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"Nobody Taught Me to Read the Air": Housing, Belonging, and Religious Adaptation Among Muslim International Students in Japan

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores how university housing influences cultural adaptation and belonging among Muslim international students in Japan. Positioned within a higher education setting characterized by indirect communication, standardized residential facilities, and limited institutional acknowledgment of religious differences, the research uses a qualitative, multimethod approach that includes autoethnography, semistructured interviews, and spatial analysis. The findings reveal that dormitories serve as important socio-spatial environments in which religious practices, daily routines, and social interactions are continually negotiated. Four interconnected themes emerged: managing halal food practices in shared kitchens, modifying spaces for ritual cleanliness and prayer, personalizing uniform rooms, and developing peer networks as informal support systems. The analysis demonstrates that seemingly neutral housing designs shift the burden of adaptation onto students. By emphasizing residential life as an educational space, this study contributes to scholarship on internationalization, religious diversity, and spatial justice while offering practical insights for culturally responsive housing policies aligned with inclusive education objectives.*

Keywords: belonging, dormitories, hidden curriculum, Japan, Muslim international students, place-making, Sustainable Development Goal 4

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INTRODUCTION

For many international students, the dormitory is the first place where daily life in a new country begins. It is where shared routines are learned, unfamiliar expectations are faced, and private practices are negotiated within institutional and social limits. In addition to providing housing, dormitories serve as key spaces for cultural adaptation, emotional support, and identity exploration. Activities such as cooking, bathing, sleeping, and socializing must be adjusted to fit new institutional rules and interpersonal interactions.

In Japan, dormitory life often introduces students to subtle cultural expectations, indirect communication styles, and implicit behavioral norms embedded in daily routines (Sachiko et al., 2023). Nevertheless, despite growing scholarship on internationalization in Japanese higher education, limited research has examined how everyday residential environments shape the lived experiences of religious minority students, especially within student housing.

For Muslim international students, dormitories are also places where religious practices such as prayer, halal food preparation, and ritual cleanliness must be maintained within infrastructures not designed with religious differences in mind. Although internationalization policies have expanded, scholarship rarely addresses how residential life influences the experiences of religious minorities in East Asian higher education settings (Rifki, 2025). Research on student housing increasingly recognizes its role in shaping belonging and adaptation (Boccagni & Yapo, 2022; Strayhorn, 2018), yet little attention has been given to how religious identity interacts with dormitory design and institutional norms in Japan.

This study explores how religious identity, spatial design, and everyday adaptation intersect within university dormitories in Japan. It addresses three research questions:

1. How do Muslim international students in Japan adapt dormitory spaces to uphold religious practices?
2. What spatial and institutional factors influence these adaptations?
3. How do these negotiations impact belonging, exclusion, and informal community formation?

These questions become especially relevant within Japan's evolving internationalization agenda. Over the past decade, national initiatives have expanded recruitment through English- taught programs and government-

sponsored scholarships (MEXT, 2009; JASSO, 2024). As of 2024, Japan hosts over 279,000,000 international students (Bensaida, 2024). While access and mobility have increased, less focus has been given to how campus infrastructure influences inclusion, particularly for religious minorities.

This study uses analytic autoethnography and interview-based inquiry to examine dormitories as relational infrastructures where adaptation, identity, and community are negotiated. As a Moroccan Muslim woman who lived in a university dorm during her first year in Japan, I position myself as both researcher and participant, drawing on analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) to engage in embodied experience alongside dialogic narratives from other Muslim students across Japan.

By focusing on residential life, this study contributes to discussions on inclusive internationalization and aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which views inclusion as extending beyond formal access to include conditions that enable equitable participation. Instead of considering housing as a secondary aspect of academic life, the study treats dormitory space as an educational site where belonging is created, negotiated, or deferred.

Hypotheses

To guide the analysis, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H_1: Dormitory infrastructure and spatial design influence Muslim international students’ ability to sustain religious practices such as halal food preparation, ritual cleanliness, and prayer.

H_2: When dormitory environments do not explicitly accommodate religious practices, Muslim international students develop informal spatial and social strategies to adapt to shared facilities and institutional norms.

H_3: Peer networks function as a form of soft social infrastructure that supports cultural adaptation and strengthens students’ sense of belonging in dormitory environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated framework combining the hidden curriculum, student housing as social infrastructure, peer networks, and relational belonging.

The hidden curriculum refers to the unspoken norms and skills that students are expected to learn without explicit instruction (Snyder, 1971; Giroux & Penna, 1979). In addition to formal academic content, institutional settings convey expectations about behavior, visibility, and legitimacy. This perspective is especially helpful for exploring dormitory life, where rules about privacy, interaction, and adaptation mostly remain unspoken.

Student housing is considered social infrastructure, meaning that dormitories create opportunities for interaction, support, and integration through design, administrative routines, and daily management (Franz & Gruber, 2022). Housing, therefore, functions not just as accommodation but as an environment that organizes student life. Belonging is seen as relational and spatial, created through everyday interactions and access to supportive environments rather than only through formal inclusion policies (Strayhorn, 2018; Boccagni & Yapo, 2022).

Rather than functioning separately, these elements intersect within residential spaces. Internationalization policies influence housing design and management. These infrastructures create implicit expectations about appropriate behavior and adaptation. Peer networks form as relational mechanisms through which students interpret and negotiate these expectations. Belonging becomes the experiential outcome of these layered interactions. This framework places individual adaptation within broader socioinstitutional processes rather than viewing it as an isolated adjustment. The relationships among these constructs are shown in Figure 1.

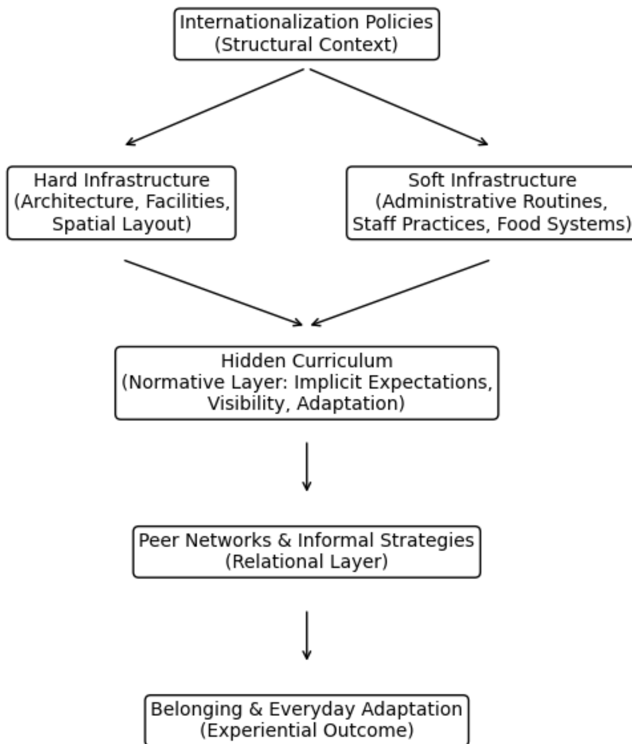

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Dormitory Space, Hidden Curriculum, Infrastructure, and Belonging

Figure 1 conceptualizes dormitories as layered sociospatial environments shaped by internationalization policies and institutional design. Hard infrastructure (architecture, facilities) and soft infrastructure (administrative routines, staff practices, food systems) structure everyday life and generate a hidden curriculum of implicit expectations regarding behavior and adaptation. Peer networks emerge as relational mechanisms through which students interpret and negotiate these norms. Belonging is conceptualized as the experiential outcome of these layered interactions. This framework situates individual adaptation within broader socioinstitutional processes rather than as an isolated adjustment.

Internationalization of Higher Education in Japan: Policy Ambitions and Practical Gaps

Research on international student adaptation remains heavily concentrated in Western contexts (Tang & Zhang, 2023). East Asian destinations such as Japan remain comparatively underexamined, particularly with respect to religion in everyday residential life. Japan's internationalization agenda has expanded significantly over the past two decades through initiatives such as the Global 30 Project (MEXT, 2009), the MEXT Scholarship, and the African Business Education (ABE) Initiative (JICA, 2024). These policies have increased enrollment and global visibility.

However, scholarship consistently argues that internationalization efforts prioritize recruitment and mobility over the transformation of everyday campus conditions (Yonezawa, 2019; Tight, 2022). Religious practice is often treated as peripheral, assumed to be privately managed rather than institutionally supported (Ota, 2012, 2014; Yonezawa, 2023).

Empirical research on Muslim students' residential experiences in Japan remains limited. While broader East Asian research shows that religious minorities frequently informally navigate accommodation gaps (Chen et al., 2019), little work has examined how such dynamics materialize specifically in dormitory life. By centering Muslim international students' residential experiences, this study addresses this gap and extends debates on inclusive internationalization into an underexamined East Asian context.

Dormitories as Socio-Spatial Arenas: Housing, Identity, and Cultural Adaptation

Dormitories are not neutral spaces but formative sociospatial environments where belonging and exclusion are negotiated (Boccagni & Yapo, 2022). In Japan, structural constraints in the private rental market make university dormitories particularly significant for international students (Arudou, 2015).

However, dormitories often operate under standardized designs that do not account for religious diversity. For Muslim students, everyday adaptation often involves negotiating shared kitchens, bathing facilities, and social programming not designed with halal practices, ritual cleanliness, or modesty in mind. Research on residence halls shows that Muslim students often rely on informal negotiation

and selective disclosure to address institutional gaps (Calkins et al., 2011; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Such adaptive strategies parallel broader findings on marginalized students constructing parallel support structures when institutional recognition is limited (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Yang (2025) further shows that residence-hall belonging depends heavily on peer relationships and staff responsiveness, suggesting that inclusion is shaped as much by residential climate as by formal policy.

Muslim Students and the Negotiation of Belonging

Unlike Western contexts, where Islamophobia may be overt (Sirin & Fine, 2008; Al-Krenawi, 2025), Japan's context is often characterized by what can be described as institutional invisibility. Religious difference is rarely explicitly rejected, but it is seldom anticipated. Through the lens of the hidden curriculum (Snyder, 1971; Giroux & Penna, 1979), Muslim students are expected to navigate prayer, dietary practices, and modesty in environments that offer little explicit guidance. The responsibility for identifying appropriate spaces and negotiating accommodations falls largely on students themselves.

This dynamic produces conditional belonging, in which participation depends on students' ability to adapt quietly. Strayhorn's (2018) relational model of belonging helps explain how inclusion emerges not from policy statements but from daily recognition and spatial access. Nojan (2023) describes similar patterns as racial–religious decoupling, in which institutional diversity rhetoric does not fully address the compounded marginalization of racialized religious minorities. In Japan, limited religious literacy (Fujiwara, 2005) further reinforces expectations of self-management of religion.

Within this landscape, peer networks function as soft social infrastructure, providing practical and emotional support. While these networks enable adaptation, their necessity underscores the uneven institutionalization of inclusion.

Dormitories as Liminal Spaces: Temporariness, Belonging, and Everyday Adaptation

Dormitories are transitional environments situated between departure and settlement (Kenyon, 1999; Cieraad, 2009). They are sites where routines, identities, and social relationships are renegotiated. International student mobility is increasingly understood as a lived, embodied experience (Boccagni & Yapo, 2022). From this perspective, everyday practices such as cooking, arranging personal space, and maintaining rituals become central to placemaking and emotional stability.

For Muslim students, these practices intersect directly with shared infrastructure and implicit norms. Dormitories thus become sites where the hidden curriculum of residential life is enacted through daily negotiation. Gender further shapes these dynamics, particularly where modesty norms intersect with shared domestic spaces. Taken together, this scholarship positions dormitories as

relational infrastructures in which institutional design, implicit expectations, and peer practices converge to shape belonging.

METHOD

Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches to understand how individuals construct meaning within specific social and institutional contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Drawing on autoethnography, semistructured interviews, spatial documentation, and visual methods, the research investigates how students adapt, resist, and reconfigure their dormitory environments as part of a broader negotiation of belonging.

This multimodal methodology was selected to foreground the embodied, affective, and sociomaterial dimensions of international student adaptation, areas often sidelined in studies that prioritize academic integration. By treating university dormitories not simply as functional housing but as sociocultural arenas, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how temporary accommodation can both constrain and enable cultural and religious identity work.

Researcher Positionality and Epistemological Framing

My positionality as both researcher and participant fundamentally shapes this inquiry. As a Moroccan Muslim woman who spent her first year in Japan living in a university dormitory, I do not write as a distant observer. I experienced firsthand the negotiations involved in preparing halal meals, performing daily prayers, maintaining modesty, and navigating the unspoken norms of communal life in Japan. Rather than treating this position as a methodological bias, I draw on narrative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Adams et al., 2015; Boylorn & Orbe, 2020) as a valid and political epistemology. My own sensory and emotional recall is used as data and as a lens for interpreting others' experiences. This approach aligns with decolonial and intersectional frameworks, which reject the abstraction of marginalized voices and instead center lived experience as a site of knowledge production (Spry, 2001; Pazil, 2022).

Participants and Sampling

The study included 14 Muslim international students (6 women and 8 men) residing in university-managed dormitories in Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan. Participants were drawn from a broader pool of 20 international students and recruited through snowball sampling via international student events, mosque networks, and Ramadan gatherings. All participants self-identified as practicing Muslims and had lived in dormitories for at least one academic semester. Detailed demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographic and Residential Characteristics (N = 14)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Scholarship	Year	D.
Imane	Female	26	Morocco	MEXT	2	D.1
Dounia	Female	22	Morocco	MEXT	1	D.2
Ami	Female	26	Indonesia	MEXT	2	D.3
Ali	Male	24	Palestine	MEXT	4	D.1
Amin	Male	23	Morocco	MEXT	1	D.2
Moussa	Male	28	Senegal	ABE	2.5	D.1
Ayman	Male	30	Indonesia	MEXT	6	D.1
Qaysar	Male	29	Iran	MEXT	3	D.2
Ahmet	Male	28	Turkey	MEXT	4	D.2/D.1
Bassem	Male	24	Egypt	Private	1	D.3
Saad	Male	25	Jordan	MEXT	3	D.2
Khawatr	Female	26	Tunisia	ABE	3	D.1
Oumnia	Female	24	Morocco	MEXT	0.5	D.1
Salwa	Female	28	Morocco	MEXT	5	D.1

Note. D = Dormitory Type; Y = Years in Japan reflects the number of years at the time of the interview, D. 2/D.1 indicates participants who relocated during their period of residence, here from Dormitory Type 2 to Dormitory Type 1. Dorm types correspond to housing categories described in Table 2.

Although not statistically representative, the sample offers detailed insight into the lived experiences of Muslim international students in Japanese dormitories. The high number of Moroccan participants reflects the researcher's proximity, which helped build trust and access through shared linguistic, cultural, and religious networks. However, this concentration also limits the study, as the experiences may be influenced by specific regional or cultural backgrounds. Instead of aiming for generalizability, the study emphasizes deep analysis during a key transitional period: students' first year living in dorms. Future research should include a broader sample across different nations, sects, and institutions.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection combined narrative, spatial, and visual methods to document dormitory life as lived experience. Semistructured interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, or French based on participants' preferences, often spanning multiple sessions to track changes over time during phases such as arrival, settlement, and religious periods such as Ramadan. The interview prompts focused on prayer routines, kitchen and hygiene adjustments, interactions with peers and residential staff, and experiences of inclusion and misrecognition. Participants also created cognitive maps by sketching their rooms and dorm layouts, highlighting functional and emotional zones (e.g., prayer areas, stress points), which were later turned into technical diagrams using publicly available dormitory materials and site visits. Photo elicitation involved instant cameras, encouraging students to photograph objects and microspaces that evoked a sense of "home" (e.g., prayer mats, spice jars, room arrangements) to support nonverbal

reflection on adaptation. Walk-along interviews were conducted during routine movements between dorms and the campus to gather embodied accounts of the boundaries between public, shared, and private spaces. Additionally, participant observation was carried out during dormitory events, mosque visits, and religious gatherings (e.g., Ramadan iftar), including during participants' moving-out periods, to understand how attachment and departure were materially organized.

Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, or French based on participants' preferences. This multilingual approach was crucial for capturing nuanced expressions of emotion, religious practice, and embodied experiences. Language choice also systematically influenced the data. Participants from Morocco, who were typically trilingual in Moroccan Arabic (Darija), French, and English, often switched between languages during a single interview. Discussions of family, faith, and emotion were usually in Darija, while English was common for academic topics, institutional procedures, or interactions with university staff. French often served as a bridging language between the two.

These language shifts were documented as part of the interpretive analysis rather than being subjected to formal linguistic analysis. Transcription and translation were performed by the researcher, with analytic memos noting instances where meaning, emotion, or religious idioms did not translate directly. Consistent with qualitative scholarship that recognizes language's role in shaping how emotion and identity are expressed (Pavlenko, 2005; Temple & Young, 2004), this study views multilingual expression as an interpretive element of participants' narratives rather than as a linguistic focus. Therefore, translation is seen not only as a technical step but also as part of the broader process of meaning-making through which experiences of belonging, exclusion, and adaptation are narrated and understood.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were central to the design and conduct of this study. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the author's academic advisor prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent before participation and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were altered to protect participants' anonymity.

Given the sensitivity of religious practice, gendered experience, and migration status, particular care was taken during interviews and observations. Participants retained control over audio recording, and interviews were paused, redirected, or stopped when discussions became emotionally or spiritually sensitive. Visual materials were collected and used only with explicit permission, and all images were anonymized prior to analysis and publication. In line with ethical standards for qualitative and autoethnographic research, the study prioritized participant agency, relational accountability, and reflexive care throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic approach that emphasized constant comparison across interviews, field notes, maps, and photographs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initial coding focused on recurring moments where daily routines intersected with built environments and institutional norms (e.g., food preparation, bathing, prayer, privacy management, and social navigation). Codes were then grouped into higher-level themes that captured patterned forms of spatial negotiation, changes over time in comfort and participation, and the relationship work involved in maintaining daily life through peer coordination. Analytic focus was also given to gendered aspects of privacy, visibility, and safety in shared housing, especially where embodied religious practices heightened the stakes of "ordinary" dormitory routines. Visual and spatial materials were treated as interpretive data rather than mere illustrations, allowing triangulation between narrated experiences and the physical arrangements of rooms, kitchens, and bathing facilities.

RESULTS

This section presents findings organized around everyday dormitory life: arrival and orientation, food preparation, bathing practices, room personalization, and peer support. Across these domains, dormitories functioned not as neutral backdrops but as structured environments that shaped students' capacity to participate and belong (Revington, 2025).

Navigating the Hidden Curriculum at Arrival and Orientation

Participants described arrival in Japan as procedurally organized but culturally opaque. Orientation emphasized administrative compliance, housing rules, waste separation, safety procedures, and registration requirements while offering little guidance on the informal norms that shape everyday interactions. Although expectations were formally stated, students reported uncertainty about how to decline alcohol without offense, interpret invitations such as "do as you please," or navigate prolonged silence in group settings. Several described being expected to kuuki wo yomu (空気を読む), to "read the air," without instruction.

This pattern reflects the hidden curriculum, through which unspoken competencies are expected but not explicitly taught (Snyder, 1971; Giroux & Penna, 1979). As one participant explained, she understood "the rules," but not "how to behave without offending people." Another participant noted that Japanese language courses emphasized grammar and honorific speech, but not kuuki wo yomu, the culturally situated practice of interpreting indirect cues and relational expectations.

In line with critiques of Japan's internationalization strategies (Yonezawa, 2019), participants' accounts suggest that institutional onboarding prioritizes procedural clarity over cultural legibility. Uncertainty extended beyond orientation events. Dounia (22, Morocco) avoided welcome gatherings because

of uncertainty about the availability of halal food. Ali (24, Jordan) repeatedly described explaining dietary requirements, noting that “my needs were not even imagined in the system.”

Opacity also appeared in bureaucratic processes. During my own early settlement period, I signed housing documents that were jet-lagged and unfamiliar with institutional routines. My My Number Card identification application was later rejected because my photograph included a hijab, delaying access to essential services until university staff intervened. Such experiences illustrate how administrative systems, structured around implicit norms of visibility and embodiment, can unintentionally marginalize religious difference.

For some participants, these bureaucratic delays created a cascading effect across housing, banking, and employment procedures. The result was not overt exclusion but prolonged uncertainty and a sense of being “one step behind.” When expectations remain implicit, misalignment is easily internalized as personal inadequacy rather than structural opacity.

For visibly Muslim women in particular, modest dress, dietary practice, and prayer routines became recurring sites of negotiation. These dynamics echo Kocalan’s (2023) findings on microaggressions experienced by Muslim women in Japan, as well as broader analyses of embodied adaptation in non-Muslim contexts (Pazil, 2022). Together, these early encounters show how the hidden curriculum of arrival positioned adaptation as an individual task. Before navigating kitchens, bathrooms, or peer networks, students were already learning that belonging depended on their ability to interpret what remained unsaid.

Religious Practice and Spatial Constraints

Before arrival, students were asked to rank three dormitory options using a brief PDF that summarized room size, kitchen access, and bathing arrangements (see Table 2). On the surface, these options appeared to differ only in privacy levels and cost. In practice, however, these architectural variables quietly structured students’ ability to observe religious practices related to food preparation, ritual cleanliness, and prayer. Most participants reported selecting housing primarily based on affordability and proximity to campus, with limited anticipation of how design features would affect daily religious routines. As one participant noted, the decision-making process felt cursory, guided more by financial constraints than by informed comparison of lived implications.

Table 2: Comparison of university dormitory types and facilities

Feature	*D.1 (Private)*	*D.2 (Semiprivate)*	*D.3 (Minimal Privacy)*
Room Size	24 m²	16 m²	12 m²
Private Bathroom	Yes	Yes	Shared
Private Kitchen	Yes	No	No
Shared Kitchen	No	Yes	Yes
Communal Bath (sentō)	No	No	Yes
Laundry Facilities	In-room	Shared	Shared
Balcony/Drying area	Yes	No	No
Privacy Level	High	Moderate	Low

Note. Dormitory types reflect standard housing options available to international students at the study site. Facility configurations shape students' capacity to manage halal food preparation, ritual cleanliness (wudu'), privacy, and everyday religious practice. By Hafsa Rifki. March 2025

Within the first two months, many students began to experience these housing choices as restrictive rather than neutral. Participants placed in Dormitory 3, the minimal-privacy option with a mandatory cafeteria meal plan and shared bathing facilities, reported the greatest tension between institutional design and religious observance. Aisha, a 25-year-old student from Egypt, initially viewed the meal plan as economical, only to realize that most dishes were unsuitable because they contained pork-based ingredients, creating a sense of exclusion within a service she was required to pay for.

In contrast, students in Dormitory 1, which offered private kitchens and bathrooms, reported significantly greater autonomy over halal food preparation and ablution schedules. However, this autonomy was frequently described as carrying a social trade-off, as residents tended to withdraw into private rooms, reducing opportunities for spontaneous interaction. As Salwa (25, Morocco) explained, "Everyone shuts their own door, so spontaneous friendships take real effort and take more time than the polite hello we say when we meet in the corridor or while waiting for the elevator."

Dormitory 2 functioned as an intermediate space. Its semiprivate design enabled social contact through shared corridors and kitchens while still providing a degree of personal control. At the same time, this arrangement required continuous negotiation regarding food contamination, alcohol, and shared utensils. Several participants described daily cooking as a form of "daily diplomacy," balancing religious observance with maintaining amicable relations in mixed-use spaces. These negotiations were rarely conflictual but were experienced as ongoing, low-level labor that shaped how and when students used shared facilities.

Because formal housing reassignment was effectively unavailable, most adaptations occurred informally and in place. Some students relied on friendships with residents in more private dormitories to access halal cooking spaces, while others accepted the compromises of semiprivate living to preserve social

connections. One participant assigned to Dormitory 3 ultimately terminated her contract and moved off campus at her own expense, illustrating the limited sustainability of minimal-privacy housing for students whose religious practices require spatial autonomy.

Across cases, what appeared to be an equal choice at the point of assignment evolved into an unspoken zoning of difference over time. Without explicit rules or prohibitions, dormitory design effectively sorted students by their capacity to absorb additional spatial and emotional labor. In this sense, architectural neutrality operated as part of the hidden curriculum, silently determining whose routines aligned with institutional space and whose required constant adjustment. Religious practice thus became not only a matter of personal faith but also a spatial negotiation shaped by infrastructure, cost, and access.

Conditional Belonging Through Everyday Place-Making

This theme explores how Muslim international students navigated a sense of belonging across interconnected everyday spaces, such as kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms. In these settings, religious practice, privacy, and homemaking intersected with dormitory design, making belonging dependent on students' ability to continually adapt to spatial changes.

Cooking and Eating: Kitchens as Contested Spaces

Across all dormitory types, food preparation was the most immediate way students encountered the limits of religious accommodation. Kitchen access, layout, and atmosphere directly shaped whether halal practices could be sustained without constant vigilance.

In Dormitory 1, private galley kitchens afforded full control over halal food preparation, but their limited size constrained culinary practices. As one participant explained, "I started cooking everything from scratch, but the space wasn't set up for real meals, so I switched to frozen vegetables just to stay halal" (Imane, Morocco, age 26). While religious autonomy was preserved, it came at the cost of reduced variety and effortful adaptation.

Dormitory 2 offered shared kitchens that facilitated social interaction while introducing new forms of negotiation. Floor-level pantries supported quick, solitary cooking, whereas the larger communal kitchen encouraged shared meals and intercultural exchange. One participant described moving strategically between these spaces: "Morning, I used the floor kitchen, quick, less crowded. Dinner, I went downstairs to cook with friends… our diets overlapped, so it was easy" (Dounia, Morocco, age 22). To prevent cross-contamination, many students carried labeled baskets from their rooms or formed informal cooking alliances with peers who shared dietary rules. These arrangements functioned as peer-based microinfrastructures that compensated for the absence of institutional guidance.

At the same time, shared kitchens could become exclusionary. Late-night drinking gatherings left alcohol residue and odors that discouraged use. As one student noted, "The kitchen was mixed gender, and I often avoided it. Fridays smelled of alcohol until midnight" (Amin, Morocco, age 23). In response, some

students retreated to floor kitchens, relied on room-based appliances, or avoided shared spaces altogether, trading sociability for religious control.

Dormitory 3 presented the most severe constraints. The mandatory cafeteria meal plan rarely met halal requirements, thereby forcing students to engage in daily scrutiny and self-restriction. One resident described the cumulative exhaustion of constant monitoring: “I lived on rice, eggs, and whatever side dishes looked safe… after asking cooks about ingredients every day, I just bought dinner at the convenience store” (Ami, Indonesia, age 26). In these contexts, kettles and rice cookers became de facto cooking infrastructure, and vigilance replaced appetite. Taken together, these culinary adaptations illustrate how a single architectural variable, kitchen access, can significantly widen or narrow the gap between dormitory design and religious practice.

Bathing, Cleanliness, and Creative Workarounds

Ritual cleanliness is central to daily Muslim practice, and dormitory plumbing configurations significantly influence students’ ability to perform ablution (wudu’) with dignity and consistency. In Dormitory 1, private bathrooms provided complete autonomy over personal hygiene and prayer preparations, thereby decreasing both logistical and social strain.

Dormitory 2 offered partial privacy. While each room included a toilet and a narrow shower stall, limited space made washing feet, a necessary step in wudu’, difficult. The optional communal bath on the ground floor added to the tension. Since sentō-style bathing requires full nudity, most Muslim residents avoided it or visited it during off-peak hours. As a result, prayer preparations required careful planning around space and time, even in housing marketed as semiprivate.

Dormitory 3 posed the greatest challenge. The default bathing facility was a communal sentō (bathhouse), making it unusable for most Muslim students. One participant explained, “I never used the public bath; it didn’t align with my values. I started showering at dawn, when the single private stall was free” (Ami, Indonesia, age 26). Others described skipping showers altogether or reorganizing their routines to avoid exposure. With only a small basin in each room, students devised complex schedules involving early-morning showers, late-night rinses, and strategic bathroom use. Over time, this constant planning led to fatigue and reduced the sense of independence that dormitory life aims to foster.

These coping practices—timed ablutions, off-peak bathing, and selective abstention—show how sanitation layouts quietly regulate which bodies can easily navigate shared space and which must constantly adapt.

Personalization and Belonging: Between Suitcases and Settling

Room personalization emerged as a key indicator of whether students experienced dormitories as temporary shelters or as spaces of belonging. All dorms enforced identical rules restricting modification, but students’ responses varied sharply by available space and privacy.

Dormitory 1 allowed the greatest scope for homemaking. Participants created prayer corners, displayed spice jars, and rearranged furniture to establish functional zones. One student reflected, “Having my prayer corner made the room

instantly feel mine; it became my anchor" (Imane, Morocco, age 26). Balconies with frosted glass enabled hijabi students to dry clothing privately, reducing the need for constant bodily vigilance. Hosting friends for tea or conversation further transformed rooms into sites of connection and comfort.

Dormitory 2 permitted partial personalization. At the same time, single rooms offered privacy for removing hijab, limited light, and fixed furniture constrained expression. Students relied on temporary solutions, adhesive hooks, carpets, and stacked storage, described by one participant as "decorating without leaving fingerprints" (Dounia, Morocco, age 22). Corridor layouts encouraged sociability but required ongoing negotiation of visibility and modesty, particularly for women.

Dormitory 3 allowed almost no personalization: strict rules and the absence of balconies produced rooms that felt transient and impersonal. As one participant explained, "It looked like a hotel room… my room was an extension of my suitcase" (Ami, Indonesia, age 26). In these spaces, limited attachment reinforced minimal interaction and accelerated emotional detachment.

Across all dorms, personalization functioned as a quiet assertion of presence. Prayer mats, spices, postcards, and carefully arranged furniture anchored identity within architectural neutrality. However, these acts also revealed the fragility of belonging. As one student summarized, "I had to choose to block the view or keep wearing hijab" (Imane, Morocco, age 26). Such dilemmas illustrate how seemingly minor design decisions, window placement, balcony depth, and furnishing rules mediate whether a room becomes a sanctuary, a compromise, or merely a place to store belongings.

Peer Networks and Uneven Institutional Support

Formal housing channels rarely explicitly address religious needs. Instead, support for Muslim students' daily religious practices largely relied on individual effort and informal negotiations. Dormitory managers and resident assistants (RAs) were generally seen as approachable and well-meaning but often unprepared to handle religious diversity. As one participant noted, "The RA meant well, but he didn't know what halal meant; I had to explain everything" (Moussa, Senegal, age 28). This pattern aligns with Yang's (2025) finding that residence-hall staff play an inconsistent role in fostering students' sense of belonging; good intentions alone are not enough without institutional guidance or training.

In some cases, staff members' prior exposure to Muslim contexts proved decisive. Participants recalled instances in which an RA who had studied in Malaysia proactively sought information about prayer practices or labeled shared cookware to avoid cross-contamination. Another housing manager, familiar with previous Muslim residents, organized a shared breakfast during Ramadan. While these actions were meaningful, they were discretionary rather than systemic. Support varied depending on who was on duty, making accommodation unpredictable and unevenly distributed across dormitories.

In the absence of consistent institutional support, peer networks emerged as the primary infrastructure for meeting religious and everyday needs. Students relied on group chats and informal conversations to share information about halal-

friendly meals, prayer-friendly spaces, and strategies for navigating shared facilities. As one participant summarized, "It wasn't the system that helped, but the people I met" (Ali, Palestine, age 24). These peer-mediated exchanges transformed kitchens, corridors, and digital platforms such as WhatsApp and LINE into sites of mutual care and collective problem solving.

Such networks functioned as soft infrastructure, compensating for gaps in formal provision through relational labor. However, their effectiveness was inherently fragile. Changes in staffing, cohort turnover, or the departure of a culturally knowledgeable cook or RA could abruptly dissolve established routines. Belonging, in this sense, was sustained through continuous interpersonal effort rather than embedded institutional design.

Across kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms, and social networks, Muslim students thus reshaped dormitory life through small but persistent acts of adaptation. These practices enabled daily functioning in spaces not designed to accommodate their religious needs, but they also underscored the limits of resilience as a long-term strategy. The reliance on peer goodwill and individual flexibility highlights a broader institutional pattern in which inclusion is enacted informally rather than structurally, setting the stage for the discussion that follows on equity, responsibility, and sustainable approaches to inclusive student housing.

DISCUSSION

Quiet Adaptation and the Architecture of Inclusion

This study explored how Muslim international students in Japan navigated university dormitories as spaces for religious practice, social interaction, and a sense of belonging. Throughout, adaptation mainly arose from ongoing individual and relational efforts rather than from formal accommodations in environments designed under the assumption of cultural neutrality.

Dormitory structures did not prevent religious practice. Instead, they were designed without considering religious differences. Kitchens, bathrooms, room layouts, and staff routines seemed neutral but redistributed the effort needed to maintain halal diets, ritual cleanliness, modesty, and prayer. As a result, inclusion became conditional, influenced by students' ability to adjust quietly and continuously.

Infrastructure and Religious Practice

The findings show how architectural features directly influence religious practices. Access to private kitchens and bathrooms greatly reduced negotiation efforts, while shared or barely private dormitories required ongoing workaround strategies. These included avoiding certain meals, bathing during off-peak hours, using room-based cooking devices, and carefully scheduling prayer times. These patterns demonstrate that adaptation is not just psychological or cultural; it is materially organized. What appears to be an equal-housing assignment can

develop into different levels of religious viability over time. Infrastructure plays a key role in inclusion.

Hidden Curriculum, Institutional Silence, and Conditional Belonging

Participants’ early experiences revealed that dormitory life also follows implicit rules. Students learned about food etiquette, alcohol use, modesty, and indirect communication through trial, observation, and peer correction rather than institutional guidance. This extends research on the hidden curriculum into residential environments. Belonging was not outright denied; it was made conditional. Those able to put in extra spatial and social effort reported smoother integration, while those with more visible practices or those limited by infrastructure experienced fatigue and hesitation. This dynamic echoes Mas (2022), who describes the hidden curriculum of student housing, in which institutional systems normalize unequal burdens and view adaptation as an individual responsibility. In this study, ongoing spatial negotiation was viewed as a necessary act of resilience, while structural redesign remained absent.

Peer Networks as Soft Infrastructure

In the absence of consistent institutional support, peer networks emerged as a vital mechanism for inclusion. Students relied on informal exchanges to find halal food options, share prayer-friendly spaces, and navigate dormitory norms. These peer connections acted as soft infrastructure, maintaining continuity where formal systems remained silent. In line with Ivanova et al. (2025), peer relationships buffered against isolation and encouraged engagement, particularly when staff responsiveness depended on individual interactions rather than institutional training. However, these networks were inherently fragile. When accommodation depends on personal goodwill rather than structural design, inclusion remains uneven and dependent.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and SDG 4

These findings challenge narratives of successful internationalization. While Japan has increased enrollment and global visibility, residential life reveals uneven integration of religious diversity into everyday campus design. This echoes broader critiques that internationalization often prioritizes recruitment and mobility metrics over deeper structural transformation (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; de Wit, 2020). Theoretically, these findings contribute to spatial justice scholarship by locating inequity within microinfrastructures rather than in overt exclusion. Dormitories serve as “homes on the threshold” (Boccagni & Yapo, 2022), where design choices subtly influence whose practices align with assumed norms and whose require additional negotiation. In this way, student housing functions as a hidden curriculum, normalizing unequal burdens of adaptation and teaching students to internalize housing limitations as personal responsibility rather than consequences of institutional design (Mas, 2022). As Revington

(2025) further argues, the structure of housing pathways differentially determines access to comfort, stability, and future opportunities, positioning accommodation not as neutral infrastructure but as a site where advantage and marginality are reproduced.

While psychological models of adaptation emphasize cultural intelligence and proactive engagement (Al-Krenawi et al., 2025), the findings show that adaptation is also structurally mediated by material and administrative arrangements. From a policy perspective, housing should be seen as educational infrastructure rather than merely logistical support. Inclusion is not solely achieved through enrollment or orientation. It is embedded in design choices, administrative procedures, and daily spatial practices. Low-cost interventions such as staff training, transparent food labeling, modular kitchen storage, and accessible bathroom facilities would lessen adaptation burdens without requiring major structural changes. These measures shift responsibility from individual negotiation to institutional planning.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Muslim international students in Japan navigate religious practices, spatial arrangements, and feelings of belonging within university dormitories. Using autoethnography, interviews, and spatial analysis, the study showed that dorm environments serve as important educational spaces where inclusion is built into the design rather than merely symbolized.

The results indicate that dorms designed with cultural neutrality in mind do not prevent religious activities; instead, they shift the effort required to sustain them. Elements such as kitchen layouts, bathing facilities, room layouts, and administrative routines affect who can move freely through the space and who must constantly work to access, maintain privacy, and stay visible. Therefore, adaptation is not merely about cultural adjustment; it is shaped by infrastructure itself.

By viewing dormitories as sites of the hidden curriculum and soft infrastructure, this research broadens discussions of internationalization beyond recruitment numbers. Although Japan’s internationalization policies have increased access and mobility, the residential environment suggests that inclusion is unevenly embedded in daily campus design. The findings suggest that belonging is not a fixed outcome, but an ongoing process shaped by spatial design, institutional silence, and peer support.

Methodologically, combining autoethnography with interviews and spatial analysis highlights the importance of embodied and relational approaches when studying religious minority experiences in higher education. The study emphasizes that dormitory systems are not intentionally excluded. Instead, it reveals that an unexamined standardized design can create unequal demands for adaptation.

For institutions dedicated to inclusive and equitable education, student housing should be seen as educational infrastructure rather than just logistical services. Small, proactive design changes and culturally aware administrative

practices can lessen the hidden effort students currently bear. When inclusion is built into physical and procedural design, dormitories can transform from silent endurance zones into supportive environments that foster diverse ways of belonging.

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▢ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
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