced migrant (i.e., having fled from a country of primary residence due to persecution or armed conflict), 11 to 17 years old, living temporarily in Malaysia as asylum seekers, and having at least rudimentary ability to communicate in English. Youth and their legal guardians received information about the study purpose, procedures, and recruitment criteria. Written consent was obtained from eligible and interested youth participants and at least one legal guardian. When literacy or language was a barrier to parents' informed consent, the study team worked with agency staff to explain the project and parents were able to affirm or refuse their consent verbally. Youth received a gift card to a local store of their choice as a token of appreciation.

### 2.2. Data Collection Procedures

*Questionnaire.* Youth completed a Demographic and Social Questionnaire, developed by the research team for this project, that asked for basic demographic, migration, and household information.

*Peer Mediated Storyboard Narrative Method (PMSN).* A full description of the PMSN method can be found elsewhere ([Ball 2020](#)). Youth self-organized into groups of four to eight peers. Each youth was provided with low-cost art supplies and a poster board. They were asked to represent their migration journey, and how it affected their sense of who they are (identity), where they belong, and their future aspirations. Initial peer group meetings were used to facilitate discussion about what these concepts might mean to the youth. As our goal was to learn how these youth perceived and responded to their experiences, these concepts were left open-ended so that youth could express them in their storyboard and narrative as they wished. It was emphasized that no art skills were needed, and youth were encouraged to communicate their experiences however they wished. Each peer group met weekly for four to five weeks, first to receive materials and discuss the task and subsequently to hear each member's narrative account.

Participants volunteered to present their Storyboard when they felt ready to show it to their peer group and give their storyboard narrative (SBN). The research team mem-

ber facilitated the peer mediation after each SBN, whereby the peers in the group, and subsequently the facilitator, asked the narrator to clarify or elaborate on portions of their narrative. SBNs, including the peer mediation process, were audio-taped. When the peer mediation process generated discussion among peers, this became part of the audio-taped record that was subsequently analyzed with reference to each participant. To enable identification of individual contributions, a trained note taker time stamped and typed as much of the oral content as possible in real time.

As the group meeting process continued over weeks, youth were invited to add to or revise their SBN. This opportunity for revision was initiated after some youth expressed interest in elaborating their Storyboards and asked if they could share these ongoing changes. In the iterative-inductive manner of grounded theory building (Glaser 1992), the research team members reviewed the SBN audio-tapes and this gave rise to questions for narrators that were pursued in follow-up interviews. Of the 13 participants in the current study, ten consented to follow-up interviews to share their stories in more depth. Due to inaudible portions of some audio-recordings, only eight of these follow-up interviews were included in the current study. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min. One follow-up interview was conducted in Farsi and translated by a Farsi-speaking research team member. Audio-taped narratives and follow-up interviews were transcribed by the research team. The primary data were the transcribed SBNs and follow-up interviews. The final number of transcripts analyzed for this study comprised of 13 initial SBNs and eight follow-up interviews. There was no intention to analyze youths' visual depictions, as the purpose of the StoryBoard procedure was to offer an engaging way for youth to privately reflect on their experiences and plan how to share their stories with others.

### 2.3. Researcher Positionalities

Our social positioning is integral to understanding how we as scholars intersect with our work:

Debra Torok—I completed this study as part of my doctoral degree in clinical psychology. Over the course of my training, I have engaged in ongoing reflections about my identity and privileges. I am a Jewish, white, cis woman, who was raised a settler on the unceded territories of many Indigenous nations in Canada. My ancestors experienced ethno-religious persecution in Europe before migrating to Canada, where we have since benefitted from the structures of settler colonial society, such as through citizenship, educational opportunities, and upward social mobility. My participation in these colonial systems, including an education system that upholds values of individualism and meritocracy, has left me with many blind spots as a researcher. In the current study context, I was at risk of missing the impacts of oppression on identity and of reinforcing individualistic, Eurocentric views about adolescent identity development and agency in my analysis. To expose and challenge my worldviews, especially those that uphold dominant societal discourses about identity, I engaged in critical reflexive practices (e.g., memo-writing) and deliberately examined systems of power in my analysis. At the same time, my Jewish upbringing connects me to a collective identity and heritage. As a witness to my ancestors' stories of persecution and resilience, surviving pogroms and the Holocaust, I have long felt compelled to learn from and to amplify the voices of those who face injustices, both within my personal and professional endeavors. While I was not able to meet participants in the current study, I listened to their recordings and read their narratives again and again in an effort to understand their experiences and represent their stories with dignity and respect.

Jessica Ball—I am principal investigator of a multi-site study of the experiences of forced migrant adolescents in transit, of which the current study was a part. For three decades I have engaged in research, mainly with Indigenous children and families in Canada and Asia, including living in Malaysia for nine years. These experiences have heightened my awareness of how I have been protected from many structural inequities and social exclusions because of being a white, middle-class, cis-gendered woman with Canadian citizenship. Reflecting on my privileged status has exposed the deeply colonial

worldview in which I was incubated through early schooling and later studies in psychology. My community-engaged scholarship has demanded vigilance against unexcavated presumptions and power dynamics. Overtime, my scholarship has been enhanced through applying humility, vulnerability, and a willingness to turn the world on its head in order to view it from the perspective of those whose marginalization is manufactured through persistent colonial laws, policies and practices. This stance motivated my current program of research which seeks to understand migration and precarity from the meanings that forced migrant youth ascribe to their experiences. The method innovated for this project aims, as much as possible, to jettison theoretically indicated constructs and questions, and to create a peer interactive environment that is youth led and generative of self-inquiry among participating youth and with the research team. This relational approach succeeded in creating a rapport with youth participants, who were curious about each research team members' lived experiences of crossing national and cultural boundaries. They were extremely eager to share their experiences with 'the world' and many stated that the peer-mediated story sharing experience generated stronger psychosocial support among peers because they recognized their commonalities across their migration journeys.

#### *2.4. Data Analytic Approach and Procedures*

We analyzed youths' narratives using grounded theory, a qualitative research method that facilitates a rich, conceptual analysis and that is used to understand phenomena on which limited research is available (Charmaz 2014; Charmaz and Thornberg 2020). We specifically took up constructivist grounded theory (CGT; Charmaz 2014), which analyzes data inductively, views reflexivity as crucial, and assumes the researcher as a co-creator of meaning and knowledge (Charmaz 2014, 2017).

The first author, Debra, engaged in ongoing reflexive practices by reflecting on and writing memos about her power as a researcher to construct and represent youths' experiences (Charmaz and Thornberg 2020; Morrow 2005). Reflexivity enabled Debra to recognize her subjectivity, challenge her assumptions about participants' realities, deepen her thinking about the data, and guide analytic discussions with colleagues that would make visible blind spots in the analysis (e.g., where she failed to see oppression or agency). Consistent with constructivist assumptions that multiple realities exist, we allowed for youths' varied and multiplicity of experiences to emerge, including some seemingly contradicting, or ambivalent, truths (Charmaz 2014). Despite all being forced migrants, youth experienced agency and oppression differently depending on their own subjectivities and intersections of social identities.

Charmaz (2017) also encourages centering power and structural inequities in the analysis. To enhance our understanding of the interrelatedness of macro-structures and participants' experiences, we complemented our use of CGT with situational analysis. Situational analysis brings structural contexts and discourses to the forefront of analyses. It involves mapping human actors (e.g., individuals, groups, cultures) and non-human actors (e.g., structural conditions) in a situation, and subsequently examining their relationships. CGT and situational analysis sensitized us to the power structures that led to inequities for youth, and exposed how the process of renegotiating identity was embedded in youths' relationships to these structures.

Data analysis took place from February 2020 to September 2020. Our coding process unfolded in three stages, drawing on recommendations from Charmaz (2014) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). The first phase involved line-by-line coding to create initial codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998), as well as writing memos about implicit assumptions and emerging actions in the data. In the second phase, we examined initial codes for relationships between them in order to generate categories about how youth negotiated their sense of self, and then related these categories to their subcategories (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This process involved making constant comparisons to ensure the emerging patterns within and across interviews were reflected in codes and categories (Charmaz 2014). We also began drawing diagrams to aid formulations of the interrelatedness of the processes in the

data, inform subsequent coding, and ultimately construct the theory. Finally, we examined relationships between the higher-level categories, pulling them together in order to provide an explanation for the variation within the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). During this phase, we more closely examined how identity was embedded within larger systems and discourses of power (Clark 2003; Charmaz 2017). This process led to the emergence of oppression and situated agency as central categories in the analysis.

### 2.5. Rigor and Trustworthiness

This study used several additional strategies to bolster its quality, credibility, and rigor (Morrow 2005). During data collection, several participants were invited for follow up interviews to ensure that their experiences were captured accurately and thoroughly. The analysis was iterative, including debriefs between the authors, who each posed questions for critical inquiry at different stages of the coding process. An external qualitative researcher also coded four interviews. When there were discrepancies in our coding, we talked through our differences and that led to further code collapsing and relabeling. From there, we deepened our critical thinking about the data and compared different meanings that were constructed by different coders, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the study findings.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Sample Description

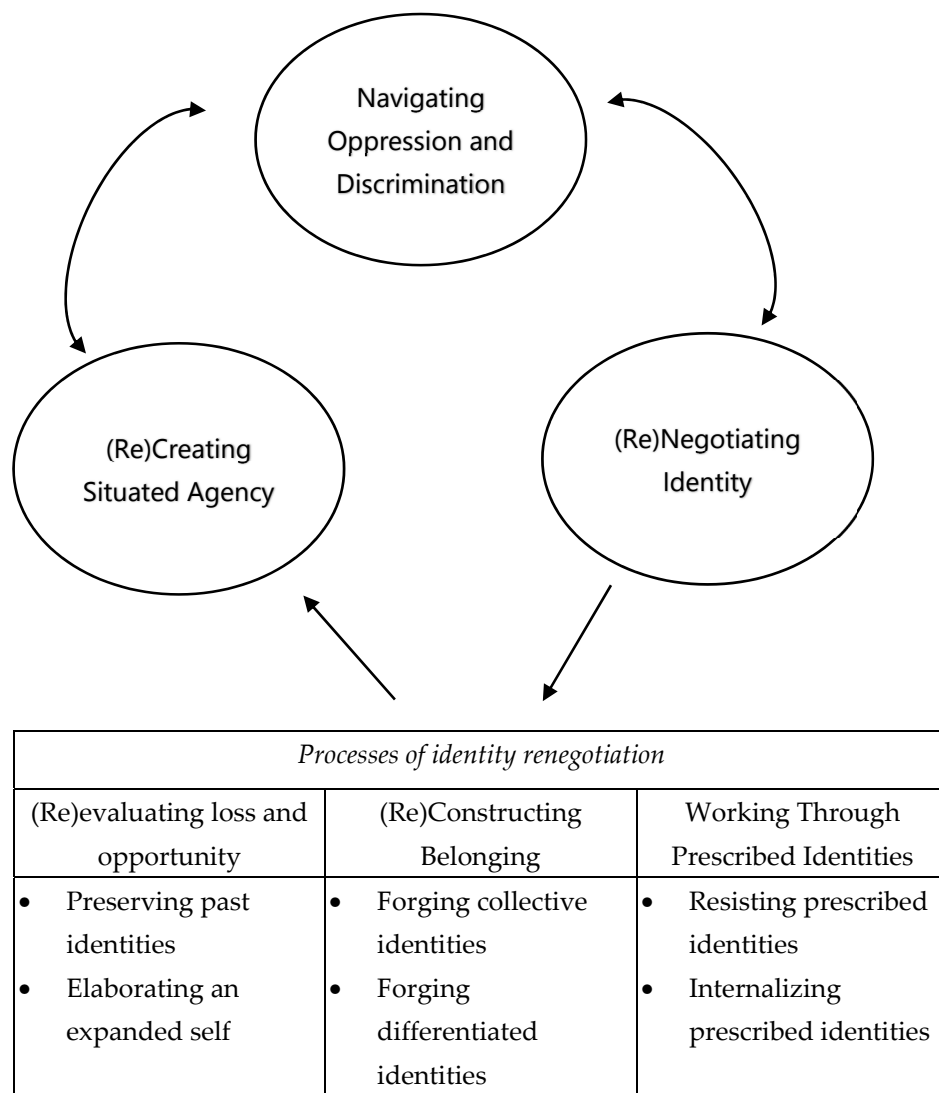
Table 1 presents the participant characteristics. Of the 13 participants, one male was an unaccompanied minor. All others had arrived in Malaysia with at least one immediate family member.

**Table 1.** Participant pseudonyms and demographics.

Name	Age	Gender	Years in Malaysia	Migration Status with UNHR	Country of Origin
Homa	12	F	1.5	Refugee	Iran
Dina	14	F	6	Refugee	Iraq
Zain	16	M	2	Asylum seeker	Somalia
Abe	16	M	3	Asylum seeker	Somalia
Assad	16	M	2	Refugee	Somalia
Ahmad	15	M	1	Refugee	Afghanistan
Safia	14	F	3	Asylum seeker	Sudan
Afia	14	F	5	Refugee	Afghanistan
Zorin	15	F	2	Asylum seeker	Afghanistan
Lana	12	F	3	Refugee	Yemen
Leila	12	F	3	Refugee	Yemen
Nazeem	16	M	4	Refugee	Iraq
Syed	15	M	6	Refugee	Pakistan

### 3.2. Main Findings

As depicted in Figure 1, the overall process that youth described was (re)negotiating self to (re)create agency while navigating oppression, discrimination, and rejection. This process represented how youth continuously renegotiated who they were as they moved between contexts where their identities and existence were contested and rejected. We use (re) to inscribe the ongoingness of this process for youth, who were likely already engaged in this process prior to the acute disruption of forced migration and who continued to re-imagine their identities and agency after fleeing their homeland. Youth (re)negotiated their identities through three main processes: (re)evaluating loss and opportunity, (re)constructing belonging, and working through prescribed identities.



**Figure 1.** The grounded theory model depicting forced migrant youth’s process of (re)negotiating identity and (re)creating agency while navigating oppression, discrimination, and rejection in Malaysia.

Through engaging in these processes, youth reconstructed identities in ways that aimed to recreate situated agency, or a sense of authority and ownership, over their experiences and narratives. We use the term ‘situated agency’ (Choi et al. 2019) because these youth repeatedly confronted oppression that reinforced their low-power positions as “illegal” forced migrants in Malaysia and that stifled their capacity to effect major changes. An explanation of situated agency as a core concept is discussed within each identity process.

### 3.2.1. Navigating Oppression, Discrimination, and Rejection

Youth faced ongoing, institutionalized oppression and discrimination over the course of their migration. In their countries of origin, youth were exposed to war and structural instability that forced them to flee. While Malaysia offered increased physical safety, youth and their families were denied legal status and so they lived with constant threat of detention and deportation. They described difficulties with affording health care and accessing formal education. In order to earn money, most youths’ parents worked illegally and were often exploited by their employers. Nazeem described how his father, who was reportedly a doctor in their home country, found a short-term job in Malaysia. After the position ended, the employer “start[ed] complaining [to] the U.N. that this guy do this,



he's like [a] liar, he's [a] terrorist. And then they [UN] reject us . . . then they tell our house owner [about] this . . . even they like kick us from the house. We tell them 'give me like 3 days so we can get our [next] house. They say, 'no' . . . [We] don't have anywhere to go". This example is one illustration of how institutional and interpersonal oppression converged to negatively impact youth and their families.

Discrimination in Malaysia also constrained youths' abilities to participate in recreational activity and to explore their interests. For example, participants who played football together shared an incident of being ejected from their practice field by Malay people who wanted the whole field to themselves. The participants recounted experiencing a sense of powerlessness, stating "we can't say anything" and "what they mean is 'this is our field because we are Malay'". Navigating these everyday experiences of discrimination and rejection was a looming reminder of their limited power and status as 'outsiders.' This had harmful implications for their futures. As Zorin said, "My brother and father don't have the right work legally. Had they could freely work, perhaps we could get somewhere and do better. Or we could study in a higher quality school".

### 3.2.2. (Re)Evaluating Loss and Opportunity

Youth described re-evaluating how losses and changing opportunities in their lives pre- to post-migration affected their sense of identity. While they expressed loss and longing for pre-migration sources of identity, they also reckoned with positive changes in their lives related to being afforded new opportunities in Malaysia. Re-evaluating these conflicting sentiments led youth to preserve past identities and elaborate expanded, and changing selves. Engagement in each of these processes depended on the length of time youth had lived in Malaysia and on how their gender positioned them differently in Malaysia compared to their home country. In an environment that thwarted identity development, the ways in which these youth handled and made meaning about their co-occurring experiences of loss and opportunity constituted an assertion of their situated agency.

Youth re-evaluated losses resulting from their ruptured access to past sources of identification, including their nationalities, cultures, and extended families in their home countries. For youth who had arrived in Malaysia within one to three years, it was especially common to preserve past ways of identifying. They continued to embody their cultures of origin through everyday practices of eating cultural foods, wearing traditional dress, and speaking their first language. Several youth openly engaged in these practices despite experiencing harassment when their appearances made visible their outsider status within Malaysian society.

Additionally, several participants reflected on losing family customs and practices over the course of migration. They relied on their family values to provide a sense of continuity within their identities. For example, Zorin described how her future aspirations to support women's independence in her home country were rooted in her family's values:

"My mother in Afghanistan used to help women . . . In Afghanistan if you have money, things can be very good. For us it was good too. When [my parents] had money, [they] would work with it and help others too. I remember my mother would help women teach them to sew. If they could sew their clothes, then they don't need to buy them. We were like that before. Also, if women can learn things to make their lives better while they can, [it] is very important . . . I want to be like that. Do something like that to help women".

This quote is one example of how youth remained steadfast to their connections to their family values and cultures, showing resistance to the rejection or erasure of their identities within Malaysian society. In ways such as this, engagement in even ordinary expressions of identity embodied situated agency.

In addition to evaluating losses, youth appraised changes in their lives that they perceived as positive. These changes were related to accessing new, albeit limited, opportunities in Malaysia that some youth would not have received in their home countries, such

as meeting people of diverse backgrounds and learning English at the agency where they received non-formal education. As denoted earlier with the example of expulsion from the football field, youth were often obstructed from pursuing new endeavors. In spite of this, however, many youth persisted in taking advantage of whatever opportunities they could to develop new insights and capabilities. Youth were particularly likely to incorporate these changes into their sense of self the longer they lived in Malaysia and the more open their parents were to change.

“I think meeting new people [helped me gain confidence] . . . Here there are people from different race, different countries, different colours. In Afghanistan you don’t see much but here, you know, when you come out of your comfort zone, you definitely see other races and you become more open-minded”. —Afia

In contrast to most boys in the study, all but one girl described migration as liberating to some degree. Compared to where they spent their early years in their home countries, living in Malaysia afforded girls a chance to study, dress more freely, and relax gender norms that had previously prohibited them from engaging in certain activities, such as football. These girls exercised agency by exploring new ways of identifying and envisioning futures that were unimaginable to them pre-migration.

“If we were still in Afghanistan, women can’t really do anything there, but in other countries women are equal to men, they can enter any occupation that they like. With migration, people can change their minds and do things for their countries to improve the situation there”. —Zorin

Youth conveyed ambivalence as they reckoned with simultaneous experiences of loss and opportunity to expand their identities. For example, Assad explained that he felt “horrible” as a forced migrant without stability and a proper education. He then later shared that meeting people of diverse backgrounds helped him to “become a different person”, which he described as the “best thing you have” while waiting in Malaysia in hope of resettlement. As another example, Homa expressed longing for a valued self that she lost, stating that “before [migrating] I was more like good” and since then started to “not really [believe] in people” or “open my heart to others”. However, Homa simultaneously capitalized on the opportunities she could access in Malaysia:

“When I think what is the good thing of all of this, you know? So I will be like yeah I become more stronger after all of the things that I live and I also . . . know four languages . . . if I didn’t go like to all of these countries, if I did just stay in [home country], I wouldn’t be like that now and I wouldn’t want to be a football player . . . After I go to all of these countries, I understand that . . . I can create my own career and stuff like that”.

Homa’s statement further exemplifies how youth recreated agency as they re-evaluated the impact of losses and changing opportunities on their sense of identity. Even while feeling despondent about their circumstances, many youth strove to positively reappraise aspects of their experiences and to pursue opportunities to expand their identities.

### 3.2.3. (Re)Constructing Belonging

Youth explored similarities and differences between themselves and their families, peers, and communities, in an effort to reconstruct a sense of belonging. Establishing belonging was complicated by forced migration, which disrupted connections to youths’ point of origin, as well as by extreme discrimination and exclusionary policies in Malaysia that prevented access to sources of affiliation for youth (e.g., formal schools). Yet, even within these constraints, youth described negotiating where they fit in their everyday interactions, processes that led youth to forging collective identities and differentiated identities. By endeavouring to reconstruct a sense of belonging in their everyday lives, these youth were recreating agency in situated ways. More specifically, rather than passively allowing institutions in Malaysia to dictate their access to belonging, youth strove to reclaim

spaces of belonging that were important to them and that in turn contributed to identities worthy of social acceptance.

The majority of the youth constructed belonging within their families. They saw their family as a safe haven amidst an otherwise rejecting environment. As Safia stated, “as long as I have my parents, I am ok”. Families provided youth with a sense of consistency in a period of upheaval, including a connection to their heritage cultures, language, and other pre-migration sources of identity. This was particularly apparent when youth did not have access to family, such as the only unaccompanied minor in this study. This youth struggled to articulate a sense of self beyond his experience of loneliness and disconnection. Most youth, however, forged understandings of their identities during everyday conversations with parents and by learning about and cherishing family values, such as Afia below:

“I wanna continue my education. I come from a very educational family. Everyone, they studied and they finished college . . . My whole life, my father didn’t get the opportunity to live a life like mine in an . . . open environment . . . So he wants me to finish my education and everything . . . his words inspired me, that’s what I want as well. My father is my biggest role model . . . Every night when [my dad] comes home from work he like sits down with me and has a conversation with me, like what did you today? What are you going to do next week? What are you going to do tomorrow? And whenever I talk about it, he goes ‘oh that’s nice, you should do this, do that’. So it really helps me”.

Two girls, Homa and Dina, who perceived their families as unsupportive, renegotiated identities that differentiated themselves from their families. Homa and Dina shared feeling less connected to their families after migrating, which they attributed to disidentifying with the gender roles that their respective families expected them to perform. Both girls pushed for independence to define their intersecting female and Muslim identities on their own terms. For example, Dina described clashes with her mother over playing football and wearing the hijab, with her mother questioning: “Why do you want to be a football player? You’re a girl, you cannot play football”, and “Why should you take [the scarf] off? You’re already old”. To manage their perceived loss of family support, these two girls forged a shared sense of identity based on their similar dreams and values. Homa and Dina reclaimed agency by pursuing a peer relationship where they felt accepted, which in a sense defied the rejection they felt in their familial and societal contexts.

In response to discrimination, youth forged identities that differentiated them from the Malaysian community. They proudly emphasized how they were unlike Malaysians, even distinguishing themselves based on appearance. Being denied membership in the Malaysian community led youth to reconstruct belonging with their migrant peers:

“When I first came to Malaysia, they were almost bullying us because we are refugees and we came to their country and they feel like we are going to kill them or something like that. They are scared from us . . . so I didn’t want to be a friend of Malaysian people. So I decided to be friends with them [indicates migrant youth peers in the group]”. —Syed

To further counter the discrimination they faced in Malay spaces, youth envisioned organizing a community of refugees that would offer a collective sense of belonging. Even the act of imagining this community allowed youth to renegotiate identities that were worthy of belonging, demonstrating resistance to exclusionary policies in Malaysia.

“If you want a refugee [situation] to improve . . . bring . . . all the refugees to one place . . . so refugees can help each other solve the problem or like they can meet each other . . . They would be more happy . . . so if I have problem, maybe he can solve it. If he have problems, I will solve it”. —Nazeem

Syed’s and Nazeem’s quotes reinforce how youth recreated agency over their experiences of belonging as they repeatedly confronted rejection. These youth did not diminish who they were to fit in with the dominant group, and instead they reconstructed belonging in spaces that validated their collective and individual identities.

### 3.2.4. Working through Prescribed Identities

All participants worked through prescribed identities as migrants, which were imposed by dominant societal discourses. These discourses stereotyped forced migrants as helpless, incapable, lazy, and as threats to society, reinforcing their limited status and power in society. Youth worked through how these myopic and imposed definitions of their identities impacted their sense of self, negotiating their acceptance and rejection of them. Inherent in youths' negotiation was a struggle of agency over who defines and shapes their personal identities and experiences. Although youth were not able to change the structures that stifled major forms of agency, some youth resisted prescribed identities in order to tell and reclaim situated agency over their own stories. Other youth seemed to have internalized prescribed identities.

Many youth resisted prescribed identities by questioning and countering anti-migrant discourses. Several pointed to their families' efforts to contribute to society, for example, by taking unstable, low-paying jobs that non-migrant residents would likely refuse. Resistance also took the form of reconstructing identities as migrants. Homa, in particular, upended myths that migrants were unworthy of equal status and underscored their value to society, pointing to historical migrant flows that created present-day multicultural Malaysian society: "Malaysia would be nothing if there were no Chinese and Indian [immigrant] people here". Similarly, Dina rejected prescriptions that homogenized and demoted forced migrants, instead recontextualizing and reclaiming her lived experience:

"I feel normal, like a normal person . . . But the problem in Malaysia [is] they insult you a lot . . . like "you're a refugee, you're that, you're this, you're not like this". And I just want to know what they mean by "you're not like us". Okay, I'm a refugee, but not every refugee doesn't have money. I bet every refugee has some money and can work. We are not poor, we have money. But the problem that we came from other country where there's war."

Moreover, youth reconstructed identities as ordinary and multi-dimensional people, who cannot be narrowly defined on the basis of one axis of their identity. As Dina said, "We all have hopes and dreams just like others. It's not bad to be a refugee, but it's hard for others to understand that we are all humans". Youth further affirmed their right to define their identity on their own terms, rather than relying on institutional discourses and documents. Homa, who was a part of a minority ethnic group in Iran, shared how citizenship documents never accurately captured her identity: "It's about my heart . . . The passport is just a paper and when the people see it, it says that you are Iranian but that doesn't mean you feel like you are Iranian".

While some youth resisted prescribed identities, others assumed and internalized them. Some youth explained how being labelled a "migrant" or "refugee" made them feel different and badly about themselves. The sheer intensity of the discrimination that youth faced in Malaysia challenged their agency to renegotiate their own identities and tell their own stories. For example, Abe stated that the forced migrant identity denied his personal identity as a Somalian: "I'm proud to be Somalian and stuff like that, but when someone called you a refugee, I don't feel proud of that. I feel different".

Internalizing and feeling trapped by prescribed identities were experiences that were reinforced and compounded by the ongoing institutional oppression youth faced in Malaysia. Lack of control over their own stories mirrored their lack of agency to control their life circumstances. Links between interpersonal and institutional discrimination, and between feelings of uncertainty and shame about oneself, were apparent throughout Safia's narrative: "It feels bad [to be a refugee] . . . If you leave your country, it's bad. When you have problems in your country, I feel bad about that". Later, she stated, "[Malaysians] will say, 'you're not like us'. It makes me feel I'm different from them. Sometimes I like being different, but sometimes it's sad . . . They ask me 'why you come here? You're not work[ing], what's your work? What you are doing here? They will say go back . . . You know you are different, and you stand out. You cannot do anything that you want". When asked to elaborate on being "different", Safia discussed difficulties affording health care,

despite her father working over-time, and her inability to control her circumstances and her future: “I don’t know if I have a future here . . . It makes me feel so bad because I don’t know what is going to happen. I feel sad because I don’t know what is the next step”.

#### 4. Discussion

This grounded theory extends previous research on adolescent identity in contexts of forced migration, ongoing displacement, and illegality (Ball and Moselle 2016; Soberano et al. 2018; Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014), especially within the Global South (Arnett 2015; Reynolds and Zontini 2016). Our study offers an understanding of how youth articulate their own experiences of negotiating identities impacted by forced migration and living in transit in a non-Western, non-signatory state. Using a narrative approach exposed the tensions between youths’ personal narratives, as ‘ordinary’ adolescents seeking freedoms to explore their identities, and the structural conditions and discourses that hindered their agency, bridging research in narrative identity and youth migration (McLean and Syed 2016; Choi et al. 2019). While some of the identity negotiation processes we found are common in adolescence, especially for migrant youth in other contexts, they were likely significantly amplified and complicated by the multiple contexts of oppression that youth inhabited, including experiences of precipitous loss and living as ‘illegals’ in Malaysia without basic protections. Privileging the subjectivities of forced migrant youth in-transit, who are underrepresented in research, contributes to the migration literature on youths’ lived experiences in Southeast Asia (Beazley 2015; Choi et al. 2019).

##### 4.1. Links between Navigating Oppression, Renegotiating Identity, and Recreating Agency

The grounded theory offered here underscores that the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which youth develop impacts their identity negotiation (Benninger and Savahl 2017; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014), and that these may be particularly salient for youth who live on the margins of society. Participants in this study grappled with oppression, discrimination, and rejection in their home and transit countries that constrained access to avenues for identity exploration and to identity-affirming discourses. These adverse experiences understandably left some youth struggling with feelings of rejection, fear, and sadness related to the uncertainty cast over their lives. Yet, even while living in unpredictable environments that disregarded or contested their existence, many youth renegotiated new self-understandings and meaning within their day-to-day lives. By striving to reclaim ownership over their identities and lived experiences, to whatever limited extent possible, these youth were in turn recreating situated agency. Specifically, agency was situated within youths’ quotidian endeavours to preserve and expand their identities, reconstruct belonging on their terms, and resist myopic prescriptions of their identities. Although youth could not effect major changes in their lives, they worked to affirm their worthiness as human beings and their rights to define their own experiences. Renegotiating identities in ways that conveyed agency, however situated, was a novel and unexpected finding, especially as youth migration research to date has mostly conceptualized agency as decision-making (Lam and Yeoh 2018). Our findings reinforce calls for narrative approaches to capture the complexities of constructing identities when structural and interpersonal inequities are salient, especially from the perspectives of youth on the move and in the Global South whose intersections of identity are underrepresented in research (Arnett 2015; Benninger and Savahl 2017; Moffitt et al. 2020).

##### 4.2. Processes of Identity Negotiation

We found that youth continually renegotiated their identities through reconciling the losses and opportunities in their lives, establishing belonging on their own terms, and re-attributing meaning to the identity discourses imposed on them. The process of (re)evaluating loss and opportunity was one of the most salient findings of this study. While the losses that youth described reflect well-known hardships associated with forced migration, including losing sources of joy and important sociocultural connections (CPPCR

2009; Bronstein and Montgomery 2011; Soberano et al. 2018), youths' perception and meaning making of positive experiences is less understood. Even at times when youth in our study felt less hopeful about their circumstances, many reframed their experiences as opportunities for personal growth and skill-building that they could leverage to achieve their imagined futures. This finding is important and adds a dimension to research that often underscores how experiences of forced migration, including internalization of trauma, discrimination in exile, and living illegally, hinder coherent identity formation in adolescence with potential negative long-term implications (Anagnostopoulos et al. 2006; Soberano et al. 2018). While the vulnerability and challenges that forced migrant youth in transit endure should not be diminished, more studies are needed to illuminate the complexity of their experiences and identities shaped by co-occurring loss and creation of opportunities even in constrained circumstances.

Despite the distinctiveness of our sample, our theory shares similarities with a range of literature about adolescent identity, particularly on ethnic, racialized, and newcomer groups (Rogers and Way 2015; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014; Valentine et al. 2009). Ample research findings show that establishing belonging is particularly challenging for youth who are members of oppressed groups, and that finding belonging among those with interlocking experiences of oppression and resilience can buffer the negative impacts of exclusion (DiFulvio 2011; Hayes and Endale 2018; Toolis and Hammack 2015; Valentine et al. 2009; Wakefield and Hudley 2007; Rogers and Way 2015). Similarly, participants in the current study struggled with questions of belonging, and they bonded with each other over shared experiences as 'migrants' in Malaysia. While their bonding may have been enhanced by our study design of sharing narratives in peer groups, forging these connections allowed at least some of the youth to see their struggles as a collective and to renegotiate identities that were worthy of belonging.

Additionally, research with newcomer youth has found that feeling belonging within families can be complicated by acculturation gaps, whereby youth may acculturate and adapt to norms in the host country quicker than their parents (Telzer 2010). In comparison, we found that the majority of youth constructed belonging with their families. However, two girls described clashes with their parents over increasingly different perspectives about their roles as Muslim women. More research is needed to elucidate whether acculturation gaps are sources of stress for forced migrant youth in transit, including how youth negotiate conflicting family and societal norms when they are not legally resettled and accepted within society.

Unlike research with resettled refugee youth that has identified a struggle to reconcile a sense of belonging between one's culture of origin and host culture (Schwartz et al. 2015), we found that forced migrant youth in Malaysia were more likely to simply disidentify with the dominant group. This is an important point of distinction between forced migrant youth who anticipate resettlement or repatriation, compared to those who are legally and permanently resettled. Forced migrant youth in transit may be less likely to form an affiliation to a transit country, especially one that rejects them, given their belief that it will be a temporary stop on a journey to another destination.

#### 4.3. Limitations

Several limitations are worth noting. First, our grounded theory is preliminary due to the small sample size. A larger sample is needed to determine whether this theory would resonate with the experiences of other forced migrant youth in transit. Second, we were not able to analyze differences in identity construction across ages because of the narrow age range within our sample. This analysis was also cross-sectional. Research that includes follow-up interviews with youth at least one year later could capture continuities and discontinuities in their stories, and yield insights about developmental processes of identity formation in mobility. However, this may not be feasible given that youth are on the move and may relocate unexpectedly. Third, Debra (first author) did not conduct the interviews and thus did not have field notes and memos to guide her analytic process. To compensate,

Debra spent nearly a year iteratively analyzing the interviews and asked the interviewer about her personal experiences with the youth participants in Malaysia. Fourth, our study asked youth a few different questions beyond the scope of identity. A more singular focus on identity as the central theme for the PMSN could generate more nuanced data about negotiated, intersectional identities. Finally, although youth were asked at the outset how they wished to be represented in our research, we were not able to re-contact youth to review the findings. In future research, it would be important to maintain contact with study participants so that they can provide feedback about study findings, which may be feasible now that many migrant youth can access forms of telecommunication.

#### 4.4. Implications and Future Directions

This study has implications for conceptualizing adolescent identity in forced migration and in contexts of illegality in the Global South. Our findings emphasize that situating identity within distinct sociopolitical and historical situations and ongoing structural conditions is crucial. We echo calls for more research examining how illegality, precarity, and marginalization interact with developmental processes, particularly from the perspectives of youth themselves (Clayton et al. 2019; Soberano et al. 2018; Moffitt et al. 2020).

Research on the intersections of injustice and youth identity should also consider resilience and agency (Clayton et al. 2019; Ellis and Chen 2013). Far from passive agents, forced migrant youth make daily choices about how to engage with their situation and attribute meaning to their experiences, even when their room for maneuver is limited. For practitioners working with forced migrant youth in transit, this finding underscores the importance of recognizing resilience in addition to validating youths' experiences of oppression (Ellis and Chen 2013; Hughes 2019). Although forced migrant youth face ongoing stressors, encouraging reflection on both individual strengths and collective resilience can help to challenge insidious stereotypes, create alternative self-constructions, and foster hopefulness and well-being.

In addition, our study offers further support for uptake of research methods that use varied forms of self- or collective-expression and that encourage a sense of community among participants. Our application of the PMSN method, which combined visual expression, story-telling, and peer mediation, was well-suited for engaging youth as a modality for expression, enhancing peer support, and learning what dimensions of migration experience are salient to youth. Further exploration of this method as an approach to narrative data collection and as a tool to promote peer psychosocial support is ongoing in the context of forced migrant youth in Thailand.

Finally, youths' voices must be entered into institutional and political discourse about how to resolve their displacement and illegal status (Ball and Moselle 2016; Soberano et al. 2018; Doná and Veale 2011). In keeping with the UN (1989), to which Malaysia is signatory, youth have a right be heard in decisions that affect them. As evidenced in our study, youth are able to articulate the impact of their illegal status and exclusionary policies on their well-being and development. Privileging youths' self-articulated needs, identities, and capabilities is necessary for making laws and services more inclusive, accessible, and representative of those whom they affect.

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