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Muslim International Students in the United States: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experience of Identities

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how Muslim international students experience their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities prior to coming to the United States and as students in the midwestern United States using E. Kim's (2012) International Student Identity model as a guiding framework. Three significant findings emerged from semi-structured interviews with 10 students who attended 4-year institutions in the midwestern United States: (a) religious difficulties of being Muslim and Islam as a flexible religion, (b) difficulties with racial constructs and ethnic stereotypes, and (c) gender difficulties of male/female interactions and perceptions of veiling. Based upon these findings, recommendations for higher education professionals, administrators, and policymakers are provided.

Keywords: higher education, identity, international student identity model, Muslim international students, stereotypes, Trump effect

Recent globalization and internationalization has led to an increase in student mobility worldwide (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Nuqul, 2015) and the number of international students studying in the United States continues to grow. Comprising 5.5% of the U.S. higher education enrollment, a record high 1,095,299 international students were enrolled in the U.S. during the 2018–2019 academic year, compared with 671,616 ten years prior (Institute for International Education [IIE], 2019).

The number of Muslim international students in the United States, in particular, has grown considerably in recent years. In the 2013–2014 academic year, 240,826 student visas were issued to students from 45 predominantly Muslim countries to

study in the United States (IIE, 2015). In 2014–2015 academic year, 284,420 student visas were issued to students from the same 45 predominantly Muslim countries to study in the United States, representing an 18.1% increase over 1 year (IIE, 2015).

The Trump administration's travel ban on individuals from six predominantly Muslim countries has called into question whether Muslim international students are truly welcome to study in the United States (Liptak, 2017). While international students from Muslim-majority countries, with the exception of Syria, are still able to apply for a student visa to study in the United States, anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies coming from the Trump administration has created an unwelcoming environment for Muslim international students and a chilling effect on international student recruitment (Fischer, 2017; Saul, 2018).

For the purposes of this study, an international student is defined as an individual studying in the United States on a nonimmigrant, temporary visa that allows for academic study at the postsecondary level. A Muslim international student is defined in this study as an individual who practices Islam or identifies as Muslim, is studying at an institution of higher education in the United States on a nonimmigrant visa or a student visa, is not a citizen or permanent resident of the United States, and is not legally permitted to remain in the United States indefinitely (IIE, n.d.).

Few studies have looked at Muslim international student identity experiences despite the increase in students from Muslim-majority countries in the United States in recent years (IIE, 2017). This study aimed to contribute to understanding how Muslim international students experience their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities and, in doing so, provide insights to higher education professionals to appropriately support Muslim international students in their campus communities. This study examined the following two research questions:

1. Prior to studying in the midwestern United States, how did Muslim international students experience their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities?
2. How do Muslim international students experience their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities as students in the midwestern United States?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity Experiences of International Students in the United States

A significant body of literature exists on U.S. college student identity development; however, international student identity development has been largely ignored despite the growing presence of international students on U.S. campuses (Chickering, 1969; Cross, 1991; E. H. Erikson, 1959; Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001; Helms, 1990; Horse, 2001; J. Kim, 2001; Phinney, 1990; Rowe et al., 1994). In response to this gap, E. Kim (2012) proposed an International Student Identity (ISI) model as an alternative to single identity theoretical views. Kim's model directly relates to this study of Muslim international students and how they experience their identities as students in the United States and was appropriate for use with this study.

Muslim International Students' Identity Experiences

Muslim international students' identity experiences are unique and different from their Muslim American peers (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). B. T. Erickson (2014) found international students experienced a shift in their Muslim or cultural identities when they went through the process of independence, exposure, questioning, and discernment. As a result of going through this process, most participants in the study grew stronger in their Muslim identity and experienced a weakened cultural identity.

Schatz (2008) found increased security and surveillance measures on campus post-9/11, and emergence of anti-Muslim feelings among select student and staff groups as well as external constituents. Schatz' postcolonial and poststructural look at the identity data indicated a concept of "U.S. and/vs. Them." Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013) gathered knowledge about cultural and religious identity development, adjustment to living in the United States, and availability of social support in the current sociopolitical climate in order to find culturally appropriate ways of assisting this population of students. Five major categories emerged from the study: "diverse views of the new cultural environment, social isolation, experiences of discrimination, religious identity, and protective factors in adjusting to living in the U.S." (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013, p. 138). Using the concept of Islamophobia and the Campus Climate Framework, Dimandja (2017) explored the racial/ethnic, religious, and gender experiences of these students and the impact of those experiences on their social and academic integration. Emerging themes included: classroom challenges related to linguistic abilities and others' perceptions of their academic performance based on their racial identity; expression of their Muslim identity through the hijab and thobe resulting in exclusion and feelings of resistance; experiences of microaggressions, overt prejudice on campus, and hostility off campus due to their racial and religious identity; national political climate causing feelings of intimidation, marginalization, fear, and discrimination; and the need for religious and cultural integration.

Several shared themes emerged from the studies by Schatz (2008), Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013), and Dimandja (2017) on Muslim international students' identity experiences. Participants in all three studies expressed feeling like a minority on their campus and being viewed as Other. Various forms of discrimination by gender, ethnicity, and religion were reported by participants (Dimandja, 2017; Schatz, 2008; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Participants reported less discrimination related to Islamic beliefs and more related to being a visible minority (e.g. veiling, skin color, accent; Dimandja, 2017; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Identity gaps (inconsistencies between self-perceptions and others' perceptions of participants) were reported by some participants (Dimandja, 2017; Schatz, 2008; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). For example, some participants reported they wore the hijab to be perceived as a committed Muslim woman, but were instead perceived as being forced to wear the hijab by men or their families (Dimandja, 2017). Finally, some participants reported dynamic shifts in their identities as Muslim international students and a feeling of "becoming" versus "being" due to ongoing negotiation of their identities (Schatz, 2008; Tummala-Narra, 2013).

Female Muslim International Students' Gender Identity Experiences

In the Western world the view of Muslim women is often of them being oppressed (Andrea, 2009; Gregory, 2014; Ozyurt, 2013). This assumption leads some to see study abroad in a Western culture as an opportunity for Muslim women to escape this imagined oppression and experience freedom. Recent studies show female Muslim international student experiences are more nuanced and complex than this dualistic thinking suggests.

Gregory (2014) found participants engaged in religious strategies (e.g., wearing the hijab, praying) as a way of educating non-Muslims about Islam. Study participants engaged with clubs and organizations to counter negative stereotypes of Muslims. Key findings from Gregory's study included: Muslim women "actively synthesize traditional gender norms from their countries with new identity formations" (p. 108); some Muslim women police others to ensure compliance with traditional gender expectations; some Muslim women "learn and apply American racial schemas within a context of constructing the U.S. as a racial and religious paradise" (p. 108); some Muslim women feel obligated to counter stereotypes about Muslims; some Muslim women maintain connections with home through daily prayer and wearing the hijab; some Muslim women engage in emotional work to make their circumstances more manageable; and some Muslim women embraced new identity formation in the United States (e.g., constructed future plans on professional and educational goals, engaged in activities prohibited in their home countries).

Seven themes emerged from Lefdahl-Davis and Perron-McGovern's (2015) study: (a) expectations versus reality about the United States—international students expected the United States to be more dangerous and unwelcoming than it turned out to be in reality, (b) acculturative stress, (c) cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States, (d) experiences of discrimination and/or curiosity—wanting to dispel myths that they are oppressed, forced to cover, and unequal to men, (e) English language issues—English proficiency as a key factor for adjustment, (f) relationships and help-seeking behavior—stigmatized in Saudi culture, and (g) the experience of being a Saudi woman in the United States. Participants in Alruwaili's (2017) study experienced their most salient identities as Saudi, female, Muslim, and student. Similar to the Lefdahl-Davis and Perron-McGovern (2015) study, some participants in the Alruwaili (2017) study reported becoming more independent after living in the United States.

Female Muslim international students in Dimandja's (2017) study who wore the hijab reported being subject to overt discrimination, being excluded from campus social life, and having a greater fear of being verbally or physically attacked. Other research on female Muslim international students indicated that wearing the hijab subjected students to experiences of discrimination, isolation, and othering (Ali, 2014; Lefdahl-Davis & Perron-McGovern, 2015; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013).

Trump Administration Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

Beutel (2018) argued that words have impact and "[h]eated political rhetoric, especially derogatory language toward groups of people, can create all kinds of

unintended consequences, including sometimes physical violence” (para. 1). Commentators and activists have asserted that President Trump’s rhetoric has emboldened others to commit hate crimes in the United States against minorities, including Muslims (Beutel, 2018). In 2015, then–presidential candidate Trump called for a ban on Muslims coming to the United States, proposed the creation of a registry for Muslims in the United States, and recommended the surveillance of mosques (Potok, 2017). Potok (2017) noted FBI reports showing anti-Muslim hate crimes increased by 67% in 2015, the highest number reported since 2001. A study by Müller and Schwarz (2018) found Trump’s tweets on topics of Islam were highly correlated with hate crimes targeting Muslims after the start of his presidential campaign in U.S. counties with high Twitter usage. The literature has not addressed how President Trump’s ban on Muslims has impacted international students who identify as Muslim and what connection, if any, exists between those impacted by the ban and Muslim international students in the United States.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

E. Kim’s (2012) ISI model was used as a guiding framework to better understand how Muslim international students experience their identities at 4-year universities in the midwestern United States. Kim proposed a six-phase for the ISI model: (a) pre-exposure, (b) exposure, (c) enclosure, (d) emergence, (e) integration, and (f) internationalization. Table 1 describes each of the six phases of the model. Kim noted that students move through the stages at various rates and may be in more than one phase simultaneously.

Table 1: International Student Identity Model (Kim, 2012)

Phases of development	Description
Pre-exposure	International students plan to study abroad with the intention of experiencing the U.S. educational system.
Exposure	International students arrive in the United States and discover their belief system diverges from the unfamiliar educational and cultural environment. During this phase, students begin developing an independent personality away from parental guidance.
Enclosure	International students withdraw from the outside environment in an attempt to adjust their academic performance.
Emergence	International students begin building social networks and engaging in extracurricular activities on- and off-campus.

Phases of development	Description
Integration	International students overcome major challenges, manage to restructure their identities, and resolve identity crises.
Internationalization	International students have an achieved identity created from their own belief system that acknowledges diversity and values individual differences in academic and cultural contexts.

The phenomenological method of inquiry focuses on identifying and describing the subjective experiences of participants (Schwandt, 2015; Wertz, 2011). Phenomenological research seeks to describe “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Transcendental phenomenology focuses on a description of participants’ experiences through epoche, or bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). E. Kim’s (2012) model examined international student identity experiences in the United States and directly related to phenomenological experiences of Muslim international students in the United States. My research used Kim’s model to better understand the ways that individual Muslim international students experience their identities.

METHOD

By engaging in transcendental phenomenology, this study focused on a description of participants’ experiences through epoche (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994) to set aside biases and prejudgments and see the phenomenon in question with new and receptive eyes (Moustakas, 1994).

Data

The primary university for this study was a predominantly White, regional, rural, public university located in the midwestern United States. The campus enrollment is approximately 8,000 and nearly 65% of the students are male. International students account for less than 2% of the student body. International students from predominantly Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait account for approximately 40% of the degree-seeking international student population.

In addition to recruiting students at the primary university site, I recruited participants from three additional campuses for the study. The campuses were a small, private, liberal arts college in a suburban setting; a small, private, professional university in an urban setting; and a large, public, research university in an urban setting. Using the descriptive/constructivist paradigm, I used purposive sampling to select participants based upon their relevance to my research question (Schwandt, 2015). I interviewed 10 participants for this study (see Table 2). The students identified as Muslim and had studied in the United States on a nonimmigrant student visa (e.g., F-1 or J-1) for a minimum of 1 year at the undergraduate or graduate level.

One participant in the study was traditionally aged (18–23 years old) and nine participants in the study were non-traditionally aged students (24+ years old).

Table 2: Sampling of Participants

Pseudonym	Religious identity	Gender	Country of citizenship	Years in the US	Level of study	Campus
Bob	Sunni Muslim	M	Bangladesh	9	UG	Midwest State University
Faisal	Sunni Muslim	M	Saudi Arabia & Kuwait	3	UG	University of the Midwest
Hannah	Shia Muslim	F	Kuwait	2	UG	Midwest State University
Michael	Sunni Muslim	M	Saudi Arabia	4	UG	Midwest State University
Michelle	Shia Muslim ^a	F	Iran	7	GR	Midwest University
Nicholas	Sunni Muslim	M	Saudi Arabia	6	UG	University of the Midwest
Oscar	Sunni Muslim	M	Saudi Arabia	8	UG	University of the Midwest
Rachel	Sunni Muslim	F	Saudi Arabia	3.5	ESL	Midwest State University
Sam	Muslim ^b	M	Saudi Arabia	5	UG	Midwest State University
Tyler	Sunni Muslim	M	Saudi Arabia	6	UG	Midwest College

Note. UG = undergraduate; GR = graduate; ESL = English as a second language.

^aNot practicing. ^bPreferred not to identify sect.

I asked participants to commit to two 90-minute audiorecorded semi-structured interviews in which they would answer interview questions pertaining to how they experienced their identity with a specific focus on religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities. I constructed questions in the initial interview to reflect key points of the study: (a) how the participant experienced their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities prior to studying in the midwestern United States, and (b) how the participant experienced their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities now as a

student in the midwestern United States. I based questions in the second interview on additional questions looking more deeply at key points of the study, but they also grew out from responses provided in the initial interview.

Each participant signed a consent form that provided an overview of the study and informed them of their rights as participants in the study. Personal information including demographic questions was collected in order to gain an understanding of the student's identities. Participants chose a pseudonym, and identifiable information was kept confidential.

Data Analysis

I used Moustakas' (1994) method of analyzing phenomenological data to analyze the interview transcripts, along with Dedoose software to create meaning units and to organize my data for analysis. I generated themes from the analysis of significant statements that I developed into clusters of meaning to provide an understanding of how participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). I developed textual and structural descriptions from the significant statements and themes and used them to describe the context that influenced how participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I used E. Kim's (2012) ISI model as a lens to identify themes from the analysis of interview transcripts. Incorporating this framework into a study of Muslim international students' identity experiences acknowledged that establishing identities is a fluid, dynamic, and ongoing process occurring in different contexts (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

RESULTS

Over the course of the analysis, three findings emerged from themes related to the research questions. The emerging findings included: (a) religious difficulties of being Muslim along with Islam as a flexible religion, (b) difficulties with racial constructs and ethnic stereotypes, and (c) gender difficulties of male/female interactions and perceptions of veiling.

Religious Difficulties of being Muslim and Islam as a Flexible Religion

Six of the Muslim international students participating in the study talked about the difficulties they encountered trying to continue the important practice of Islamic prayer five specific times each day as well as Friday prayer each week. For Bob, having to choose between prayer and school work was especially difficult. Bob explained:

Last year I skipped my prayer because I just didn't have the time of day. ...that would never happen back home because everything is closed. So that culture is set up that way. Being in school over here, if I choose to go to prayer, I have to make up the work I'm skipping. So, the student, it feels that a bargain.

Bob felt he should not have to choose between practicing his prayers and fulfilling his obligations as a student. He knew he should practice his prayers and conveyed that he wanted to pray, but he also did not want to have to make up school work he would miss if he went to pray. Additionally, four participants had difficulty finding an appropriate place to pray discreetly while on campus.

Four students stated they believed God recognizes and understands complications regarding prayer time in the United States, just as God would understand having to miss prayers back in their home countries due to being sick or in the hospital. Islam, therefore, was seen by many of the participants as a flexible religion, allowing for exceptions to the strict practice of prayer at specific times each day in the U.S. environment where Muslim prayer times are not a regular part of the culture.

Regarding Islamic prayer Faisal explained:

So, really, I can pray sometimes, with me, I practice my religion. I'm not a very rigid guy, you know—I have the freedom, the freedom to practice my religion and the way that keeps me continuing my whole life.

Michael also discussed the flexibility of Islam in the context of his personal, social life and prayer. Michael shared:

Like, for example, today we want to go out before the sunset. You know we have a prayer on that time. And we have another prayer, we have to pray before midnight. So, I'm going out—you know—I have to pray before. And, uh, because our religion make it easier for us. You can make it together when you are traveling—when you can't, like, I can't find a place to pray. So you can pray together when you are traveling you can pray the prayers together. You can combine. Yeah. Uh...so, this is something I like about Islam.

Six of the students in this study struggled with being able to continue practicing their prayers at the regularly scheduled times each day due to needing to attend class and not being able to find a comfortable space to perform their prayers, especially as a woman. Despite these challenges, Muslim international students in this study found ways to practice Islamic prayer by delaying prayers until after classes were over or combining prayers together when they were able to pray.

At least four students talked explicitly about being afraid to pray in public in the United States or altering where and how they pray so as not to raise fear in those around them who hold negative stereotypes of Muslims. Rachel described her fear of praying in the United States this way:

I am scared to pray here in the US, like in a part of something because some people think it's bad thing or something. And maybe because I saw a video of some people pray outside and someone is hurt him or do something to him and that make me comfortable to [only] do that in my home.

Nicholas described his concern about making others feel afraid if they saw Muslims praying on campus:

...if we want to prayer, we will not prayer in front of the people. Kind of go in the corner or something so we will not disrupt them or stand in their way. ...because you know that American people they have this stereotype about Muslims and mostly it's bad. So that I'm just trying to be normal and not make anything kind of, make them afraid.

This finding also related to how Muslim international students were impacted by the Trump administration's rhetoric and policies pertaining to the travel ban on individuals from predominantly Muslim-majority countries and general anti-Muslim sentiments. For Michelle the impact of the Trump administration's travel ban had severe consequences. Unable to return home to Iran due to the travel ban, she was unable to visit her family, some of whom she had not seen since 2011, and her family could not visit her in the United States. Due to the uncertainty of what would happen to the Optional Practical Training program if Trump was elected, she had to delay her graduation by two semesters and pay additional tuition to remain enrolled during that time, creating a financial hardship. Half of the participants in the study described feelings of fear experienced by themselves and their family during the time leading up to the 2016 presidential election and for several months afterward caused by Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies. Two participants in the study expressed conflicted feelings or no feelings of impact from the Trump administration's travel ban. Faisal explained:

...as a Muslim international student, as a Saudi especially, there is nothing have been changed for us as a Saudi students. ...in my mind really this is just very simple rights for American government to do. Because they're trying to avoid the, you know, avoid any bad people coming to America. ...This is American rights to do, I think, my personal idea. So, yeah, but being a Muslim, as a Saudi student here ... I haven't facing any issue at all.

Difficulties with Racial Constructs and Ethnic Stereotypes

This finding is related to how Muslim international students viewed their ethnic or racial identity prior to studying in the United States and how Muslim international students viewed their ethnic or racial identity while studying in the Midwest. Racial identity was often a new and unfamiliar concept for participants in the study. Six students found the use of racial categories to be troubling. When asked to describe themselves racially, several students expressed they were unfamiliar with this construct before coming to the United States. Michael shared, "We don't have something like this in Saudi." The term racial identity was also new for Michelle who, originally from Iran, had lived in another Asian country before coming to the United States to study. Michelle explained, "...that concept was new to me when I came to the US ...it was like hyphenized, African-American, or it was a question. So it was a very new concept for me when I came here."

Overall, participants in the study did not know about racial constructs and categories used in the United States until after arriving. Students' ethnic identities such as Arab, Bengali, or Persian were more salient to them than any racial identity.

Four students in the study discussed how their national identity was viewed either positively or negatively. Oscar shared how he believed Saudi students are viewed as either good or bad in the midwestern United States:

... either they're, um, seen as being perfect, um, a good Saudi, no problems, no fights, no, ah, partying, focus on school. Or, the opposite. ... Partying 24/7, smoking, drinking, missing classes. That's how I see Saudis are viewed in the US. Either this or that. And some of them are viewed as bad people. I don't like to use that word, but they are viewed as terrorists ... yeah, they're viewed as terrorists. In a very bad way. Just because you're Saudi. Or, in some way, because you're a Muslim.

Rachel shared how she believes Saudis are viewed by those who remembered the events of September 11, 2001, and those who did not:

I think some old people see me... bad things... because do you remember September 11? I ask someone, why the old people always hate, not hate, but don't like us Saudis? Do you remember September 11? They think the Saudis do that, they remember, but I think the younger people don't remember that.

Originally from Iran, Michelle discussed how she found Persians were viewed either positively or negatively by different generations in the United States:

So Persians... either people know them very well, which is people who are ...not the younger generation, they know them because of Iran and the US close relationship before Iran's revolution. ...And they have such a good perception about Persians. Or the younger generation, they, when they say Iran, they are like, oh, Iran, that has nuclear power, or wants nuclear power, or dangerous.

Despite being stereotyped and facing discrimination as Muslim international students in the midwestern United States, participants found ways to cope with the impact, often with assistance from other Muslim international students. Oscar described an experience:

I was giving a training to a couple of old people who don't know how to use technology. ...we finished this first session ...they gave me the best attitude. The next day, um, she enjoyed the session so much to the point where, um, she started asking me, how old are you? Do you have a wife? ...And as soon as I said, I'm from the Middle East, she paused and looked up... where in the Middle East? And I said, Saudi. And that acceptance just went away.

Gender Difficulties of Male/Female Interactions and Perceptions of Veiling

This finding is related to how Muslim international students in this study experienced differences between male/female interactions on campus and in the classroom in the midwestern United States. Two of the female students in the study, Rachel and Hannah, discussed difficulties navigating interactions with males and how

those interactions differed from their interactions with males in their home country where cross-gender interactions were limited and closely monitored.

Rachel described how her husband helped her frame this new and uncomfortable relationship with a male teacher in a way that made it possible for her to participate in the classroom:

...when I came to the US when I talk with man I am so shy, because I don't talk with man a lot in Saudi Arabia, I just talk with my family or my husband. ...there were a teacher, he teach me and I, it's hard to me to sit and have any question ask him. But then I thinking about, I didn't do something wrong, I just came to here to learn and, but my husband says, it's ok. He is a teacher, he's not anyone, but I feeling so shy to do that. But when I thinking and doing I change ...some idea in mind, it helps me a lot to be comfortable to talk with man in the education, just in the education.

Like Rachel, Hannah was able to overcome a difficult situation where she needed to interact with men. In Hannah's case, she was able to form friendships on campus with male Kuwaiti students who understood her culture and religion since there were no female Kuwaiti students who could fill the role. Like Rachel, Hannah felt it was alright to interact with men as long as it was within the context of helping each other with school.

Nicholas shared what has and has not changed for him in the United States regarding interactions with females:

One example of what is not ok—it's not ok to sit alone if I'm a man and you're a female, but for this studying thing, it's ok, it's not a problem. But it's not good to stay like very far away in a room, nobody can see us, it's kind of protecting us from something else.

Like Hannah, Nicholas noted that on his campus, it is alright for men and women to study together as long as they are in spaces where others can see them so they are not tempted to interact in ways that are not appropriate or acceptable in Islam.

The female participants in the study came from three different countries with different cultural expectations for veiling. When asked how she thought Muslims were perceived in the midwestern United States, Hannah shared most people are not comfortable with her wearing the hijab, but are respectful of her. Hannah explained, "They see me like, what's she wearing? ...but they don't ask about that, they respect that. I see that they respect what I wear, what I do." Sometimes Rachel would be with her friend who does not wear an abaya, only a hijab, and people would question why they were dressed differently. Rachel said:

...people ask us in the [café], you are Muslim? And you are Saudi? In the same country, why it's different, hijab? I tell to him that Islam says choose what you want. Just if you feel comfortable with something, just do it. And I choose cover my face and she, she choose hijab.

Rachel viewed these questions as an opportunity to help people in her community understand Islam and Muslim women's ability to choose if or how they wish to veil.

Although Michelle chose not to cover, she believed veiling should not be viewed as a tool of oppression, but rather as a choice. Michelle shared:

Like a nun, if you see a nun, you respect her, because you think she is pure. But we don't have the same respect for Muslim women, because you see that hijab as an oppressive tool on the woman. But some of them, I would say, it's their choice, they want to wear that way, but we usually ignore that part.

All three female participants in the study believed that veiling was a choice for Muslim women. All three participants were comfortable with their own choice to veil or not to veil and respected the choices of other Muslim women to veil in different ways or not to veil at all.

DISCUSSION

While E. Kim's (2012) ISI model showed how participants in my study experienced components of identity beyond what Chickering (1969) and Erikson (1968) theorized, additional factors made it difficult to apply. Participants shared how their identities were constructed around cultural values, viewpoints, and traditions from their home countries (Phase 1), how they opened up to unforeseen possibilities as challenges/obstacles were encountered (Phase 2), how they reflected heritage and cultural values strongly in their identities (Phase 3), and how they appreciated values of tradition, but also examined other ways of thinking (Phase 4).

E. Kim's (2012) model, however, did not always fit well with this population of students. Participants in this study did not express experiencing certain elements of E. Kim's Phase 1: Pre-Exposure—Inheriting Self. Participants did not report experiencing conflict with their parents while selecting their U.S. university or major, nor did they express enduring rigorous competition with their peers or spending extra time working to meet university eligibility requirements. Perhaps this is because the majority of the students were from countries where they were financially sponsored by their governments and were able to choose from a list of approved U.S. universities and majors, thereby removing the element of competition that is typically present for students coming from East Asia and other Asian countries where competition for scholarships and prestige associated with getting into highly ranked universities is more prevalent.

Participants did not express concern that U.S. students and instructors might falsely attribute their limited English proficiency to academic incompetence as found in Phase 3: Enclosure—Securing Self. However, it is possible that this concern would have emerged if the question had been asked of the participants. The study focused on the students' religious, racial/ethnic, and gender identities and did not ask about academic or language acquisition experiences, which may explain why this competence concern did not emerge in the study.

It is important to recognize two outlying participants in the study, Michelle and Bob, as their identity experiences tended to fall outside those of the other participants. Michelle and Bob had been in the United States longer than most of the other participants, 7 and 9 years, respectively. They tended to demonstrate a familiarity

with the ways identity is conceived in the U.S. culture, which enabled them to provide a greater depth and breadth in their identity experiences. Michelle and Bob also tended to provide more examples of identity experiences ranging into Phase 4, Phase 5, and Phase 6, whereas the other participants who had not been in the United States as long did not show this depth and breadth of identity experiences. Michelle was the only graduate student in the study. Michelle was also the only nonpracticing Muslim in the study. Michelle was from Iran and Bob was from Bangladesh, which are non-Arab nations, while all of the other participants were from the Arab nations of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.

As in other studies, participants in this study had to renegotiate how they practiced their beliefs through prayer, the intentional process of exploring identity, (re)negotiating beliefs, and considering factors contributing to identity experiences (Cerbo, 2010; Dey, 2012; Neider, 2011). However, the theme of Islam as a flexible religion, especially when it comes to prayer and prayer times, was not found in any of the literature reviewed for this study. By identifying flexibilities within Islam, students in this study were able to find workable solutions despite studying on campuses and in communities that did not provide adequate access or space for daily prayer and communal Friday prayers.

Like participants in the Fries-Britt et al. (2014) study, three of the students in my study found that typical race and racial identity development frameworks in the United States did not capture the behaviors and perceptions of foreign-born students of color. Participants in my study experienced consistent ethnic identities that did not change, despite exposure to U.S. ethnic identities. Like female participants in Cerbo's (2010) study, Hannah and Rachel used a religious lens to make meaning of their interactions with others. As long as they did not violate their Islamic values, Hannah, Rachel, and one male student, Nicholas, were able to navigate relationships with the opposite sex in ways that would not have occurred in their home countries of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Rachel reported two incidents when her expression of her Muslim identity through the hijab resulted in feelings of resistance from members of her midwestern U.S. community. Hannah reported negative responses to her hijab when visiting a mall in a larger nearby city similar to participants in the Dimandja (2017) and Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013) studies.

While none of the participants in my study reported feeling unfairly discriminated against as a whole in their midwestern U.S. communities, five participants reported feeling unfairly discriminated against by specific faculty or segments of the population. Three participants discussed how they expected to find more discrimination against Muslims in the United States based upon what they had seen and heard in their home countries prior to coming to the United States. Despite being stereotyped and facing discrimination as Muslim international students in the midwestern United States, participants found ways to cope with the impact, often with assistance from other Muslim international students and family members. Participants who experienced incidents of bias and discrimination showed evidence of both stress and resilience.

Seven of the participants in the study found Trump's ban on individuals from Muslim-majority countries as well as general anti-Muslim sentiment caused feelings of marginalization, fear, and discrimination. Two of my participants, Michael and

Faisal, not only did not feel threatened by the Trump administration's policies and rhetoric, but also actually supported Trump's decision to enact the policy even though they themselves were Muslim.

Several implications for practice arose from the findings of this study. It was apparent that Muslim international students face difficulties in practicing Islamic prayer on U.S. campuses given that classes are scheduled during regular prayer times. As most U.S. university academic calendars are built around the Christian calendar, such accommodations are already built in for major Christian holidays such as Christmas. Building in accommodations, such as flexibility for attending class or taking exams on major religious holidays such as Eid al Fitr, eliminates the need for students to have to choose between their education and their faith.

Creating space where Muslim international students can gather for prayer on campus meets another important need for Muslim international students, as well as Muslim faculty and staff. A dedicated multifaith room that can be used not only by Muslim international students, but also by students of any faith or belief system, is perhaps the number one need of Muslim students as well as all religious minorities on college campuses (Asmar, 2005; Dimandja, 2017; Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016).

Additional recommendations alluded to by students in the study included a number of suggestions for faculty on U.S. campuses. Faculty should make efforts to familiarize themselves with their roster of students prior to the start of each term and note any students they may have from other countries. Faculty should work to include in their course design something related to these students' backgrounds. Many excellent resources exist to guide faculty in creating inclusive classrooms for international students as well as internationalizing the curriculum (Bond & Scudamore, 2010; Campbell et al., 2016).

Institutions should reinvest part of the international tuition fees back into international student recruitment efforts, scholarships, retention services, and broadening access to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, institutions should create opportunities for international students to gain valuable work experience and recover a part of their investment (Choudaha & de Wit, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitations of time and space made it impossible to investigate all aspects of participants' religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities. As reflective interpretation changes recollection of original events, oral histories provided by participants altered the original experience and, therefore, the meaning of the original event (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002).

Further qualitative research with a larger sample and in other geographic regions would provide additional responses on how Muslim international students experience their identities. A grounded theory study could be used to develop a Muslim-specific ISI model. This could conceptually bring together E. Kim's (2012) ISI model, Dey's (2012) model of identity development of Muslim American students, and/or elements of other models. Future studies should consider the socioeconomic status of participants and whether or not they were self-funded or government-funded.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study support other research within the literature that Muslim international students studying U.S. campuses encounter difficulties participating in Islamic prayer; difficulties with male/female interactions inside and outside of the classroom; and stereotypes and discrimination based upon their religious, ethnic, and gender identities and demonstrate resilience and the ability to cope with discrimination encountered in U.S. communities. Ultimately, this research is related to improving the experiences and outcomes for Muslim international students. These experiences and outcomes include successful completion of academic programs and earning their degrees, reduced incidents of racism and discrimination, and a safe and healthy environment for growing and learning. Institutional leaders, student services professionals, and faculty should recognize the challenges faced by Muslim international students on their campuses and be intentional about implementing changes to policies, programming, and curriculum to create a climate where all Muslim international students can succeed.

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