



**Uluslararası Eğitimde Nitel Araştırmalarda**  
**Mükemmellik Arayışı Dergisi (UENAMAD)**  
**International Journal of the Pursuit of Excellence**  
**Qualitative Research in Education (IJPEQE)**



<http://www.uenamad.elayayincilik.com/>

## **Exploring Challenges and Needs of Muslim College Students on Campus**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by Muslim college students on campus in Connecticut in the United States. To accomplish this objective, a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study was designed and conducted, which involved in-depth interviews with Muslim college students and their parents. The study used the mission of higher education, the uniqueness of Islamic culture, and the principles of equity and social justice as guiding principles to guide the research process. The study findings revealed that Muslim college students encounter significant challenges related to their Muslim identity while attending US higher education institutions. These challenges include cultural clashes, balancing faith and academic responsibilities, stereotyping, discrimination, and lack of representation and support. The study results have significant implications for higher education leaders and stakeholders, highlighting the need for increased awareness and support for Muslim immigrant students. Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving the academic attainment, social integration, and career development of Muslim college students in the United States.

**Keywords:** Challenges of Muslim college students, cultural clashes

#### **Article History**

Received: 29.08.2024

Accepted: 26.12.2024

Published: 31.12.2024

#### **Article Type**

Research article

#### **Recommended Citation:**

Douda, A. & Yavuz, O. (2024). Exploring Challenges and Needs of Muslim College Students on Campus. *Uluslararası Eğitimde Nitel Araştırmalarda Mükemmellik Arayışı Dergisi Uluslararası (UENAMAD)*, 3(2), 1-17.

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study is to explore cultural challenges and issues that immigrant Muslim students have reported facing about their presence in US higher education institutions. In recent years, issues of immigrant students in US higher education have been extensively studied (Mohamed, 2019 & Wingfield, 2006). Many domains, such as students' legal status, financial support, cultural, and linguistic hurdles, have been thoroughly covered. Despite these studies which scholars have conducted, the situation of Muslim immigrant students in the US educational system in general and the area of immigrant Muslim students in higher education still needs deeper investigation (Jackson, 2014). When looking at the current situation of this group of immigrants and their influx to the United

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States in recent years, many gaps which needed addressing could be identified (Sankar, 2011; Wingfield, 2006). This research seeks to uncover some of these gaps and provide the audience with additional firsthand information about the cultural life of this group in US colleges.

New Muslim immigrant students in US higher education institutions are entangled between two cultures (Anderson, 2020 & Brenneman, 2020, Mohamed, 2019): the American multi-culture which is prevalent in their institutions, and the Islamic culture maintained and practiced by their families at home (Anderson, 2020 & Koller, 2015). Ghafur (2015) and Mohamed (2019) study this issue of Muslim immigrant students' cultural identification in Western Societies. They have found that many Muslim students experience cultural challenges in their daily college interactions. Ibrahim (2009) delineates some of the essential Islamic cultural issues that Muslims need to observe and practice routinely including teenagers in American educational institutions. He underlines specific issues related to worship, dress, food, and Muslim holidays as major areas of concern to these students in college. This study investigated the conditions of Muslim immigrant students in US higher educational institutions by looking at the most pressing Islamic cultural issues they bring with them from their homes—issues they have to observe strictly and exercise daily—to see how Islamic cultural practices are carried out in these institutions. Mustafa (2007) frankly asserts the existence of significant differences between Muslim children's values and beliefs as perceived by their parents and their school culture. He identifies major differences such as coeducation and female dress style, which are real issues facing these newly arriving students. Having this notion of being different from others with whom they share the same setting might give them a sense of insecurity, force them to hide their identity, and may risk their academic and social success (Brenneman 2020).

The problem explored by this study was the difficulty of adjusting to living in a multicultural environment that new immigrant Muslim students face in American higher education institutions and the lack of knowledge from higher education leaders, faculty, and staff about them. Understanding the width and breadth of the problem would tremendously contribute to the cultural integration of these new students coming into the higher education system and curb its adverse effects on their educational careers (Koller, 2015; Shaikh Jilani, 2015). The researcher intends to define these cultural challenges, find their true sources, and explore how Muslim immigrant students live with them while they are in a higher educational institution. The researchers' ultimate objectives are to uncover daily firsthand experiences of the studied participants about the issues at hand, believing that getting this type of information from firsthand sources would help set practical tools to address them and consequently clear the path for these students to complete their college education safely and productively. Mohamed (2019) and Zamulinsky, 2021 outline these cultural issues. Moreover, they assert that Muslim immigrant children's cultural assimilation in their new communities does not benefit these immigrant students only, but also their new Western communities. In addition, it boosts these students' contributions to their new communities economically and socially. In brief, this study investigates cultural challenges facing new Muslim students in US higher education by tracing their families' influences and identifying strategies they use to mitigate the negative impact on their lives.

The significance of the study stems from the fact that finding the exact problems facing Muslim immigrant students in their school environment would provide higher education leadership with tools and strategies to surmount them. They would also supply these leaders with important knowledge about cultural issues facing this increasing segment of students. Making such knowledge available through scientific studies would help states' legislatures and higher education leaders make policies to accommodate this group of students and improve their social and academic achievement (Zamulinsky, 2021, Koller, 2015, & Korteweg & Yardakul, 2009). The study's findings would also raise the awareness of these students about the culture of their institutions and help them negotiate ways of leading a successful college life under the umbrella of a multicultural environment. Understanding such a multicultural environment might eventually enhance their social integration into the country's larger society. Furthermore, in the context of the current cultural conflict between the secular Western culture and the religious Islamic culture, a better understanding of this segment of the Muslim community would give more insights into the ongoing dialogue of culture and may solve more significant social and political issues involving the two cultures.

**Main Research Question:** What Muslim-related issues (MRI) do Muslim immigrant students report that they face, related to their Muslim status, as students in American higher education institutions?

### **Conceptual Framework and Literature**

The conceptual framework was based on the mission and function of US higher education, the uniqueness of Islamic culture, and the principle of equality and social justice in US higher education. The second part of this section focuses on cultural issues related to the study, defining culture linguistically and terminologically. along with providing an overview of types of cultures and the relationship of culture to religion. The third part reviews topics related to American higher educational institutions. Presenting a brief overview addressing issues pertinent to US colleges in terms of structure and leadership. Finally, in this part, the researcher explored social system theory and its influences on the issue of study in addition to issues relevant to Muslim students on US college campus.

The conceptual framework is used to identify and focus the study's view on the issues addressed in the research (Gregory, 2020, Jabareen, 2009 & Yin, 2018). In this respect, this conceptual framework served as a compass for guiding the course of the study and controlling it from trespassing to access issues that were not related to the subject of the research (Yin, 2018). The researcher will discuss the details of this conceptual framework in the next part.

Since the subject of the study was the cultural challenges facing immigrant Muslim students at colleges and universities in the United States, the first element the researcher needed to know was what previous researchers had said about the word culture, linguistically as well as terminologically. In fact, the precise definition of the word culture paved the way for identifying its constituent elements, patterns, types, and other problems that have been researched (Chance, 2009 & Evans, 2001). It also helped in scrutinizing the research questions and enriching the conceptual framework. The researcher also discussed types of culture in terms of monotheism, pluralism, and how individuals interact in each culture to identify their direct impact on their lives (O'Banion, 2012). In this instance, the researcher also reviewed the role of religion, its importance in cultural overlap, and its association with the subject of study.

This part also explores some aspects of higher education in the United States providing the readers with the most important description of the study's setting. By reviewing the literature on the structure and leadership of these institutions. Discussing the structure and leadership of these institutions revealed the field of the study and assisted in understanding the context in which the research took place (Creswell & Creswell 2018 & Yin,2018). This literature paved the way to explore Muslim cultural issues in depth and helped to carry out this study. The researcher explored some aspects of Muslim student life in US higher educational institutions. Before going into the details of the literature review, the researcher will present the conceptual frameworks involved in his research in the following part.

The conceptual framework of this research consists of three factors that I highlighted earlier, namely: the function of the university in society, the uniqueness of Islamic culture, and finally the availability of social justice and equality as a human requirement in college. To better understand the function of US colleges, the study tracked changes in the function of the US colleges as higher education institutions entrusted with serving the community. They began as small institutions in terms of size and number of students, working to graduate a small number of students to serve religious purposes in American society. This function continued to change until it reached what it is today. Colleges in the US today have become large institutions, endeavoring to graduate large numbers of cadres and professionals who work to serve society in various fields. Today, American colleges are striving and competing continuously to achieve these goals by creating a conducive environment for learning and performing scientific research for all students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, nationality, or color.

About the function of the US college, this framework is based on what previous scholars (Shorelight Team, 2022 & Eckel & King, 2004) wrote about problems facing colleges to achieve their function, such as the issue of colorblind within the college, availability for material to support students, and working to provide other social requirements. It also benefited from O'Bannon's (2010) focus on what colleges must do in order to create an appropriate climate for achieving learning. To O'Banion, this objective can be reached by enabling colleges to facilitate educational processes on their campus and providing students with the necessary research requirements. Making research requirements available will assist students to do all types of scientific research that society needs to meet its daily life

activities.

The researchers also elaborated on the uniqueness of Islamic culture to better understand its sources and basic principles. Knowing the principles of Islamic religion and culture informs readers about its manifestation and reflection on the lives of Muslim students at home and college. In this regard, the researchers explored what Al-Jazairi (2000) wrote about the five pillars of Islam as the basis of Islamic culture. The five pillars of Islam consist of testifying that there is no god but Allah, establishing prayer, paying zakat (charity), fasting Ramadan, and performing pilgrimage to Mekkah for those who can afford it. These pillars, collectively represent the beliefs, values, and customs of Muslims, which are clearly reflected in their daily lives through the performance of their religious duties. Since Muslim students perform this ritual of worship daily in their homes without any objection, this research tries to see what are the difficulties faced by Muslim students when performing these acts in their US colleges.

The research intended to look at the framework of this study through the function of the US college and the uniqueness of the Muslim culture by evaluating the application of the principle of social justice and equality in college. In this regard the research aimed to verify the extent to which these basic principles of equality and social justice of Muslim students are achieved in college. The researchers looked at what Santamaria (2013) wrote about the application of social justice in daily life. Moreover, Brennan and Naido (2008) elaborated on the foundations that must be available for this social justice to be achieved in college. Thus, the above cited three elements constitute the factors on which the researchers built the framework of this study.

The focus of this research are challenges and needs of Muslim students in American universities and colleges by looking at Muslim students Islamic culture and American college culture. To achieve this goal, the study began its literature review by defining what the word culture means linguistically and terminologically. The researchers identified the linguistic meaning of culture as explained by Topal (2023). They also looked at the explanation of the word culture in Arabic. Omer (2008) mentioned that the word “thaqfa” is the equivalent of the word culture in Arabic, and it literally means “to educate” and “to make beautiful and usable”. Thus, culture terminologically means, in the field of social and human sciences, values, customs, beliefs, and assumptions adopted by a certain society, and which are reflected in the daily practice of this society. Moreover, the literature review of this study looked at what previous scholars have said about types of cultures. They defined two major prevalent types of cultures in some societies, such as monoculture and multi-culture. Monoculture is a type of culture in which one culture dominates the life of the entire society and prevents other cultures’ contributions on that society. However, multi-culture is a culture where different cultures interact and become the mainstream culture of society. An example of a multi-culture is the American culture, which is the same culture in American higher education institutions.

The main site of this study is an American higher educational institution in which Muslim college students perform their Islamic rituals. In this regard, the researchers reviewed what scholars wrote about American higher education. The review included theories that handle US higher education institutions as organizations in terms of their structures and leadership (Chance 2009 & Northouse 2012). The researcher reviewed classical theories, bureaucratic theories, and systems theories. The research focused on systems theories and systems thinking as pivotal theories that shape the hierarchical structure of US colleges today. The researchers also reviewed various leadership theories, such as the transformational, instructional, servant and situational leadership theories (Lynch, 2014 & Northouse, 2012), to define what kind of leadership required to meet the needs of all stakeholders, including Muslim students, in college.

The literature of this research also reviewed what previous scholars said about the lives of Muslim students in American colleges. This part began by looking at the problems of these students in different historical periods. The research also explored what several researchers recently wrote about the lives of Muslim students in American universities, especially after the events of 9/11 (Anderson, 2020, Wingfield, 2006 & Jilani, 2015). Most of these scholars wrote about specific issues, such as factors related to the practice of worship, Islamic dress, food, or other social pressures like sexual harassment and discrimination (Mohamed, 2019). The researchers focused on the details of these aspects; nonetheless, they reviewed what other researchers wrote about the lives of Muslim students in terms of social, economic, psychological, emotional, and academic aspects (Emis-Demitras, 2021).

This literature concentrated on the academic aspects of the life of Muslim students on campus because the main objective of the educational institutions is to provide an educational opportunity and ideal climate for all segments of students on their campus, regardless of their religions, colors, races, and other affiliations. The literature review looked closely at this aspect and compared it to the afore explained conceptual framework of this study.

### **The Gaps**

Despite the apparent existence of such cultural problems in these new students' lives, there is a huge gap in areas such as describing how they would respond to the pressure from the new schools' culture while practicing rituals stipulated by their home culture and religion (Brenneman, 2020, Demitras, 2021) rituals they would typically do at home without reservation or restriction and are difficult to do at school because of cultural differences, such as group prayers and education (Anderson, 2020). Performing these rituals would, at times, become extremely difficult in a college setting. In this regard, there are a lot of significant unseen details implicated in the process of these students' lives in college. These details have a great influence on their social and academic ambitions, which need to be found and resolved. Thus, the researchers believe that investigating immigrant Muslim students' college lives would uncover some of these details and help all stakeholders to create a better college environment for these students and consequently improve their social and academic achievement. The study will discuss in the coming paragraphs the research methodology that the researchers used to conduct this study and their findings.

### **Methodology**

The problem studied was the adjustment difficulties of living in a multicultural environment that new Muslim immigrant students face in fitting in at universities and colleges in the United States. The study intends to define these issues, find their real sources, and explore how Muslim immigrant students live with them while they are in a higher education institution. The ultimate objectives of the study were to uncover the firsthand experiences of the participants with the expectation that getting this type of information from direct sources would help set effective tools to address them and consequently clear the path for these students to complete their education safely and productively. In brief, this study investigated what Muslim-related issues (MRI issues) Muslim immigrant students report that they face, related to their Muslim status, as students in American higher education institutions.

Guided by the purpose and question posed above about cultural, social, and academic issues of new Muslim students in US colleges, a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) was conducted. Data pertinent to conflicting cultures were collected and analyzed from designed individual interviews and focus groups of parents of the study targeted population. In qualitative "empirical systems are represented by non-numerical measures" (Patterson & Michael, 2002, p. 2). This study used procedures utilized in hermeneutical phenomenological methods to collect and analyze qualitative data about Muslim college students' experiences to answer the questions of this research. The study intends to use a hermeneutical phenomenological inquiry because it aimed to deal with practices of Muslim students at home and college that were highly visible and unanimous. "When dealing with practices that are highly visible or with beliefs that are almost unanimous, the investigations rely on observations of a few knowledgeable persons" (Ember & Ember, 2004, p. 27). Moreover, a hermeneutical phenomenological study enabled the researcher to collect firsthand data from these students about their daily personal college experiences and how they created meanings and themes from these experiences. Moreover, through this approach the research did not limit itself, endeavoring to dig deeper into these students' college experiences. An intensive investigation of these experiences through a phenomenological study permitted the participants to report about their college lives independently and voluntarily. "This up-close information gathered by talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research" (Creswell, 2014, p. 164). Looking for meaning in Muslim students' lives in college through their experiences and direct voices was a major point that called for a qualitative hermeneutical study in this instance.

### **Participants and Setting**

Studies about the lives of Muslim immigrant students in college are lacking (Mohamed 2019; Wingfield, 2006). Thus, one of the objectives of this research was to dig deeper into the experiences of

these students in college by using an inductive method of investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Exploring the cultural adjustment difficulties of new Muslim students in US higher education in depth necessitated the collection, analysis, and interpretation of a considerable amount of qualitative data. The targeted population in this study was new Muslim college students from the immigrant community of Greater New Haven, Connecticut. The specific population was a part of a larger Muslim community that has resided in the area since 2000. New Haven, Connecticut, is a port city in the United States, located in New Haven Harbor on the north shore of Long Island Sound.

The city's population is around 131,020 with diverse backgrounds (Data USA 2019), White (44.4%), African American or Black (32.6%), Latinos (17.7) and Asian (5.0%). According to the World Population Review (2022), 15% of the population in the city is foreign-born. The estimated number of the Muslim population in the city is 27.000. The real influx of Muslim immigrants has sharply increased during the last two decades due to the unrest in some Islamic countries. The area has two Islamic Centers—Masjid Al-Islam and New Haven Islamic Center—and several other small locations for Islamic gatherings. The area is vibrant with Muslim businesses such as halal stores and restaurants, indicating a tangible presence of Muslim populations. The New Haven region is home to Yale University, Quinnipiac University, Albertus Magnus College, the University of New Haven, Southern Connecticut State University, and Gateway Community College. Most of those schools have Muslim associations serving Muslim students' needs. Participants were purposefully selected based on the criteria cited below. Participants in these qualitative procedures were diversified to align with the study's problems, purpose, and questions. In this study, diversity of participants was defined by gender, age, nationality, college type, home language, parent education, and legal status (Table 1&2). The researcher selected several males and females to participate in interviews and focus groups.

- Participants were 18 years and older and included undergraduate and graduate students.
- As Muslims are scattered in many countries, particularly in the Middle East, the researcher limited the participants to those from Arabic-speaking states and diversified them across as many countries as possible.
- The researcher mentioned that this study would focus on US higher education institutions; therefore, participating students were selected from different colleges in Connecticut and outside of Connecticut, including two-year and four-year colleges. Participants' home language was also important in this study.
- People with different languages hold unique ways of thinking. Thus, all participants were Muslim Arabic speakers from different countries. The different countries provided broader insight into the issue under consideration.
- The study also looked at parents' educational levels during the recruitment of the sample. Since part of the study involved investigating family influences on students' behavior on campus, parents' education certainly plays a crucial role in the study and should be considered. Thus, the participant groups included parents who were diverse in their education levels, from the highest degree holders to those who never went to school.
- The study was about Muslim immigrant students from New Haven in US higher education institutions; thus, the study sample included all genres of immigrants, those with legal immigration status and those without status.

Particularly, 12 Muslim college students and 12 parents of college students from the Connecticut area participated in this investigation based on availability, willingness, and the researcher's determination as to potential sources of knowledge for his study. All the participating students attended US higher education institutions in the US during the 2022–2023 academic year. Additionally, participants were of immigrant families who entered the country after 2000 and practice Islamic rituals regularly—for example, attending Islamic gatherings at least once a month.

### **Data Collection and Data Sources**

This study collected a significant amount of qualitative data to gain insight regarding the main research question: What cultural dilemmas do Muslim immigrant students report having relative to their presence in higher education institutions? Particularly, two major data collection methods used were interview and focus group sessions supported by participants' observation.

**Students' Interviews:** The 12 Muslim college students who participated in this study provided qualitative data using open-ended interview questions. The interview protocol contained ten questions

reflecting on the five research questions. Hence, there was one interview session for each student. The researcher sent the interview protocol to participants before the date of the interview. This process gave the students enough time to reflect on the questions and provide quality information. Hermeneutical phenomenological studies seek to grasp the real lived experience of the participants about the phenomenon. Interview questions were broad and probing semi-structured and directed to answer the five research questions. Through these broad open questions, the researcher allowed participants to tell stories about their lives as Muslim students in US colleges. Moreover, the duration of each interview was between 45-60 minutes, spaced to avoid putting pressure on participants. The researcher used interviews because they provided information that cannot be accessed through observation or documents. Clear protocols for interviews and other data collecting instruments were defined. Sample main interview questions include (1)- As a Muslim student in a college secular environment, can you describe the challenges you encounter every day in this setting? Is it different from your life at home? In what sense can you elaborate? (2) What are the issues relevant to the challenges you face every day? For the interviews, participants were given a choice to schedule appointments during their free time when visiting families. No participant compensation was offered except coffee and tea for the meetings that were conducted in a café or at home. The recorded audio from all interviews and the researcher's notes were saved in a secure place and will be destroyed three years after the study.

### ***Parents' Focus Groups***

As the researcher has outlined above, this investigation sought to learn more about Muslim students' college life as the participants perceive it themselves and the influence of their families' life issues. The purpose of combining focus groups and interviews in the study was to dig deeper into the cultural background, beliefs, and values reflected in the students' actions and practices while on campus. Thus, in addition to the students' interviews, the researcher conducted focus groups for the parents of the studied sample. The researcher's objective of holding a focus group for the parents was to get more insight into the influences of these parents on their children's culture and to triangulate data sources in the study to reinforce its validity and trustworthiness (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The parents' focus group was designed and conducted specifically to answer issues related to research questions 1, 3, and 5. They were conducted after completing interviews with participating students. Data collected from the focus group were used to concentrate on closing gaps in the student interviews and getting a holistic sense of the problem of the study by involving families.

Focus group questions were broad semi-structured questions. They were designed to give parents enough time and freedom to elaborate on their perceptions of the study's main research question. They explore exactly what they expect of their children's behaviors in college and what they think college should make available for them as Muslim students. The focus group protocol contained three questions (see Table 2). They were carefully constructed and sequenced to yield the best information the researcher was seeking (Curry, 2015). Thus, they were framed as follows: opening, introductory, transitional, and key questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Opening, introductory, and transitional questions were straightforward and focused on basic general information about the participating parents, such as questions about personal and daily activities. The rest of the three questions addressed significant issues relevant to the problem of the study. Curry (2015) states that focus groups are especially useful because they widen the range of responses, activate forgotten details, and release inhibition.

The researcher used interviews with students and focus groups with their parents because students are less open and usually lean towards an individualized life more than parents. Moreover, the researcher's knowledge of the parents indicated that he might collect more useful information from the parents through focus groups than from individual interviews. The researcher used focus groups with parents to obtain their collective knowledge about the issue under study while using interviews with students to retrieve information about their individual experiences in college. Table 2 shows the research and focus group questions. Two focus group sessions were held one for male parents and one for female parents. The male focus group was entirely conducted in Arabic and the female focus groups used Arabic and English. Male and female were separated by the researcher believed that this arrangement would give participating parents more room to express their opinions about the issue. The

main focus group question was “What kind of difficulties do you expect your children might encounter in adjusting to their Islamic Culture in College?”

### **Data Analysis**

Hermeneutical phenomenological research is a genre of many qualitative studies. Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process of moving from specific to general data interpretation (Yin, 2018). The researcher outlined the steps he used to look for, find patterns of meanings, to make sense of the collected data, particularly to find out people’s experiences about specific phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A thematic method of qualitative analysis was used based on the research problem, purpose, questions, and methodology proposed by the researcher. The researcher endeavored to find meanings and subsequently generate themes from the Muslim college students’ experiences in US higher education institutions collected through this method. Creswell & Creswell (2018) mention several measures and steps to analyze hermeneutical phenomenological study data. Specifically, the measures used to analyze these investigations were the evaluation of transcriptions of the individual interviews and focus group discussions. Therefore, the units of analysis were the audio from individual interviews, focus group discussions, and associated transcription data. Gadamer, 2007 outlines three major steps of analyzing hermeneutical phenomenology data: pre-understanding, hermeneutic circle, and fusion of horizon. The researcher followed these steps in combination with additional illustrative tools to analyze data in this study. A summary of the analysis is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Steps of Data Analysis*

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Step 1	Immersion (compiling) Transcribing, organizing, and assigning pins to all data of the interviews and focus group. Beginning of a thorough reading for initial coding.
Step 2	Understanding (disassembling): Reading and rereading, using Microsoft spreadsheets to conduct line by line coding to align codes identified in the initial coding.
Step 3	Abstraction (reassembling): Grouping similar codes defined from line-by-line coding stage to build large meaningful categories.
Step 4	Synthesis and themes development (interpreting): Open coding, grouping what each participant has said about an issue by comparing and connecting categories from the participant's account to generate themes.
Step 5	Illumination and illustration: Interconnecting themes generated from the open coding process to build stories about the studied issue. This story is reported in chapters four and five.

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## **Findings**

### **Challenges of Muslim College Students**

The overall findings focused on “What Muslim related issues (MRI) do Muslim immigrant students report that they face, related to their Muslim status, as students in American higher education institutions?” After a comprehensive analysis of the collected data from the interviews and focus groups, the researcher has found five major challenges; Identity, social pressures and restriction, communication and building networks, discrimination and non-recognition, and finally ignorance and negligence, which are confronting Muslim college students in US Higher Education. In the following paragraphs, the research will elaborate on each of these themes.

#### **Identity**

The identity dilemma is the number one challenge facing Muslim college students in U.S. colleges (Koller, 2015). The problem of identity lies in the Muslim college students’ struggle to balance Islamic culture with the secular culture that is prevailing in U.S. colleges. The researcher reached this theme by analyzing data collected from participants answering research question one. Many of the interviewed students and their parents express their concerns and the difficulties they face in their daily lives to accurately position themselves as American Muslim college students. Extracting and connecting codes and categories from statements given by participants during the interviews and focus groups have led the researcher to this theme. This identity challenge manifests itself in many aspects and is expressed by students and parents in different ways. Raheem, a senior college student, states explicitly, "I think the biggest challenge is that Muslims through school in America face is the second environment, specifically the question of cultural identity in a society that is not prepared for them to



find their identity. Hence "Identity refers to how people answer the question, who are you? The question can be asked explicitly or implicitly on a personal or collective level to others or to oneself." (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2017) Based on this definition of identity, Muslim college students constantly ask themselves and their Muslim and American societies who they are? Raheem continues: *"Am I an American Muslim or a Muslim American? But this term 'American Muslim' was really coined because I believe and in a more specific way, it's an American Muslim."*

From the perspective of identity challenges, research participants explain how people define and stereotype them by their Islamic identity in different ways. This definition comes either through their appearance, the way people perceive them, or the way they are seen by others when practicing Islamic rituals. Etha, a community college student originally from Sudan, complains about how people stereotype her at college by her appearance as a Muslim wearing a hijab. *"When they see a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, they say that this is a strict and rigid Muslim woman. I think they should avoid me. I have to be careful about the way they talk to me, and how they treat me."* It's not just the appearance of Muslim students that results in identity and stereotyping challenges, some interviewees also complained that they get annoyed by the way others perceive and treat them on campus. Some assert that people in their college surroundings make them feel that they do not belong here. San, another veiled student from Morocco, explains with sadness and annoyance *"Their looks at you make you feel more nervous than ordinary people. So, you feel like you're not from this community and they don't care about you."*

Nona, a young college student from Sudan, explains, *"If I want to pray or do Islamic things, I have to go back to my room, I have to go pray in my room and then you have roommates, you have to tell them who you are and what you do, and why you do it so they can understand and respect you."* These issues of identity are always present in the lives of Muslim university students. Participants state that identity challenges sometimes serve as a reminder to them that they live in a different environment than home. Warfly, a graduate student from Libya elaborates, *"sometimes you feel strongly that you don't belong to this place, like in the month of Ramadan, I feel that no one considers your needs in school."*

Muslim college students' discussion of identity challenges demonstrates their awareness of being in a society different from their Muslim society and thus enables them to identify their needs to be addressed in the best way so that they can lead a normal college life. Identity challenges are not only recognized and expressed by Muslim college students but are also present in statements made by their parents during focus groups. Abee, a mother of two college students explains, *"but I think it's not just about food and prayer, it's more likely to be a clash of cultures, more precisely identity and a clash of culture."* She continues to elaborate, *"the rules and regulations we use to raise our children at home are Islamic, but when they go to college, they face a completely different society with very different rules and a completely different perspective on life."* Hence, she contends that girls feel more identity problems than boys in their schools, *"but veiled girls have bigger problems. Society considers them to be oppressed Muslim girls, and they don't understand exactly how to behave. They look at them like alien creatures from other planets."*

Kali, father of two female college students, highlights the identity challenges faced by Muslim college students in USA colleges. *"I think the biggest issue for Muslim students in college is the issue of identity: students are struggling with the dilemma of being Muslim and American at the same time. Therefore, they usually strive to find the best ways to present themselves to the university community in the right way."* Kali argues that the environment is not ripe for Islamic practices, so Muslim students have to find strategies to balance and adapt themselves to living in a US college environment, he asserts, *"The issue is not only the challenges, but the issue is the environment itself that conflicts with Islamic life on campus. For example, if you go to my college, you will find some kind of Muslim community and some kind of Islamic services and activities, such as places for Muslim students to live an Islamic life."* He appreciates and emphasizes this point, *"This is very good, but if you go to other colleges, there is no kind of Islamic life or services provided to students that they desire, and Muslim students in these colleges usually find themselves lost because they have great difficulties to perform their religious duties and highlight their Islamic culture."*

The identity problem has implications for other challenges and issues faced by Muslim college students, particularly parents' fear of their children losing this Islamic identity. Some of the parents

interviewed clearly expressed fear that their children would lose their Islamic identity by abandoning their Islamic beliefs, values and customs and assimilating into the country's secular, multicultural society, as Yan who is a parent from Iraq, emphasizes, *"I am really afraid to lose my children because of this culture."* However, Raheem, a student, downplays Yan's fears, *"So, when you come here and fear for your children, you teach them what you know, which you know is different from life here, what your parents taught you won't work here, times and places are different."* Noun, a father of two college students and an American college graduate, acknowledges the existence of cultural identity challenges and accepts them as a reality to deal with, asserting that the fear of the parents of Muslim students is unjustified and unfounded. *"We know for sure when we immigrated to this country that there is more cultural diversity and freedom than in our country, so we have to prepare our children accordingly, and we should not be afraid or surprised to deal with other cultures."*

Despite the differing opinions expressed by interviewees regarding the identity crisis of Muslim college students, the researcher asserts that Muslim college students and their parents believe that Muslim college students can reconcile the two different cultures and mitigate identity challenges. AS Abee expresses, *"We have many concerns, however, our children know more than us in this country to balance their lives"*. However, the identity crisis faced by Muslim college students in higher education in the USA produces many other challenges and issues that the researcher found in the study, which are presented in the following paragraphs.

### ***Cultural Pressures and Restrictions***

As a result of the identity crisis that Muslim college students face, the researcher found many other challenges that college students have to deal with. Among these challenges are cultural pressures and restrictions. Several of the social activities in US higher education institutions are not usually compatible or aligned with the Islamic teachings that a Muslim college student tries to abide by and respect. Therefore, Muslim college students refrain from participating in them. This abstention causes some feeling of pressure and restrictions on these students. Mela, (2012) defines social pressure as *"... the pressure we all feel to confront to different standards or to fit in. In school there are certain pressures to behave in a certain way"*. Thus, the researcher defines cultural pressures as the external undesirable factors that exist in the students' colleges and invite them to do things that are not permitted in Islam, such as parties, drinking, or freely-mixing and intermingling between men and women. Restrictions and limitations on the other hand are internal factors linked to Muslim students' beliefs and values that limit them from approaching in some of the activities in their colleges. Assin, a second-year university student originally from Sudan, describes college life as being filled with social and cultural pressures. *"Leading a fully conventional Islamic lifestyle on a university campus poses challenges due to the conflicting nature of many activities with Islamic teachings."* such as dating, drinking alcohol, and eating pork. Muslim college students stress that these pressures come from different directions, such as pressures from family, peers, teachers, or the entire environment in which they live.

The majority of these pressures stem from a lack of understanding of Islam among students, families, and the college community. As Nari, a Yemeni graduate student, points out, people often pressure Muslim students because they fail to comprehend the reasons behind their actions. They question why they even bother adhering to Islamic principles. Nari elucidates that certain Islamic values clash with college culture, such as partying and certain female dressing styles. Consequently, male and female Muslim students find themselves constantly under pressure as they strive to reconcile their Islamic social and cultural values with the demands of university life. Nona explains, *"I mean, I would say, when you are born into a religion you are automatically pressured into following it, you were born into it, but there has to be some other reasons as to why you are following it"*. She argues, *"you have to try and find this reason. It's like love, like a kind of acceptance of yourself, because yes, we're all Muslims, but we don't see the same thing and we don't follow the same thing"*. Nona stresses the need to shift these pressures to the positive side to adapt her Islamic life to her college life. Jean, a college student, agrees with Nona that the stress comes from home and from school. *"I agree with this. Sometimes students do it for their parents because they are trying to make parents proud. Their parents don't want to hear bad news from others"*.

The challenge of making parents proud by balancing school culture with home culture weighs heavily on Muslim college students. The burden of family expectations, coupled with peer pressure when

trying to opt out of non-Islamic activities, creates difficulties for them. Additionally, the task of adequately explaining Islamic customs and beliefs to their colleagues adds further strain to these pressures. Warfly expresses frustration, lamenting, *"I feel compelled to justify my choices and clarify Islamic principles to my peers. It's overwhelming. I want to ensure I convey the right information, so there's no misunderstanding. The pressure to get it right is immense."* Warfly elaborates on the struggle faced by Muslim students in navigating these complex dynamics.

The expression of these types of pressure is repeated by many interviewees as they find themselves subject to constant demands and interrogations by their friends. The worst scenario in this regard is that sometimes they themselves have not had satisfactory answers to these queries. The feeling of pressure on Muslim students is shared by students and their parents. Amy, a mother of two college students from Sudan, emphasizes, *"It's hard work for the children and for all of us. It's too much pressure. So, yes, my advice to them is to stay away from haram."* Ivey, a mother of two college girls and an American college graduate, acknowledges that there is pressure, but denies that it comes from parents, *"I am one of those mothers who never pressured my children to wear the hijab, we told them everything is between you and God, not for us, if you do good things, you pray for God and not for us."* However, Ivey understands that "some parents do pressure their children, especially veiled girls." Abee confirms what Ivy said, *"Their parents want them to do it because they have pressure at home like pressure to perform prayers or wear this kind of clothing."*

Most of these pressures occur because students are confused about how to deal with Islamic issues in their college environment. Assin wonders all the time *"Why am I not allowed to drink or date with my boyfriend!?"*. Considering that these issues come from different directions: families, schools, peers, and the general community (Miller, 2014). This places students in a constant quest to balance these issues. *"Things start at home, students are confused, they want to obey their parents and they want to live their normal college life,"* explains Sab, a father of two college students from Egypt. He asserts, *"We, the parents, have lived our lives in very harmonious Muslim societies and we want our children to imitate the same life in a completely different society and this is very difficult."* Yan follows the same rhetoric expressed by Sab, *"for our children in college, they have to deal with two completely different laws: school law and home law, which are difficult to reconcile. In our country, there was a correspondence between the culture of school and home, but here there is no match"*.

Given the conflict between the freedom of college and Islam's restriction of certain activities, parents know that their children are under pressure, but they don't have the tools to relieve that pressure. Sab adds again, *"Yes, we feel their pressure, but we have to bridge the gap between us and them"*. He suggests that the best way to ease these pressures is to reconcile home and school, *"I know for sure that they will never accept our full advice unless we accept what they want to do, and we certainly will not allow them to do everything they want! There are big challenges for all of us, but we need to meet halfway to pave the way for a better life for them."* Achieving a halfway position between students and parents is the center of cultural pressure on Muslim students. Although parents struggle to get involved in guiding their children's lives, some parents admit their limitations in this regard. Fatima, originally from Libya and mother of a college student, emphasizes *"it depends on the student himself because he spends more time in college with his professors and friends, less with his family, and he actually faces pressure from two different directions and always works to reconcile the two environments."*

### **Communication and Building Networks**

One of the fundamental objectives of university education is establishing communication and forging connections with individuals and groups on the college campus. Chance (2009) highlights the significance of communication, deeming it a vital tool for educational institutions. However, due to the distinctive nature of Islamic culture, Muslim college students encounter the need for additional efforts and strategies to navigate their interactions with others and adopt the most appropriate communication approaches. This implies a careful selection of how they convey messages and receive them from others, ensuring sensitivity to avoid causing offense to anyone involved.

One of the crucial issues that hinder Muslim students' communication with others is language, especially for the new students who did not attend high school in the US. Three students comment on the role of language in defining their connections and building rapport with the college community in

and out of the classroom. Yosef talks about his connections with others, *"It is the language. Sometimes there is not enough time to learn English. So, you are not ready to communicate in a good way to move on to the higher programs you intend to get like a Master's Degree"*. Di, who is originally from Iraq and is pursuing an associate degree from a community college, adds humbly, *"Mm-hmm honestly, like, it was only the language when I first came."* San vividly expresses the challenges of language and the process she went through when she first entered college, *"Um, so the challenge I found going to school in the US was the language first and foremost. Because when I was in my country, I used to study Arabic, French and some English. So, my English wasn't very good, and I had to start with, uh, ESL. I have to study English first, then I can decide which main program to go to"*.

Language isn't the sole barrier that hinders Muslim students from forming connections with the broader college community; there are other significant issues as well, such as dietary restrictions, gender mixing, and partying. These aspects are perceived by Muslims as potential sources of cultural conflicts. Consequently, Muslim students may abstain from participating in certain social events and find it challenging to interact freely with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds. In an interview, Nari, known for being among the more conservative Muslim students, explains, *"I avoid attending parties that serve alcoholic beverages or non-halal food like ham."* He further elaborates on his relationships with classmates, stating, *"They know very little about me. The only person who truly understands me is my roommate. We share a strong bond and communicate much more openly than I do with my classmates."*

The challenge of forming meaningful relationships and making friends significantly impacts Muslim college students, affecting not only their social lives but also their academic achievements and leading to considerable frustration. San candidly expresses her frustration about the lack of friends to communicate with or seek academic assistance from, saying, *"I couldn't find any friends who would be there for me or with whom I could seek academic help."* She further explains the issue, sharing, *"During a group assignment, when the teacher asked us to form groups, I was never included with any of them. It makes me feel like I'm alone, sitting there, waiting for the teacher to assign me to a group."* Numerous Muslim students face similar challenges, expressing their difficulties in establishing strong connections with their classmates.

Muslim students attribute their struggle to build strong networks within the college community to the cultural disparities between the college culture and Islamic values. Yosef points out, *"It's challenging to form friendships and have a fulfilling social life, especially considering the significant gap between our cultures and religions."* Mo emphasizes the importance of having friends in college and how people connect, but he highlights that these connections should not contradict the teachings of Islam. He observes, *"Some Muslim students may feel compelled to join their non-Muslim friends at a bar or engage in activities that go against their Islamic beliefs in an attempt to fit in and be culturally appropriate."* However, he concludes that such connections might conflict with Islamic teachings while acknowledging that building relationships for positive cultural and academic benefits remains essential during college life.

Parents often play a significant role in influencing their children's college experiences, particularly when it comes to forming friendships. Di shares her experience, saying, *"My parents always advise me not to imitate the lifestyle of other college students my age. They emphasize the importance of staying true to who I am and not adopting practices that go against Islamic principles or beliefs."* Consequently, language, Islamic education, and other cultural barriers directly impact Muslim college students' lives, creating boundaries in their connections and interactions with other cultural communities on campus. In the upcoming challenge, the researcher will delve into the challenges related to discrimination and lack of recognition, expanding on their findings in this regard.

### ***Discrimination and Non-Recognition***

In the course of the interviews and focus groups, several students shared instances of discrimination and non-recognition experienced by Muslim college students within their respective campuses. To accurately present this portion of the research findings and align them with the study's conceptual frameworks—namely, the mission of higher education, the uniqueness of Islamic culture, and principles of equality and social justice—the researcher defines the term *"discrimination."* In accordance with the American Psychological Association's definition, discrimination refers to the

unfair or harmful treatment of individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.

The researcher inquired about direct experiences of discrimination and racism among the interviewed students, and Jean's response was indicative of the prevalent issue. Jean said, *"No, I haven't personally experienced it, but I have friends who have gone through such incidents. For instance, there were two girls walking around—one of them was dark-skinned and wore a hijab. People used to call her strange names and make hurtful remarks like, 'Go back to your country, you ISIS!'"*

These distressing accounts exemplify the challenges faced by Muslim students in their college environments. The experiences of discrimination and racist attitudes directed at their peers underscore the urgent need to address issues of equality, inclusion, and social justice within higher education institutions. It is vital to create a campus culture that embraces diversity, promotes understanding, and fosters an environment of respect and acceptance for all students, regardless of their background or beliefs.

The issue of discrimination and lack of recognition poses significant challenges for Muslim college students, as it hinders their ability to access the necessary services to perform their Islamic rituals. Jamal, a father of two female students, underscores the importance of recognition starting at home, where parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's understanding of their Islamic identity. He mentions, *"Parents should teach their children to recognize their individuality and values so that when they step into the larger community, they are aware of their differences and have a sense of diversity, which won't be a problem for them."*

Interestingly, despite discussions about discrimination in college, Yosef, an international student, denies experiencing explicit discrimination in the classroom. He believes that a significant majority, around 88% to 90% of Muslim students in the classroom, do not face discrimination issues. Yosef emphasizes that the classroom is a place of learning where everyone is treated equally. Remarkably, even though students talked extensively about discrimination in their colleges, the study did not find any of the 12 interviewed students to be direct targets of discrimination. This finding suggests that while discussions and perceptions of discrimination are prevalent, direct personal experiences of discrimination may be less common among the participants in this particular study. However, it is essential to recognize that this may not be reflective of the broader experiences of Muslim students on various campuses. The importance of addressing discrimination, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a supportive environment for all students remains a vital goal for higher education institutions.

### ***Ignorance and Negligence***

The dearth of sufficient information regarding Islam in American colleges presents a significant hurdle for Muslim students pursuing higher education in the United States (Koller, 2015; Mohamed, 2019; Brenneman, 2020). Numerous students who were interviewed expressed frustration at the prevailing misconceptions about Islam within their school communities. Consequently, they find themselves devoting a considerable amount of time and effort to educate others about their identity and the true nature of Islam, enabling them to practice their faith without hindrance on campus. Nari laments, *"The lack of understanding is astounding. When we pray, some individuals believe we are kissing the ground. They are unaware of our customs and practices!"* In a similar vein, some Muslim college students are troubled by their own limited knowledge of Islam, which makes it challenging for them to convey accurate information to their classmates. Assin adds, *"Personally, my insufficient understanding of Islam as a religion creates internal conflicts as I navigate various situations in this new environment."*

Furthermore, several students pointed out that the lack of understanding about Islam among college authorities leads to various issues and denies Muslim students access to essential services required for their Islamic practices. Nona provides further insight, stating, *"For instance, during Ramadan, it's challenging to find food after 8:00 pm because they are unaware that we fast throughout the day and need to break our fast at that time. They are also unfamiliar with the significance of Friday prayers for us. Performing Friday prayers becomes difficult as there are no breaks during that time."* Nona perceives this situation as a form of ignorance on the part of the school. Similarly, Jean identifies this ignorance as a lack of knowledge about Islam among his peers. He takes it upon himself to explain the reasons behind his actions to them in hopes that they will comprehend and respect his practices.

However, Mo argues that US colleges are not entirely ignorant of Islam; instead, they require further education to enhance their knowledge. *"I don't believe any school lacks a basic understanding of Islamic cultures. Perhaps these ideas and backgrounds need further development, but I think everyone in schools is aware of Islam,"* Mo asserts. Etha adds, *"The cafeteria staff often fail to comprehend or disregard our dietary restrictions related to pork or Halal food. We wish for our food and utensils to be uncontaminated, just like a clean knife free from any pork residue."*

The aforementioned issues present challenges faced by Muslim college students across various institutions of higher education in the United States. These challenges are not isolated but interconnected and often overlap, contributing to numerous problems that impact the dedication of Muslim students to their religious practices. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and codes related to the challenges faced by Muslim college students.

**Table 2**  
 Challenges of Muslim College Students

Themes	Codes
Identity	Culture- environment- identity - fear - adjustment - self - appearance
Cultural Pressures and Restrictions	Social activities- pressure- restriction- challenging - internal issues- external issues
Communication and Building Networks	Friends-connection- social - interaction+ events - gathering - teacher& staff- worship.
Discrimination and non-recognition	Mistreatment- discriminate- racism unwellcome- islamophobia- ISIS- Nonrecognition- Islam - personality.
Ignorance and Negligence	Knowledge- ignorance- authorities - service - rituals - misunderstanding - Islam

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The research findings highlight the challenges and pertinent issues that Muslim students encounter in their college lives. A central theme that emerged from the interviews is "identity," as conceptualized by Vignoles, Schwartz,& Luyckx (2017) who define it as "how people answer the question, who are you?" This question may be directed explicitly or implicitly, either internally or externally, at an individual or a collective level. According to the interviewed Muslim college students, the notion of identity revolves around how they perceive themselves within the college environment and how others view them as individuals with a unique Islamic culture. Many participants strongly believe that their Islamic culture forms an integral part of their identity. Furthermore, they emphasize that this Islamic identity significantly influences other themes addressed in response to research question 1, such as experiencing pressure and restrictions, navigating communication and building social networks, facing discrimination and lack of recognition, and encountering ignorance and negligence.

The manifestation of this identity is evident in various aspects of their daily activities, including practices related to worship, dress, adhering to halal food, and their interpersonal interactions. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the interviewed Muslim college students are resistant to being stereotyped or stigmatized solely based on their Islamic identity. They seek to be recognized as individuals with unique perspectives and experiences beyond their religious and cultural backgrounds. Multiple researchers have examined the matters concerning the identity of Muslim students from various perspectives, including integration, acceptance, adjustment, and rejection. They assert that the disparity between Islamic culture and mainstream American culture significantly contributes to the emergence of identity challenges faced by Muslim students in American educational institutions. Nonetheless, these studies by Jilani (2015), Ghafur (2021), and Anderson (2020) reveal that Muslim students can harmoniously coexist on their U.S. campuses without having to abandon any aspect of their Islamic culture.

In interviews with various students, it became evident that maintaining their Islamic identity in college poses numerous challenges. Previous studies aimed to investigate the identity issues of Muslim students in U.S. educational institutions, but their focus was limited to specific aspects, leaving a more comprehensive understanding elusive. However, "Dilemmas of Muslim Students in US Higher

Education" sought to delve into these challenges comprehensively, exploring the influence of students' family origins on their social and academic experiences in college. During these interviews, students confirmed that they not only face identity issues as Muslim college students in their new society, but their parents also experience similar challenges. Both students and parents expressed feeling like outsiders in their new environment, leading to difficulties in adapting and assimilating into the larger society. These sentiments were recurrently emphasized throughout the interviews, shedding light on the complexity of the issues faced by Muslim students and their families in the United States.

Embracing Islam as a religion entails significant responsibilities, and Muslims adhere to these principles both philosophically and theoretically, and often practically. Islam's core principle revolves around unwavering obedience to the Creator (Sardar & Davis, 2004). In college, Muslim students strive to uphold their faith's teachings while actively engaging in the cultural aspects of their academic environment. They seek to maintain their religious practices, please their families, and integrate into the college community simultaneously. However, this endeavor to strike a balance between these contrasting forces (Fullan, 1993) can create cultural pressures, hinder communication, and lead to feelings of discrimination and neglect in U.S. higher education. The struggle to lead a normal college life while staying true to their religious beliefs presents challenges that Muslim students encounter as they navigate their educational journey.

Muslim college students and their parents firmly hold the belief that Islam is a moderate religion (Aljazairi, 2000). Islam encourages its followers to practice moderation while remaining steadfast in their commitment to the faith and upholding its foundational religious responsibilities. However, this perspective also places pressure on Muslim students, leading them to voluntarily abstain from certain activities and avoid freely mingling with groups engaging in practices that might contradict Islamic principles. Consequently, they find themselves in a conflict within their social lives as they navigate the delicate balance between their religious values and social interactions.

Previous studies have delved into the challenges faced by Muslim students in U.S. educational institutions (Sankar, 2011). However, certain issues, such as pressure and restriction, gender segregation, and difficulties in networking with other cultural groups, have received comparatively less investigation. As indicated in this study, scholars like Wingfield (2006), Jilani (2015), and Ghafur(2021) have pointed out that Islamic culture in college can lead to stereotyping and stigmatization of Muslim students. Mustafa (2007) argued that adhering to Islamic teachings in educational institutions is driven more by the desires of parents than the students themselves. While the researcher cannot confirm this claim, it is important to note that all interviewed students and parents emphatically emphasize that following an Islamic lifestyle in college is entirely their own choice.

### ***Recommendations and Implications to The University's Community***

Creating a safe environment for Muslim college students involves the efforts of the entire university community, including faculty, staff, students, and administration. Here are some ways that the university community can offer a safe environment for Muslim college students:

- 1. Education and awareness:* The university community can offer education and awareness about Islam and Muslim cultures to help dispel myths, stereotypes, and misunderstandings about the religion and its followers. This can include seminars, workshops, and cultural events that showcase Muslim cultures and customs.
- 2. Addressing discrimination and harassment:* The university community should have policies and procedures in place to address any incidents of discrimination, harassment, or bias against Muslim students. This can include providing safe reporting mechanisms and training for faculty and staff on how to recognize and respond to incidents of discrimination and harassment.
- 3. Providing safe spaces:* The university community can offer safe spaces for Muslim students to pray, gather, and socialize with others who share their beliefs and culture. This can include designating prayer rooms and providing access to halal food options on campus.
- 4. Accommodating religious practices:* The university community can accommodate Muslim students' religious practices, such as providing prayer breaks during class time, scheduling exams and assignments around important religious holidays, and offering flexibility for religious observances.
- 5. Offering mental health support:* The university community can offer mental health support that is sensitive to the cultural and religious needs of Muslim students. This can include offering counseling

services provided by mental health professionals who are knowledgeable about Islam and can provide culturally appropriate support.

The findings indicate that creating a safe environment for Muslim college students involves ongoing efforts to promote understanding, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. The university community should work together to create a welcoming and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their background, beliefs, or identities. It is important to note that cultural pluralism is praiseworthy and must be dealt with from this standpoint. Universities are encouraged to acknowledge that every student on the university campus has his/her own privacy and needs, so they must be observed and not violated.

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### **Ethical Declaration and Committee Approval**

Throughout the entire research process, scientific, ethical, and citation guidelines have been meticulously followed.

The study received ethical approval (IRB) permission.

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### **Proportion of the Authors' Contribution**

All researchers contributed equally to this study.