Exploring (Re)Connection with Métis Young Adults

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Abstract

Strong connections to land, culture, and community are associated with increased well-being for Indigenous Peoples, yet colonial policies have disrupted such connections. Métis young adults often face unique challenges in connecting to their culture, with little research addressing such issues. This study explores how Métis young adults (aged 18–29) navigate (re)connecting to culture, and its implications for well-being. Three themes emerged: (1) In the Dark: Navigating the Shadows of Identity, (2) Reconnecting Through Kinship, and (3) Reclamation of Knowledge. Findings highlight the multifaceted ways Métis young adults navigate reconnecting and provide recommendations on supporting individuals on this journey.

Key words: Métis, young adults, youth, reconnection, well-being

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For Indigenous Peoples in Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), having strong connections to culture is integral to mental health and well-being (Anderson et al., 2022; Crooks et al., 2015). Studies have shown positive relationships between engaging in one's own culture and improved well-being (for example, Doery et al., 2023; Walls et al., 2022), and these connections contribute to greater feelings of belonging and acceptance (Sutherland et al., 2024; Wexler, 2009). When looking at Métis-specific scholarship, similar themes arise. For instance, Ginn et al. (2022), who worked with Métis people from Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3 (now Otipemisiwak Métis Government Districts 5 and 6), found that health and well-being were strongly tied to having strong connections to community, land, and culture—all of which are grounded in Métis kinship systems.

For Métis people, kinship networks are a source that individuals use to situate and understand themselves, and it is within these networks that individuals hold a profound sense of mutual care and responsibility for each other (Macdougall, 2017). Kinship refers to the relationships and sense of responsibility individuals have for one another, including between family and extended family members, friends, and community, and extending to non-human relatives (e.g., animals, plants) and spiritual worlds (Gaudry 2018; Macdougall 2010). These deep-rooted connections describe how Métis people have organized their society and community relationships, both internally and externally (Macdougall, 2010). Gaudet et al. (2020) further explain the importance of kinship roles, particularly those held by Métis women, in guiding, supporting, and caring for others within kinship networks. Through these roles, Métis women – or "Aunties" – foster safe, trusting relationships that support identity formation through connection, care, and cultural grounding (Gaudet et al., 2020). These kinship networks help form the relational basis of Métis identity—how one knows who they are, and where they belong (Macdougall, 2010). However, when kinship systems are broken or disrupted, as they have been for many Métis families through colonial practices (Campbell, 1983; Fiola, 2015), Métis youth and young adults may face additional challenges in navigating their own cultural development.

Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Adolescence and young adulthood is a critical developmental and transition period. Individuals often start establishing their values, creating a coherent sense of self, and building a sense of identity and purpose—all of which are essential elements in psychosocial development for this age group (Phinney, 1989; Wexler, 2009). During this developmental period, many individuals start to actively explore and begin solidifying their cultural identities (Phinney, 1989). These developmental processes set the stage for establishing one's values, social bonds, and decision-making skills, which are needed to successfully transition to adult roles (Brown et al., 2022; Wexler, 2009).

For Indigenous youth, previous studies have shown that developing a strong cultural identity contributes to a better sense of belonging (Sutherland et al., 2024; Wexler 2009) and greater well-being (Crooks et al., 2015). Additionally, having a strong cultural identity protects Indigenous youth as it helps them cope with the hardships they experience (Doery et al., 2023;

Njeze et al., 2020; Wexler, 2009). Inkster (2023) further explains the importance of having a strong cultural identity for youth, stating, "Young people need assistance in developing ideas around cultural identity because belonging to a group can promote resilience" (p. 4). Crooks et al. (2015) also outline the significance of cultural connectedness and cultural identity development while illustrating how the two are connected and reinforce one another. Specifically, in evaluating how culturally relevant programs contribute to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youths' well-being, Crooks et al. (2015) found that having strong connections to one's culture improved youths' sense of identity, as well as protected youth against feelings of shame.

Although the benefits of having strong connections to culture and community are well documented for youth and young adults, a large majority of the existing studies are pan-Indigenous. The few that are Métis specific consistently highlight the role that strong connections to culture and community, or a lack thereof, play in young people's lives. For example, when explicitly working with Métis youth through beadwork, Inkster (2023) noted the importance of helping Métis youth connect with their culture, as being disconnected can lead to feelings of emptiness. This emptiness, or being disconnected from culture, was further described by a knowledge holder as a "hole that individuals carry of not knowing who or where they come from" (Lisa Shepherd, as cited in Inkster, 2023, p. 202). Strengthening one's connection to culture, whether through cultural practices such as beading or through conversations with family, is not only healing but also reaffirming of one's cultural identity, toward building resilience (Inkster, 2023). Additionally, in Gabel et al.'s (2024) study, a consistent theme among Métis youth was the important role that culture and community played in the development of their identity and their overall well-being. These studies illustrate the importance of culture in building and strengthening individuals' cultural identity, however many questions remain regarding how individuals who have been disconnected from culture and community can reconnect.

Struggles with Identity and the Complexity of Reconnecting

For Métis youth, developing a strong cultural identity and (re)connecting can be further complicated due to distinct histories (e.g., the scrip system, Boyer & Andersen, 2024), which have resulted in misconceptions regarding Métis identity and vast disconnection from family, land, community, and culture. This can make identity development challenging for Métis youth, as they must navigate a societal landscape that either misunderstands or dismisses Métis identity (Boyer & Andersen, 2024).

Ongoing colonial narratives, rather than recognizing Métis people as a distinct political and cultural nation grounded in relational governance, continue to misrepresent Métis identity by reducing it to questions of blood quantum and racial "mixing" (Gaudry, 2018; St-Onge et al., 2012). The emotional impact of such narratives on young people can lead to fear of judgment, feelings of inadequacy, and if their kinship networks have been disrupted, confusion regarding their identity. Adding to this misrecognition, many Canadian youth have been taught a colonial-biased curriculum in which Métis people are described as "rebels" and portrayed as antagonists

in the nation-building of Canada (Poitras-Pratt, 2021). This can cause youth to experience both external skepticism and questioning, as well as internal doubt regarding their identity (Gaudry 2018; St-Onge et al., 2012).

Youth who lack strong relational supports may be especially vulnerable to self-doubt and identity confusion, as they may not have individuals they can go to for validation of their experiences and identity. Participants in Gabel et al.'s (2024) study touched on this, describing how having older family members pass away can make it more challenging for youth to learn more about their culture and their own family's history, ultimately impacting healthy cultural identity development.

Together, these factors are central to understanding the complexities of reconnecting for Métis young adults. Reconnecting is more than learning and reclaiming one's identity or family history—it is an emotional and social struggle against colonial narratives that continue to dismiss Métis realities (Macdougall et al., 2012; Poitras-Pratt, 2021).

Gap and Current Study

In sum, connections to land, culture, and community are foundational for healing and well-being for Métis people in Canada. However, due to historical (and ongoing) misrepresentation and systemic issues that the Métis face, many still struggle with feelings of disconnection. Although there has been considerable growth in Métis-specific research that has emphasized the importance of connection for healing and well-being for Métis people (e.g., Auger et al., 2022; Flaminio et al., 2020; Gabel et al., 2024; Inkster, 2023; Sasakamoose et al., 2016), younger age groups remain underrepresented. In their scoping review investigating Métis-specific health research, Gmitroski et al. (2023) note that although individuals aged 15–24 make up 16% of the total Métis population in Canada, no studies focused specifically on this group.

Additionally, much of the literature that includes Métis youth and young adults does so through a pan-Indigenous lens, grouping First Nations, Métis, and Inuit together. This approach obscures the distinct experiences of specific nations and limits our understanding of Métis-specific issues (Boyer & Andersen 2024; Forsythe 2024). For example, distinct historical factors like the scrip system have and continue to undermine Métis collective identity. Whereas the Canadian state dealt with First Nations on a nation-to-nation basis through treaties, scrip was distributed individually, ultimately de-collectivizing Métis people (Boyer & Andersen, 2024).

These circumstances highlight the need for Métis-specific research. Métis young adults who are actively reconnecting—or wanting to—face a societal landscape that often misconstrues or dismisses Métis identity, which can hinder cultural identity development. There is a clear gap in research addressing the unique challenges of (re)connecting with Métis culture, community, and land, particularly among adolescents and young adults, whose experiences are often overlooked. To help fill this gap, the current study centres the voices of Métis young adults as they navigate (re)connection, including the barriers and facilitators they encounter and the supports they feel are needed in order to develop and sustain strong connections.

Method

Ethical Framework

This research was guided by the Six Principles of Ethical Métis Research (i.e., Reciprocal Relationships, Recognize Diversity, "Respect For," "Research Should," Safe & Inclusive Environments, and Métis Context (National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO], 2010), and the First Nations OCAP® principles. Although OCAP® pertains explicitly to First Nations, it informed how data access, privacy, and confidentiality were approached. We used Mashford-Pringle et al.'s (2023) Weaved Indigenous Framework for Research to integrate both OCAP® and Ethical Métis Research principles.

Recruitment

Eligibility for this study was based on participants self-identifying as Métis and being aged 18–29, aligning with the study's focus on young adulthood. Recruitment was done through the University of Calgary's Research Participation System (RPS) and through posting recruitment flyers in culturally relevant spaces such as the Writing Symbols Lodge (WSL). RPS participants received 1 percent course credit, and those recruited through flyers were given a $25 Everything Card as an honorarium. A Qualtrics survey confirmed eligibility and collected anonymous demographic data (e.g., age, gender identification, Métis Nation/region/settlement they are from). Eligible participants provided contact information at the end of the survey to schedule interviews. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB23-1299).

Interviews

We collected data for this study through one-on-one interviews with participants using a semi-structured interview guide, with questions posed in a conversational manner. The first author conducted all interviews. This approach allowed for guided conversations based in relationality, aligning with Métis traditional knowledge sharing through storytelling. Interviews lasted between 15–35 minutes. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams or in person in a comfortable, private, and safe space, based on participant preference. The interview location was kept flexible to recognize the Métis research principle of safe and inclusive environments, ensuring that participants were given spaces where they felt safe and comfortable to share their experiences. Each interview was recorded using Microsoft Teams. To ensure complete transparency with participants and to uphold the principle of "Respect For" (i.e., the importance of mutual understanding and agreement, participant rights, and the use of their stories), informed consent was also reviewed verbally before starting the interview (NAHO, 2010). Participants were also allowed to review and edit their interview transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected their experiences. No participants in the current study requested edits to their individual transcripts.

Analysis

As a Métis researcher (first author) exploring Métis young adults' experiences in reconnecting, my identity, background, and personal journey of reconnecting, deeply informs this work. Acknowledging how my lived experiences and assumptions may shape the research, I engaged in ongoing critical reflexivity throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). To support this, I used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), which emphasizes researcher reflexivity and is well-suited to under-researched areas (Braun & Clarke, 2020, 2023). RTA values subjectivity as a source of insight, recognizing that knowledge is contextually constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2022b), aligning with the Métis research principle of "Métis Context." (NAHO, 2010). This approach ensured that participants' narratives were at the core of this project while providing respect and sensitivity for the nuances of Métis identity and reconnecting. The second author served as a research supervisor and mentor to help support the overall research project. The second author is a third-generation, White settler woman who has conducted research in support of youth and young adult well-being for the past 15 years. She comes to this research as an outsider to the experiences of Métis young adults, and in the role of a support to the first authors' work as a Métis researcher.

For RTA, Braun and Clarke (2020) put forth a six-stage approach to be used as a guide, which they explain is flexible and non-linear, allowing researchers to go back and forth between stages. The first stage of this approach entails familiarizing oneself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). To familiarize myself with the data, I first de-identified and transcribed each interview myself. I then read through each transcribed interview, reviewing to ensure all identifying information was removed and to make myself more familiar with the data. To identify patterns in participant stories, I re-read each transcript while also recording my reflections. Once the interviews were transcribed, de-identified and reviewed for accuracy, I printed the transcripts to code them manually.

The second stage involved creating initial codes, which Braun and Clarke (2022b) describe as the building blocks of analysis that create a sound foundation for themes. I utilized deductive methods by using my research questions and previous experience as a guide, as well as inductive, by allowing the data itself to guide me to new insights. As a more visual and tactile learner, I decided to code transcripts manually, which helped to identify patterns more effectively. With a hands-on approach, I could engage with the data more intimately, allowing me to identify patterns between data points more easily.

Stage three focused on theme development, where I reviewed both the initial codes along with my reflective notes. Simultaneously, I scanned for patterns in the codes within and across participants to highlight potential themes within the context of the research questions and participant narratives. I then reviewed candidate themes to ensure that they accurately reflected the lived experiences and stories that participants shared. During this process, I found it useful to start creating visual maps of certain relationships I saw form, as well as to make notes of core ideas I had started to generate and whether these ideas fit together (or not) in telling a story about the data.

In stage four, I focused on reviewing and refining my candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). In RTA, themes must have a central concept that is unique to each specific theme, there must be relationships and distinctions between themes, and when put together, the themes must tell a sound narrative that is reflective of participants' experiences and answers the research question(s) (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). I continued visual mapping in this part of my analysis, as it helped me see how some of my original candidate themes could merge to become one and visualize how the overall structure of my analysis was taking shape. This phase also included re-examining the data extracts within each theme to confirm that the extracts coincided and produced a consistent pattern. I also reviewed the themes to make sure they were comprehensible and that they provided an accurate and eloquent story of the data.

In the fifth stage of analysis, I developed a brief summary of each theme to confirm that the themes generated each had a solid core concept and were distinct. While creating each summary, I reflected on questions such as "What story does this theme tell?" and "How does this theme fit into my overall story about the data?" (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 35). Lastly, during this phase, I started to think about naming each theme. Braun and Clarke (2022b) state that theme names should be short and informative phrases, representing the analysis related to that specific theme. This phase continued into phase six of analysis, which includes writing the report, which should tell a story of the data that is rich, coherent, and succinct (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). I braided the narrative generated from my analysis together with rich extracts from the data to provide a whole and compelling story, as shared in the Results and Discussion section. The second author also supported the fifth and sixth stages of the analysis process.

Results and Discussion

This study engaged five young Métis adults between the ages of 18 and 27, with 60% of participants identifying as women. From participants' stories, the themes were constructed to describe how they have been able to (re)connect, including any facilitators or barriers they experienced. The three themes were (1) In the Dark: Navigating the Shadows of Identity, (2) Reconnecting Through Kinship, and (3) Bridging Knowledge and Reclamation. All themes are presented in thematic maps and described in subsequent sections.

In the Dark: Navigating the Shadows of Identity

This theme focuses on how participants described being initially "in the dark" about their Métis identity due to shame and trauma passed down over generations. Participants spoke of family silence regarding their Métis heritage and misconceptions regarding Métis people, all of which can develop into feelings of inadequacy. Colonial narratives also played a key role in such misconceptions.
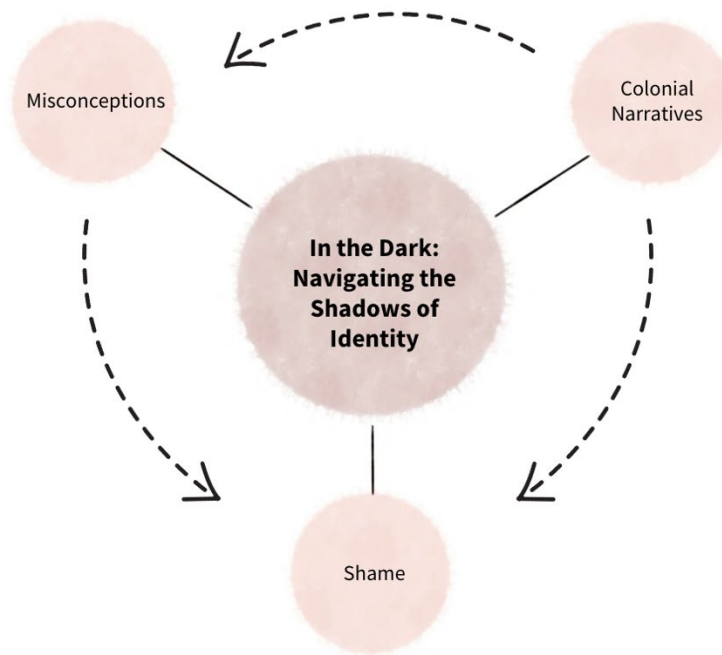
Figure 1. Thematic Map of "In The Dark: Navigating the Shadows of Identity"

In describing what being Métis meant to them, it became clear that the participants I spoke with had to traverse through the complex interplay of various external and internal factors, including colonial narratives and family dynamics. Participants discussed traumas and shame passed down from grandparents and/or parents, as opposed to the passing down of traditional and cultural knowledge. While participants' experiences varied, all described some form of disconnect or silence in their early experiences of (re)connecting with their Métis identity—whether through family silence or avoidance, or through feelings of uncertainty regarding how others would perceive or validate their identity.

Although some participants spoke from a place of growing pride or increased clarity, all described early challenges in feeling affirmed or supported in their cultural identity. Participants discussed dealing with misconceptions from others due to ongoing colonial narratives, such as beliefs regarding blood quantum and racial purity (Macdougall, 2017; Paul et al., 2023). For example, in response to what being Métis means to them, Participant 5 mentioned how they "found that being Métis was always seen as not fully Indigenous." Similarly, Participant 4 also expressed experiencing instances where they were often perceived as "not Indigenous enough" due to their physical appearance, discouraging them from engaging in cultural activities.

Being perceived as "not fully Indigenous" due to one's physical characteristics is a colonial concept steeped in beliefs regarding blood quantum, wherein "Indigenous peoples with non-stereotypical features are often assumed they are less 'Indian' and challenged on how much 'Indian blood' they have" (Paul et al., 2023, p. 249). Participant 3 echoed how misperceptions of Indigeneity can contribute to internalized feelings of inadequacy and how this impacted their experience of reconnecting:

I felt like I wasn't enough or Indigenous enough compared to my friends or cousins who are Status or Treaty. It just makes you feel like you're not enough, we're not Indigenous enough to be reconnecting. [Man, age 24]

Feelings of not being "enough" can contribute to shame, which negatively affects Indigenous youth. Because feelings of shame are often internalized, younger individuals may struggle to identify the systemic root causes of these feelings (Crooks et al., 2015). In addressing systemic causes of such feelings of inadequacy, participants discussed the impact of residential schools and the resulting silence and shame that have permeated Métis communities for generations. Many Métis residential school survivors have shared that their experiences at residential schools taught them to be ashamed of their culture and identity and that these feelings of shame often trickled down to subsequent generations (TRC, 2016; Chartrand et al., 2006).

Participant 2 elaborated on how historical injustices, such as residential schools, have perpetuated cycles of trauma and silence that continue to cast a shadow over individuals' identities today:

It inflicted a lot of shame across an entire group of people even if they weren't directly involved. It created this sense of it's not good to be Métis. I know my mom's side, being Métis wasn't exactly a thing they were proud of, so it almost ties back into that, that missing identity. If you don't think it's good to be Métis or who you are, you're likely going to suppress that and not pass it down. But of course, the fear and shame passed down. [Man, age 25]

In sum, participants' narratives highlighted how feelings of shame are connected to larger struggles for identity and belonging. As discussed above, not feeling "Indigenous enough" is reflective of broader colonial constructs that base individuals' "Indigenousness" solely on racial purity (Macdougall, 2017). Such sentiments are also embedded in discourse focused on racial purity, blood quantum, and mixed-blood inferiority that continue to undermine Métis people's sense of self (Paul et al., 2023). As noted by these participants, colonialism's insidious influence has infiltrated many individuals' sense of self, leading to internalized struggles over identity and belonging, and barriers connecting.

Reconnecting Through Kinship

The second theme focuses on how kinship relations and supports can play a vital role in creating pathways for individuals to learn and (re)connect. It encompasses how kinship connections aid in the transmission of knowledge and history, facilitating healing and identity reclamation. These relationships are reciprocal, as individuals are influenced by strengthening their connections to family and community while simultaneously contributing to their family and community's continuity and healing. Participants commonly referred to significant others, such as family, friends, and the larger Métis community, as largely shaping their ability to (re)connect.
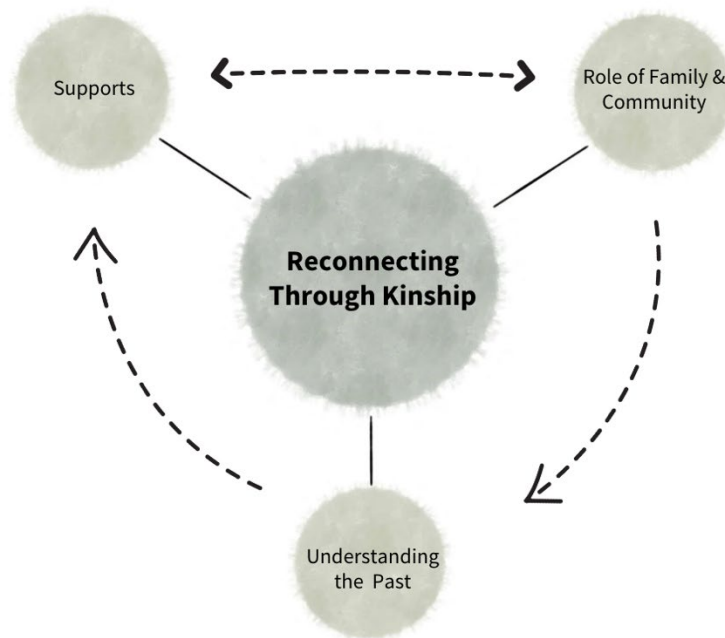
Figure 2. Thematic Map of "Reconnecting Through Kinship"

For example, Participant 5 described their connections to culture, land, and community as being rooted in their family:

> I had a hard time connecting, so I had to find my own identity in being Métis and that included staying connected with family members, which was important to me because if I wasn't connected with them, I had no other source of being culturally educated and grounded. [Woman, age 27]

Participant 1 mirrored the importance of family in strengthening their connection and how reconnecting was a reciprocal process within their own family:

> I felt like ever since I moved to university and I've been strengthening my connection, my mom back home has started doing that as well....And all the stuff that she learns, she shares with me. Same with my grandparents...Our whole family is just kind of sharing our knowledge around that we pick up from everywhere. [Woman, age 19]

> Dialogue with family members helped individuals understand the trauma and shame that had been passed down. Participant 2 explained the importance of having these conversations within their own family:

> If possible, you know, talk to your parents, your family members, and ask for their experiences. I know in my case it wasn't really talked about cause a lot of the experiences —if not all of them—were negative. But I would recommend having those tougher conversations with your parents and their parents [grandparents] if possible. [Man, age 25]

Having open dialogue with one's family is a crucial step in understanding and reconciling one's family history, specifically as it pertains to the shadow of historical trauma and shame that can

linger for generations. In some cases, individuals may discover silenced family histories or survival tactics that denied Métis ancestry (Poitras-Pratt, 2021). In acknowledging that these conversations may be hard, Participant 2 also stressed the importance of safe environments and vulnerability:

> It's gotta be like a safe environment, one you're comfortable with. I think the number one thing I've experienced is kind of chipping away at that, that shame or that embarrassment. I would just say being very vulnerable is necessary to really understand the past and how it affects you now. [Man, age 25]

The need for safe environments to be able to discuss sensitive family histories highlights the complexity of navigating these conversations. In mentioning having to "chip away" at the shame that has been passed down, Participant 2 outlines the courage that is required to tackle painful family experiences. This mirrors Métis youths' experiences in Inkster's (2023) study, where having safe environments to dialogue with Métis adults assisted the youth emotionally in helping them cope, while also providing a path to growing a stronger connection to culture. These discussions can also facilitate pathways to deconstruct internalized shame that, for many, has been a barrier to fully embracing their Métis identity.

Significant individual relationships with certain family members can also play an influential role in helping bridge cultural gaps. Participant 4 described the importance of the relationship with their grandparent in relation to their Métis identity:

> Being Métis for me, is a connection to family. Especially my grandpa; getting cultural knowledge from him has strengthened our relationship and my connection. If I didn't have him, I probably wouldn't know much about the [Métis] history. Although I'm definitely at the beginning stages of reconnecting. But if I didn't have him, I would have a tough time trying to strengthen my connection. [Woman, age 18]

Support from non-Indigenous friends and family is also important when (re)connecting. Participant 1 described the vital role that their partner, father, and friends have played in supporting their journey:

> My boyfriend, we've been together for years and he's, you know, he's not Indigenous, but he's helped me a lot as well as, you know, my dad's not [Indigenous] either. And he's helped me so much as well, which is amazing and I have some really great friends who are also super supportive in my journey. [Woman, age 19]

Due to the emotional nature of reconnecting—a process that is often taxing and heavy (Poitras-Pratt, 2021)—this excerpt illustrates how having supportive others is essential for both coping and healing, even when those others are not directly part of your community.

This importance of a personal support system also led to discussions of the importance of having more formal supports in place, such as support groups and programs, to reach individuals who may not have support from others. These more formal supports can aid in dealing with isolation, coping, and moving forward. Participant 2 described how such groups or programs are essential.

It is certainly a lot to unpack and to understand, and I know some people, you know, they might be a little more emotionally charged depending on what the stories that have been passed down are. So I think, if there was some kind of support group or network, say for Métis people, especially youth, helping deal with the depth of grief and how to move forward from it, ideally not from a place of like anger or frustration. [Man, age 25]

This quote highlights the complexity of unresolved grief that can be passed down through generations and the importance of recognizing and mourning current and past grievances (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). To reconnect after being "in the dark" and experiencing "shame passed down," this grief needs to be processed through both informal supports — which can take the form of trusted relationships that provide validation and/or meaningful dialogue with family — and formal supports such as counselling where individuals have the opportunity to share their experiences and gain coping strategies (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

In sum, participants' responses to being disconnected from their Métis heritage and then pursuing reconnection were rooted in their relationships with family, community, and supportive others. These relationships created pathways for participants to gain more knowledge regarding Métis culture and history, as well as their own family's history. Participants not only emphasized the vital role internal community connections play but also how the act of building relationships with others outside their immediate context facilitated reciprocal support and healing on a larger scale. For young adults who do not have access to these informal, natural supports, more formal supports like planned programs may be important. Together, building and restoring these relations can also directly confront colonial strategies to "divide and conquer," and serve as an act of resistance.

Reclamation of Knowledge

The third theme focuses on how participants actively sought cultural knowledge to develop a strong Métis identity. Participants described geographical location as a double-edged sword, with benefits and drawbacks, and stressed the importance of education, literature, and Métis representation in reconnecting.
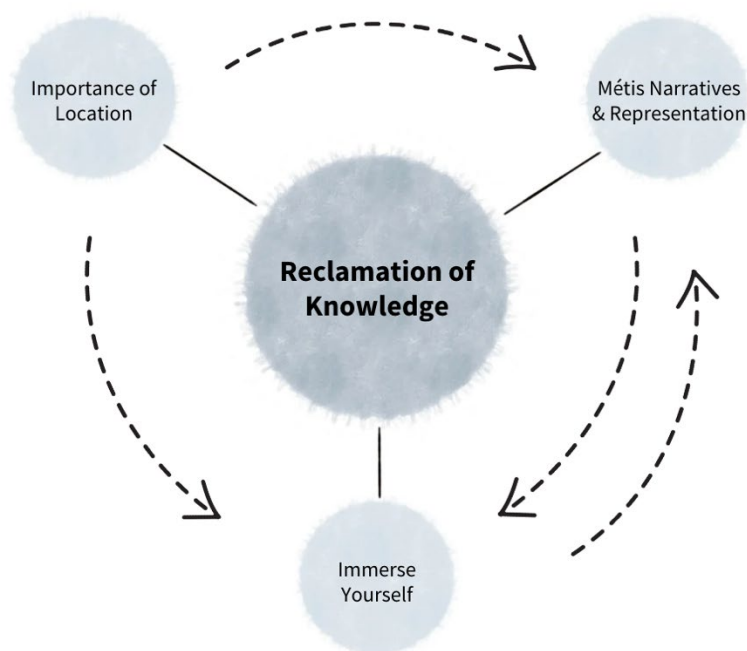
Figure 3. Thematic Map of "Reclamation of Knowledge"

Although participants perceived relationships as strong facilitators in reconnecting, they also recognized their own role in this process. Participant 3 described the importance of individual initiative and agency:

> In my experience – the best way to find and strengthen connections is to put myself out there. So, when taking Indigenous Studies courses, making sure I attend classes, read more, and make an effort to connect. [Man, age 24]

As post-secondary institutions in Canada were built on and generally perpetuate colonial ways of being, knowing, and doing (Poitras-Pratt 2019), this effort to engage serves to reclaim a space within a colonial institution and cultural landscape that has historically marginalized both Indigenous Peoples and perspectives. In this way, active engagement within colonial institutions to strengthen one's connection to culture, identity, and community can be seen as a form of resistance and survivance (Auger, 2021; Poitras-Pratt, 2021).

Putting in the personal effort to establish connections also pushed participants to reach out to family, peers, or their Métis community. Participant 5 expressed the courage necessary to take such initiative, noting it often makes individuals step outside of their comfort zone:

> You have to immerse yourself. You just need to really step outside of your comfort zone. Even for myself, I relied on my mom to connect me, whereas once I didn't have her, I had to step out of that comfort zone and make my own connections and be like, okay, I'm interested in doing this [activity/event]. Where do I go? Then, I would reach out to my [Métis] Nation. [Woman, age 27]

Reaching out to participate in cultural programs or events may be challenging, depending on an individual's location. It became clear in discussing connections to culture and land that there was a dichotomy of experiences in urban versus rural areas. Participant 2 touched on the issue of accessibility and awareness of cultural programs and how these may not always be well-communicated or available in rural areas:

> I'd say a lack of awareness of programs, or even if there are. I'm sure those programs exist. But I don't know if it is communicated or advertised effectively or is not as available up north or in more rural areas. So, I'd say that would probably be the biggest roadblock to potentially reconnecting or learning more for me. [Man, age 25]

This reflection highlights a significant barrier to reconnecting: finding and accessing cultural resources, which may be less available in rural areas.

Similarly, Participant 1 discussed an increase in opportunities to engage in cultural events once they moved to an urban centre, something that was not accessible to them before:

> When I moved here to [city] for school, I became so much more connected, because there is so much more going on in terms of cultural events, and there was never any of those in [my hometown]. [Woman, age 19]

This quote details the rich opportunities that may be present in urban centres and how such experiences were not available in the rural location of the participant's hometown. However, Participant 1 also noted the drawbacks of being in urban areas as it relates to connecting with the land:

> It's kind of been hard because with the land like my connection to the land is a lot better back home where I grew up because my mom taught me all the different medicinal herbs and the berries there and here it's pretty different. It's just hard to have that connection to the land in a big city where concrete is everywhere. [Woman, age 19]

Thus, although urban centres can increase access to cultural events, it is often at the expense of one's connection with the land. On the other hand, those in rural areas may more easily be able to connect with land, but cultural events may not be as accessible. This presents a constant negotiation Métis young adults may need to engage in, as they find themselves in spaces that can facilitate connections to certain aspects of their cultural identity while hindering others.

Participants also discussed the need for increased Métis representation across various spheres of life, highlighting the role that visibility can play in fostering a greater sense of belonging. For example, Participant 1 described the impact of having Métis teachers in their school growing up, which allowed for a solid foundation in building their cultural identity. However, Participant 1 also expressed a desire for broader Métis visibility beyond isolated instances:

> Having more Métis people around definitely would have made it so much easier. I was quite shy as a child, and being the only Métis person around actually trying to reconnect was hard. Like I had that one [Métis] teacher, but having that in more spaces... [Woman, age 19]

The vital role of Métis representation was identified among other participants, as well. For instance, Participant 3 mentioned how formal education and Métis literature facilitated their cultural learning:

> Honestly, just through [name of university]. Because of the Indigenous studies program, I'm not in that program, but I often take their courses as options if I can...and reading stuff written by Métis authors or about Métis history. That helps to learn about history and culture. [Man, age 24]

Similarly, Participant 4 recalled how having Indigenous professors in their post-secondary education impacted their cultural learning, as this helped them to be immersed in Indigenous literature that their professor had selected for class readings:

> It helps to be immersed in that cultural perspective. You can see how our culture views relationships with animals and each other and the Earth through these stories too. [Woman, age 18]

These excerpts allude to the essential roles Indigenous education and literature play in facilitating cultural learning. This illustrates how enhanced Indigenous representation in various spaces can act as a bridge, immersing Métis young adults in culture in ways that assist them in comprehending their culture's history. Access to and learning one's culture facilitates reconnection and is considered a key component in identity development and well-being for Métis youth (Gabel et al., 2024).

In discussing education, it is necessary to point to the constantly evolving nature of education. Participant 2 touched on this, noting that although education can progress forward, it still may not provide a full picture, leaving students to piece fragments of stories together on their own:

> They [education] do touch on residential schools, which 10–20 years before us that wasn't even a topic. So I mean that is a step in the right direction, but I kind of feel like— you learn about [residential schools] and the definitions, like assimilation. But as to why or how it affects us now is not quite there as much as I think it should be. [Man, age 25]

In omitting how and why historical injustices affect Indigenous communities now, education fails to acknowledge and undermines the impact of such events in shaping Indigenous realities today. Since oppression is often embedded in institutional structures today, Indigenous youth may struggle to locate their personal or community hardships within experiences of colonization (Wexler, 2009). One way education systems can tackle this is by teaching youth about the social determinants of health and their relationship to historical trauma, illuminating how both can permeate generations if not recognized and processed. Integrating Métis historical narratives into education provides Métis youth with a thorough understanding of their cultural history, including the challenges their community has faced and the contemporary manifestations of these hardships (Poitras-Pratt, 2019). Acquiring Métis historical literacy also facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge (Poitras-Pratt, 2019), a vital component of reconnecting.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of taking the initiative to gain cultural knowledge and strengthen their connections. Generally, having more Métis representation was

noted as something that would facilitate stronger connections, with participants expressing a need for an increase in Métis representation and visibility in general. Finally, the importance of location cannot be understated, as participants described both positive and negative impacts of being in either urban or rural areas.

Implications

Findings from this study provide valuable insights into the diverse ways Métis young adults have engaged in strengthening their (re)connections to culture. Starting this journey is not without challenges; therefore, this study proposes a conceptual model of recommendations to support Métis young adults in (re)connecting. As illustrated in Figure 4, the interconnected model is organized into three key areas, each addressing a different range of needs: restoring relationships and culture, building natural support, and formal healing supports.
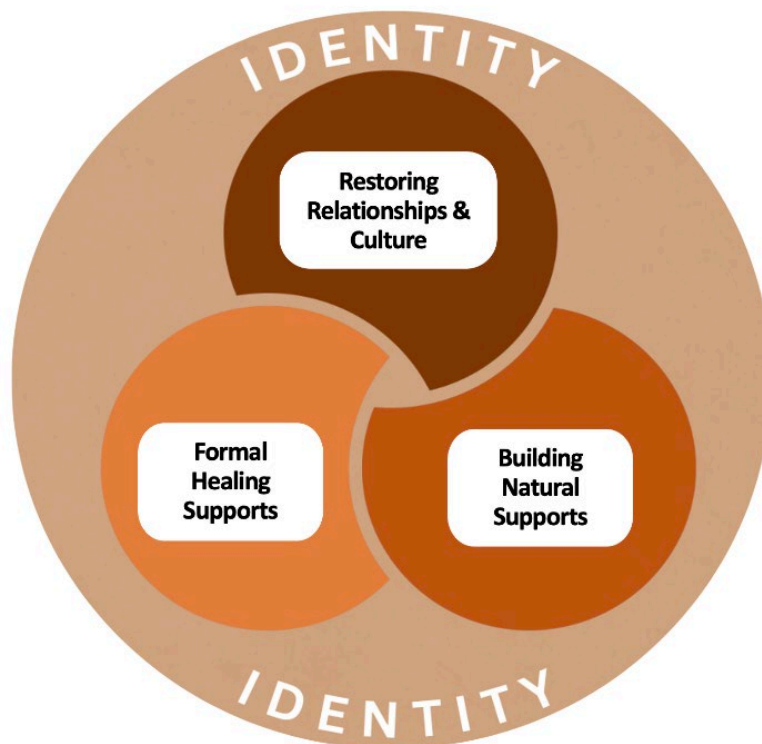

Figure 4: Conceptual Model of Recommendations to Support Reconnection

Restoring Relationships and Culture

It is crucial for Métis young adults to strengthen their connections by restoring relationships. In the current study, participants expressed the difficulty of facing misconceptions regarding Métis identity, which contributed to feelings of inadequacy or not feeling Indigenous "enough" to reconnect. In Gabel et al.'s (2024) study, when Métis youth describe the complexity of their identity, they also discuss misconceptions, which often surface due to racial constructions of Indigeneity. These constructions of Indigeneity add to the shame and trauma that have been passed down from previous generations, demonstrating how the legacy of colonial injustices

lingers within families (Gabel et al., 2024). However, it has been shown that having a strong cultural identity is a protective factor amongst Indigenous youth against things like feelings of shame or inadequacy (Wexler, 2009). Incorporating Métis storytelling, language programs, and land-based education can help pave paths for Métis individuals to strengthen their connections based on their own cultural frameworks. Assisting Métis young adults in restoring their relationships and developing strong cultural identities also helps to protect them from feelings of shame. Additionally, this form of cultural revitalization can not only strengthen Métis identity but can also encourage non-Indigenous allies to engage meaningfully with Métis culture rather than passively absorbing information.

Building Natural Supports

As highlighted by participants, Métis young adults who are (re)connecting may also need informal and/or formal resources for support, as reconnecting is an emotionally taxing process (e.g., Poitras-Pratt, 2021). Increasing Métis visibility can be a natural form of support for many Métis young adults. For instance, having more Métis peers and educators in post-secondary settings can help Métis youth feel more comfortable and foster connections (Gabel et al., 2024). Additionally, creating peer affinity groups within post-secondary institutions can limit feelings of isolation for Métis young adults by informally connecting them with peers who are on similar journeys. However, to prevent burnout for Métis faculty and students, it is important that institutions provide sustainable backing (e.g., hiring support positions) to support Métis faculty and students.

Formal Healing Supports

Culturally grounded formal healing supports that are strengths-based and tailored to the unique experiences of Métis young adults are instrumental in addressing the deeper layers of trauma while fostering a stronger sense of identity. These programs should offer holistic support—addressing emotional, spiritual, and cultural well-being. Formal support (e.g., counselling services) can also help Métis young adults develop the courage to step into cultural spaces with humility and a readiness to learn. Many participants in the current study spoke of wanting to engage in culture but were scared to because of previous experiences. Healing programs can guide Métis young adults toward overcoming fear or insecurity, transforming these challenges into opportunities for growth and reconnection.

Connection to Ongoing Work

Findings from the present study contribute to the growing presence of Métis-led initiatives, scholarship, and community work that centres on the importance of connection for Métis well-being. In particular, Métis academics and community members have highlighted the necessity of Métis-specific spaces. For instance, Delgado and Forsythe (2025) found that a large majority of Métis people within post-secondary institutions were first-generation students who "did not have kinship ties or direct family members to mentor them through their degrees, or future academic

positions, creating a need for community connections and networks beyond one's traditional kinship ties" (p. 2). Additionally, participants in Flamino et al.'s (2020) study discussed the importance of creating spaces where Métis people can connect with one another, as it is within these spaces that individuals can foster community kinship connections, which are directly tied to well-being.

Intentional spaces can also help facilitate the development of strong connections between Métis people, which is considered essential for "surviving and thriving" (Forsythe, 2023, p. 127) in post-secondary institutions. These relationships also help younger Métis individuals gather guidance from mentors. For instance, in Forsythe's (2023) study, Métis grandmas and aunties within the academy cautioned about the demanding nature of institutions, advising that it is critical for Métis academics to set realistic expectations for themselves and to set boundaries to avoid over-burdening themselves. These examples demonstrate the growing awareness that Métis well-being and cultural reconnection are deeply relational.

The current study complements this work by focusing on the experiences of Métis young adults, an age demographic which has historically received less attention (Gmitroski et al., 2023), despite it being a critical period for identity formation. Such work is important as developing and solidifying a cultural identity is a vital component of healthy youth development (Wexler, 2009), and has been associated with confidence, belonging, and enhanced well-being (Crooks et al., 2015). The current study's finding of shame regarding one's Métis identity highlights the necessity of helping Métis youth and young adults (re)connect. Further, because young adulthood is typically a transition period where identity exploration and solidification occur (Phinney, 1989), it is a critical time to support Métis young people in (re)connecting with their culture.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Areas for Research

Strengths

This project addresses a critical gap by taking a strengths-based approach to explore the experiences of Métis young adults in their journeys of (re)connecting. Participants in the current study were actively engaging in reconnecting, with many of them being at the "beginning stages" or wanting to pursue deeper reconnection, but feeling unsure of how. In part, this uncertainty of "how" was linked to a perceived lack of accessibility to cultural activities. The identification of misconceptions surrounding Métis culture and identity and its contribution to feelings of inadequacy and shame is a key area for future educational and awareness-raising initiatives. Feelings of shame regarding one's Métis identity are considered a detrimental outcome of colonization (Campbell, 1983; Fiola, 2015) and have impacted multiple generations, creating a complex relationship between Métis identity, well-being, and shame (Gabel et al., 2024). This finding highlights the necessity for increased Métis narratives—as presented by Métis people, knowledge keepers, and scholars—whether through education, media, art, or other mediums to increase awareness. Reclamation of identity and culture for Métis people has been considered a

form of healing as it facilitates working through internalized shame (Auger et al., 2022; Fiola, 2015). This is exemplified within the current study, where participants described being able to "chip away" at shame through dialogue with their family and consequently, starting the process of reclamation.

In the context of young adulthood and identity, having such conversations with family and/or supports to process historical trauma aids in cultural identity development as it "provides individuals with stabilizing resources to draw on when seeking a coherent sense of self" (Wexler, 2009, p. 270).

This project also provides a detailed picture of the landscape that Métis young adults must navigate to (re)connect to their culture. Such information is pivotal for supporting the development of Métis-rooted interventions, supports, and policies that can actively confront barriers experienced when focusing on facilitating cultural (re)connection. Such insights are applicable to the development of new programs and initiatives that can support Métis young adults to build a strong cultural identity and (re)connection to their culture, community, and land.

Limitations

This project initially explored the experiences of Métis young adults who were attending a post-secondary institution within Districts 5 and 6 of the Otipemisiwak Métis Government but later expanded to include Métis young adults living in Calgary and the surrounding area. This focus was rooted in my own position as a current visitor residing in Calgary for post-secondary education. However, we later expanded recruitment to include any Métis young adult living in Calgary and the surrounding area. While this brought in a wider range of perspectives, the sample was still primarily representative of students attending post-secondary institutions as visitors in Treaty 7/Districts 5 and 6, and this likely captured a restricted range of experiences. Although this is not necessarily a limitation in qualitative research, because my goal is to inform supports and services for Métis young adults who want to (re)connect, gathering additional perspectives is an important next step for future research.

Additionally, because participants were actively engaged in reconnecting, they likely had more knowledge or initiative than individuals who were not interested in reconnecting. Although this limits the perspectives sought in the current study, seeking participants who were either interested or in the process of (re)connecting makes this work reflective of the current challenges and opportunities that Métis young adults may have experienced on their diverse journeys.

Future Research

Given the "double-edged sword" of urban versus rural residency described by participants, future studies could strengthen this area of research by comparing Métis young adults' experiences across different geographical regions. Research employing such comparative work could further explore the contrasts between urban and rural areas that this study identified. In doing so, future work can highlight location-specific barriers or opportunities that affect (re)connection. In addition, studies could also expand this to look at potential differences and similarities across

wider geographic regions, such as provinces included in the Métis homeland. This could result in a more holistic and in-depth understanding of Métis young adults' experiences and allow for the creation of tailored supports. Additionally, there is limited research regarding the perspectives of Métis young adults who either have more or less solidified connections with their culture and community, which could be another potential area for future research. Finally, given the significance of misconceptions and shame on paths to (re)connection, future projects should work to establish and evaluate different approaches to overcoming such hurdles. Inquiring into what strategies are practical and helpful can aid Métis communities with tools to assist young people in developing strong cultural connections and identities.

Conclusion
The findings from the current study identified key elements influencing (re)connection for Métis young adults. Conversation, family connections, and the presence of supportive figures were powerful influences in overcoming disconnection. Further, learning about one's culture and experiencing Indigenous representation were vital pillars of belonging and pride. In contrast, obstacles such as experiencing shame tied to colonial discourses regarding Métis identity, and the incongruent cultural opportunities present in rural and urban contexts, impeded individuals' journeys of (re)connection. The emotional weight of reconnecting accentuates the necessity for Métis-rooted supports that can guide younger generations around these barriers while also providing a safe space for healing.

Additionally, the findings from this study complement previous work outlining how cultural connections are instrumental to the well-being of Métis people (e.g., Flaminio et al., 2020; Gabel et al., 2024; Gaudet et al., 2020). Together, this work illustrates how removing barriers to (re)connection can enhance well-being and foster healing with families, communities, and the larger Métis Nation. Supporting Métis youth and young adult as they (re)connect on their own terms creates space to strengthen relationships and honour their identities stories, and communities—as well as the generations who came before and those still to come.

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Dr. Deinera Exner-Cortens, PhD, MPH (she/her) is a third-generation settler. She currently lives as a visitor on Treaty 7 and Calgary Nose Hill Métis District (District 5) territory. She grew up in Battle River Territory, in the Medicine Hat Métis District, and as part of her academic training, is grateful to have lived on the lands of the Massachusett, Pawtucket, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc peoples, as well as the Gayogo̱hó:nǫʔ (Cayuga Nation) peoples of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Attawandaron peoples. Professionally, Dr. Exner-Cortens is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair (Childhood Health Promotion) at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on promoting well-being with adolescents, and preventing dating violence, bullying, and suicide.