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AI's Impact on Social Integrity, Well-being and Academic Performance of International Students

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ABSTRACT

The present investigation explores the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in international students' lives. It fosters a sense of belongingness and community engagement among international students of Chandigarh University using AI. It looks at the reality of AI in improving social integration, academic advancement, and general well-being through advanced education mechanisms and support system applications. AI-enabled tools such as smart tutoring systems, chatbots, and language translation software help in academic conversions and cross-cultural communication. Additionally, services like mental health support via accessible counseling services, boosting emotional well-being, self-esteem, and happiness are on offer with AI's help. The research also addresses algorithmic biases and data privacy challenges, stressing the need for ethical considerations in AI use. Overall, it highlights AI's potential to enhance international students' experiences during their stint at host country.

Keywords: Academic support, AI, International students, Mental health, Social integration, and Well-being

INTRODUCTION

In a fast-paced globalized world, international students experience challenges to adapt to new academic environments. They also balance cultural as well as language differences in a foreign country. With these added challenges, the students require access to resources to help them succeed academically. Present study focuses on various variables and first variable is AI's control on the social integration of university pupils. Particularly, it is a multifaceted topic with implications for various aspects of student life. AI-powered platforms and social networks can facilitate the creation of virtual communities among university students (Owens & Looms, 2010). These platforms use algorithms to connect students with shared interests, courses, or backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging.

AI language translation tools help break down language barriers. It enables international students to communicate to their peers effectively. This promotes cross-cultural interactions and the formation of diverse social connections (Zhou et al., 2022). Educational technologies, that too powered by AI, provide personalized academic support. These systems contribute to academic success, positively influencing students' confidence and social integration by adapting to individual learning styles and needs.

AI-powered virtual assistants or chatbots offer immediate support for students who are culturally or geographically diverse. Whether answering academic queries or providing information about campus life, these tools contribute to students' overall well-being by enhancing their access to resources. AI can play a role in providing mental health and counseling support. Chatbots are designed to offer emotional assistance and resources that can contribute to students' psychological well-being, especially when faced with the challenges of university ((Nguyen Thuy Van et al., 2024).

AI technologies, including automated messaging and communication tools, can streamline administrative processes. It fosters clear and transparent communication, as international students can get clear and transparent information on various events at university campus, schedules, and resources as well (D'Mello & Graesser, 2012). Also, the beauty of AI algorithms is that it can analyze students' preferences, behaviors, and academic performance. This approach is helpful to provide personalized recommendations. This includes suggesting relevant courses, extracurricular activities, or social events. It caters in contributing to a more tailored university experience. To address concerns like data privacy, algorithmic biases, and the responsible use of technology, it's essential to address ethical considerations related to AI. Additionally, AI implementation is crucial to maintaining trust among students in ensuring transparency and ethical practices (Asri, 2024).

AI's effect on social integration entails with both the positive contributions and potential challenges. In recent years, AI's influence on the academic routine of university students is popularized as a dynamic and evolving area of research. AI technologies, however, can provide personalized learning experiences when students' learning styles, preferences, and performance are to be analyzed. Adaptive learning platforms offer tailored content and assessments, potentially improving students' understanding of academic material (Käser & Alexandron, 2024). AI-driven tutoring systems can assist students in various subjects. These systems adapt to individual needs, providing additional support, practice exercises, and feedback ((Mao, 2025). Research suggests that students using AI-based tutoring systems may show improved academic performance compared to traditional methods. AI also enables assignments' and assessments' automated grading. This not only saves instructors' time but also gives immediate feedback to the students. Timely feedback can enhance the learning process and contribute to improved academic outcomes (Xu, 2025).

AI can analyze large datasets to identify patterns related to student performance. Early intervention systems can alert educators to students who may be at risk of falling behind academically, allowing for timely support and intervention (Shoaib et al., 2024). Universities can use AI to optimize resource allocation. However, it needs to ensure that educational resources are directed in a way where they are much required. This can contribute to a more efficient learning environment and potentially enhance academic outcomes (Yingsoon & Rahman, 2025). It has been noticed that AI-enabled language conversion tools can overcome language barriers for international students. They helps in making academic content more accessible. Technology's such type of amalgamation may positively impact students' academic integration, especially who belongs to diverse linguistic backgrounds (Ma, Akram, & Chen, 2024). AI supported virtual laboratories and simulations helps in providing students with realistic experiences in various disciplines. This immersive learning approach can enhance understanding and application of theoretical concepts, potentially improving academic performance (Asare et al., 2023).

AI's application is crucial if ethical considerations are to be addressed. This involves ensuring fairness, transparency, and mitigating algorithmic biases to prevent unintended negative impacts on students' academic experiences. Understanding the impact of AI on academic performance requires a nuanced examination of various applications and their implications ((Fazil et al., 2024). As AI continue to transform the education, ongoing research and evaluation are essential to assess its effectiveness and

address potential challenges (Coniam, 1998). AI's impact on international students' well-being in a university setting is a multifaceted topic with several dimensions (Velastegui-Hernandez et al., 2023).

Moreover, AI-driven mental health and counseling services offer timely and reachable help to international students. Interestingly, Chatbots and virtual assistants operational with natural language processing capabilities can offer immediate assistance, resources, and coping strategies. These are further contributing to improved emotional well-being as well as social interactions among international students ((Shahzad, Xu, Lim, Yang, & Khan, 2024)). Subsequently, AI may help alleviate feelings of remoteness and improve social connectedness. It can come by providing platforms for communication, language translation, and collaboration.

Thereby, AI will be positively influencing the overall well-being of students studying away from their homes (Lee & Zhang, 2024). With this approach, AI applications that promote cross-cultural communication and understanding can have a say to a more comprehensive and supportive environment for international students. AI empowered virtual experiences, language translation tools, and cultural awareness programs promotes empathy and reduce cultural barriers, thus, positively impacting the well-being of students (Du, 2024).

Recent research suggests that AI-powered communication tools, including chatbots and virtual assistants can make things easier for information-sharing and also act as a support system for international students (El Fahmi & Astutik, 2023). A reduction in stress levels and enhancement in overall well-being can be witnessed with the help of quick access to relevant information about academic processes, campus resources, and cultural adaptation. As linguistic challenges are much common among international students, AI can offer personalized support by understanding individual needs and preferences. This further applies to academic assistance, mental health resources, and general guidance (Bhutoria, 2022).

Moreover, tailored support systems can contribute to a more positive and personalized university experience for international students (Dekker et al., 2020). It's crucial to address ethical considerations related to data privacy when it comes to implement AI in support services. It is also significant to make sure that AI applications prioritize the confidentiality and security of student information that too is essential for maintaining trust and well-being (Prinsloo et al., 2024). It is important to mention that AI-driven response mechanisms can supplement student satisfaction, concerns, and overall capabilities. Collecting feedback through automated assessments or virtual assistants allows universities to spot areas for improvement and modify their

support services to meet up the well-being needs of international students better (Tapalova & Zhiyenbayeva, 2022). AI's holistic impact on international students' well-being requires ongoing assessment, feedback loops, and a commitment to addressing emerging challenges. Balancing technological advancements with ethical considerations is key to maximizing the positive effects of AI on student well-being (Daniel, 2019).

AI is transforming a variety of aspects of international education, from teaching and learning to administrative processes. Here's a comprehensive look at the role of AI in international education. AI finds more utility in the human society paving a way to examine AI's relationship with humans. Even, technology has progressed from the sheer encoding of human awareness into designing machines (Chen et al., 2023). Humans "know how" to attain the knowledge they need separately, and then obtain from it and act autonomously in the situation. Hence, this type of need is not a new thing. However, it has a scientific base that could be traced back to the inception of computers. This paper employs a multidisciplinary approach to discover how a human's natural cognitive aptitude could interface with a machine's artificial cognitive intelligence (Popenici & Kerr, 2017).

Over the past 50 years, the AI's scientific advancement has shaped the way we know the Human-AI link. This journey helps us discover the character of this relationship, focusing on the role of belief and the various risks and opportunities at the human-AI interface (Raees et al., 2024). By exploring these elements, we can recognize key technical challenges in generating a reliable interaction between humans and AI. A critical evaluation of available literature reveals that integrating AI into human society needs a form of enduring human participation in decision-making processes (Hamilton Mann et al., 2024). This participation remains decisive, regardless of how advanced AI becomes. With a special reference to education, understanding AI's fundamental nature is a key phenomenon. At its core, AI is a program designed which has been designed in such a way as it could rethink the functions of the human brain. It also helps in offering a means of simulating human cognitive processes (Horvitz et al., 2024).

Generative AI, an exact type of artificial intelligence, can make new data based on the information it has already been skilled on. This makes it more alike to the human brain compared to other AI technologies. By recognizing patterns in on hand datasets, generative AI can create unique outputs such as stories, poems, novels, essays, and even paragraphs. It influences technologies like machine learning, natural language processing, and neural networks (Bringsjord & Ferrucci, 1999). The benefits of AI in education are clear, particularly when it comes to automating repetitive tasks.

One area where generative AI proves more than ever useful is in quiz creation. Teachers can currently rely on AI tools to rapidly and competently generate quiz questions, saving precious time and effort. This not only streamlines the process but also ensures more accurate assessments of student progress.

AI's another advantage is its ability to analyze data and present it in a statistical format. For instance, by analyzing quiz results with AI, educators can receive detailed insights into student performance, highlighting strengths and weaknesses. This enables teachers to create personalized educational plans that cater to each student's unique learning needs, fostering more effective learning. Generative AI has the capability to transform education by automating manual tasks. Tasks such as research and grammar checks, which would usually take hours to fulfill manually, can now be done in a while with AI tools. This can significantly trim down the time required to finish assignments. Educators and students alike can streamline workflows and enhance the learning experience by integrating AI into the teaching and learning process. With AI support, students can access the resources they need to shine in their academic endeavors, improving both the competence and excellence of their education (Yong & Liu, 2024).

Effectively adapting to a novel social and academic setting is a key challenge for educators (Cohen, 2018). Academic difficulties may take time to surface, and individual students' psychological or social issues may not be immediately apparent to staff, especially when managing large numbers of students with whom they may have limited regular interaction (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010). Administering a range of complex and separate assessments to measure social, psychological, and academic adaptation can be inefficient in a busy academic setting (Leander et al., 2010). Social integration is regularly more challenging for international students than for their familial counterparts, as they not have access to their home social networks, friends, and families (Pho & Schartner, 2021; Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977). A key challenge for international students, particularly those from non-Western countries in Western education settings, is unfamiliarity with the host country's culture and customs. This cultural gap can significantly affect their academic performance (Akanwa, 2015). Developing intercultural knowledge can improve social interactions and strengthen student connections (Stone, 2006).

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic added an additional layer of trouble, as international students were enforced to limit social gatherings and physical meetings due to quarantine policies. In this context, mediated communication through social media became a crucial tool for meeting their social needs. This raises important questions about how international

students, with their unique psychosocial vulnerabilities, engage with social media (Dhiman & Paliktzoglou, 2024).

We conceptualize psychosocial well-being as a precursor to social media use, drawing from the social compensation perspective (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Research within this outline suggests that psychosocial vulnerabilities, such as depression or loneliness, can add to the probability of social media use, as persons with these challenges frequently find mediated environments more at ease than in-person interactions (High & Caplan, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). However, most of these empirical findings have been paying attention on only one feature of psychosocial well-being or between-group effects, for example, persons with severe depression engage in more social media use than those with low depression (Wickrama, Conger, Lorenz, & Jung, 2008). In contrast, communication scholars are calling for a person-centered approach to illustrate distinctive personal experiences in relation to social media use (Fulmer & Zhai, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

AI brings a number of positive impacts to education, including virtual assistants, intelligent assessments and feedback, personalized learning, and improved administrative efficiency. However, it is necessary to think the ethical implications of AI execution, ensuring that these technologies are used responsibly with respect to student privacy, algorithmic transparency, and the human interaction's security. Education can be enhanced, and the learning experience can be transformed to better meet the evolving needs of the digital era. It can be achieved by harnessing the potential of AI while addressing these ethical concerns (Popenici & Kerr, 2017).

The number of students who decide to attend a university abroad is rising. Teachers frequently think that foreign students are not academically adjusted enough. There is conflicting evidence from recent studies regarding whether or not overseas students do worse academically and in terms of academic integration. Accordingly, research should broaden its attention to comprehend the fundamental causes of these performance disparities between local and international students (Morrison et al., 2005).

Compared to local students, international students place a higher emphasis on their faculty and educational system. Local and international students, however, utilize their free time differently and have little social interaction with one another. In conclusion, non-Western students are less integrated than their Western counterparts, score significantly lower on academic and social integration tests, and have marginally worse grade point averages (GPAs) and European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) ratings.

International students appear to learn better in institutions with small class sizes and collaborative learning environments.

According to Alison Owens and Susan Loomes (2010), integration benefits international students in a number of ways. First, it facilitates their social and academic transition by assisting them in establishing connections with the host institution and the local community, which is important for their academic performance and general well-being. Second, it gives international students a sense of belonging to the country of destination, which fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of its culture. Third, it offers opportunities for personal growth, including the development of empathy and intercultural communication skills. Finally, integration offers useful advantages like language learning and networking opportunities.

Computational intelligence applications and technological developments in higher education have made it easier for teachers to spot underachievers early on. The HEI now has a competitive edge thanks to artificial intelligence (AI), which makes it possible to conveniently and effectively monitor and evaluate pupils. In the past, predictive analytics on the performance of the "students" and more insightful pedagogical analysis for stakeholders have also been made possible by data mining and machine learning techniques. However, the study of student performance as a time-series problem has gained more attention recently.

AI's capacity to customize learning experiences is one of its major educational accomplishments. In order to produce personalized content and recommendations, AI systems can evaluate huge amount of data, together with student performance, preferences, and learning styles (Gligorea et al., 2023). Personalized learning routes, adaptive feedback, and the ability to pinpoint areas in which students require more assistance are all capabilities of intelligent tutoring systems.

In comparison to typical classroom settings, Gobert, Li, Dickler, and Lott (2024) discovered that students who got individualized training through AI-based systems demonstrated higher levels of engagement. They have improved academic performance, and increased information retention as well. By automating grading, giving instant feedback, and relieving teachers of some of their workload, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are transforming the assessment process. Student responses, papers, and assignments can be analyzed and evaluated using machine learning algorithms, providing reliable and impartial evaluations (Qasmi & Fatima, 2024).

Giri (2025) discusses that students can receive quicker and more accurate feedback from AI-powered assessment systems, enabling them to

make necessary adjustments and enhance their conceptual understanding. Chatbots and other AI-powered virtual assistants have emerged as useful tools in the field of education. These assistants can help students right away by responding to their inquiries, helping them understand difficult subjects, and being available around-the-clock (Labadze et al., 2023).

Social recognition with fellow international students was found to envisage better psychological adaptation, which in turn predicted improved socio-cultural adaptation. However, no lagged effects were observed regarding social media use within this group. The findings emphasize the importance of the international student community as a key resource for successful cross-cultural adaptation. It is argued that the close proximity and shared experiences within this group facilitate the benefits of social identification during the acculturation process (Bierwiaczonek, 2017).

These results are consistent with other research that highlights the value of friendships and bonding experiences among the group of international students during the study (Hendrickson, 2011; Beech, 2018; Quinton, 2020). Since international students have a common experience that crosses many aspects of their lives—they are in a new country, move through similar situations both inside and outside of universities, and deal with similar academic and acculturating challenges—students may be encouraged to actively seek out the group of international students because they provide a more immediate source of support (Beech, 2018; Kundariati, Ibrohim, Rohman, & Nida, 2025)) and strengthen the sense of belonging (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Gomes et al., 2014).

Taušová, Bender, Dimitrova, and van de Vijver (2019) discovered that a thorough model of acculturation must take into account the impact of fellow sojourners on individual outcomes. Because they seem to be a crucial group to share the adaptation experience with. This is particularly crucial for international students, who typically travel for brief periods of time and move around in areas that facilitate social interaction and their decisions for the future (Hendrickson, 2018).

It may be unexpected in this regard that social media use directed at other international students has no lag effects. This deficiency, in our opinion, may indicate that social media by itself is insufficient to greatly aid the process of acculturation or the development of identification with other international students, and that face-to-face interactions may actually be the deciding factor (Damian & Van Ingen, 2014). In order to determine the circumstances in which social media may benefit international students' acculturation and cross-cultural adaption, future research might compare in-person and virtual interactions.

Neji, Boughattas, and Ziadi (2023) explored how AI-based chatbots can improve student satisfaction and engagement by providing individualized help and lowering reliance on human support. AI technology makes administrative work more efficient, giving teachers more time to engage with pupils in deeper ways. Scheduling, attendance monitoring, data analysis, and other automated procedures can improve operational effectiveness and free up teachers to concentrate on teaching.

According to Anderson (2019), AI-based administrative solutions greatly cut down on the amount of time spent on repetitive tasks, improving resource allocation and efficiency in educational institutions. Even though AI has enormous potential to improve education, ethical issues still need to be taken into account.

Selwyn (2014) emphasizes the need for significant indication on AI's ethical implications in implementing it in education. Though it is evident that AI helps to maintain transparency, and equity in the education setting. His research examines the AI's use and its impact on students' academic performance at the University of Guayaquil. Selwyn (2014) highlights concerns such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the over-reliance on technology, all of which must be carefully considered and evaluated.

Designing and implementing a predictive model to forecast academic success in order to expect student performance was the goal in this study. This study takes a quantitative, projective, non-experimental, and predictive method. Academic performance criteria were incorporated into a questionnaire, which was then validated using the expert judgment criterion. Data was gathered using the Google Forms platform and the questionnaire. A 92% response rate was achieved with the distribution of 1100 copies of the questionnaire and the receipt of 1012 responses. Gretl software was used to create the prediction model, and a coefficient of determination of 0.9075, mean square error (0.26), and mean absolute error (0.16) were taken into consideration when fitting the model.

The findings demonstrate a significant and direct impact on pupils' academic achievement, with p-values < 0.001 and positive coefficients around zero indicating the statistical relevance of age, hours, days, and AI-based tools or applications. In order to create an artificial intelligence-based mode, it was determined that a predictive model with theoretical backing might be put into practice to modify the variables.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess AI's positive influence on social integration of international students at Chandigarh University.

2. To examine AI's relationship of positive influence with academic performance of international students at Chandigarh University.
3. To investigate AI's relationship of positive influence with the general well-being of international students at Chandigarh University.
4. To compare AI's positive influence on social integration, academic performance, and general well-being with respect to male and female international students at Chandigarh University.

HYPOTHESIS

1. AI's positive influence is positively correlated with the social integration of international students at Chandigarh University.
2. AI's positive influence is positively correlated with the academic performance of international students at Chandigarh University.
3. AI's positive influence is positively correlated with the general well-being of international students at Chandigarh University
4. There is a significant difference in the AI's positive influence on social integration, academic performance, and general well-being between male and female international students at Chandigarh University

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The present study employs a cross-sectional exploratory correlational research design. It is to explore relationships between the positive influence of AI and three specific variables: social integration, academic performance, and general well-being among international students at Chandigarh University. This design is perfect for identifying patterns and relationships at a specific point in time, laying the groundwork for future in-depth studies.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample for this study consists of 60 international students (30 males and 30 female) aged between 18-26 years, having exposure to AI and currently enrolled at Chandigarh University. A simple random sampling technique ensures the representation of diverse academic disciplines and backgrounds within the international student cohort. This approach minimizes bias, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection Tools

To ensure the validity and reliability of the measurements, four standardized instruments were employed. The below mentioned tools (from S.No. 1 to 4) were selected to comprehensively measure the constructs of interest, aligning with the study's objectives.

1. **Affinity for Technology Interaction:** Franke, Attig, and Wessel (2019), used this tool to assess students' wellbeing, candidness, and engagement with AI and technology.
2. **Brief Social Integration Scale**: Holland and Gruhn (2012), developed this scale that evaluates the extent of students' social integration and their campus immersion capabilities.
3. **Health and Well-Being Scale**: Deliberated by Cosby (2017), this instrument assesses the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of international students.
4. **Academic Performance Scale**: McGregor (2015) developed this scale assesses academic outcomes such as GPA, participation, and confidence in learning.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

AI plays a trans-formative role in international students' experiences with significant implications in academic performance and well-being. This study's results highlight critical pathways for leveraging AI to foster inclusivity, academic success, and overall student satisfaction. By contextualizing these findings within broader debates on AI's role in education and social structures, this research underscores its potential to address pressing challenges faced by international students.

Hypothesis 1 (AI and Social Integration)

Despite a positive correlation (r=0.217, p=0.096), the evidence does not support a statistically significant relationship. This suggests that AI's current applications may not sufficiently target social integration needs. Prior research indicates that cultural barriers and a lack of human-centric AI design could limit its efficacy in fostering community and belonging. Institutions should investigate tailored AI tools, such as virtual communities or cultural exchange platforms, to address these gaps.

Table 1 shows AI's positive influence, which is significantly positively correlated with the social integration of international students at Chandigarh University. The correlation analysis between the positive influence of AI and the social integration of international students at Chandigarh University yielded a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.217 with a p-value of 0.096 based on a sample size of 60. While the positive correlation suggests a potential link between AI enhancement and social integration, the non-significant p-value indicates that, at the conventional 0.05 significance level, there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 1
Correlation Analysis (Hypothesis 1)

		Social Integration Test (DV)	AI (Enhancement) (I.V)
Social integration test (DV)	Pearson correlation	1	.217
	P-Value		.096
	N	60	60
AI (enhancement) (I.V.)	Pearson correlation	.217	1
	P-Value	.096	
	N	60	60

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Therefore, the findings do not support the assertion that the positive influence of AI is significantly positively correlated with the social integration of international students at Chandigarh University. Further investigation, consideration of effect size, and exploration of potential influencing factors may be warranted for a comprehensive understanding of this relationship.

Hypothesis 2 (AI and Academic Performance)

The significant positive correlation (r=0.555, p<0.00) aligns with studies emphasizing AI's potential in personalized education and adaptive learning systems. This robust relationship suggests that AI tools like virtual tutors and intelligent feedback mechanisms can significantly enhance academic performance, particularly for students navigating a new educational system. Universities should prioritize integrating AI-driven learning support into their academic frameworks.

Table 2 displays that AI's positive influence is significantly positively correlated with the Chandigarh University's international students' academic performance. The correlation analysis for Hypothesis 2 reveals a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between the AI's positive influence and Chandigarh University's international students' academic performance. The Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.555** with a p-value of 0.000, based on a sample size of 60, indicates a robust relationship.

Table 2

Correlation Analysis (Hypothesis 2)

		AI (enhancement) (i.v)	Academic performance (d.v.)
AI (Enhancement) (I.V)	Pearson Correlation	1	.555**
	P-Value		.000
	N	60	60
Academic Performance (D.V.)	Pearson Correlation	.555**	1
	P-Value	.000	
	N	60	60

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation is considered significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Therefore, the findings provide strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis, supporting the assertion that the positive influence of AI is significantly positively correlated with the academic performance of international students at Chandigarh University. These results suggest a potentially beneficial role of AI in enhancing academic outcomes, highlighting the importance of further exploration and consideration of the implications for educational practices at the university.

Hypothesis 3 (AI and General Well-Being)

The positive correlation ($r=0.30$, $p=0.017$) underscores AI's role in supporting mental health and emotional well-being. Tools like AI-based counseling and mental health apps likely contribute to this outcome. These findings reinforce the need for ethical and culturally sensitive deployment of AI technologies to bolster student support services.

Table 3 shows the positive influence of Artificial Intelligence is significantly positively correlated with the general well-being of international students at Chandigarh University.The correlation analysis for Hypothesis 3 indicates a statistically significant positive correlation between the positive influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the general well-being of international students at Chandigarh University. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.307* with a p-value of 0.017, based on a sample size of 60. The correlation is considered significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Consequently, the results provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 3
Correlation Analysis (Hypothesis 3)

		AI (enhancement) (I.V)	General well being (DV)
AI (enhancement) (I.V)	Pearson Correlation	1	.307[*]
	P-Value		.017
	N	60	60
General well being (DV)	Pearson Correlation	.307[*]	1
	P-Value	.017	
	N	60	60

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis 4 (Gender Differences)

The lack of significant gender differences highlights the inclusivity of AI applications across male and female students ($p > 0.05$; $p > 0.05$; $p > 0.05$ for all outcomes). This finding is crucial for ensuring equity in technology design and deployment, suggesting that current AI tools are perceived as accessible and beneficial regardless of gender.

Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference in the positive influence of Artificial Intelligence on social integration, academic performance, and general well-being between male and female international students at Chandigarh University. The independent samples t-test results for Hypothesis 4, examining the difference in the positive influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on social integration, academic performance, and general well-being between male and female international students at Chandigarh University, indicate that there is no significant difference.

Levene's test for equality of variances did not reveal significant differences in variances between the groups for each outcome measure. The t-tests, assuming equal variances, showed no statistically significant differences in the means of general well-being ($t = -0.364$, $p = 0.717$), academic performance ($t = -0.348$, $p = 0.729$), and social integration ($t = -0.374$, $p = 0.709$) between male and female students. The confidence intervals also include zero for each outcome measure, further supporting the conclusion that there is no significant difference.

Table 4

Independent Samples Test (Hypothesis 4)

Dependent Variable	F	p	T	df	p
General Well Being (DV) vs. Gender (Male and Female)	.525	.472	-0.364	58	.717
Equal variances not assumed			-0.364	57.68	.717
Academic Performance (DV) vs. Gender (Male and Female)	.666	.418	-0.348	58	.729
Equal variances not assumed			-0.348	57.69	.729
Social Integration Test (DV) vs. Gender (Male and Female)	.439	.510	-0.374	58	.709
Equal variances not assumed			-0.374	57.51	.709

Note: DV = dependent variable; SE diff>0.50; mean diff = -.20

Therefore, the results suggest that the positive influence of AI on these factors does not differ significantly between male and female international students at Chandigarh University. These finding suggests that AI-enhanced experiences may contribute positively to the overall well-being of students, emphasizing the potential importance of integrating AI technologies to enhance student life and well-being in a university setting. Further research may explore specific mechanisms through which AI influences well-being and inform strategies for its effective implementation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated how AI affected social integration, academic achievement, and overall well-being, among other facets of international students' experiences at Chandigarh University. It also looks at possible gender inequalities in these kinds of partnerships. The results are organized in accordance with the hypothesis of the study.AI has a profound impact on overseas students' experiences, changing both their academic achievement and general well-being. The study's findings point

to essential directions for using AI to promote academic achievement, diversity, and general student pleasure. This study highlights AI's ability to address urgent issues encountered by international students by placing these findings within larger discussions on the technology's role in education and social systems. Considerably, the international student communities living in host nations are minorities. Thus, AI facilitates them in providing information on various aspects they experience during their stint in diverse settings.

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into these relationships:

i.   **Social Integration**: Although a favorable relationship between AI use and social integration was hypothesized, there was insufficient evidence to support this claim in the statistical study. This suggests that more research is necessary to fully understand how AI promotes social integration.

ii. **Academic Performance**: AI's influence and Academic performance were found to be positively correlated in a robust and statistically significant way. This demonstrates how AI tools can improve learning results and help international students succeed academically.

iii. **General Well-Being**: The use of AI and students' overall wellbeing were found to be significantly positively correlated. This implies that AI-powered resources, such support networks and apps for mental health, can have a beneficial effect on students' emotional and mental well-being.

iv. **Gender Differences**: The influence of AI on social integration, academic achievement, and overall well-being was not found to differ significantly between male and female international students. This result suggests that, given the scenario under study, the advantages of AI are the same for both genders.

Considering all aspects, the findings highlight AI's key role in different facets of international students' academic experiences. The complexity of these connections, however, highlights the necessity for additional study to fully understand the personal and contextual fundamentals influencing AI's efficacy. To guarantee AI's fair and safe use in education, future research must also report ethical issues including algorithmic biases and data privacy.

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Impact of Digitalization on Study Habits among Minority Students

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ABSTRACT

This research report examines the impact of digitalization on minority pupils' study habits in government schools in the Punjabi regions of Ropar and Mohali. The study employs a survey method to gather data, allowing for a systematic analysis of the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of minority students in utilizing digital tools for academic purposes. In all, 625 students were administered, comprising 325 males and 300 females between the age group of 14 to 15 years in the ninth grade. It investigates whether digital tools contribute to enhanced learning outcomes, collaboration opportunities, and access to educational resources, or if they exacerbate existing disparities in educational attainment, such as the digital divide.

Keywords: digitalization, government schools, minority students, Punjab, social media, and study habits

INTRODUCTION

With technology advancing into every area of life, the digital age has had a profound effect on society as a whole, including education. Understanding how these advances affect students' study habits and learning experiences—especially those from minority backgrounds—is becoming increasingly important as digital tools and resources are increasingly incorporated into academic settings. With a focus on government schools in the Indian state of Punjab's Ropar and Mohali regions, this study examines the intricate relationship between minority students' study habits and digitalization. Students can now readily access a wealth of information online, including research materials, academic literature, and educational resources, thanks to the democratization of digitalization. Students are empowered by this accessibility to investigate many viewpoints and enhance their education outside the confines of the classroom (Taipe, 2024).

Minority students are facing several disparities in the educational system because they frequently face institutional and socioeconomic impediments. It is critical to look into how these technologies impact minority students' study habits, academic performance, and overall educational outcomes as digitalization permeates classrooms. Students can participate in active learning through the use of digital tools, which provide interactive learning platforms like educational apps, online simulations, and multimedia materials. These systems offer customized instruction, real-time feedback, and cooperative problem-solving, all of which can improve student understanding and engagement (Khanduri & Teotia, 2023). Study habits have changed as a result of digitalization, which offers convenience and flexibility in accessing educational resources at any time and from any location. In order to accommodate a variety of schedules and learning preferences, students can participate in virtual classes, study remotely, and complete asynchronous learning activities (Hans & Crasta, 2019). Students can develop their organizational and time management abilities with the use of digital tools like note-taking software, task management applications, and calendars. Students that use these tools to organize their study schedules, create objectives, and rank their work will be more productive and do better academically (Freo, 2022). This study aims to offer insights into the unique setting of Punjab, where the dynamics of digitalization may interact differently with the socio-cultural fabric of the region, by concentrating on government schools in the districts of Ropar and Mohali. A methodical investigation of minority students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences using digital learning tools can be accomplished through the use of surveys. This study attempts to obtain

detailed insights into the access, usage patterns, and perceived advantages and difficulties of digitalization in students' study habits by directly collecting data from students at government schools. By using this method, the study aims to close current gaps in the literature and provide useful recommendations for practitioners, administrators, and educational policymakers that support minority students' fair access to digital resources.

By means of an extensive examination, this study aims to tackle many significant inquiries: How do minority pupils in government schools utilise digital technologies for studying? What benefits and drawbacks do digitalisation appear to have for their methods of study? What roles might socioeconomic factors, institutional support, and cultural influences play in mediating the effects of digitalisation on minority students' study habits? By looking at these topics, the study hopes to increase understanding of the complex linkages between digitalisation and the study habits of minority students.

Digitalization has rapidly transformed various aspects of education, including how students engage with their studies. This study aims to investigate the impact of digitalization on the study habits of minority students, focusing on how digital tools and resources influence their learning patterns. Additionally, the study seeks to explore whether digitalization affects male and female minority students differently. Two hypotheses guide this investigation. The first hypothesis (H_1) posits that there is no significant difference in the impact of digitalization on the study habits of minority students as a whole. The second hypothesis (H_2) suggests that there is no significant difference between the impact of digitalization on the study habits of male and female minority students. By examining these hypotheses, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digitalization influences the educational experiences of minority students, with a particular focus on gender differences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital technology integration in educational settings has changed the face of teaching and learning, posing opportunities as well as challenges for students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds (Vasilyeva, 2021). This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the body of knowledge about the ways in which digitalization influences the study habits of minority students. Through the consolidation of significant discoveries from empirical research, theoretical models, and academic discourse, this review aims to clarify the intricate dynamics influencing the

correlation between digitalization and study practices among various student demographics (Hegyes et al., 2017).

Several studies have examined the connection between minority kids' academic success and digitalization, pointing out both advantages and disadvantages. For example, Kristan et al. (2018) observed that minority students' academic performance was positively connected with their access to digital resources, which allowed them to interact with peers, access educational materials, and participate in interactive learning experiences. Other research, however, has issued a warning on the possible harm that digital distractions and excessive screen time may do to academic performance (Rideout & Katz, 2016).

Students' study habits, digital literacy, and learning methodologies are all impacted by digitalization. Due to differences in access to technology and digital resources, minority students may have difficulties in acquiring digital literacy competencies (Warschauer & Tate, 2017). Furthermore, studies indicate that minority students frequently do not have the opportunity to develop the critical thinking abilities and information evaluation strategies needed to successfully navigate the digital ecosystem (Pettersson, 2021).

Language ability, cultural norms, and socioeconomic background are only a few of the sociocultural variables that mediate how digitalization affects minority students' study habits. Minority students from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to encounter obstacles while trying to use digital resources, which exacerbates already-existing disparities in educational results (Vasilyeva, 2021). Furthermore, cultural variables could affect how students feel about using technology and what digital learning environments they prefer (Zambrano et al., 2016).

Digitalisation can increase student motivation and engagement since it provides immersive and interactive learning opportunities. Digital platforms that include varied viewpoints and culturally appropriate content may be advantageous to minority pupils (Arredondo-Salcedo et al., 2022). However, studies indicate that elements like instructional design, feedback systems, and students' innate interest in the subject matter affect how effective digital technologies are at fostering motivation. (Parmis et al., 2020).

In order to effectively integrate digital technology into educational settings, policy measures that eliminate access hurdles and promote digital fairness must be accompanied with institutional support. In order to guarantee that minority students have equitable access to digital resources, schools and educational institutions are essential in providing the necessary infrastructure, training opportunities, and support services (Arısoy, 2022). Furthermore, minority students might be empowered to fully use the potential of

digitalization in their study habits through legislative initiatives targeted at closing the digital divide and fostering digital literacy abilities.

Therefore, research on how digitalization affects minority students' study habits emphasizes the intricate relationship that exists between technology, sociocultural context, and academic performance. Digitalization has chances to improve academic performance and learning experiences, but it also raises issues with equity, access, and digital literacy. Further research should continue to explore creative methods of utilizing digital technology to support a variety of learning needs and promote equitable educational outcomes for each student.

There hasn't been enough research done in the literature to determine how precisely digitalization affects minority students' study habits. Although the impacts of digitization on study habits have been extensively studied, minority children have not received as much attention, especially in particular situations such as government schools in Punjab, India. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research are also necessary to comprehend the complex and long-term effects of digitalization on the study habits of minority students. The lack of research in this area makes it difficult to create focused interventions and regulations that encourage fair access to digital resources and enhance minority students' academic performance. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to close the knowledge gap about how minority students' study habits are impacted by digitalization. The study aims to investigate how minority students' study habits, educational experiences, and academic performance are impacted by digital technology by focussing on this specific demographic within the context of Punjabi government schools in India.Comprehending these dynamics is vital in formulating customized interventions and policies that foster fair distribution of digital resources and augment academic achievements for minority pupils in heterogeneous educational environments.

RESEARCH METHOD

The goal of the study was to determine how minority students' study habits were affected by digitalization. Survey method was used to gather the data. To choose the sample, random sampling was used.

Tools

In this research study, the Study Habit Scale developed by Deepti Sharma and Masaud Ansari (2017) was used. There is total of 48 items, which consisted of 37 positive items and 11 negative items. There were five possible responses on the five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided,

disagree, and disagree strongly. For positive items, the scoring was 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1, and for negative items, the scoring was reversed. The scale's dependability was determined to be 0.863, significant at the 0.01 level of significance. The scale's validity was confirmed by Pearson's coefficient of correlation, which varied for each dimension and was significant at the 0.01 level of significance. The values ranged from 0.385 to 0.508. As a result, the scale was determined to be valid and dependable for the current investigation.

'Digital and Social Media Engagement Scale'

The researcher herself developed the "Digital and Social Media Engagement Scale". The study's goals were in mind as the researcher created the scale's initial draft. The researcher examined the self-prepared tools prepared by different researchers in the past to know and understand the process of developing a scale. The research tool had gone through four stages and is described below:

In the first Stage, to develop the tool for the "Digital and Social Media Engagement Scale", the researcher examined previous literature in detail. After reviewing the previous literature in the concerned field, the researcher contacted many experts in the concerned area. In the second stage, wide-ranging statements related to the "Digital and Social Media Engagement Scale", were sought from supervisors and different subject experts who had specialization in the concerned field. In the third stage, the comments, suggestions, and corrections were provided by the supervisor and the various experts and all suggestions were integrated by the researcher into the scale. The recurring and vague statements were discarded from the scale. In the fourth Stage, the scale was tried out on a small sample, i.e., adolescents. The scale was again administered to the same adolescents with a gap of one month to check the consistency of the statements. In the last, the scale was once again given to the subject experts for final suggestions, and their suggestions were incorporated by the researcher. Hence, the scale was finalized.

Originally there were 80 items, but 60 items were retained in the final tool after eliminating vague and ambiguous statements. There are six dimensions of the scale, i.e. educational needs, building community relationships, amusement and enjoyment, time span, facing restraints and future prospects. The negative assertions were marked in the opposite order from the positive statements, which were marked 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1.

Reliability and Validity of the Scale

The reliability of the scale ranged between 0.70-0.86 in all the dimensions, which is high, and the validity of the scale was established by the experts.

Table 1
Dimensions of the Scale

Sr. No.	Name of the Dimension	No. of Statements
1.	Educational Needs	10
2.	Building community relationships	10
3.	Amusement and Enjoyment	10
4.	Time Span	10
5.	Facing Restrains	10
6.	Future Prospects	10
Total		60

Table 2
Scoring for the Positive Statements

Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Table 3
Scoring for the Negative Statements

Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

All groups have Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70, indicating that our scale's internal consistency with this particular sample is good.

Participants

The present study was focused on grade 8th students from six different schools in Ropar and Mohali districts of Punjab, India. The researchers personally contacted students and administered a total 625 students.

The following hypotheses were proposed:
H$_1$: There is no significant difference between the impact of digitalization on study habits of minority students
H$_2$: There is no significant difference between the impact of digitalization on study habits of male and female minority students

Table 4
Reliability of Scale Cronbach's alpha for all the groups

Impact of the "Digital and Social Media Engagement Scale"	Reliability	Number of items
Dimension-I: Educational Needs	0.813	10
Dimension-II: Building Community	0.709	10
Dimension-III: Amusement	0.747	10
Dimension-IV: Time Span	0.721	10
Dimension-V: Facing Restrains	0.860	10
Dimension-VI: Future Prospects	0.801	10

RESULTS

Examining how digitalization impacts minority students was the aim of the study. In order to determine how using digitalization may impact many components of study habits, including time management, focus, organization, and self-discipline, this purpose entails exploring these areas. Researchers hope to learn whether minority students 'who use digital tools frequently experience distractions, procrastination, or disturbances in their study habits.

Table 5
Correlation between Digitalization and Study Habits of Adolescents

Variables	N	Mean	R	p-value
Digitalization	625	154.77	0.559	0.000*
Study Habits	625	163.03		

*Significant at 0.05 level

Table 5 and Figure 1 present statistical data on the relationship between usage of digital tools and study habits among 300 participants. Here, N indicates the number of participants, while "mean" represents the average score for each variable. The correlation coefficient, which indicates the direction and intensity of the association between study habits and the use of

digital tools, is displayed by the parameter r. The correlation coefficient in this case is 0.559, which suggests that there is a somewhat positive correlation between the two variables.

Figure 1

Scatter Plot showing Correlation between digitalization and Study Habits of Adolescents
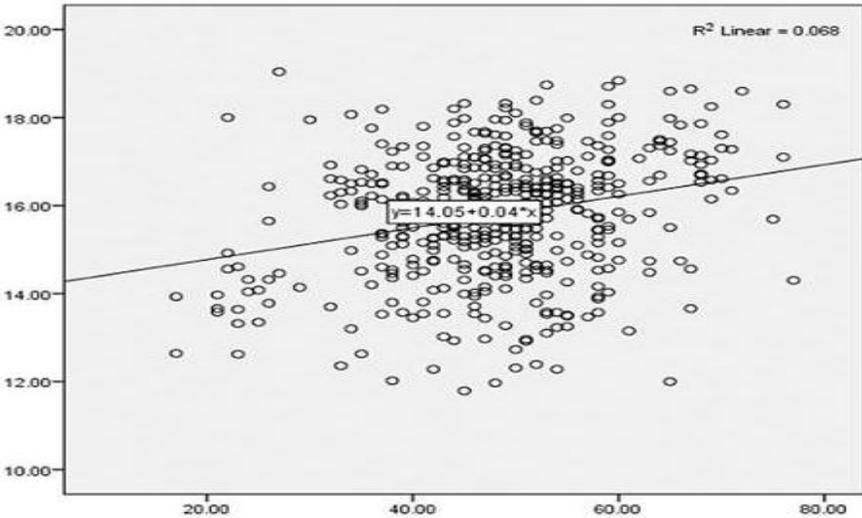
This finding has been supported by a study by Giang (2019) that researched the most often utilized websites were social networking sites. Moreover, a noteworthy correlation was observed between the degree to which students utilized social networking sites, their study practices, and their interpersonal connections with their teachers, families, and friends. More precisely, the more frequently students used social networking sites, the stronger the positive association was found between their study habits and interpersonal relationships. Boahene et al. (2019) investigated that a strong positive association exists between students' usage of digital networks and their study habits; the more time students spend on their study habits, the more time they spend on social networking sites. Haruna (2021) found out that social media is a potent medium for communication that has influenced practically every aspect of daily life, especially for students. It makes information transfer easier and fosters teamwork. This study looks at how social networking apps affect engineering university students' study habits. The study examined several aspects of students' study habits. A total of 437

respondents participated in the research. Utilizing the structural equation modeling (SEM) method, the acquired data was examined. The variables of study habits and digital and social media use are significantly correlated., as revealed by the structural relationship analysis of the various study habit elements. Aslam (2020) suggested that students' learning habits were positively impacted by consuming electronic media, including television. Okeke & Nneka (2019) discussed that there is no correlation between students' use of social media and their study habits. Even though the study found that digital tools had no appreciable impact on learners' study habits, it was nonetheless advised that teachers, parents, guardians, and school administration keep an eye on their children's usage of digital tools.

Therefore, hypothesis 1: There will be no significant difference between the impact of digitalization on study habits of adolescents stands rejected, and there is a correlation between the digitalization and study habits of adolescents. The "p value" column indicates the significance level of the correlation coefficient. A p value of 0.000 signifies that the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Overall, the data suggests that higher levels of digital tool usage are associated with better study habits among the participants. The objective of studying the impact of digitalization on the study habits of male and female adolescents is to gain insights into how their engagement with digital platforms influences their approaches to studying and learning. In order to achieve this objective, it will be necessary to investigate the study habits of minority students, both male and female, taking into account their social media usage patterns. Specific topics to be examined include time management, attention, organization, and self-discipline.

Researchers aim to investigate whether frequent use of digital tools leads to distractions, procrastination, or changes in study routines among both genders. Additionally, the objective encompasses exploring potential differences in how male and female minority students utilize digitalization and how these differences may relate to variations in their study habits. By conducting this study, researchers seek to identify any gender-specific impacts of digitalization on study habits and provide insights that can inform strategies and interventions aimed at promoting effective study habits and academic success among minority students, irrespective of gender.

Table 6 provides a comprehensive overview of two variables, digitalization usage, and study habits, categorized by gender across a total of 625 participants. The "digitalization" variable presents the total count as well as the counts, averages, and standard deviations for participants who are male and female. With a standard deviation of 15.22, the average digitalization consumption among men is 156.52, while the average among females is

marginally lower at 154.07 with a standard deviation of 14.66. The average gender-specific digitization usage is calculated to be 155.34. Similarly, matching statistics are shown for the "study habit" variable. With a standard deviation of 15.59, the average study habit score for men is 164.52, and the average score for women is 161.03 with a standard deviation of 14.67. The average score for all genders' study habits is 162.85. Overall, the table offers a clear comparison of digitalization usage and study habits between males and females, providing valuable insights into potential gender-based differences in these behaviors.

Table 6
Gender- wise overview of the Digital and Social Media Engagement Scale and study habits of adolescents

Variables	Gender	Count	Mean	Standard Deviation
Digitalization	Male	325.00	156.52	15.22
	Female	300.00	154.07	14.66
	Total	625.00	155.34	14.99
Study habit	Male	325.00	164.52	15.59
	Female	300.00	161.03	14.67
	Total	625.00	162.85	15.24

Now we compare all these variables to see if they are statistically significant different between male and female. We applied an independent sample t test to compare means.

Table7
Independent T-test for Equality of Means

	Independent Samples t-test for equality of means				
Variables	T	df	P-value	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Lower	Upper
Digitalization	2.041	623	**.042**	.092	4.795
Study habit	2.876	623	**.004**	1.107	5.872

Table 7 presents the results of independent sample t-tests conducted to assess the equality of means for two variables: digital and social media engagement and study habits. For the "digitalization" variable, the t-value is 2.041 with a corresponding degree of freedom (df) of 623. At the 0.05 threshold of significance, the corresponding p-value of.042 indicates statistical significance. The 95% confidence interval of the mean difference (0.092–4.795) suggests that there is a significant difference between the groups compared in terms of digitalisation consumption. Likewise, with the same degrees of freedom, the t-value for the "study habit" variable is 2.876. At the 0.05 threshold of significance, the p-value of.004 indicates statistical significance. There appears to be a substantial difference in study habits between the groups that were examined, as indicated by the 95% confidence interval of the mean difference, which runs from 1.107 to 5.872.

Therefore, hypothesis 2 stands rejected, and there is a significant difference between digitalization and the study habits of male and female adolescents. In summary, both digitalization usage and study habits show significant differences between the groups being compared, highlighting potential areas for further investigation or intervention.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

First, it was discovered that minority students' study habits were significantly impacted differently by digitalization. Therefore, Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the impact of digitalization on study habits of minority students gets rejected. Minority students may face unique challenges such as limited access to digital resources, digital literacy gaps, or a lack of personalized online learning tools that align with their cultural contexts. These factors contribute to the rejection of the null hypothesis, highlighting that digitalization affects this student group more distinctively than initially predicted. This finding emphasizes the need for educational policies to address digital equity, ensuring that minority students receive adequate support in their learning environments.

Secondly, it was clear from the results that there is a significant difference between the impact of digitalization on study habits of male and female minority students. Therefore, Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the impact of digitalization on study habits of male and female minority students gets rejected. This suggests that gender plays a crucial role in how students adapt to digital tools and environments. Possible explanations for this difference could include gendered experiences with technology, varied access to educational resources, or societal norms influencing how male and female students engage with digital platforms. The

rejection of Hypothesis 2 underscores the need for a gender-sensitive approach when integrating digital tools into educational systems for minority students. Addressing these differences can improve educational outcomes by providing targeted interventions based on the unique needs of male and female students. The findings from these hypotheses highlight important nuances in how digitalization affects minority students, pointing to broader structural inequalities that must be considered in the design of digital learning environments.Therefore, through resolving educators' concerns and applying the knowledge gathered from this research, educational stakeholders can successfully incorporate digital tools to improve instruction and student results (Saheb & Tbena, 2024). A thorough examination of survey data and previously published research has produced a number of important conclusions.

First, the advent of digitization has had a significant impact on the way minority students' study since it provides opportunities for improved information access, interactive learning, and improved time management and organizational skills. However, problems such as the digital divide, disruptions, and excessive information also impact study habits, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address these variations (Hetmanczyk, 2024). Second, the study emphasizes how crucial it is to take sociocultural aspects like socioeconomic position, linguistic ability, and cultural norms into account when figuring out how minority students' study habits are affected by digitalization. The opportunities and constraints that are unique to a given context affect how students interact with digital resources and how well they serve learning objectives. In general, this study advances our knowledge of the intricate relationships that exist between minority students' study habits and digitalization. The study offers insights that can guide the creation of focused interventions and policies intended to improve educational outcomes and promote digital equity for minority students in a variety of educational settings by highlighting the opportunities and challenges brought about by digital technologies.

IMPLICATIONS

The study's conclusions may help policymakers understand the unique requirements of minority children in a digitally enhanced learning environment. Comprehending the disparity in digital access and resources can aid in developing fair policies. For instance, governments and educational institutions may prioritize digital infrastructure and offer financing for underprivileged places if it is demonstrated that minority students have restricted access to dependable internet and digital tools. Minority pupils

frequently come from homes with little access to technology (Spjeldnaes & Karlsen, 2024). They may find it challenging to use digital platforms efficiently as a result, which may hinder their capacity to create productive study routines. Minority students can need more guidance and assistance, in contrast to their more accustomed peers, in order to fully benefit from digital learning settings. Also, the study's conclusions can assist instructors in modifying their pedagogy to better meet the needs of minority students' digital learning environments. More culturally sensitive digital tools and resources could be incorporated by colleges and universities into their curricula to improve accessibility and inclusivity for a wider range of learners. The psychological effects of digitalization on study habits may be revealed by the research, especially if minority students encounter isolation or digital tiredness in online learning settings. Support programs that assist students in striking a healthy balance between screen time and wellbeing, such as mental health counselling, stress management classes, and digital detox techniques, may need to adjust as a result (Zhang et al., 2024).

If the study discovers that linguistic or cultural hurdles make it difficult for minority students to use digital platforms, it could have an impact on creating more inclusive digital learning settings. It may be necessary for educational institutions to offer support systems, culturally appropriate curriculum, and multilingual platforms that take into account the varied backgrounds of minority students. This study offers important insights into how minority students' study habits are impacted by digitalization, which could have a substantial impact on policymakers, educators, institutions, and communities. In the digital age, educational systems may foster greater fairness, inclusion, and academic success by addressing the opportunities and difficulties the report highlights.

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The Mediating Role of Colorblindness on Gender and Acceptability of Racial Microaggressions among Black People at a Historically White Institution

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ABSTRACT

Chronic exposure to racial microaggressions (i.e., interpersonal race-based insults or invalidations that are often based stereotypes) may lead to traumatic stress symptoms, increased headaches, reduced self-efficacy, and fatigue among Black individuals. We were interested in examining differences in how Black students, faculty, and staff at a historically white institution rate racial microaggressions as acceptable, with particular focus on gender and colorblind racial attitudes as predictors. Using survey-based methods and mediation analysis, we found that colorblind racial attitudes mediate the relation between gender and ratings of acceptability. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: colorblind, microaggressions, race, and racial attitudes

INTRODUCTION

The focus of the current study surrounds the racially microaggressive experiences of Black people (i.e., individuals with African ancestry, which includes the African diaspora broadly) on university campuses. We were specifically interested in (a) understanding how Black men and women perceive microaggressions differently and (b) exploring potential factors that may account for such differences. Pierce (1970) coined the term, microaggression, to describe *offensive mechanisms* that occur daily for Black Americans and send the message that they are inferior. The definition of the term has expanded, as racial microaggressions today are defined as verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights that often communicate hostile and derogatory messages toward people holding racially minoritized identities (Sue et al., 2007). Derald Wing Sue is one of the leading microaggression scholars, and in one of his seminal papers, he and colleagues (2007) define three types of racial microaggressions. *Microassaults* are blatant instances of racism (e.g., use of the n-word, refusing service to Black people), whereas *microinsults* (e.g., asking a Black woman if her hair is real) and *microinvalidations* (e.g., telling Black people they are too focused on race and that they should instead focus on our shared experiences as Americans) are often more subtle forms of microaggressions.

It is important that we acknowledge our positionalities as scholars engaged with the current research project before referencing the relevant literature and discussing the methods we used to engage in the current project. All four authors identify as Black women who have had direct lived experiences with racial microaggression in our personal, academic, and professional lives. The first author is an Associate Professor of psychology and Licensed Clinical Psychologist who has written extensively on microaggressions and has facilitated multiple workshops and trainings on the topic. She has also supervised several graduate student projects on microaggressions, as she is the Principal Investigator for a lab that focuses on these transgressions. During the development of the study and data collection, the remaining authors were graduate-level student members of this lab whose dissertation projects focused on racial or income-driven microaggressions. As practitioners trained in school psychology, each of these authors was trained to engage in socially just service provision that addresses issues of racism and other forms of oppression head on.

The lead author's interest in this project stemmed from her engagement in prior research studies that identified limitations that we specifically aimed to address as part of the current project. There exists limited literature to understand how individuals holding racially minoritized identities experience microaggressions differently or that focus on the mechanisms for which these direct effects may be relevant. Further, our lab

has had conversations anecdotally about differences in perceptions and responses to racism among Black men and women. These conversations also sparked an interest in the relevant project, and our views, thoughts, and opinions given our personal experiences surely have informed our engagement. As such, we were intentional about using the existing research literature to inform our hypotheses, instead of relying on our direct lived experiences. It should be noted that we very much value the experiences that we have had as Black women, as a CRT framework necessitates that people's experiential knowledge is at the forefront. However, because we reflect a particular shared identity, it was of upmost importance that we relied on the empirical literature to support our hypotheses.

RESEARCH METHOD

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has received growing attention publicly although most people's understanding of the concept is flawed. Nonetheless, CRT can be directly applied to understanding the lived experiences of people holding racially minoritized identities, and specific to this study, Black people. Scholars like Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado founded CRT following the Civil Rights Movement given the lack of attention to racism and the centrality whiteness in research (Curry, 2008). Initially, the focus was on education, as scholars have written extensively on the role of racism in education (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2020). However, engagement in CRT scholarly work has expanded across disciplines, with scholars in fields such as psychology using the framework.

Relevant to CRT, Solórzano and Pérez Huber (2020) contextualize racial microaggressions as an outcome of white supremacy and institutional racism that permeates systems such as education, healthcare, and the media. Although use of the term *micro* may signal that these are small or unintentional, this term instead refers to the interpersonal (rather than systemic) nature of these transgressions. When individual actors exist in systems that are racist and have been socialized to hold biases, they may be likely to engage in microaggressive behaviors whether they are purposeful or not. One tenet of CRT emphasizes the *experiential knowledge* of racially minoritized people and the importance of *counter-stories* that push back on the dominant narrative (Brown, 2021). Solórzano and Pérez Huber (2020) stress that an analysis of microaggressions that centers the lived experiences of those holding racially minoritized identities is key, rather than a focus on how microaggressions affect white individuals. Relevant to the current study, we specifically focused on the perspectives of Black people instead of engaging in a comparative analysis of their experiences opposite to their white counterparts.

Racial microaggressions are often driven by stereotypes that we hold for certain groups of people. It should be noted that *no one* is exempt from engaging in microaggressive behavior–whether that be based on race or other minoritized identities such as sexuality, ability, or religion–as individuals are socialized to hold stereotypes about groups. Further, it is also the case that individuals may experience microaggressions at the intersection of their multiple minoritized identities. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality*, which refers to how social and political systems disadvantage and marginalize individuals when they hold multiple interlocked minoritized identities. For example, Black trans disabled women may experience oppression differently than white disabled women, given the addition of minoritized racial and gender identities that situate them to experience ableism intersecting with racism and sexism. Relevant to the current study, we were interested in exploring how perceptions of racial microaggressions as acceptable may be different for Black people in higher education given their gender.

Racial Microaggressions and the Context of Higher Education

The microaggressive experiences of Black people have been studied extensively (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Hall & Fields, 2018; Smith et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2008), and researchers have specifically well-documented the racially microaggressive experiences of Black people on college campuses (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018; Kanter et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2013; Morales, 2021; Pittman, 2012; Rollock, 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000). Black people's microaggressive experiences are often driven by stereotypes about their race. For example, stereotypes that position Black people as criminals may produce microaggressions such as clutching one's purse or wallet around Black people, watching them closely in a store, or over- policing their gatherings on college campuses (Smith et al., 2016; Sue, 2008). In education, Black students are also perceived as less intelligent, and school personnel often assume that their families do not prioritize their education (Allen, 2010). When teachers and college-level professors hold such stereotypes, they may be more likely to express surprise when they have a Black student who is the exception, or they may not make an effort to engage with their Black students and their families. When one assumes that all Black people have the same lived experiences and values, such stereotypes may lead to college professors or department chairs asking the only Black student or faculty member in their class or department for the *Black perspective*. Black faculty report that their race very much defines their role on campus, as they have daily microaggressive encounters with white colleagues who invalidate them and white students who insult them (Pittman, 2012).

An understanding of Black people's experiences in higher education is very relevant to our understanding of how they interpret the university

environment. In their review of the literature on *school climate*, Thapa and colleagues (2013) reference five domains that describe the general functioning of schools: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, the institutional environment, and the school improvement. The relationships domain (i.e., respect for diversity, school connectedness and engagement, social support) is most relevant to the current study, as a significant amount of research has demonstrated that students holding racially minoritized identities experience their school climate as more negative as their white counterparts *and* that the student-teacher relationships domain is the most important dimension of school climate for Black students (Thapa et al., 2013). These findings are important because positive perceptions of school climate are directly related to higher academic achievement, adaptive mental health, and less behavioral problems (Thapa et al., 2013).

Although a significant amount of the school climate literature references experiences in K-12 education (McIntosh et al., 2021; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019), this work can be directly applied to university students and the campus setting more broadly. In their study about the transforming perceptions of campus climate for historically underrepresented groups on college campuses, Rankin and Reason (2008) defined climate as "the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution," with specific focus on "attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" (p. 264). An abundance of literature suggests that perceptions of campus climate for students and faculty/staff holding racially minoritized identities vastly differ from the perceptions of their white counterparts, which is on par with the K-12 literature (Campbell-Whatley, 2015; Konold et al., 2017; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Shirley & Cornell, 2012; Voight et al., 2015).

It is essential to note the role of exposure to microaggressions on interpretations of campus climate for racially minoritized people at historically white institutions (HWIs). Results of quantitative and qualitative empirical studies have found that exposure to microaggressions plays an integral role in how individuals interpret campus climate, as experiences with these transgressions lead to a lack of connection with the learning environment and feelings of isolation (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2019; Solórzano et al., 2000). We know that Black students and faculty/staff at HWIs perceive their campus climate negatively, and these disparities may be influenced by the degree to which these students are exposed to microaggressions on campuses that are predominantly white (Fields et al., 2022; McDougal et al., 2024).

Results of these studies that are specifically relevant to the consequences of microaggressions on college campuses are not surprising,

given what we know about the general impact of these transgressions. Whether intentional or unintentional, racial microaggressions often result in deleterious effects on one's physiological, psychological, and emotional functioning (Nadal et al., 2014; O'Keefe et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2007). Specifically, chronic exposure to microaggressions has been linked to the presentation of traumatic stress symptoms, reduced-self efficacy, increased headaches, and fatigue in Black individuals (Helms et al., 2010; Moody & Lewis, 2019; Smith et al., 2007;). Research also points to immediate cognitive consequences of these transgressions, as exposure to microaggression immediately depletes one's cognitive resources to inhibit responses (Banks & Landau, 2021), which are essential for functioning in an academic environment. Clearly, the consequences of racial microaggressions for college-age individuals on university campus may be substantial, as higher education as a system is embedded with racism (Barber et al., 2020; Harper, 2012), making exposure to these transgressions for individuals holding racially minoritized identities inevitable.

Racial Microaggressions and the Intersection of Gender

Given our focus on the role of gender, a discussion surrounding the microaggressive experiences for Black women and men is important. There exists an abundance of literature demonstrating that Black women are often perceived as loud, angry, and hypersexual, as the stereotypes of the sapphire and jezebel have long existed and continue to be relevant in systems that are embedded with racism, such as media (Ward et al., 2023). Several scholars (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2021; Moody & Lewis, 2019; Sissoko & Lewis, 2023; Williams & Lewis, 2019) have published a significant amount of research surrounding the specific experiences of Black women with gendered microaggressions (i.e., transgressions that occur at the intersection of this group's race *and* gender). For example, Black women report experiencing microaggressions that objectify them (e.g., comments about their body parts), silence them (e.g., professors not calling on Black women in science, math, engineering, and technology classes), or reference the *strong Black woman* (e.g., being told they are too independent or assertive) or *angry Black woman* (e.g., being told that they need to calm down) stereotypes (Lewis & Neville, 2015).

Although it is clear that Black women have specific microaggressive experiences that are driven by the interconnectedness of racism and sexism, one cannot ignore the nuanced experiences of Black men. Although cisgender Black men hold the dominant gender identity, racial identity intersects for all Black men so that their experiences with power and privilege are much different than their white same-gender counterparts. For example, regardless of physical characteristics, Black men and boys as young as five are more

likely to be perceived as larger in size, threatening, and aggressive in comparison to their white counterparts (Todd et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2017). Robinson-Perez (2021) argues that state sanctioned violence, mass incarceration, and the over policing of Black men is disproportionate when compared to other groups (Alexander, 2010) and occurs as a result of gendered racism. On college campuses, these stereotypes may lead to microaggressive behaviors from others such as discipline practices that are harsher for Black men, being interpreted as aggressive and threatening when you disagree with others during meetings, encounters with campus police and law enforcement that are not warranted, pushback from students driven by assumptions that Black faculty are not experts, and general assumptions that they are not a part of the campus community (Davis et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2007). We recognize that Black men's and women's unique experiences with racism may impact how they interpret their experiences with racial microaggressions. As such, we were not only interested in exploring the main effect of gender on ratings of acceptability–we aimed to examine a potential explanation for potential differences.

Some scholars have positioned research on microaggressions as problematic given multiple arguments including their interpretation of them as subjective and depending on individuals' interpretation (Williams, 2020). Further, legislation to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on college campuses have increased given the U.S. political climate and the Trump administration's agenda (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2025). Such efforts provide systemic legitimacy to the dominant narrative that *reverse racism* is the problem and that these transgressions do not matter. Although we argue that individuals' subjective interpretations are valid, given our theoretical interpretation of racial microaggressions under a CRT lens, there is nonetheless research that has addressed these concerns. For example, researchers have examined differences in individuals' perceptions of microaggressions as acceptable. For example, Mekawi and Todd (2018) found that that men are more likely to rate microaggressions as acceptable when compared women. Other studies have identified similar findings, as women and girls are more likely to notice microaggressions and perceive them as more offensive than men and boys (Banks et al., 2022). Researchers have speculated that these differences may occur given girls' and women's exposure to more transgressions given their gender identity (Current Authors; Mekawi & Todd, 2021). Conceivably, Black women may interpret microaggressions as more harmful, as the intersectionality of race and gender may make these transgressions more salient for this group. These findings are directly relevant to the current study; however, research has not specifically identified whether these relations are particularly relevant for Black men and women. These groups have many experiences on university campuses that are

similar given their racial identity and other encounters that are particularly relevant to the intersection of their race and gender. Given these differences, it may be the case that Black men and women experience and perceive microaggressive encounters differently. As part of the current study, we were interested in examining potential differences in how Black university students perceive microaggressions as acceptable and identifying a potential explanation for why this may be the case.

Colorblind Racial Attitudes as a Potential Mediator

The described differences in perceptions of microaggressions do not undermine the rigor of microaggression research, as differences in individuals' perceptions of *any* concept is plausible and expected. In fact, an analysis of how and why individuals perceive microaggressions differently is useful, in that such scholarship can be used to address the harm that occurs as a result of these transgressions. Research suggests that colorblind racial attitudes may explain how one perceives microaggressions as offensive. Racial color blindness is a "distortion and minimization of racism" (Neville et al., 2005, p. 28) and "refers to the belief that race should not and does not matter" (Neville et al. 2000, p. 60). From a CRT lens, colorblind ideologies ignore the prominence of racism in the everyday lived experiences of racially minoritized people, and erases these experiences when we attempt to engage in research that is positioned as *neutral* and *objective*. An extensive amount of research has pointed to white individuals' difficulties perceiving racism and microaggressions when they endorse colorblind ideologies (Edwards, 2017; Wise, 2021), but researchers have not yet explored the role of these ideologies in explaining how racially minoritized people perceive experiences with microaggressions. We were interested in exploring the relation between Black university students' colorblind attitudes and their perceptions of microaggressions as acceptable.

Although there is limited research in this area, prior studies helped to inform the hypotheses we posed. Specifically, Wise (2021) found that for white college students, colorblind attitudes were inversely related to perceptions of racial microaggressions as problematic. When participants endorsed greater colorblind attitudes, they were less likely to find these transgressions offensive. Banks and Horton (2022) identified similar findings as part of an experimental study where undergraduate students were prompted to rate the harmful nature of multiple microaggressive vignettes. Specifically, researchers found that participants' endorsement of colorblindness predicted harmfulness ratings, as those participants who reported greater colorblind ideologies rated the scenarios as less harmful. Lastly, Mekawi and Todd (2018) not only found that men are more likely to rate microaggressions as acceptable when compared to women but also that ratings of acceptability are significantly related to colorblind ideologies. As such, it may be the case that

colorblind ideologies explain the process by which gender predicts one's ratings of acceptability for Black women and men.

Given differences in how Black women and men experience microaggressions relevant to the specific stereotypes that exist for them at the intersection of their race and gender, we aimed to explore explanations for how perceptions of these transgressions may differ for Black individuals enrolled and working at an HWI. First, we wanted to assess potential differences in acceptability for Black men and women. Given prior research (Mekawi & Todd, 2018) we hypothesized that Black women would rate microaggressions as less acceptable than Black men, given their specific experiences with racism at the intersection of their gender and race. We were not only interested in exploring this direct effect, as we also asked the following question: do colorblind racial attitudes explain the relation between gender and acceptability of racial microaggressions? Given the literature regarding colorblindness detailed above, we predicted that colorblind racial attitudes would explain the relation between gender and acceptability. The following includes details surrounding the survey-based methods we used to address these questions specific to the mediating role of colorblind racial attitudes on gender and perceptions of acceptability.

Participants

We recruited 97 Black students ($n = 72$) and faculty/staff ($n = 25$) enrolled at a Midwestern historically white institution (HWI). We did not place any restrictions on age, as participants were 18-62 years old ($M = 28.10$, $SD = 12.54$). Participants who reported a nonbinary gender identity were not included in the sample, because we were interested in comparing the experiences of Black men and women given specific literature on how individuals of these genders experience their Blackness differently. There were 71 women and 26 men who participated in the study. Relevant to sexual orientation, 22 participants endorsed a lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientation and 70 reported that they were heterosexual or straight. It should be noted that five participants did not respond to this item. Finally, 86 participants responded that they identified as Black racially, and 11 endorsed a biracial identity.

MEASURES

The data used for the current study were part of larger dataset where participants completed counterbalanced questionnaires to assess exposure to racial microaggressions, colorblind racial attitudes, and the degree to which they perceived microaggressive behaviors as acceptable. Given our focus for the current study was on perceptions of acceptability, we did not use questionnaire data that assessed participants' actual exposure to microaggressions, as we only focused on their interpretations of these transgressions as acceptable. As such, the below sections represent the two

measures that were used for the current study. Prior to the completion of these measures, participants responded to a demographic survey that assessed their race, gender, sexual orientation, and age.

Perceptions of Microaggressions as Acceptable

Participants completed items on the *Acceptability of Racial Microaggressions Scale* (*ARMS*; Mekawi & Todd, 2018) to assess the degree to which they found 34 microaggressive items acceptable. The *ARMS* includes four subscales: *Victim Blaming*, *Exoticizing*, *Power Evasion,* and *Color Evasion*. Items included racial microaggressions that target multiple racial and ethnic identities. Ratings were on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*totally unacceptable*) to 6 (*perfectly acceptable*). For the purpose of the current study, we were interested in participants' overall endorsement of the presented items as microaggressive, instead of a focus on the specific subscales. As such, we obtained an average across all items, with higher scores indicating greater acceptability of the microaggressive items. Reliability data for subscales from the initial study (α = .91-.94) was consistent with data we obtained for ratings across the overall scale (α = .95).

Colorblindness

We used the *Colorblind Racial Attitudes Scale* (*CoBRAS*; Neville et al., 2000) to assess participant color-blind racial attitudes. The *CoBRAS* includes the *Racial Privilege*, *Institutional Discrimination*, *Blatant Racial Issues* and *Total Colorblindness* subscales. The latter was the focus of the current study. Participants responded to 20 items on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We averaged ratings to obtain the *Total Colorblindness* subscale score, with higher scores indicating greater colorblind racial attitudes. Reliability data obtained from the current sample (α = .89) is consistent with reported coefficients from Neville and colleagues' (2000) initial study (α = .86).

PROCEDURE

After receiving approval from our university's Institutional Review Board, we disseminated recruitment materials for the study via our university's mass email system. Interested students first viewed an eligibility survey that included multiple items. This survey was only meant to assess if potential participants identified as Black. We did not screen for ethnic identity (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Nigerian). Those who endorsed a racial identity other than Black were thanked for their interest but were not allowed to continue. Eligible participants then viewed the consent form and selected the *next* button to consent to participate in the study. As mentioned above, participants were exposed to the three measures of interest via Qualtrics in counterbalanced order. We also used attention check items and did not include participants who failed these items or the aforementioned eligibility items (*n*

= 46). After completing all questionnaires, participants were able to enter a raffle for 1 of 5 $20 gift cards via a separate survey not linked to their study data.

RESULTS

We conducted preliminary analyses before addressing our primary research questions. Across the entire sample, ratings of colorblind racial attitudes ranged from 1.00 to 5.30 ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.91$) and were positively skewed (1.20, $SE = .25$). Most participants' ratings indicated low colorblind racial attitudes, a few participants ($n = 8$) provided ratings for which the average was a 4 or higher (i.e., *neutral* to *strongly agree*). Ratings of acceptability ranged from 1.00 to 5.29 ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.81$), and the *ARMS* was also positively skewed (1.53, $SE = .25$). Almost all participants ($n = 96$) provided ratings on the *ARMS* indicating low acceptability of the microaggressive items (i.e., ratings less than 4). Results of correlational analyses indicated some significance, as participants' report of colorblind attitudes was positively correlated with ratings of acceptability, $r = .67$, $p < .001$. In other words, the more participants endorsed colorblind attitudes the more likely they were to rate microaggressions as acceptable.

Lastly, we conducted preliminary analyses using Independent Samples T-tests to examine gender and status (e.g., student or faculty staff) differences for the colorblind racial attitude ratings. For these analyses, we entered gender i.e., (women = 1, man = 2) or status (i.e., faculty/staff = 1, student = 2) as the predictors, and the *CoBRAS* (Neville et al., 2000) as the outcome variable. Men ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.06$) in our sample were more colorblind than women ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(95) = -3.05$, $p = .003$, $d = -.70$. We did not find any significant differences in colorblind racial attitude ratings for students ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.91$) when compared to faculty/staff ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(95) = 0.47$, $p = .64$, $d = .11$. The same was true for acceptability ratings, as no differences were identified between student ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.81$) and faculty/staff participants ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(95) = 0.08$, $p = .93$, $d = .02$.

To address our primary questions surrounding the potential of colorblind attitudes as a mediator, we conducted several regression analyses to examine each component of our hypothesized model. First, we found that gender predicted acceptability ratings ($b = .50$, $t(95) = 2.78$, $p < .01$), as men in the sample rated microaggressions as more acceptable than women. Gender also significantly predicted ratings of colorblind racial ideologies ($b = .61$, $t(95) = 3.05$, $p < .01$), as men in our sample were more likely to endorse colorblind racial attitudes as compared to women. Lastly, colorblind racial attitudes, which we examined as the mediator variable, positively predicted acceptability of microaggressions ($b = .61$, $t(95) = 8.86$, $p < .001$), meaning participants who endorsed more colorblind racial ideologies were more likely

to perceive microaggressions as acceptable. Because we found that the a-path and b-path were both significant, we conducted mediation analyses using Hayes (2017) PROCESS macro for SPSS model 4 (Hayes, 2017). Specifically, we tested our hypotheses using a bootstrapping method (5000 resamples) with bias-corrected confidence estimates at 95% (MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). We entered gender as the predictor, the *ARMS* (Mekawi & Todd, 2018) as the outcome variable, and the *CoBRAS* (Neville et al., 2000) as the mediator. We found that the total effect of gender on acceptability, ($b = .50$, $t(94) = 1.01$, $p = .007$), was erased when accounting for colorblind racial attitudes, ($b = .35$, $CI = 0.10, 0.64$), indicating full mediation (see Figure 1). In other words, colorblind racial attitudes fully explained gender's significant effect on perceptions of microaggressions as acceptable.

Figure 1.
Colorblind racial attitudes mediate the process by which gender predicts perceptions of acceptability
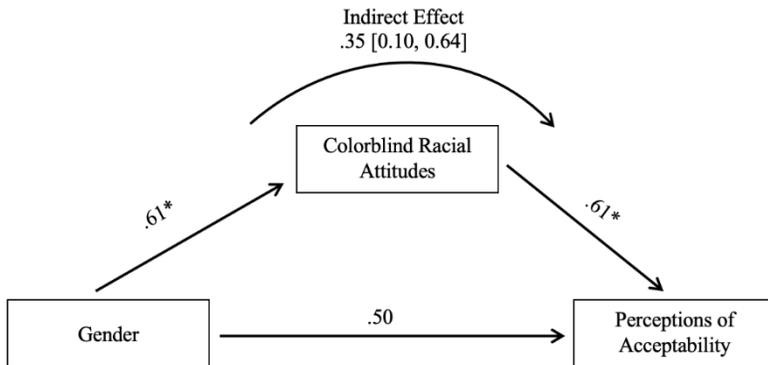
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research has extensively pointed to the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions, as exposure to these transgressions is associated with deficits in physiological, psychological, cognitive, and emotional functioning (Banks & Landau 2021; Mekawi & Todd, 2018; Nadal et al., 2014; O'Keefe et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2007). Black students, faculty, and staff at HWIs report daily exposure to racial microaggressions that contribute to their overall interpretation of the campus climate as hostile and not inclusive (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000). For students, these experiences may also lead to difficulties academically (Sanchez, 2019). Researchers have begun to explore how individuals interpret

these transgressions as acceptable or not, as Mekawi and Todd (2018) developed the *ARMS*, which is the first measure that examines perceptions of acceptability. As part of the current study, we were interested in using this measure to explore how gender impacts perceptions of acceptability for Black students, faculty, and staff at an HWI, and more specifically, if colorblind racial attitudes explain this relation between gender and acceptability.

Our sample of 97 Black individuals who were enrolled or employed at a Midwestern HWI responded to demographic items, the *ARMS,* and the *CoBRAS* (Neville et al., 2000). These data demonstrate that colorblind racial attitudes significantly mediated the relation between gender and ratings of acceptability. In other words, results of the current study suggest that colorblindness explains the relation between gender and acceptability or explains the process by which gender predicts acceptability ratings among Black people at an HWI. Our findings are consistent with prior research that has pointed to gender differences in acceptability independent of race and relevant to the significant relation between colorblind racial attitudes and acceptability (Banks & Horton, 2022; Mekawi & Todd, 2018). There, however, have been no studies to date that specifically focused on the attitudes of Black people. We sought to address this gap in the literature surrounding the particular experiences of Black people, and even more specific to individuals on historically white college campuses who are exposed to these transgressions daily. Results of the study support our hypothesis that colorblind racial attitudes explain how and why Black men rate microaggressions as more acceptable than Black women, as their attitudes that race does and should not matter account for gender differences in perceptions of racial microaggressions. This was the first known study to specifically examine colorblind and acceptability of microaggression attitudes for Black people enrolled and employed at HWIs.

We were able to show that colorblind attitudes explain the process by which gender predicts acceptability of microaggressions. However, more research is needed to explain *why* differences in colorblind racial attitudes exist for men and women broadly and specific to Black people on historically white campuses. It might be the case that women are more in tune with the colorblind nature of racism given their specific experiences with gendered racism. However, as mentioned earlier, Black men have specific gendered experiences with racism too. There does not exist any literature linking ideologies like racial identity or race consciousness to colorblindness or that suggests these concepts might explain differences in colorblindness. In fact, Simien and Clawson (2004) found that Black feminist ideologies (i.e., the understanding that Black women experience discrimination at the intersection of their race and gender) are significantly related to aspects of race consciousness and identified no differences in how Black men and women

endorsed the latter. Gonlin and Campbell (2017) argue that Black people who are more engaged socially with white people may hold these attitudes to reduce cognitive dissonance in an effort to adapt to whiteness. They specifically point to research on Black people who attend multiracial churches, and Tatum's (1997) research surrounding Black adolescents' struggles with racial identity development when enrolled at predominantly white schools is also relevant. Clearly, additional research is needed to understand the role of colorblind racial attitudes and why differences present for Black women and men.

LIMITATIONS

Although we argue that the results of our study address a major gap in the research literature, there exists limitations that must be considered. First, our sample of Black individuals was unique, in that we recruited participants from one Midwestern HWI where Black students make up less than 10% of the student population. It may be the case that students in higher education receive greater exposure to content relevant to racism and oppressive systems and the same is likely true of faculty and staff. Although the skew of both measures was not surprising, it is nonetheless a point worthy of mention when considering the potential of generalizability. Findings of our study should be interpreted with some caution, as results specifically speak to the experiences and attitudes of Black students, faculty, and staff at a specific HWI who generally do not hold colorblind attitudes and feel that racial microaggressions are unacceptable. We might argue that these trends are likely similar to the population of Black people in the U.S., given what we know about their socialization to racism. However, a replication of the current study that includes a community sample of Black individuals representing diverse identities and worldviews would be beneficial. Such an exploration might include increased diversity in gender, as the current sample were primarily women and only included a gender binary, and more intentional consideration of age and various ethnic backgrounds (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Nigerian).

Our sample size was also relatively low, considering the typical sample size of research that uses mediation analyses. However, Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) published a study surrounding required sample sizes to detect mediation effects. Given their analyses, samples where the a- and b-path coefficients are equal to or larger than 0.59 require low sample sizes ($n = 34$). In the case of the current study, coefficients for both of these paths ($b = 0.61$ and 0.61) were higher than recommended and the number of participants in our study ($n = 97$) also exceeded recommendation.

IMPLICATIONS

The current study has significant implications for the microaggression research agenda and practical efforts that are taken to address these transgressions. To the former point, research that expands on the results of the current study might consider the limitations mentioned above. Although we found support for full mediation, in that the total effect for the relation between gender and acceptability was nonexistent when controlling for colorblind racial attitudes as a mediator, future research might explore other potential factors, such as moderating variables that change the relation among the studied variables. As mentioned previously, this has been an understudied area in the literature, so analyses that continue to explore relations among these variables and others is needed. Most of the research on colorblind racial attitudes has explored such attitudes among white people, although some researchers have explored differences in these ideologies among racially minoritized people in interracial relationships (e.g., Gonlin & Campbell, 2017). Additional research is needed to understand differences in Black individuals and other racially minoritized groups endorsement of colorblind racial attitudes.

Many administrators on university campuses have undertaken efforts to familiarize the campus community with microaggressions and to provide students, faculty, and staff with strategies to avoid engaging in microaggressive behavior and tools to respond when they witness or receive these transgressions. In fact, there has been a great deal of research published that has examined results of such trainings that are not only relevant to higher education (e.g., Williams et al., 2020), but also speak to the experiences of those in K-12 schools (Banks et al., 2024), medicine (e.g., Sandoval et al., 2020), and generally in the workplace (e.g., Fattoracci & King, 2023). Facilitators of such trainings must not take a *one size fits all* approach, as individual difference variables inform how participants engage in these trainings. Specific to results of the current study, facilitators and administrators on university campuses might pay particular attention to addressing the colorblind racial attitudes of Black men (and other participants) prior to targeting responses to microaggressions. When individuals feel that race should not and does not matter, they may not be prepared to fully grasp the potential deleterious consequences of race-based microaggressions. As such, specific focus on addressing such factors may improve individuals' responses to such trainings.

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"I Wish I Wasn't the Only One": Understanding the Racialized Experiences of Graduate Students of Color in the Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study seeks to explore the racialized educational experiences of graduate students of color (GSOC) seeking degrees in humanities disciplines. Using Critical Race Theory, this investigation sheds light on the lived experiences, inside and outside the classroom, of minoritized graduate students as they navigate their educational environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of nine graduate students who were selected through purposive sampling to participate in the study. The findings support and extend the literature examining the educational experiences of graduate minority students in higher education. Implications are discussed, as are best practices for faculty and educational administrators to better support and address the racialized encounters experienced during graduate study for minoritized students of color.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Graduate Education, Graduate Students of Color

INTRODUCTION

In academic spaces, there is an array of student ethnicities, races, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and languages (Gollnick & Chinn, 2017). Graduate student enrollment is expected to increase from 2 million to 3.3 million by 2026 (Allen et al., 2020). University faculty and administrators must be prepared to effectively mitigate oppression based on race, culture, ethnicity, and language (Yuan, 2017) in those educational environments. The way students experience and navigate their graduate education journeys and manage the stressors will often differ. Graduate students, especially doctoral students, have however been absent in educational literature which has led to the misunderstanding of their mental, physiological, motivational and social experiences (Sverdlik & Hall, 2019). Additionally, the intersectionality of race and gender highlights the unique experiences of graduate students of color.

There is minimal research on humanities doctoral experiences (McAlpine & Austin, 2018) and few studies have focused on the racialized educational experiences of minoritized students enrolled in humanities graduate programs. While existing literature does systemically account for the graduate school experience, researchers must consider that these experiences come from various academic disciplines, numerous methodologies, and diverse types of graduate education (Brunsma et al., 2017). This phenomenological study explored the educational experiences of graduate students of color pursuing degrees within humanities disciplines using Critical Race Theory to understand impacts to academic success, accessibility to professional opportunities, and the overall graduate school experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduate students of color (GSOC) often face racism, discrimination, and daily microaggressions (behavior, speech, ideologies) in the classroom (Harris & Linder, 2018), in their departments, or in their programs (Brunsma et al., 2017). Scholars have implied that both race and gender are interconnected units that should be examined together (Dinsmore & Roksa, 2023) and increased marginalization of GSOC could be a result of intersecting identities. Park and Bahia (2022) found that Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) graduate students are regularly confronted with racism, colonialism, and pressured to represent their entire racial group while simultaneously feeling alienated in their respective academic courses of study. Especially because of lacking or insufficient systems of support, Black, first-generation doctoral students experience discrimination and isolation, struggle with imposter syndrome, and resort to survival to persist in their

studies (Wallace & Ford, 2021). That survival is seen in GSOC self-advocacy and community, both out of necessity in environments ineffectively designed to support their success (Perez et al., 2020).

Graduate students of color experience unique challenges at colleges and universities (Bowers et al., 2016). GSOC experience isolation, a lack of sense of belonging, racism, discrimination and microaggressions, mental health, stress, identity issues and lack of support or mentoring (Brunsma et al., 2017), lack of cultural diversity and awareness, absence of multicultural curriculum and course materials, and solitude all which have a negative impact on GSOC achievement (Gayle, 2016). Research indicates that campus climate, expectations of faculty, curriculum structures, predominately White student spaces, and lack of institutional support for this unique population of students are all impediments to GSOC academic and psychosocial attainment (Harris & Lee, 2019). When support is obsolete or inadequate, minoritized graduate students' impression is that their overall sense of who they are, their educational experiences, and their perspectives have no place in academe (Brunsma et al., 2017).

Sense of Belonging

When students feel that their institution is generally unsupportive of them as students (Hussain & Jones, 2019) sense of belonging is at its lowest (O'Meara et al., 2017). Inhibited sense of belonging can have a negative impact on student retention, students' perception of campus climate, student's academic success and can contribute to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Campus Racial Climate (CRC) is the policy atmosphere and the overall perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of a college or university (Bowers et al., 2020) that are also present through cultural and racial group interactions and the interplay of internal forces such as governmental policies and external forces such as the racial setting of a university (Lewis & Shah, 2021).

Mental Health

Humanities and art and design graduate students are more likely than others to experience mental health issues, report suicidal ideation, (Lipson et al., 2015; Kaler & Stebleton, 2020) and suffer from anxiety and depressive disorders (Chirikov et al., 2020; Kaler & Stebleton, 2020). Lipson et al. (2015) attributed the cause to the nature of humanities disciplines which requires original contributions to the field, is susceptible to scrutiny and subjectivity, and is highly competitive. For many racial minorities, negative race related experiences can cause racial stress or trauma that may impact their physical, psychological, academic, emotional or overall well-being,

coined Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) (Charles et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2021), yet students of color remain an under-researched population regarding mental health issues (Lipson et al., 2018). Institutional systems, financial difficulty, academic structures, and meager mentoring are additional factors that attribute to elevated stress for graduate students (Charles et al., 2021).

Institutional Response

As racial dissension continues, it is important to acknowledge the action of racialization to establish a better understanding of racial practices (Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2019) that occur both inside and outside the academy. Institutions committed to creating lasting, campus-wide reform, related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) on campus should be thoughtful when instituting changes and must be fully dedicated to the process. Lingras et al. (2021) indicated when committing to this work, it is imperative to reframe DEI as essential to institutional effectiveness to form capacity for this effort and it must be included in the strategic goals and plans of the institution. There is no standard solution for all colleges and universities; changes will be slow and incremental, but the goal is to generate continual improvement around this concept (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). As institutions of higher education create and implement strategic plans addressing diversity and inclusion issues on their campus, it is important to understand the experiences of GSOC (Bowers et al., 2020).

The Current Study

This phenomenological study allowed for GSOC to use their voice and share their stories about how they experience the educational space as a racialized minority. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, organize, describe and report themes that are found within a set of data (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, peer debriefing was utilized to assess and confirm the methodology, findings, and themes.

The study of Critical Race Theory (CRT) guides this research to understand more deeply the racialized educational experiences of students of color. The purpose of CRT is to expose what is taken for granted when race and privilege are evaluated as well as the forms of exclusion that is prevalent in United States society (Hiraldo, 2010). There are five tenets that comprise the framework of CRT: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest conversion, and critique of liberalism (Hiraldo, 2010). These tenets can be used to dismantle inequities that are often utilized to create systems of privilege and oppression (Hiraldo, 2010).

CRT can play a critical role when colleges and universities and educational leaders work toward becoming and creating more diverse and inclusive spaces and climates. Higher education CRT scholars have centered their work around three predominant themes, including (a) colorblindness, (b) selective admissions policy, and (c) campus racial climate (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Applying the CRT framework supports the purpose of this study, will give relevance to the topic, and provide a better understanding of the significance of this research in the field.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design. Qualitative research is utilized to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts (Sutton & Austin, 2015). A phenomenological design allows the researcher to make meaning of or explore the lived experiences of the individuals under-study. Further, phenomenological research allows the researcher to familiarize oneself with the philosophical analysis of the human experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). Utilizing a phenomenology design is where new perspectives and acknowledgements can be established to both inform and redefine how we understand that experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). A phenomenological study allowed for GSOC to use their voice and share their stories on how they experience the educational space as a racialized minority. The study involved gathering qualitative data that was descriptive through semi-structured interviews via Zoom for approximately one hour and observing the participants' movements and reactions during the interview process. Prior to the scheduled interview, participants completed a demographic survey via Google Form which included demographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity), year of study and major. The interviews were transcribed utilizing the transcription feature via Zoom. Once the transcripts were completed, each participant had the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. When member checking was completed, the information was sorted into categories, and themes and codes were developed from the data. The researcher identified details such as phrases, ideas, concepts, keywords and terms that addressed the research inquiry. The transcripts were read multiple times and notes were taken in the margins to help detect any themes that emerged.

Participants

This study took place at a predominantly White, private, 4-year university. Black or African American, Hispanic and Asian make up about 28% of the total student enrollment. Nine students elected to participate and

were asked to complete a demographic survey to verify eligibility, then contacted to schedule a Zoom-based interview. Participants (Table 1) ranged from the first year of study to seven years or more.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Department of Study
1	Natasha	Female	Black	Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MA)
2	Hibbert	Female	Black	Music (PhD)
3	Hai	Male	Multiracial (White/Hispanic/ Native American)	Music (PhD)
4	Frida	Female	Black	Visual Arts (MFA)
5	Ella	Female	Multiracial (Black/Asian)	English Language and Literature (PhD)
6	Lu	Male	Asian	Middle Eastern Studies (MA)
7	Sola	Female	Multiracial (Black/Asian)	Music (PhD)
8	Lain	Female	Asian	Cinema and Media Studies (PhD)
9	Rosa	Female	Multiracial (Afro-Indigenous)	Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MA)

Note. Ethnic categories were self-reported. Degree programs are listed in full with abbreviations provided in parentheses.

RESULTS

The following major themes emerged from the study: *barriers to involvement, relationships, engagement and connectedness,* and *identity.* Table 2 provides a codebook for these themes, including a description and sample phrases from the data collected.

Table 2

Theme	Subthemes	Description	Sample Associated Quote from Interview Data
Barriers to Involvement	Financial burdens, mental health, knowledge gap, isolation, self-advocacy	Obstacles that impede the success of students during graduate school experience.	"…figuring out…billing and insurance and all…that's a big burden that takes my time away from the program."
Relationships	Faculty-student mentorship (or lack of), peers, campus climate	The relationships that participants had or did not have with the campus community.	"I'm still…looking for those social spaces in which I can see other scholars and support other scholars…"
Engagement and Connectedness	Connected, involved, feelings of inclusion (or lack of)	The ways in which participants were connected or involved (or lack of).	"…defeatism… It doesn't give you a sense that academia is going to… suddenly become a welcoming career path for you."
Identity	Race, ethnicity, representation, individuality	The academic environment in relation to their identity.	"I think being a student of color means that you're always aware of…double consciousness... consciously aware of how your white faculty are thinking as well."

Codebook of Themes and Subthemes Derived from Interview Data

Figure 1

Themes Revealed to Address the Research Inquiry
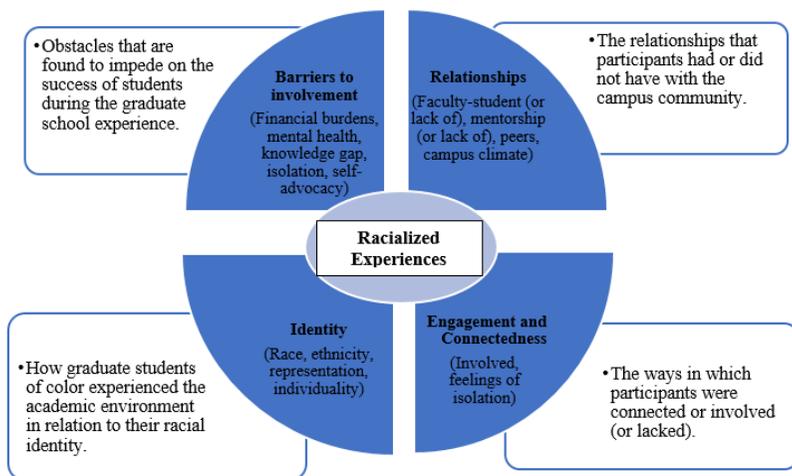
Note. This figure was created by the author to illustrate key themes from interview data.

Barriers to Involvement

Countless obstacles that can impede on the success of students were revealed, as well as details about how these encounters make graduate school a difficult space to navigate. These barriers included financial burdens, knowledge gap, feelings of isolation or exclusion, mental health issues and the need to self-advocate. Natasha said, "*A lot of the barriers for me have been financial, it's a very expensive year.*" Hai talked about having enough money to take care of himself and his partner: "*Trying to find a way to live roughly, the two of us, off of my stipend has just been really, really hard.*"
Another barrier participants indicated was being expected to already have an understanding coming into the university because they were graduate students. One participant described it as having a "base knowledge." Hibbert said:

> ...another barrier that I felt for me was just knowledge because I came straight from undergrad and so there was a lot that I didn't learn that master students would have known...unsaid knowledge that you know professors would have expected us to have.

Ella retorted:

…feeling like we can't ask questions about how to do things that are just kind of pushed onto us in very matter of fact ways whenever people are like, oh yeah, you should be submitting to conferences and things like that but then no one wants to tell anyone how to write an abstract…

Lain talked about this gap from a cultural capital perspective.

I would say part of it is, that there's a big sort of initial gap if you do not come from a background that is familiar with what graduate education looks like and academia as a whole. So, I come from a working-class background and also my parents were not American and so they weren't familiar with the American university system, especially the academic system.

Participants expressed the graduate school journey as being isolating or having felt excluded at times. Frida categorized her experience of isolation to her identity, her age and being a parent. Natasha associated her feelings of isolation to her current experience as a graduate student.

I initially came in with the intention of getting a PhD… However, seeing the way that grad school has been for me and like the first term being so again identically rigorous and kind of causing a little bit of social isolation for me, I just don't think that's a great plan for another six years of continuing it down that path.

Mental health is another major issue that may affect graduate students of color. A few participants identified mental health issues as being a challenge as they navigated academia as graduate students. Lain expounded:

I sometimes hear people at other schools describe their experience in graduate school as more of you know, as a nine to five job and as that being sort of a healthy way that they've come to understand their role. And I really don't know anyone at the [redacted name] as a graduate student who experiences it that way. It really feels like you're expected to be producing all of the time. I don't feel like I really am able to shut off from responsibilities tied to the university.

Self-advocacy is how students navigate their graduate school experience with little to no support from the academic departments or institution. Participants expressed the need to provide self-direction or self-advocacy to be successful in the program. When describing his overall graduate school experience, Hai used the word "*tumultuous"* and shared "*I've constantly just had to do a lot of things on my own with no support*." Sola noted:

> *…there are certain bureaucratic systems that make it hard for anybody kind of to get what they need in a fast way…another thing with kind of the bureaucratic stuff is just what self-advocacy looks*

like in a department that, you're gonna have to rely on for a long part of your career, especially in the beginning.

Relationships

This theme focused on the *relationships* students had or did not have with faculty, peers and academic staff in their departments as well as how these relationships may affect departmental culture. Most participants had established relationships with faculty, more so with their advisors or faculty on their committee; however, students in masters' programs indicated that because their programs go by relatively quickly, establishing faculty relationships are not always easy. Frida shared "*It's a very short program…So that's not a lot of time to build relationships with faculty, which is certainly the model that we see in other countries and even in more traditional programs.*"

The advisor relationship plays an integral role in the faculty-student relationship. Rosa defined these relationships as being "*positive*" and shared how these advisors serve as "*sounding boards*" that she can continuously turn to. Other participants noted feeling supported by their faculty advisor, even beyond the academic space. In reference to his advisor, Hai stated: "*We just had lunch a few weeks ago and it was not academic, you know, just hey, how are you doing? Haven't seen you in a while, thing. She's absolutely great!*"

When describing the relationship participants had with peers, many indicated they have connected with peers and for some, these relationships extend outside of their immediate departments and among other cohorts of students. Rosa described the relationship with peers as "*rewarding*" and academic discourse is both "*enriching*" and "*fruitful*". Critical aspects of these peer relationships were that of support and having a shared experience with others. Sola said:

> *I came to [redacted name] because I met my cohort during prospective students' weekend and really, really loved all of them. To me that was one of the most important things about finding a school is that even if the professors don't get it, that my peers will at least, and I have found a lot of support, in my black peers and also other peers of color and also white students.*

The culture of the academic departments was an indication of student's feelings related to campus climate. One student described their department as having two cultures, meaning there is one culture you experience when you are a prospective student and another being "*academic presumption*". Culture was also expressed in relation to matters of social justice. Sola replied:

I think that like a lot of departments, especially since the murder of George Floyd, there's been a lot of reckoning in the department with what steps do we need to be taking to make this a better environment for everybody?

Two participants talked about the disconnect within their departments in reference to the culture and efforts to effectively support students of color. Related to her department, Ella stated:

I think there is still a disconnect. It's very much in the sense of their hearts are in the right place. You know, they're trying, they mean well, but they're not as effective as, in my experience, just not as effective as they seem to think they are.

When it comes to leading efforts of equity and justice, there is often an additional responsibility or an expectation that faculty of color spearhead DEI related work and provide support to students of color in their department. Hai details this complex relationship.

I think that, there's still just a huge disconnect between the students and the faculty and my advisor…I feel like she has gotten just all, you know, a lot of the race relations kind of [expletive] has been put on her to do all this kind of reconstructive work in our department…I just don't think it's fair to her at all.

Though there appeared to be a disconnect among faculty in relation to students, Hibbert talked about the culture of community and comradery amongst the graduate students in the department.

Particularly among students, we really try to pick each other up. I don't say that that's reflective of all cohorts, but at least for, you know, my cohort, the ones under us, there is this, you know, not family, but just the really deep community. We wanna support each other. We wanna make sure that we survive the ridiculousness, that's happening around us and make sure that each of us makes it through every successive level.

Engagement and Connectedness

The data revealed that the *engagement and connectedness* theme identified ways in which participants were connected or involved in either their academic departments or other areas on campus and how students utilized campus resources, such as the career development office. Involvement and feelings of inclusion lends to academic success and positive experiences. Participants discussed how their involvement, or lack thereof, impacted their graduate school experiences. Some participants felt the need to be involved was not just important for them as individuals but for future graduate students of color at the university. Sola noted:

> *...part of it is there's only three black students in the department and one of them has already been very involved. And although the work shouldn't have to fall on us, I do feel a certain responsibility to the next generation of black students, to make things better for them.*

Although campus involvement is important and attributes to student success, some participants admitted to not being engaged on campus. The need to set boundaries, disconnect from campus life and the academic space was important for some participants who purposely made decisions to not live near campus and limit their campus engagement. In reverse, student organization involvement has been beneficial in various ways for those participants who do elect to be engaged on campus. Both Lain and Rosa talked about their involvement with their respective student groups. Lain said:

> *...the graduate student union has been a really important outlet for me both to sort of get a better sense of bearing when I've been really confused about how to progress through the graduate program but also as a way to sort of build solidarity and have a real sense of community outside of classrooms, but still at the university and also I think that's built a stronger connection with the south side neighborhood as well.*

Career prospects become increasingly significant for graduate students as they matriculate, and connection to campus resources such as the career development office can assist in this process. Lu acknowledged how his department is "*super supportive*" and has gone above and beyond to make him aware of various opportunities stating that his current academic year was funded by a fellowship. Rosa indicated that her program, shares job opportunities with students in their department that are in the local area, in the country and even abroad. Even if they had not utilized campus career resources, they were at least aware that the career development office existed to guide in career exploration. Due to negative experiences in academia, several participants discussed having little desire in exploring or securing careers in the academic environment. One student explicitly used the term "*traumatized*" to describe her experience and noted that she would be taking a long break following graduation. Neither Ella or Hibbert are interested in pursuing careers in academia and indicated exploring other options.

Identity

The data revealed that the final theme, *identity,* uncovered how graduate students of color experienced the academic environment in relation to their racial identity. For participants, identity was connected to their race or ethnicity, representation, being the only person or few persons of color and identifying as first-generation. Some of these same identities, in addition to

being an older graduate student and parent, overlapped with the theme of *barriers to involvement* related to isolation. Hibbert shared about the nuances of being a student of color to immigrant parents, how there aren't many opportunities to engage about that experience, and how that unique experience may not be understood in a primarily white space.

> *…a lack of having students that were like me, simultaneously black but also a child of immigrants. That's a very specific worldview where you understand what it means to be treated differently because of your race but you're also shaped by parents who are migrants. And so, understanding what it means to be almost like this dual citizen. And that's a very different head space that faculty don't necessarily know how to access or, given that it is a predominantly white space.*

Related to representation, or the lack thereof, in the program Natasha noted:

> *While there are other black students this year, there are only I think, five of us and they're really aren't any black mentors or preceptors or senior faculty in the program. And I think that's an important thing to highlight just because if you are looking at this program from the outside, and you don't know anyone here it doesn't seem like a place that you are meant to be if you don't know that other people like you are here at every level.*

Participants talked about identity as being the only person of color, Frida simply stated "*I wish I wasn't the only one.*" Sola talked about the burden she feels to perform well as a graduate student, being one of the few students of color in her department.

> *I think there's a lot of pressure to do well… the visibility of being one of the only black people in the department or one of the only students of color, there's implications for when you don't do well and I think that pressure keeps me up more at night than getting a job. I feel there's a need to see black students do well and not because of affirmative action. There is a need to, for me to prove that in whatever way kind of as problematic as it is, there is a need for me to kind of prove that to my professors…the people superior to me.*

Lain used the work "*precarity*" in relation to identity and how that has shaped her experience as a graduate student of color.

> *…if you were to take an intersectional approach that brings together sort of minority status racially with gender identification, with class background, then I think that it really sort of heavily determines what I feel is possible. What kinds of sort of social, even just interpersonal networks I'm able to have within my department.*

Identity, especially when connected to other systems of inequity, is a critical component related to the way in which GSOC experience and progress through their programs. Particularly within a predominately white academic environment, identity shaped their experiences in various ways as participants often felt isolated due to their racial identity, being non-represented and compelled to perform well being the only student of color or the first in their families to pursue graduate education.

DISCUSSION

A review of scholarly literature suggested that there is a disconnect between humanities programs and university commitments related to creating a more diverse, expansive, equitable and inclusive academic experience that eliminates obstacles for GSOC. The results of this study confirm those findings. As GSOC experience increased demands to perform and produce high caliber work, mental wellness becomes more imperative for academic success. In a pursuit of higher education, particularly at the graduate level, there is an expectation that students automatically know how to successfully navigate the environment. That is not always the case for many graduate students, and this can be increasingly discouraging for GSOC who often have multiple challenges (financial burdens, food insecurities, disabilities) they are confronting that may disrupt their academic progress.

Barriers, Belonging, and Backing

Financial difficulties were one of the primary barriers that participants admittedly face while completing their graduate degrees. Whether it was to pay for course materials or to cover personal expenses such as rent or food, some of the participants described finances as being a struggle they dealt with that sometimes led to them prioritizing work over academics. In the absence of programs and support to mitigate or even eliminate these challenges however, mental wellness is adversely impacted.

Feelings of isolation was a meaningful factor in how GSOC experienced graduate education. Due to the absence of cultural diversity, students of color often experience separation and isolation during graduate school (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). GSOC hesitate to challenge authority figures or systems that could result in a negative consequence for them (poor grade or lack of job references). Support is unsubstantial, the space is isolating, and resources are limited. Rather than assessing these needs and offering specialized assistance, the attention is back on the recruitment of prospective students rather than the immediate needs of current students.

To recruit graduate students especially GSOC, it is no longer adequate to lean solely on the name recognition of a university or prestige of

a program, but to effectively communicate how the program and the university can offer the best educational experience to its students. Programs must be transparent about the strengths and academic requirements, but also committed to ensuring they are addressing critical issues and advancing the program to its full potential so GSOC can make informed decisions on the academic environment best suitable for them and their needs.

Though advocacy and the need to self-advocate as they cycle through their programs was mentioned by a few participants, this subtheme was not more prevalent in the data collected, enough to rise to the level of a primary theme. Still, its emergence as a common thread merits recognition. The conclusion is that students are either unfamiliar with how to advocate for themselves or others in an academic environment or are unaware that they are already doing this in some way. People of color are expected to be resilient in the face of adversity and persevere through tough times, but to always be required to use these skills becomes exhausting. Rosa explained more intently the weight of resiliency for a student of color.

> *Being a graduate student of color…comes with being told often you're so brave and you're so creative and you're so resilient. And as I've grown up, I've kind of hated those words because they're so charged and weighty and they [are] really weaponized, against, women specifically, women of color specifically.*

Reducing or eliminating barriers to involvement for GSOC means creating a safe academic environment that includes physical and psychological safety, creating and following equitable practices that address the individualized and specialized needs of students, reviewing policy through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens, and ensuring that funding resources are available and equally accessible.

Representation

Course offerings and limited topics, particularly in gender and ethnic studies, also appeared to impact the scholastic experiences of humanities GSOC. Natasha, a Black female student said, "…*class opportunities, there aren't always things in Black studies or in the English department that are particularly about my topic of race and gender… I had hope there'd be a kind of a larger swath of topics.*" Regarding curriculum diversity, Hai, a multiracial male student of music mentioned trying to create a diverse and inclusive classroom experience for the students in the course that he lectures because his own experiences often do not reflect similar goals:

> *I see my role of just trying to change curriculum, just support students. Especially in the classes that I lecture as well, just really support the students of color in my classes. Not teach them from a*

colonial standpoint at all… I teach through migrations and encounters and just what this music or what any music can do for different communities and build on solidarities… I try and teach it that way and I think that a lot of the students of color really get more involved or just care about it more when they are seeing that, they feel represented in this way.

Hai's comments highlight the unfortunate truth that the GSOC experience is lacking true representation of the growingly diversified educated society.

Relationships

The quality of relationships, particularly with faculty, can impact the academic success of GSOC. In this study, many participants confidently shared the support provided to them through faculty relationships, mainly when trust was established. It is confirmed that faculty mentors, especially those who share a similar background (race, ethnicity, gender) as their students, can contribute to the welfare and student success of GSOC when these relationships are formed and maintained (Brunsa et al., 2017). As students are seeking support from faculty of color, they too are grappling with similar encounters (invisibility, proving themselves, questioning of intellect or expertise) in the academic space (Gorski, 2019). Unfortunately, not all students have a faculty mentor or feel supported by faculty in their academic department.

Social Engagement

Campus engagement and humanistic connections are positive indicators on GSOC academic progress and graduate experiences, yet scholarly demands often impede on students establishing meaningful connections or their desire to engage. Increased academic demands and the effort of wanting to succeed make extracurricular involvement and forming connections challenging. Many participants did see the academic value in being connected with their peers or engaged in various areas on campus or in their departments. Hibbert stated:

I think my cohort was the reason why I ultimately decided to come to [redacted name] as opposed to the other great offers that I was courting at the time…because I knew that regardless of how crazy [redacted name] would drive me at least I would have people to talk about it with as opposed to other institutions where I was maybe one of two and I didn't feel like I would survive that very well.

The institutional structure related to campus climate and the academic climate can impact the educational experiences of GSOC. Prioritizing ways to create a supportive climate and one actively engaged in equitable practices

can reduce students' negative experiences, feelings of marginalization and help to retain them (Bowers et al., 2020). Participants described the culture of their various departments and the ways in which that culture effects their academic experiences. For some participants there was a sense of a supportive climate that positively influenced the way they excelled academically or even experienced the environment. In relation to social justice concerns, there appeared to be greater intention in assessing the climate and seeking ways to remove barriers, especially for students of color. Yet, it is highly evident that some departments were doing better than others in creating a more equitable space where GSOC felt supported, visible, and connected.

Being a graduate student is alienating, especially when engaging in independent research. Campus involvement allows students to explore ways that enhance their educational experience. This form of engagement combined with strong reciprocal relationships with faculty and peers have a favorable outcome for GSOC in relation to academic success. Students can lean on their peers as other individuals who are sharing a similar experience or share an affinity to shape healthy networks and a strong sense of belonging. It is equally important that faculty create an academic climate where connection with peers, especially connecting students of color with other students of color, beyond the department or institution, and involvement in extracurricular activities, inside or outside of the academic space, are encouraged. Faculty must also establish a rapport with students as faculty serve as vital resources that attribute to the success of students. Further, college campuses are urged by Critical Race Theory (CRT) to actively address matters that align with inclusive and equitable practices (Harris & Linder, 2018). These practices must not be exclusive to the overarching campus environment, rather should permeate within the academic departments as well. In doing so, this creates a positive campus climate and culture where students are understood, protected, and supported in their graduate journey.

Engagement and Connectedness: Campus Resources

Securing a job in their field is usually the goal for many if not all graduate students as they near graduation. Research implies there is a decrease in academic appointments, forcing students (particularly those completing degrees in the humanities) to search for industry jobs (Ganning, 2018; McAlpine & Austin, 2018). Due to many negative experiences in the academic space, participants in this study indicated not having an interest in seeking academic roles. The academic demands of a humanities program have left some students unsure about an academic future beyond graduate education. Despite some of the adverse experiences that many participants

had, and even considering the less than favorable job market for humanities careers, Hai, though he professed he has been turned off by academia, and Sola both still would consider pursuing careers in academia. Hai shared:

> *One reason why I would want to stay in academia is to help support just more students of color who are coming in after me. I really do, you know, care about that a whole lot. I think that if I were to stay in academia, it would be to try and change things…*

Establishing relationships and connecting with the career office, as a student but even as a faculty member or administrator, can prove to be beneficial as programs work to aid students in determining life after graduate school.

Identity

For many of the participants, identity impacted their overall educational experience, with many shared sentiments of being the only or one of few GSOC in their programs or departments. Rosa, said that being a GSOC was both "*special*" and "*complicated*." She added, "*I would say that overall being a graduate student of color at this university and also being a woman of color from a nation that is still colonized also brings its own context*." Additionally, students felt exposed and more self-aware of how they represented themselves and how they may be perceived by others because of their identities. Hibbert explained:

> *I think being a student of color means that you're always aware of the famous double consciousness. You're aware of your own situation but you're consciously aware of how your white faculty are thinking as well. So, it's just like, how am I presenting? Even when I'm talking, it's like, how do I sound? Because this is not a space where I can say ain't.*

GSOC, regardless of their environment but particularly at a university, are hyperaware of themselves in relation to their identities and their experiences, and even more so when there are intersections of those identities. Experiencing varying emotions of the graduate school journey or even imposter syndrome is a natural occurrence for GSOC. Understanding GSOC experiences help higher education staff and faculty recognize and mitigate what may be contributing to those realities, and the harm caused to the overall GSOC trajectory in academia.

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to examine the experiences of minoritized graduate students completing degrees in the humanities field. The results of the qualitative data analysis uncovered graduate students of color (GSOC) racialized educational experiences as they navigate through their academic programs. After a thorough review of the

data collected from the qualitative interviews with nine participants, four themes emerged: *barriers to involvement, engagement and connectedness, relationships* and i*dentity.* These four themes connect to the research questions which, as designed, sought to illuminate the educational experiences of minoritized graduate students completing degrees in the humanities. A review of scholarly literature suggested that there is a disconnect between humanities programs and university commitments related to creating a more diverse, expansive, equitable and inclusive academic experience that eliminates obstacles for GSOC. In higher education especially, the goal is to create a campus climate and infrastructure that promotes high levels of engagement and community. Thus, this study was important to understand the authentic experiences of GSOC more deeply.

Limitations of the Study

This study focuses only on graduate students of color experiences seeking degrees in the humanities and does not reflect the experiences of GSOC studying in other fields who may have different or similar experiences. Although humanities disciplines are pertinent for critical human society (Dorot & Davidovitch, 2020), there is a decrease in humanities enrollment when compared to other areas (Costa, 2019). Thus, it is important to note that by focusing on the humanities, the study is already focused on an academic field already experiencing some form of marginalization. The influence of the limitation however is mitigated by evidence in the literature which validates the experiences found in the data.

IMPLICATIONS

As the study presented, GSOC are significantly impacted in various ways by their educational experiences. Dinsmore & Roksa (2023) denote that minoritized students are more dependent on institutional support systems but are less likely to receive it. Which further demonstrates that GSOC need additional resources and "*better infrastructure support from the university*" to be successful yet support may look differently depending on their specific needs. GSOC equally deserve an educational environment where they feel seen, heard, and better represented in a space that was not designed with them in mind. Dismantling oppressive systems and removing barriers to involvement must be the primary responsibility of college and university faculty and administrators to improve the educational atmosphere, specifically for minoritized students. The findings of this study indicate that for GSOC to have an educational experience that is positive, barriers must be eliminated, campus must be supportive and collegial, accessibility to resources that abet their professional goals and sense of belonging.

Participants indicated the lack of representation within their cohorts and academic departments but also the "*lack of representation at higher levels…*" as it relates to faculty and staff. Institutions should seek to improve the diversification of its campus at every level. Participants also desired diversity of course offerings and classroom discussions that were inclusive of varying ethnic backgrounds and experiences and often had to find alternative spaces to engage in these conversations beyond their department or university "*…to go fill these gaps…*". Faculty must also consider and reflect upon their own understanding of power, privilege, and oppression, which will better equip them to address and incorporate diverse topics into the classroom environment (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021).

Students seeking graduate education has steadily increased. For GSOC, it is important that educators address the marginalization and the racialized experiences of this population as they matriculate. Colleges and universities should first assess and measure the perceptions of the university climate including curricular and cocurricular offerings, then prioritize efforts to increase and advance DEI efforts. The enhancement of the campus climate and the betterment of educational experiences for students is a shared responsibility of everyone (faculty and staff), and everyone must be held accountable in promoting these efforts. It is no longer acceptable to call upon these individuals who we deem as the experts in all areas of diversity and inclusion when we all have the power and ability to disrupt harmful behaviors and engage in discourse, no matter how uncomfortable.

Due to the growing number of minority students attending colleges and universities, the focus should be on how to improve educational philosophies, instruction and curriculum design, as well as investment, and organization to meet their needs and demands (Yuan, 2017). The cultural background and the personal experiences of minoritized students are all constructed by their identity, their learning, their communication, and their academic performance styles (Yuan, 2017). It is imperative that faculty can engage in difficult discussions related to racial violence that students of color face (McGowan et al., 2021), that they are capable of leading students through various research interest and topics, and that higher education institutions are ensuring structural diversity exists within programs (Scott & Johnson, 2021). Therefore, if students encounter microaggressions in the classroom, receive minimal support from advisors, have limited connection with faculty of color and experience marginalization in their disciplines or with their peers, faculty engagement in diversity related research or changes within department admissions and recruitment policies will be insignificant (Slay et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

The results of the qualitative phenomenological data analysis uncovered that graduate student of color (GSOC) experiences related to *barriers to involvement, engagement and connectedness, relationships*, and *identity* impact educational experiences as they navigate through their academic programs. Students can be the university's greatest ambassadors; however, if they are having negative encounters, they will not encourage prospective students to consider our schools. Yet, when students are having positive experiences, they can share these experiences confidently and genuinely with other students.

As educators seek to support and advocate for GSOC, they too must advocate for themselves and communicate their needs to be successful in their academic programs and graduate. Afterall, educators cannot assist if they are unaware of the concerns. However, when we are aware of the problems, work can be done to fill in the educational gaps as appropriately. As educators positively influence the educational landscape, so too can they provide the impetus to demolish inequitable practices, improve policies and procedures and provide quality educational experiences for graduate students of color.

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Power, Privilege, and Abuse: A Marxist Examination of 'Bacha Bazi' in *The Kite Runner*

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Bacha Bazi' is a commonplace term used in reference to the pervasive act of objectification and sexual abuse of preadolescent kids by predominant male patrons in the Afghanistan society, festering it rotten from inside. Existing in an unofficial, institutionalized setting, it often results in a culturally enforced and approved metamorphosis of young boys, affecting how they construct their social and sexual identity—which stays distinct and unaltered—as they are coerced into becoming dancing boys and male escorts for wealthy patrons compelling them to serve as both, a source of sexual pleasure and amusement. Bacha Bazi is a new social function that has been given cultural legitimacy by a society that is sharply split between the powerful and the powerless. The Kite Runner *by Khaled Hosseini is a sharp social commentary on the Marxist nature of this cultural malpractice from the points of view of Hassan and Sohrab. The current paper is qualitative research into the power play and politics of Bacha Bazi in the Afghanistan society from a Marxist perspective*.

Keywords: *Bacha Bazi*, Culture, Dancing Boys, Marxism and *The Kite Runner*

INTRODUCTION

Khaled Hosseini's voice is one of the most compelling voices in modern times. Hosseini was born against the stormy backdrop of Afghanistan's history. His journey from a war-torn Kabul to the literary heights of global eminence is a testament to the perseverance and persistence built into the very fabric of his novels especially his masterpiece, *The Kite Runner*. Few books in the annals of modern literature have had the same profound impact on society and intensity as Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. This ground-breaking work is evidence to the persistent ability of narrative to shed light on the darkest facets of the human experience, especially considering Afghanistan's chaotic past. Essentially, the story addresses the severe consequences of child abuse and delivers a biting critique of a society shattered by violence, betrayal, and the unwavering quest for forgiveness.

The events shown in *The Kite Runner* take place in Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion, a place where friendships are both holy and brittle, with kites soaring and secrets being whispered. Amir, a child at the core of the narrative, is plagued by the ghost of his own timidity and the terrible repercussions of a single act of treachery. However, beneath the surface, there lies a deeper truth that pierces to the heart of Afghanistan's most reprehensible secret: the gruesome acts of child exploitation and abuse.

The Kite Runner exposes the harsh reality of a society plagued by the mistreatment of its most defenseless citizens, from the menacing picture of Hassan, Amir's devoted friend and victim of abhorrent assault, to the sneaky presence of Assef, the personification of cruelty and corruption. Hassan's son Sohrab is born into a world still haunted by the horrors of the past, carrying on his father's legacy of pain. After his parents pass away, Sohrab is left orphaned and alone to fend for himself. He gets caught up in a vicious game of politics and power and is forced to endure the same kind of maltreatment and exploitation that killed his father before him. As a result, his innocence and spirit are shattered, and he becomes a passive witness to the atrocities committed against him.

Researchers have observed the harsh truth of a world where innocence is destroyed, and youthful ambitions are dashed under the weight of unimaginable trauma via the prism of Hosseini's exquisite words. "By naming and shaming a rapist, Hosseini makes clear that sexual violence is an affront to social order and human rights that deserves global scrutiny as an issue of principle" (Banita, 2019).

This sexual violence shown in the novel takes place in the name of "*Bacha Bazi*", a sacrilegious and abominable act of sexually exploiting young boys, which goes beyond dancing and voyeurism. "It also includes activities

such as forcing victims to dance in public and private ceremonies, subjecting them to massages, pederasty, rape, intercourse, touching, pornography and more" (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

The recruitment of young preadolescent boys marks the beginning of the *Bacha Bazi* cycle. The men who own these 'Bachas' or who are only following the horrendous custom are known as the 'Bacha Baz'. They search for boys amongst the impoverished villages of Afghanistan between the ages of eleven and twelve. The Bacha Baz would either kidnap these youngsters or traffic them for a specific sum of money thus exploiting vulnerable families living in extreme poverty. In the Uzbek community of Afghanistan, this practice is also referred as *bachabozlik*, and the terms of address between an Uzbek dancing boy and his lover are *uka* ("younger brother") and *aka* ("older brother") (Baldauf et al., 1990).

Bacha, the boys who dance, are kept by the *Bacha Baz* up until they turn twenty and are no longer sexually appealing (Russia Today, 2016). Older boys in their twenties are not considered good enough to be a *Bacha* by the *Bacha Baz*. The transaction starts when the boys perform for older males at private parties where they are kept by the *Bacha Baz* for entertainment purposes. The guests would then bid to take their favorite *Bacha* home after the celebration. Sometimes a *Bacha Baz* would spend time with the *Bacha* for a while, or lay claim on him thus preventing any other *Bacha Baz* from spending the night with him.

In most cases, the private party would end with the young child (*Bacha*) being coerced into having coerced sex (rape) by the patron *Bacha Baz*. This perverted act of *Bacha Baz*i has attributed to a breach of a large percentage of Afghanistan's human rights, leaving permanent damage on the young impressionable minds of the Bachas who become unequipped to seek meaningful lives. Additionally, for most of the young boys involved in the company, dancing is the only skill they shall have for the rest of their lives thus rendering them unemployable in other areas.

The exposure of the tale of the dancing boys by the international media began in the year 2012. In the same year, a man from the U.S army was shot dead by a sniper hired by a *Bacha Baz* who was confronted for having a *Bacha* chained to a bed in his barrack (Goldstein and New York Times, 2015). Nevertheless, the United Nations (UN) had been watching the recruitment of *Bachas* long before the tragedy of 2012. Consequently, the United Nations and the Afghan government signed an agreement to stop the malpractice of *Bacha Bazi* (US News, 2011*)*. Furthermore, the UN implemented the speech act that year, marking the beginning of securitization, by declaring "*to take immediate and specific measures to put an end to and*

prevent the perpetration of…. bacha bazi" (Statement by Chairman of Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, 2011). The UN persisted in pressuring the Afghan government to terminate the practice of *Bacha Bazi* from the country, even if the speech act itself did not significantly alter the country's situation. The UN's SIGAR 2017 report demonstrated this endeavor, stating that *Bacha Bazi* must end and that Afghan officials were involved in its practice.

      Another Speech act had also been done by AIHRC or Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. This NGO decided to speak up about *Bacha Bazi* as a threat towards human security and propose the government to establish a law to put *Bacha Bazi* down (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2014).

      The practice of *Bacha Bazi* is still widespread in the community even though the UN and AIHRC's address led to the Afghan government acting against it in 2015. The custom that was perceived as a danger to public safety was elevated to a national security concern. The shift began in 2015 when the Afghans began to publicly discuss the atrocities committed by the Taliban against their people during their rule. Once they were set free from the Taliban, they realized that the people put into power were doing even worse things than the Taliban itself (Goldstein and New York Times, 2015). Since then, the *Bacha Bazi* securitization process has continued unabated.

      The government is still working to abolish the tradition, as are other players like the UN and AIHRC. The latest move done by the Afghan government is revising the entire chapter of the criminal code to *Bacha Bazi* in 2017 (The revised Afghanistan criminal code: an end for *Bacha Bazi*, 2018). The objective of the current study is to use the Marxist theory in order to examine how the class struggle depicted in Khaled Hosseini's book *The Kite Runner* led to *Bacha Bazi*.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

      A vivid literature review sheds light on the gruesome act of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan as archived by several scholars. Pallavi Thakur in her paper titled "AFGHAN WAR-ZONES AND BACHA BAZI: AN ANALYSIS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF KHALED HOSSEINI AND NADEEM ASLAM" highlights the chaotic lives of the native people in the conflict-ridden areas in *The Kite Runner* and *The Blind Man's Garden* while telling the tale of the commodification of children during war in parallel. These books are a patchwork of interpersonal connections and the war's toll on them. Both Hosseini and Aslam expose the plight of the defenseless youngsters caught in the whirlpool of the "war on terror" while also portraying

the geopolitical issues. Due to their homelessness, ethnic rivalry, poverty, parent loss, and compromised security, Afghan children were particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation during war and strife. The fundamental rights of children have been violated by Afghanistan's culturally accepted pedophilia. When local warlords sexually abuse children and US security troops refuse to defend the defenseless victims, it takes on its most repulsive form. These books highlight the hypocrisy of war and conflict, which serve to uphold the status quo of power structures rather than protect the rights of the populace.

Aanchal Arora and Manju Rani explore the arrival of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan and its psychological impact on the mental wellbeing of the victims as depicted by Hosseini in *The Kite Runner* emphasizing how the coerced androgynous identity availed by the young dancing boys leaves permanent psychological scars.

Amalendu Misra derives the civil war and political instability in Afghanistan to be the prime factors contributing to the deteriorating condition of the Bachas. He highlights how this ominous trend of rape and sexual violence are further incentivized in military war zones.

Sen in paper titled "Breaking Silence, Telling Stories: Unveiling the Trope of Male Rape in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*" has decoded the idea that men are 'unrapable' is stigmatized by the gendered discourse around rape. She further investigated why most occurrences of male rape have gone unreported. She further draws attention to how Hosseini illustrates the challenges faced by young onlookers who struggle with their duty to rape survivors and ultimately prioritize their safety over helping the victims. She examines how Hosseini avoids the physical experience of rape by framing it as a question of race, national identity, and power. Amongst the rape novels of the twenty-first century, it attests to the predicaments of onlookers and the general public due to their inaction and quiet, and how it results in the communal responsibility of child survivors of sexual assault.

Gibran et al. in the paper titled "The Negative Impacts of the Cultural Ban and Oppression of Human Rights on the Afghan's Psychological Condition in Khaled Hosseini's Novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*" has exposed that Khaled Hosseini's novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, depict examples of cultural ban and human rights violations in Afghanistan, would have a profound effect on the characters' psychological growth. Both Hazaras, Hassan and Sohrab, were victims of Taliban violations in *The Kite Runner*. Sohrab is the main character of the story because his psychological state is shown to be impacted by Assef's mistreatment of him, which led him to become his sex slave. The novel also

mentions the ban on kite-fighting, though Sohrab is never shown playing kite before the last chapter. Nonetheless, the abuse he endured during the novel's battle did illustrate the detrimental effects of human rights violations on psychological development.

Bacha Bazi as a concept has recently gained traction due to international interference. However, there remains much to be explored. The objective of this paper is to critically examine the root cause of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan from a Marxist perspective

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Karl Heinrich Marx and Friedrich Engels founded a political and economic theory popularly known as the Marxist theory that primarily draws its foundation from social class conflicts. Marx's central thesis was that those in society who possessed the means of production held all the power, and as a result, they were able to oppress and take advantage of those who lacked it. Marx thought that all cultures harbored an underlying political unconsciousness that included oppression. For instance, the owner of the factory exploits his employees, while the owner of the land exploits the farmer. One of the key claims of this theory is class distinction, which holds that people are split into groups according to their power and income, which leads to conflict within these groups. The lower class was deprived out of necessities like food, shelter, healthcare, education, and other things by the upper class, who took advantage of them in every manner possible. Marxism holds that a piece of literature reflects its cultural, social, and political context. In *The Kite Runner*, the Afghan society is split into two sections i.e., the Pashtuns and the Hazaras. While the former represents the economically and socially stronger class, the latter form the weaker socio-economic section of the society. The novel explores the atrocities committed by Pashtuns in the name of ethnic differences and the subsequent consequences of such heinous actions.

RESEARCH METHOD

According to scholars (Creswell & Maietta, 2002), qualitative research is aimed to deeply investigate, infer and analyze social phenomena through a typical context. Qualitative research is always based on the researcher's own interpretation of the given text. The use of these qualitative research methods in this study serves the goal of providing a thorough description of the text. The text is examined and assessed in-depth to answer the three vital questions in the world of research: What, Why and How? Hence, for the purpose of this study, an in-depth study of the primary text (i.e., Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*) was done. Consequently, relevant

books and articles served as secondary sources to bolster the findings. Techniques such as comprehensive descriptions, contextual details and engaging in the dialogic narrative proved quite useful in deciphering the driving motive behind each character's actions.

CONFLICT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS: AFGHANISTAN'S BACHA BAZI AS FORERUNNERS OF EXPLOITATION

According to Trading Economics (2021), the poverty in Afghanistan brought on by high unemployment rates (13.28%) pushes people to look for other means of money, which in turn leads to the exploitation of young boys who are already vulnerable. The percentage of the population below the poverty line in 2020 is 49.4% as per the statistics published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2020). The All-Survivors Project (2021) conducted a study focused on enhancing survivor-centered healthcare responses for male victims/survivors of sexual violence in Afghanistan. Kandahar, a male victim/survivor, states that: "Some boys have economic problems, some are jobless, so they want to address their needs and make relationships with such people. The perpetrators get benefits from their economic weakness" (Corboz, 2023).

RELIGIOUS TEXTS AND HOMOSEXUALITY

The young boys are terrorized into performing organized sodomy and homosexuality which has been condemned in various incidents amongst religious texts such as The Holy Bible and the Qur'an. The tale of Lot is one such instance. In Arabic, the word used for sodomy is liwāṭ (Bosworth et al., 1986). Luṭ (Lot) was a Prophet and messenger of God sent to educate and guide the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is told that God punished them as a warning against homosexuality alluding to it as a sin or "abomination" (fāḥisha). Consequently, the name Lut (Lot) came to be connected to the phrase for someone who engages in sodomy i.e., the sodomite, or lūṭī as a reference to the biblical narrative. The Qur'an (7:78–81) states: "And Lot, when he said to his people …: 'See, you approach men lustfully instead of women; no, you are a people that do exceed (musrif)'" (Arberry, 1980).

BACHA BAZI DUE TO CLASS CONFLICT DEPICTED IN *THE KITE RUNNER*

Afghanistan has always been the land of cultural and ethnic conflicts. The root cause of these class conflicts that give rise to the exploitation of Hazaras is the ethnic strife between Pashtuns and Hazaras. Hosseini employs

his characters to illustrate this dilemma effortlessly. His depiction of Hassan and Sohrab illustrates the maltreatment of the minority Hazara children. Assef mistreats Hassan as he thinks "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be" (Hosseini, 2013). This shows how the feeling of class superiority complex is hammered into every Pashtun, right from their early childhood. Amir is a Pashtun too while Hassan is a member of the Hazara community. Hence, Assef doesn't enjoy Amir and Hassan's friendship and thinks of Hassan as beneath them. He deliberately bullies Hassan and refers to him as "flat-nose" indicating his inferior Hazara identity (Hosseini, 2013). His maltreatment of Hassan is motivated by his hatred towards the Hazara community.

Hassan is a skilled kite runner. During the kite flying competition, while trailing the blue kite that Amir cut off, Hassan runs into Assef on his way back. "When Amir hurriedly approached the bazaar, he saw Hassan holding the blue kite and was trapped by Assef and the two other boys. Despite numerous threats, Hassan refused to give Assef the kite when he asked for it" (Arora and Manju, 2023). Assef gets ballistic on being refused by an ordinary Hazara servant boy. Thus, he takes revenge by forcing sodomy on Hassan. This act of raping gives Assef a sense of dominance both physically and metaphorically while Hassan quietly resigns himself to his fate of subversion as the inevitable fate of every *Bacha* in the land of *Bacha Bazi* (See figure 1).

> *One was the blue kite resting against the wall, close to the cast iron stove; the other was Hassan's brown corduroy pants thrown on a heap of eroded bricks. Assef knelt behind Hassan's hips and lifted his bare buttocks. He kept one hand on Hassan's back and undid his jeans. Dropped his underwear. He positioned himself behind Hassan. Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even whimper. He moved his head slightly and I caught a glimpse of his face. Saw the resignation in it. It was a look I had seen before. It was the look of the lamb.* (Hosseini, 2013)

Amir is a gullible onlooker during the episode and refrains from intervening to assist Hassan out of fear for his own safety. He goes into detail about his escape from the alley.

> *I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of get- ting hurt". He rationalizes his cowardly deed as a way to ease and heal his guilt. "He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?* (Hosseini, 2013)

This again solidifies the destiny of a poor Hazara in a world dominated by Pashtuns.

Figure 1
Kite Runner Timeline (Krespil, 2011)

Date	Event(s)	Amir's age	Page
1915	Baba's grandfather married his 3rd wife and Baba's father was born.		
1931	Picture of Baba's father with *King Mohammad Nadir Shah* (*displayed in living room*). *He reigned from 1929-1933.*		5
1933	Baba is born		24
	King Nadir Shah is assassinated.		
	Mohammad Sahir(Zahir) Shah takes throne.		24
1963	Amir's birth		
	Amir's mother, Sofia Akrami, dies		
1964	Hassan's birth	1	6
	Sanuabar leaves		6
1973	*King Mohammad Sahir Shah, away in Italy, is overthrown by his cousin Mohammad Daoud Khan, ending "the king's forty-year reign with a bloodless coup" (36).*	10	35-37
	Daoud abolishes monarchy, establishes himself as President		36
1974	Hassan's surgery	11	47
1975	Amir wins the kite contest	12	66
	Hassan's rape		73/75
1976	Amir's 13th birthday party	13	94-100
	Hassan and Ali leave		109
1978	*Daoud is assassinated*	15	
1980	*U.S. boycotts Olympic games in Moscow*	17	
1981	*Russians invade.* (March) Baba and Amir leave Afghanistan.	18	110-124
	Amir and Baba are in Pakistan		

The fact that Hassan was consistently picked out for bullying and humiliation demonstrates that the wealthy and majority always held the reins of power in society. In contrast, despite Amir's timidity and cowardice, he was consistently spared because he was the powerful man's son. "How lucky I was to have Baba as my father, the sole reason, I believed Assef mostly refrained from harassing me too much" (Hosseini, 2013). Assef capitalizes on his Pashtun heritage and his vile actions are further intensified with the invasion of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The situation in Afghanistan worsened following the Taliban invasion. While resourceful Pashtuns fled to America or Pakistan, those who were less affluent remained in the country and became affiliated with the Taliban. The worst was reserved for the Hazaras in the country. Amir was one of the few lucky ones who moved to the United States. Amidst the nation's turmoil, Hassan was left on his own. He had a child named Sohrab after

getting married. Unfortunately, he and his wife were assassinated by the Taliban one day, leaving Sohrab as an orphan. When Amir discovers that Sohrab is his nephew and Hassan is his half-brother, he hurries back to Kabul to defend Sohrab from the Taliban and *Bacha Bazi*. As Rahim Khan tells him "Children are fragile, Amir Jan. Kabul is already full of broken children and I don't want Sohrab to become another" (Hosseini, 2013). Amir, the book's protagonist, becomes intimately involved in Sohrab's life as he looks for forgiveness for his past wrongdoings. Sohrab's desire for atonement is intertwined with his road to rehabilitation. Through the lens of Sohrab's depiction, the piece addresses issues of guilt, atonement, and the generational ramifications of violence. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini subtly refers to the concept of *Bacha Bazi* through the characterization of Sohrab.

The orphanage is mostly home to Hazaras and other impoverished, malnourished youngsters. The proprietor of the orphanage informs Amir when he goes to save Sohrab "There is very little shelter here, almost no food, no clean water" (Hosseini, 2013). The children are taken from the orphanage by wealthy Pashtuns who in turn sexually abuse them. One such sexual predator harassing Sohrab is none other than Assef.

Amir, in his urge to save Sohrab gave Sohrab's polaroid to Zaman, the orphanage caretaker. "Salaam alaykum," I said. I showed him the Polaroid. "We're searching for this boy" (Hosseini, 2013). At first, Amir is turned away by the orphanage director, who thinks that Amir is a Talib who has come to take a child to satiate his sexual avarice. "I am sorry. I have never seen him" (Hosseini 2013). Upon knowing that Amir has actually come to protect Sohrab, Zaman tells him that the boy has been abducted from the orphanage by a Talib, obliquely warning him that he might become a victim of sexual exploitation.

> There is a Talib official, he muttered. He visits once every month or two. He brings cash with him, not a lot, but better than nothing at all. His shifty eyes fell on me, rolled away. Usually, he'll take a girl. But not always. (Hosseini, 2013)

Zaman also regrets not being able to protect the children in the orphanage from the dangerous warlord. "If I deny him one child, he takes ten. So, I let him take one and leave the judging on Allah" (Hosseini, 2013). This demonstrates the Talib's sadistic indulgence in using children to satiate his need for sex. Zaman acknowledges his powerlessness by saying "I swallow my pride and take his goddamn filthy… dirty money. Then I go to the bazar and buy food for the children" (Hosseini, 2013). The text further highlights how the Taliban has seized total control and is responsible for the suffering of the Hazaras. It illustrates how poverty and helplessness have contributed

to the spread of *Bacha Bazi* throughout Afghanistan thus resulting in their children being mistreated, abused, and treated like commodities.

> *The poverty index of Afghanistan was rising from 2007 to2017. It grew by 4% from 2007-08 to 2011-2012 before increasing sharply within 2016-17. The poverty gap also grew by 5% in total from2007-08 to 2016-17. The trend seems to keep increasing every year, and it becomes a severe problem and a trigger to the practice of the cause of BachaBazi. (*Nisya et al, 2019)

Amir runs to the place where Sohrab is being held to find him. The fact that the crime against Sohrab is committed in public, far more so than the attack on Hassan, and without guilt or concern for repercussions, adds to its horrific aspect. He freezes on seeing Assef. Knowing that Sohrab is Hassan's kid, acts as a catalyst for Assef's hatred towards him. Amir requests Assef to let go of Sohrab. Assef sends his men in to bring the youngster. As Sohrab enters the room, Amir hears a jingling sound. He is stunned to see Sohrab:

> *A boy dressed in a loose, sapphire blue pirhan-tumban followed. The resemblance was breath-taking. Disorienting. Rahim Khan's Polaroid hadn't done justice to it. His head was shaved, his eyes darkened with mascara, and his cheeks glowed with an unnatural red.* (Hosseini, 2013).

This description of *Bacha Bazi* centers on the deliberate reconstruction of a young boy's sexual identity to suit the palate of the pedophilic *Bacha Baz*. Amir remarks, "I guessed the music wasn't sinful as long as it played to Taliban ears" (Hosseini, 2013). He observes Sohrab dancing for the Taliban.

> *Sohrab raised his arms and turned slowly. He stood on tip-toes, spun gracefully, dipped to his knees, straightened, and spun again. His little hands swiveled at the wrists, his fingers snapped, and his head swung side to side like a pendulum. His feet pounded the floor, the bells jingling in perfect harmony with the beat of the table. He kept his eyes closed.* (Hosseini, 2013)

Sohrab is in terrible shape wrapped in fear and humiliation. He has experienced emotional and physical trauma since childhood. He is extremely terrified and made aware of the horrors of sexual assault by the Talib's presence. Here Sohrab is representative of the dancing boys of Afghanistan who are easy targets of *Bacha Bazi* due to their lack of resources as orphans. Amir witnesses Talib's seductive efforts towards Sohrab. By referring to Sohrab as "my Hazara boy", Assef confirms that he views the youngster as his property. "Bia, bia, my boy," the Talib said, calling Sohrab to him. Sohrab went to him, head down, stood between his thighs. The Talib wrapped his arms around the boy.

How talented he is, nay, my Hazara boy!" he said. His hands slid down the child's back, then up, felt under his armpits. One of the guards elbowed the other and snickered. (Hosseini, 2013)

The Talib's sexual perversity is evident in the way he caresses Sohrab's body. Hosseini aptly depicts the plight of the Hazara youngsters who are confined in *Bacha Bazi* and are sexually abused because of the ongoing antagonism between the two ethnic groups. The book reveals the Pashtuns' unwavering determination to eradicate all trace of the Hazara population from Afghanistan. The Talib, Assef, explains the rationale behind the Pashtuns' choice to purge Afghanistan.

Like pride in your people, your customs, your language. Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage. (Hosseini, 2013)

The comment makes clear how deeply Pashtuns hate Hazaras and other ethnic groups, a hatred that has resulted in bloodshed, killings, barbarism, and ruthlessness in Afghanistan.

For example, the Hazaras in Afghanistan are never treated on par with the Pashtuns, and their distinctiveness allows the suppressed Hazaras to lead a restricted life without demanding much from society, while the Pashtuns continue their dominance (Ethnicity in Afghanistan Literature, 2021).

Children are the victims of violence and sexual abuse due to this culturally induced civil war. Amir criticizes Assef for his unwavering resolve:

What mission is that? I heard myself say. Stoning adulterers? Raping children? Flogging women for wearing high heels? Massacring Hazaras? All in the name of Islam? (Hosseini, 2013)

The novel portrays *Bacha Bazi's* existence as partly motivated by cultural rivalry. Diana Saltarelli and Kenneth D. Bush explain that the main ethnic group uses a variety of tactics to subjugate the minority ethnic groupings, "Their strategies include scorched earth tactics to starve populations and destroy infrastructures, sexual torture and mass rape, ethnic and social cleansing, and even genocide" (2000).

The Kite Runner projects the predicament faced by thousands of male Afghan children who are entrenched in the culture of *Bacha Bazi*. "*Bacha Bazi* is a reflection of an extreme instance of the oppressive, sexually perverse Afghan patriarchy" (Arora and Rani, 2024). The book also makes the case that individuals as well as society as a collective unit must take action against the imposing and authoritarian power structures that seek to control it through the imposition of harsh rules. Any culture that violates people's human rights and is based on exploitation ought to be rejected rather than nurtured.

RESULTS

Marxism helps us understand how historical materialism, class conflict, and ideological hegemony interact to sustain oppressive and exploitative regimes, especially when it comes to the precarious situation of youngsters like Hassan and Sohrab. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* uses these characters as powerful metaphors for the working class under capitalism. As a Hazara born into slavery, Hassan's life paints the innate power disparities that are maintained by socio-economic classes. He is brutalized by the affluent Pashtun class. His son, Sohrab, carries on his father's history of exploitation by succumbing to political unrest and war, highlighting the novel's portrayal of oppression's cyclical nature. The novel also emphasizes how ideology plays a part in maintaining and legitimizing exploitative regimes. Characters such as Assef, motivated by an ideology of racist, ethnic and social superiority, take advantage of their power and victimize others who are considered inferior. This intellectual hegemony maintains the status quo of power relations and permits the unfettered exploitation of weak people such as Hassan and Sohrab. Those in authority use Hassan's loyalty and innocence as a commodity, turning him into a tool for their own gain. In a world full of instability and bloodshed, Sohrab loses his identity and agency and is used as a pawn by warlords and opportunists underlining the structural inequities that sustain cycles of exploitation and oppression better by analyzing the power dynamics, and ideological hegemony that are present in the book.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic strife and instable political environment are some of the root causes of the abominable act of *Bacha Bazi*. It is a clear violation of children's human rights committed in the name of class dominance in Afghanistan which needs to be curbed at all costs. The UN should formulate and implement stricter legal mandates against such form of child/human trafficking, slavery and abuse. The perpetrators should be given quick and severe punishments. While concerned individuals should stay active and alert at the first signs of sexual and child abuse, sex education and self-defense classes should be made mandatory in all schools in Afghanistan. Apart from this, the socio-economic gap between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the country needs to be addressed. Easy and free access to both physical and mental healthcare should be provided equally for all irrespective of their class, ethnic or racial identity. It is only via a combined effort that we can hope to bring in a better tomorrow for the children of Afghanistan, free of *Bacha Bazi* and its repercussions.

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Peer-Reviewed Article

Buddhist Philosophy and Confucian Thought: Reinterpreting Family Values among Vietnamese Youth in Contemporary Society

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ABSTRACT

This study explores changing family values among Vietnamese youth amid socio-economic transformation and globalization. While traditional values like marriage and filial piety remain important, they increasingly coexist with modern ideals emphasizing education, economic stability, and personal autonomy. Using structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 397 young adults aged 18–30, the study offers both quantitative and qualitative insights. Findings reveal growing acceptance of non-traditional structures, including cohabitation, single parenthood, and shared caregiving, signaling a shift toward more progressive, inclusive family models. These changes reflect a redefinition of familial roles and expectations. The study's implications are relevant for educators, policymakers, and social workers aiming to strengthen family cohesion and adapt to evolving societal dynamics in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords: Education, Family values, Gender equality, Intergenerational relationships, Tradition and modernity, Vietnamese youth.

INTRODUCTION

Family values, as fundamental components of cultural identity, play a crucial role in shaping social norms and individual behaviors. In Vietnam, a country characterized by its rich cultural heritage and rapid socio-economic transformation, family values are undergoing significant evolution. Historically, the traditional Vietnamese family system has been strongly influenced by Confucian, Buddhist, and indigenous philosophies, collectively emphasizing values such as filial piety, collective well-being, social harmony, and hierarchical respect within family structures (Nguyen, 2022b; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Confucianism has played a particularly pivotal role in shaping the Vietnamese family structure by promoting hierarchical relationships, filial duty, and gender roles centered around patrilineal lineage and elder respect (Nguyen, 2022a, 2022b). Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, has contributed significantly through teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and compassion, guiding moral behavior, familial responsibility, and harmonious interpersonal relations within Vietnamese society (Nguyen et al., 2022; T. V. Nguyen et al., 2024). These traditional philosophies, interwoven with indigenous beliefs, established the Vietnamese family as a cornerstone of societal cohesion, where familial obligations and communal responsibilities were prioritized over individual desires.

However, contemporary Vietnam's integration into the global economy has brought about profound changes in social structures, economic dynamics, and cultural interactions. These changes are particularly evident within the family unit, where traditional roles and expectations are increasingly challenged by modern values such as gender equality, economic independence, and personal autonomy. Young Vietnamese adults, in particular, are navigating these shifts, balancing respect for traditional family norms with a desire for greater individual freedom and self-expression. This transformation raises critical questions about how family values are evolving in contemporary Vietnamese society and what implications this evolution has for social cohesion and cultural identity.

Research on the transformation of family values in Vietnam reveals both continuity and change. Traditional values such as filial piety, respect for elders, and communal living continue to be important, but they coexist with emerging attitudes that prioritize personal fulfillment, gender equality, and economic independence. Studies by Nguyen (2022a), Susilo (2020), and T. V. Nguyen et al. (2024) highlight the tension between preserving cultural identity and adapting to modern influences. These scholars emphasize that

while globalization and modernization present challenges to traditional values, they also offer opportunities for renewal and adaptation.

At the same time, the role of technology and social media in reshaping family interactions cannot be understated. As noted by Tympa et al. (2024) and Mackay et al. (2022), digital communication tools have transformed how family members connect and share their experiences. While these technologies facilitate greater connectivity and can enhance familial bonds, they also introduce new dynamics that can disrupt traditional patterns of interaction and create generational divides.

Given these complex dynamics, it is essential to examine how Vietnamese youth perceive and navigate the evolving landscape of family values. This study seeks to explore their attitudes towards traditional norms and modern values, the impact of technology on family interactions, and the educational implications for transmitting cultural and ethical values in an increasingly globalized and digital world. By focusing on these themes, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping family values in Hanoi, Vietnam (Figure 1) and to provide insights that can inform policies and practices that support both cultural continuity and social progress.

Figure 1
Hanoi – Capital of Vietnam
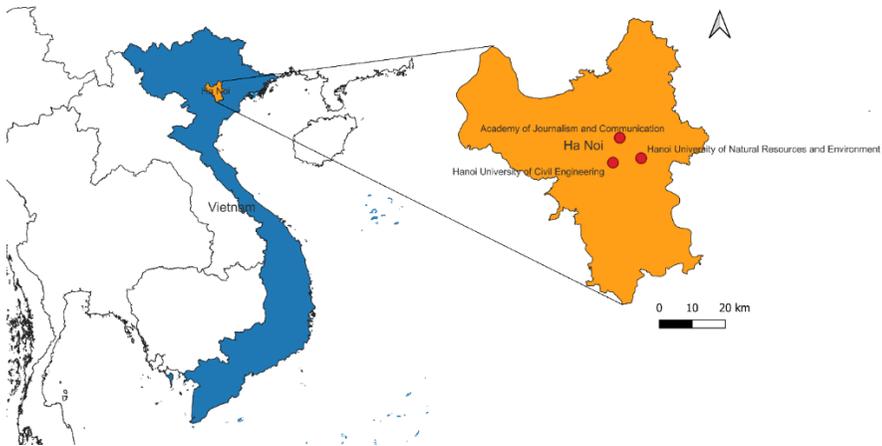
Note. Created by the author.

In doing so, this study addresses several gaps in the existing literature, particularly the need for more nuanced analyses of how young Vietnamese negotiate the interplay between tradition and modernity. It also seeks to

provide empirical data on the attitudes and behaviors of Vietnamese youth, which are crucial for understanding broader social trends and developing culturally relevant educational and policy interventions.

Overall, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the evolution of family values in Vietnam, offering a comprehensive examination of the forces shaping these values and the strategies that families and individuals use to navigate a rapidly changing social landscape. By bridging traditional perspectives with contemporary realities, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the role of family values in sustaining Vietnam's cultural identity and fostering a cohesive society amidst global changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Family Values and Cultural Identity

The preservation of traditional family values remains a cornerstone in shaping Vietnam's cultural identity, especially in the context of globalization. Nguyen (2022a) asserts that global influences are reshaping family structures and values, advocating for policies that can balance positive impacts while mitigating risks. This sentiment is echoed by Susilo (2020), who emphasizes the family's role in instilling cultural and moral values in children, which is crucial for maintaining societal cohesion and identity. Both researchers agree that while globalization presents challenges, it also offers opportunities to reinforce traditional values by adapting them to new contexts.

However, T. V. Nguyen et al. (2024) and Nguyen et al. (2022) argue that the philosophical underpinnings of Vietnamese family values, particularly Buddhist principles like the Four Noble Truths, continue to shape contemporary views on family and social responsibilities. They suggest that these philosophical traditions provide a framework for understanding and preserving cultural identity amidst rapid change. Nguyen (2022b) extends this discussion by examining the influence of Chinese philosophy on Vietnamese thought, especially regarding human relations and moral education, suggesting that these deep-rooted philosophies offer resilience against the erosion of traditional values. The contrast in these perspectives highlights a key debate in the literature: whether external global influences necessarily dilute traditional values, or whether they can coexist and even strengthen under the right conditions.

Adding to this discourse, T. N. T. Nguyen and Q. T. Nguyen (2024) highlights the impact of urbanization on cultural values, emphasizing the necessity of balancing traditional practices with modern influences to sustain cultural identity amidst rapid changes. This is in line with Pham (2013), who

stresses the importance of cultural stability and sustainability, contending that preserving traditional values is crucial in a globalized world where local customs are increasingly threatened. Similarly, Ton and Nguyen (2014), and Mai and Mai (2003) provide insights into the challenges posed by urbanization and globalization, arguing for deliberate efforts to integrate traditional values with modern life. These scholars collectively suggest that the preservation of cultural identity is not about resisting change but about navigating it thoughtfully.

Modern Influences and Gender Equality

The integration of modern values such as gender equality, economic independence, and personal autonomy presents both opportunities and challenges for Vietnamese families. Putri et al. (2023) highlight the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for both genders, particularly in education, noting that societal stigmas still limit women's educational and professional prospects. They advocate for policies that promote gender justice, aligning with Pusztai et al. (2022), who explore the impact of education and economic independence on marriage behavior. They find that education can delay marriage but also promotes gender equality by enhancing women's economic independence, suggesting a complex relationship between modern values and traditional family structures.

Contrasting these findings, Tympa et al. (2024) argue for the importance of financial literacy and economic education from an early age, positing that these skills enhance children's social-emotional development and promote financial independence, which is vital for modern family dynamics. This emphasis on practical education reflects broader global trends towards empowering individuals through knowledge and skills, but also raises questions about the compatibility of these trends with traditional Vietnamese family values, which often emphasize collective well-being over individual success.

Changing Attitudes Towards Marriage and Family Structures

Attitudes towards marriage and family structures among Vietnamese youth are undergoing significant transformation, reflecting broader socio-economic changes. Pusztai et al. (2022) note that while marriage remains a critical social institution, the criteria for selecting a partner have shifted towards personal compatibility, love, and mutual respect, moving away from traditional considerations of family background and parental approval. This shift towards greater autonomy and personal choice is further corroborated by Minh and Huong (2023), who report a decline in parental influence over marriage decisions among modern youth.

Vu (2021a, 2021b) explores the dynamics of companionate marriage and gender roles among young couples, highlighting that women are more engaged in emotional labor and seek greater intimacy, while men often suppress their emotions, leading to potential conflicts that, although not necessarily threatening marital stability, can affect marital quality. Tran (2021) examines liberalizing trends in marriage and divorce, reflecting increased individualism and gender equality, while Vu et al. (2021) emphasize the sacrifices single mothers make for their children's education, driven by cultural values and aspirations for better social outcomes. H. M. Nguyen (2024) discusses the impact of socio-economic changes on family dynamics, noting challenges such as gender roles, childcare, and elderly care. Ngo-Thi et al. (2022) find that changing attitudes towards premarital relationships and marital expectations are shaping young adults' intentions to marry. These findings collectively suggest a shift from traditional norms towards more individualistic and flexible approaches to marriage and family in Vietnam, yet also highlight the tensions and conflicts that can arise as traditional and modern values collide.

The Role of Technology in Family Interactions

The integration of technology and social media into daily life has dramatically reshaped family interactions, altering how family members communicate and share experiences. Tympa et al. (2024) argue that technology facilitates communication and helps maintain connections among family members, which is particularly valuable in an increasingly mobile and dispersed society. However, they also note that technology can detract from direct, personal interactions, introducing a dual impact that is evident in the Vietnamese context, where youth increasingly rely on digital tools for communication while striving to uphold traditional family bonds.

Mackay et al. (2022) discuss "technoference," where technology use interrupts family interactions, negatively affecting parent-child relationships and potentially leading to feelings of neglect among children. In a similar vein, L. T. T. Nguyen et al. (2024) further examine the impact of Internet usage on parent-child communication in Vietnamese households, highlighting that while the Internet can foster more open and egalitarian communication, it also creates conflicts and misunderstandings due to generational and cultural differences. They advocate for a more structured approach to managing technology use within families to better navigate these challenges.

In addition, a study by High 5 Inc. (2023) supports this view, emphasizing the value of intentional family bonding time without technological distractions. Their findings suggest that tech-free environments

during meals and gatherings lead to improved communication and stronger relationships, underscoring the importance of balancing the benefits of technology with the need for meaningful personal interactions. Collectively, these studies underscore the complexities of managing technology's role in family life and suggest that finding a balance between digital connectivity and personal interaction is crucial for maintaining strong familial bonds in an increasingly digital world.

Educational Implications and Family-Based Value Education

The family's role in educating children remains fundamental, particularly in transmitting cultural and ethical values. Susilo (2020) emphasizes that value education within the family can significantly improve children's attitudes, behavior, and stress management, underscoring the need for educational programs that integrate family-based learning and support the transmission of traditional values while adapting to contemporary contexts. Phan et al. (2024) add to this discussion by highlighting the role of higher education institutions in shaping societal values and responsibilities, suggesting that these institutions can extend their influence to family education and community engagement.

Lastly, Nguyen and Nguyen (2024), Nguyen, Nguyen, et al. (2023), Nguyen, Pham, et al. (2023), and Pham et al. (2023) discuss the relevance of traditional philosophical doctrines, such as Confucianism and the thoughts of President Ho Chi Minh[1], in contemporary Vietnamese education and family values. They argue that integrating traditional values with modern educational practices is essential to address the challenges posed by globalization and rapid economic development. This integration, they suggest, can provide a balanced approach to education that respects cultural heritage while embracing progressive changes.

Despite the extensive research on the evolution of family values in Vietnam, several gaps remain. There is a need for more longitudinal research to track changes in family values over time and understand how these values evolve with societal changes and individual life stages. Comparative studies examining family values across different cultural and socio-economic

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[1] President Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) was the leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) from 1945 to 1969. He also founded the Indochina Communist Party (1930) and the Viet-Minh (1941). He was one of the main forces behind the post-World War II anti-colonial struggle in Asia, leading the Vietnamese nationalist movement for almost thirty years, and he was also one of the most significant communist leaders of the twentieth century.

contexts within Vietnam could also provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing family values.

Additionally, while the impact of technology and social media on family interactions has been acknowledged, further research is needed to identify strategies for leveraging technology to enhance family bonds and support educational initiatives. The role of policy in supporting diverse family structures and promoting gender equality also requires further investigation. Future research should focus on developing and assessing the impact of policies that promote work-life balance, flexible working hours, and parental leave, as well as community programs that encourage shared domestic responsibilities.

This literature review underscores the dynamic interplay between traditional and modern values within Vietnamese family structures. It reveals a complex and evolving landscape in which longstanding traditions—such as marriage, filial piety, and communal living—continue to hold significance, while contemporary influences like gender equality, economic independence, and personal autonomy increasingly shape family dynamics.

In response to the gaps identified in existing scholarship, this study aims to explore how Vietnamese youth perceive these traditional values in the context of rapid societal change. It also investigates prevailing attitudes toward modern ideals, including shifts in roles and responsibilities within the family. Furthermore, the research examines how technology and social media influence family interactions and communication patterns among young people. In addition, it seeks to understand youth perspectives on emerging family forms, such as cohabitation, single parenthood, and divorce. Lastly, the study considers the educational implications for families in transmitting cultural and ethical values amid globalization and technological advancement. By addressing these questions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Vietnamese family values are evolving and how this transformation can be navigated to preserve cultural identity in a modern context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to explore the evolving family values among Vietnamese youth. The methodology is designed to capture a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of the young population (aged 18-30) towards traditional and modern family values in the context of socio-economic changes and globalization.

Research Design

The research design follows a sequential explanatory strategy, starting with quantitative data collection through structured questionnaires, followed by qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews (Figure 2). This approach ensures that quantitative findings are supplemented with qualitative insights, providing a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons behind the observed trends.

Figure 2

Research Methodology flowchart
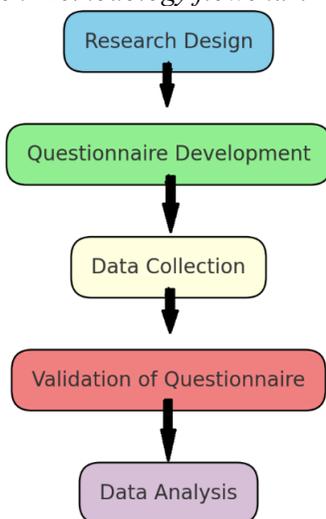
Note. Created by the author.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was specifically developed for this study, drawing on existing literature and theoretical frameworks related to family values, gender roles, marriage, and intergenerational relationships in contemporary Vietnamese society. It was designed to cover the following themes:

- Attitudes towards marriage and criteria for selecting a life partner.
- Perceptions of filial piety and intergenerational responsibilities.
- Views on gender equality and economic roles within the family.
- Preferences for family living arrangements and caregiving roles.
- The impact of modern technology on family dynamics and interactions.

The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions, including multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative

and qualitative data collection. A full list of the questions is included in Appendix A.

Data Collection

Data was collected from October 2023 to April 2024, targeting Vietnamese youth aged 18-30 from three major educational institutions: the Academy of Journalism and Communication, Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment, and Hanoi University of Civil Engineering in Hanoi, Vietnam (Figure 1). A total of 397 participants completed a Google survey form, and 50 of these participants were chosen for in-depth interviews based on their survey responses.

Validation of the Questionnaire

To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of participants (n=30) prior to the full survey. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the questions for clarity and relevance. The final version of the questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in the field of sociology and cultural studies to ensure content validity.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify patterns and correlations between different variables, such as gender, educational attainment, and socio-economic status. The qualitative data from the in-depth interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and insights. The results of the questionnaire were validated using Cronbach's alpha to measure internal consistency and reliability. The qualitative findings were triangulated with the quantitative data to ensure robustness and depth in the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the institutional review board of each participating educational institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process.
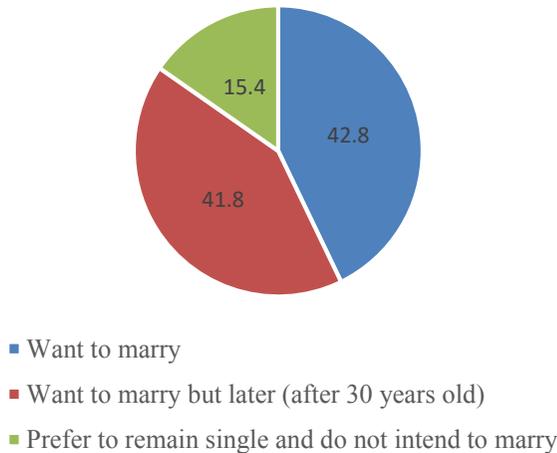
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Values of Marriage and Love in Vietnam Today

Marriage and love remain significant values in contemporary Vietnamese society, including among the younger generation, though there is a growing trend towards marrying later in life. Survey data indicates that only 16.1% of respondents are in favor of marrying at the legal age in Vietnam (20

for men and 18 for women). Nevertheless, 84.6% of young people consider marriage necessary, with 41.8% preferring to marry later, after the age of 30. Additionally, only 15.4% of young respondents express a preference to remain single and not marry, underscoring that marriage is still an important goal for the majority of young Vietnamese (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Future Preferences for Marriage and Family

■ Want to marry

■ Want to marry but later (after 30 years old)

■ Prefer to remain single and do not intend to marry

This inclination aligns with the traditional view that starting a family is a key milestone in adulthood. Furthermore, the survey results from Question 2 in Table 1 reveal that the proportion of women wanting to marry after the age of 30 (44.1%) and those not wishing to marry at all (17%) is higher than that of men (37.76% and 11.89%, respectively).

Despite the sustained importance of marriage, the criteria for choosing a life partner have evolved significantly. Young people today prioritize educational level (78.3%), good job, and high income (71.5%) as primary considerations (Figure 4). The criterion of being from the same hometown is the least chosen, at 27.5%. This shift from collective values, such as family compatibility, locality, and ethnicity, to individualistic considerations reflects a broader societal trend towards personal achievement and economic stability. This change is consistent with the findings of Nguyen et al. (2022), and T. N. T. Nguyen and Q. T. Nguyen (2024), who argue that modern Vietnamese youth increasingly prioritize personal growth and self-fulfillment over traditional familial expectations.

Table 1

Marriage Preferences Among Young Vietnamese by Gender

Dimensions	Question survey	Male		Female	
		Qt	%	Qt	%
Want to marry	2	72	50.35%	98	38.6%
Want to marry but later (after 30 years old)	2	54	37.76%	112	44.1%
Prefer to remain single and do not intend to marry	2	17	11.89%	44	17.3%
		143	100%	254	100%

Note. Qt = Quantity.

Furthermore, the increasing acceptance of non-traditional family structures, such as cohabitation without marriage and single motherhood, highlights a significant shift in societal values. Historically, these arrangements were rare, but they are becoming more prevalent today. The rise in divorce rates among young couples also reflects this changing landscape, with 76.3% of young people indicating a willingness to consider divorce if their marriage becomes unsuitable. Additionally, 48.6% of participants expressed a willingness to live alone or become single mothers, and 42.1% explicitly chose this option, according to responses to Question 4 of the survey.

Figure 4

Criteria for Choosing a Life Partner
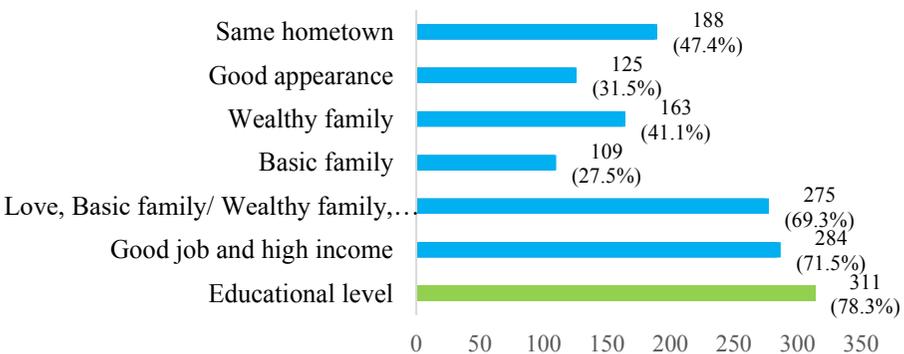
The findings from Question 4's survey results provide a comprehensive overview of attitudes toward specific social situations. The survey included 397 valid responses, with no exclusions, ensuring a complete dataset for analysis. The reliability of the survey scale, which aimed to measure attitudes toward various social scenarios, was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha. The Cronbach's alpha which resulted in a value of 0.776 (and 0.777 based on standardized items) across three items "Single Motherhood," "Living Alone," and "Divorce if Marriage is Unsuitable." This suggests a good level of internal consistency, indicating that the items reliably measure the same underlying construct. Table 2 provides the mean and standard deviation for each phenomenon based on survey responses.

Table 2:
Acceptance of New Family Phenomena among Vietnamese Youth

| Phenomenon	Survey Question	M	SD	N
Single Motherhood	4	2.32	1.302	397
Living Alone	4	2.57	1.381	397
Divorce if Marriage is Unsuitable	4	3.57	1.340	397

Note. M = Mean Response, *SD =* Standard Deviation, *N =* Number of Responses.

The results indicate a moderate acceptance of divorce when a marriage is unsuitable (M = 3.57, SD = 1.340), while acceptance levels for living alone (M = 2.57, SD = 1.381) and single motherhood (M = 2.32, SD = 1.302) are lower. These statistics indicate a relatively higher acceptance for divorce when a marriage is unsuitable, compared to less acceptance for living alone and the least acceptance for single motherhood. The scale's reliability is generally good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.776), although the item on divorce seems to diverge slightly from the other items in how it aligns with the overall construct being assessed. These insights provide a nuanced understanding of social attitudes within the surveyed population.

These findings suggest a considerable shift in perceptions of marriage, with sustainability no longer regarded as an inviolable objective. Instead, divorce is increasingly viewed as a legitimate response to marital dissatisfaction, prioritizing individual autonomy and personal happiness over traditional concepts of marital stability. This evolving perspective is consistent with the arguments put forward by Vu (2021a, 2021b) and Tran (2021), who emphasize a trend toward more individualistic and flexible approaches to marriage and family in Vietnam.

The prioritization of values within romantic relationships has also evolved. Young Vietnamese continue to value fidelity (94.7%) and responsibility (92.7%) highly, alongside other attributes such as equality, sharing, and financial stability—all of which are prioritized by over 80% of participants (Figure 5). This strong emphasis on equality and financial stability reflects a practical and egalitarian approach to relationships, where mutual respect and shared responsibilities are central. Notably, chastity, once a highly valued virtue in traditional Vietnamese culture, is now the least prioritized value among the younger generation. This represents a significant departure from rigid traditional norms, moving towards a more flexible and contemporary understanding of love and relationships. This shift is consistent with the findings of L. T. T. Nguyen et al. (2024), who suggest that modern Vietnamese youth are increasingly favoring values that align with personal autonomy and egalitarian principles.

Figure 5

Love Values Prioritized by the Young Generation
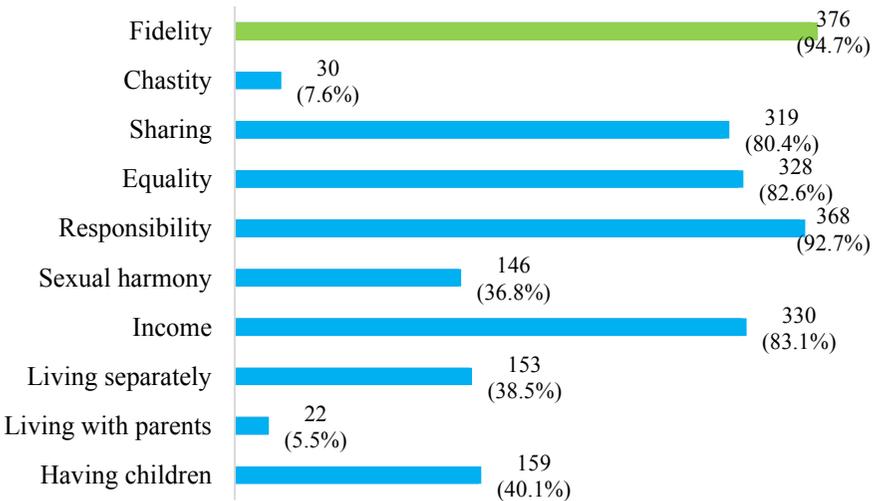
The shift in values concerning marriage and love among the younger generation in Vietnam reflects broader social changes. The increased importance of education and economic independence in marital decisions aligns with the research by Pusztai et al. (2022), who note that while religiosity still influences marriage decisions, education both strengthens and delays marriage plans by fostering greater economic independence and personal development. The changing views on marriage and divorce reflect a

shift towards personal fulfillment and away from traditional constraints, paralleling global trends towards gender equality and the recognition of women's rights to education and economic independence, as discussed by Soetan and Nguyen (2023).

These evolving values in marriage and love reflect a significant transformation within Vietnamese society, where traditional norms are being re-evaluated and adapted to contemporary realities. The emphasis placed by the younger generation on education, economic stability, and equality indicates a shift towards a more modern and individualistic approach to relationships, while still maintaining the fundamental importance of marriage and family. This balance between tradition and modernity is essential for understanding the current social dynamics in Vietnam and their implications for future generations. The study of these evolving values offers crucial insights into how Vietnamese society navigates the interplay between preserving cultural identity and embracing modern influences.

2. Changing Perspectives on Family Values and Filial Piety in Vietnamese Society

Vietnamese family values have traditionally been characterized by a strong sense of filial piety and the importance of children within marriage. However, recent studies indicate a shift in these values among the younger generation. This analysis explores these changing perspectives, drawing from various research studies and contextualizing them within broader socio-cultural and economic trends.

### The Necessity of Children in Marriage

Traditionally, children were considered essential for a happy and lasting marriage in Vietnamese society. The belief was that children, particularly sons, were crucial for continuing the family line and providing support in old age. However, recent survey data suggest a shift in these perceptions among young Vietnamese. While 40.8% of participants still agree that children are necessary for a successful marriage, a nearly equal proportion, 41.8%, disagree (Figure 6).

This divergence reflects a more modern perspective that challenges the traditional notion that children are the central bond in a marriage. This shift in attitude contrasts sharply with past beliefs, particularly in rural areas, where the absence of children often led to polygamous practices, such as a man marrying another woman to ensure offspring. Today, the younger generation's more relaxed view on this matter mirrors broader changes in societal norms and values, where marriage is increasingly seen as a

partnership based on mutual compatibility rather than a means to fulfill familial obligations.

Figure 6
Necessity of Marriage as the Bond for a Happy Family
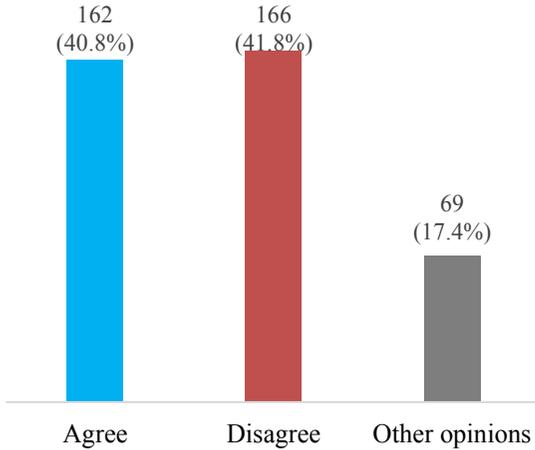
Changing Attitudes Toward Sons and Daughters

　　Historically, Vietnamese families have shown a strong preference for sons, primarily because sons were expected to financially support parents in their old age and carry forward the family name to future generations. This preference originated from Confucian teachings, an ancient Chinese philosophy widely adopted in Vietnam, which stresses male lineage and the duties of sons to continue family traditions and take care of their aging parents. Even today, virtually every person in Vietnam is familiar with this cultural expectation, recognizing its influence on family and social interactions. Under these beliefs, sons are seen as essential for preserving family honor and ensuring the family's continuity.

　　Survey responses to Questions 9 indicate a significant shift in how young Vietnamese view the necessity of having children and the traditional preference for sons. When asked whether children are essential for a happy and sustainable marriage, only 13.1% (n = 52) of participants agreed, while 44.33% (n = 176) disagreed, and 42.57% (n = 169) chose "Other". This suggests that the younger generation increasingly views marriage as a partnership based on compatibility, rather than one defined by parenthood.

　　Furthermore, the survey results reflect a pronounced shift in young Vietnamese attitudes toward childbearing and the traditional preference for sons. In response to Question 10a, only 2.77% of respondents (n = 11)

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believed it was necessary to have a son, while 71.53% (n = 284) agreed that "any child is a child," regardless of gender, and 26% (n = 102) selected "Other". This data underscores a generational departure from Confucian-influenced norms, which historically emphasized the importance of sons for continuing the family line and supporting aging parents. Instead, today's youth are embracing a more egalitarian perspective, valuing children for their emotional and familial significance, not their gender.

Additionally, when asked about their ideal family size (Question 10b), Vietnamese youth expressed a wide range of preferences, reflecting evolving attitudes toward parenthood. 37.28% of respondents (n = 148) preferred to have two children, followed by 27.7% (n = 110) who preferred one child, and 9.32% (n = 37) who wished to have more than two children. Notably, a significant portion—25.7% (n = 102)—indicated that they did not plan to have children.

Figure 7
Young People's Preferences on Number of Children When Starting a Family
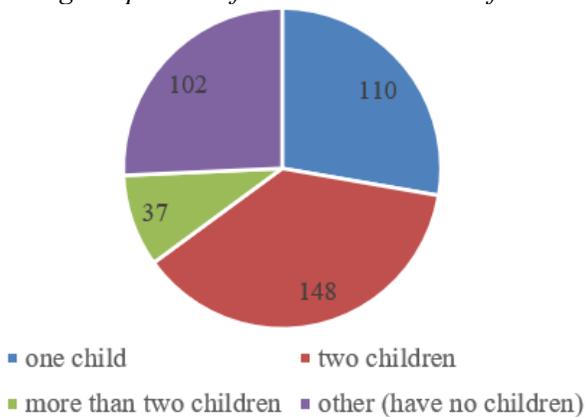

Figure 7 illustrates these varied preferences, which underscore a broader transformation in family values among Vietnamese youth. The responses reflect a growing emphasis on individual autonomy, emotional well-being, and personal fulfillment over adherence to traditional expectations about family size. This shift points to a cultural move toward smaller, more intentional family structures, where choices about having children are guided by lifestyle, economic considerations, and personal aspirations rather than societal norms.

Filial Piety in Contemporary Context

Filial piety, a cornerstone of Vietnamese ethics, has traditionally required children to demonstrate devotion and respect towards their parents, encapsulated in the saying, "father's kindness, child's filial piety." Children were expected to make their parents proud, provide care, and support them in their old age. However, modern family structures and lifestyles have influenced the expression of these values. The traditional multi-generational household, where grandparents, parents, and children coexisted under one roof, is becoming less common. Instead, there is a growing trend towards nuclear families and independent living arrangements. Recent data show that only 34.5% of young people express a desire to live with their parents after marriage, preferring instead to live independently (Figure 8). This preference for separate living arrangements underscores a shift towards valuing personal freedom and space, which can dilute traditional family bonds. Despite this shift, the sense of emotional responsibility remains strong among the younger generation, with 87.2% believing it is their duty to care for their parents. This dichotomy reflects a nuanced understanding of filial piety, where financial and emotional support are maintained, but personal space and autonomy are also prioritized.

Figure 8
Caring for Parents and Living with Parents After Marriage
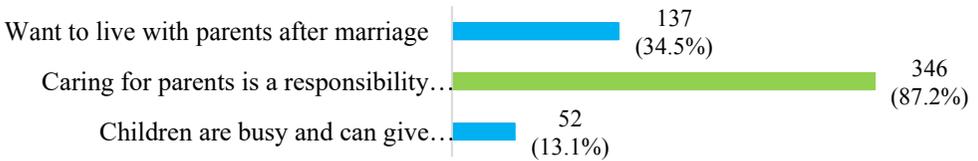
**Gender Equality in Caring for Elderly Parents**

Traditionally, the responsibility of caring for elderly parents in Vietnamese families has been assigned to the eldest or youngest son, a practice rooted in the long-standing cultural preference for male heirs. However, recent survey findings (Question 8) reveal a significant shift toward gender equality in caregiving roles.

As illustrated in Figure 9, 76% of participants believe that both sons and daughters should equally share the responsibility of caring for aging parents. In comparison, only 16% still believe this duty should fall solely on the son, and just 8% think it should be the daughter alone. This data demonstrates a growing societal recognition of equal family obligations across genders. This change reflects a broader movement towards gender equality and challenges the traditional patriarchal norms that have dominated

Vietnamese society for centuries. The shift towards shared caregiving responsibilities indicates an increasing recognition of the importance of gender equity within family roles and obligations.

Figure 9

Perceptions of Responsibility for Caring for Elderly Parents Among Vietnamese Youth
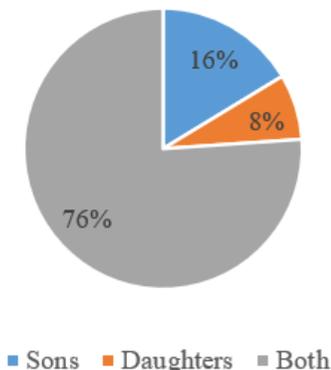
The findings from this section reveal that Vietnamese family values—especially concerning children, gender roles, and filial piety—are being reinterpreted in response to ongoing socio-cultural and economic transformations. Traditional beliefs, such as the necessity of children in marriage and a strong preference for sons rooted in Confucian ideology, are giving way to more egalitarian and individualized perspectives. The data indicate that while a majority still value children in marriage, very few insist on having sons specifically, reflecting growing gender equality and a weakening of patriarchal expectations.

Similarly, while filial piety remains a core ethical principle, its expression has become more flexible. The traditional model of multi-generational households is increasingly replaced by nuclear living arrangements, with many young people preferring independent homes after marriage. Nonetheless, a sense of emotional and financial responsibility toward aging parents persists, suggesting that the core of filial duty is being retained, albeit in a modernized form. The majority of participants also support equal caregiving roles for sons and daughters, underscoring a broader shift toward shared family responsibilities.

These evolving perspectives are deeply shaped by urbanization, the expansion of education—particularly for women—and the country's integration into the global economy. As extended families transition into smaller, more autonomous units, values such as autonomy, equality, and

mutual support gain prominence. Understanding these shifts is essential for developing culturally relevant policies that support both the evolving aspirations of Vietnamese youth and the preservation of enduring cultural values within a rapidly modernizing society.

3. The Evolving Role of Family in Psychological, Emotional, and Moral Support

The family has traditionally been viewed as a cornerstone of psychological, emotional, and moral support, serving as a haven where members can share their joys and sorrows. This role, however, is undergoing significant changes in the face of modern technological advancements and shifting societal norms. Analyzing recent studies, we can see a nuanced picture of how families are adapting to these changes and what implications they hold for the future.

Importance of Family for Psychological Well-Being

Despite the rapid advancement of technology and evolving dynamics in modern life, the family remains a vital source of psychological support. The survey data indicate that 61.7% of family members continue to value face-to-face interactions, particularly during dinner, as an opportunity to talk and share experiences (Figure 10).

This finding highlights the enduring importance of direct, personal communication in fostering a sense of belonging and emotional security within the family unit. This is consistent with Susilo (2020), who emphasizes the family's role in cultivating values and emotional well-being in children. However, there appears to be a gap in the family's capacity to fully meet the emotional support needs of its members. The data reveal that only 47% of individuals primarily turn to family members for emotional support. In contrast, 31% rely on friends, and 22% choose to endure their problems alone. This suggests that while the family continues to play a significant role in providing emotional support, it is increasingly being supplemented or even replaced by other social relationships. This shift could be indicative of a changing perception of the family's role in emotional care, where external friendships and self-reliance are becoming more prominent.

### Impact of Modern Technology on Family Dynamics

Modern technology and social media have significantly reshaped how Vietnamese families interact and maintain emotional connections. While these tools have made it easier to stay connected across physical distances, they have also introduced new dynamics that may weaken traditional face-to-face communication. According to responses to Question 13 of the survey,

61% of young people reported calling their parents daily when living away from home. This frequent communication suggests that digital tools play a valuable role in providing timely psychological and emotional support, reinforcing family bonds despite physical separation.

Figure 10
Times When Family Members Talk and Share with Each Other

- Before family dinner (when preparing dinner together)
- During family dinner
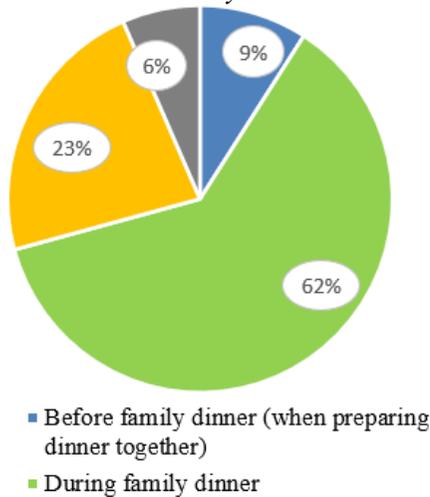
However, the use of technology within households paints a more complex picture. As shown in Figure 11, while majority engage with social media for news and entertainment (88.89%), followed by chatting with friend groups (73%) and studying or researching materials (76.30%), only 61% report using these platforms to communicate with family members (Question 6). The data, drawn from survey Question 6, reflects the prominence of entertainment and peer communication over family interactions in digital engagement. This gap highlights a growing trend in which technology is more often used for external social interaction than for nurturing family relationships at home.

This imbalance suggests that although technology can strengthen emotional ties across distances, it may also inadvertently reduce the frequency and quality of in-person communication within families. When digital interaction replaces meaningful face-to-face conversations, especially among family members living under the same roof, it can contribute to emotional disconnection. These findings point to the dual role of technology—as both a bridge and a barrier—in shaping modern family dynamics in Vietnam.

Figure 11
Purposes of Social Media Use Among Vietnamese Youth
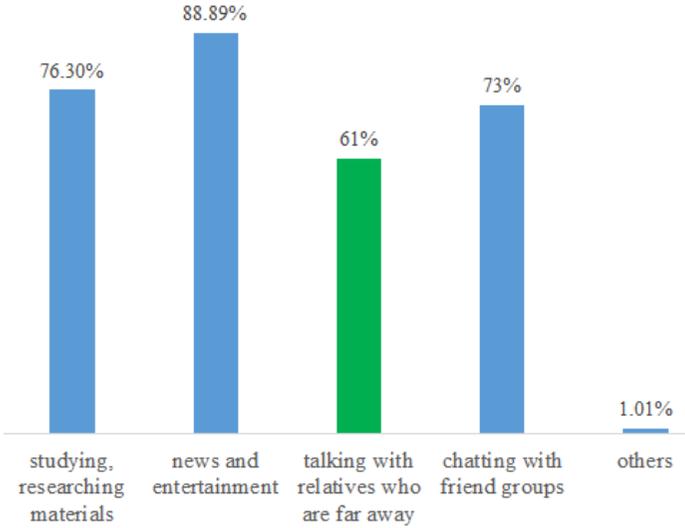
The above analysis highlights how the Vietnamese family's role in providing psychological, emotional, and moral support is both enduring and adapting in response to contemporary social and technological developments. While face-to-face communication during family meals remains a vital source of emotional connection for many, the increasing reliance on digital communication has reshaped how family members connect—particularly among youth. Survey responses to Questions 6, 13, and 18 demonstrate that although 61% of young people call their parents daily when living apart, only 61% use social media to communicate with family, compared to 73% for chatting with friends and 88.89% for entertainment. Moreover, only 47% of respondents turn to family for emotional support, while 31% confide in friends and 22% choose to cope alone. These trends reflect a diversification of emotional support systems and a gradual shift away from the family as the sole provider of moral guidance. Despite this, the family still plays a meaningful, if evolving, role in shaping values and supporting emotional well-being. The dual influence of modern technology—as a tool for connection but also a potential barrier to deep interaction—underscores the importance of maintaining intentional, personal engagement within families. As Vietnam continues to modernize, a balanced approach that leverages the benefits of connectivity while preserving traditional modes of interaction will

be essential to strengthening emotional bonds and sustaining the family's moral foundation.

4. The Role of Family in Education and Participation in Family Activities

The family, traditionally seen as the first and most sustainable educational environment, plays a crucial role in the formation and development of an individual's personality. This role has become even more significant in the modern context of globalization, where information is abundant, diverse, and complex. Analyzing recent studies, we see that the family's influence on education and participation in family activities remains vital, though it faces new challenges and opportunities.

Educational Role of the Family

The role of the family in education extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and skills; it encompasses the formation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are foundational to societal development. As highlighted in the literature review, scholars such as Nguyen et al. (2022) and Susilo (2020) emphasize that the family remains a crucial environment for instilling cultural and moral values. This argument is supported by recent survey data, which show that 68% of young Vietnamese frequently receive education about family traditions, while 32% do so occasionally. These traditions, which include preparing offerings for holidays, caring for relatives, and engaging in culturally significant practices, reflect a continued commitment to preserving cultural heritage within families despite rapid societal changes.

However, this traditional educational role is not without its challenges. In the context of globalization, families are tasked with the dual responsibility of maintaining traditional values while also incorporating advanced global human values. This dual role is crucial for fostering a generation that is both rooted in its cultural heritage and prepared for the complexities of a globalized world. The literature review points to a tension between these objectives, with some scholars advocating for a balance that prioritizes cultural continuity without rejecting modern influences (Nguyen, 2022a; T. V. Nguyen et al., 2024). This balance is necessary for ensuring that family education remains relevant and effective in the modern era.

Skill Learning and Extracurricular Activities

Modern Vietnamese families are increasingly recognizing the importance of a well-rounded education that includes not just academic learning but also the development of other skills, such as music and sports. Survey data reveal that 63% of young people have opportunities to learn these skills through their families, underscoring a broad recognition of the value of

extracurricular activities (Figure 12). However, 34% of respondents indicate a lack of access to such opportunities, suggesting disparities that may affect the comprehensive development of young people.

Figure 12

Access to Extracurricular Learning Opportunities Among Vietnamese Youth
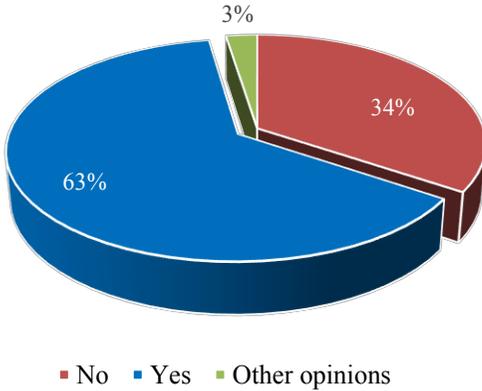
This focus on skill development aligns with global educational trends that emphasize holistic learning and the cultivation of diverse talents. As discussed in the literature review, there is a growing emphasis on preparing individuals to be adaptable and capable in a rapidly changing world (Phan et al., 2024; Soetan & Nguyen, 2023). Families play a pivotal role in this process by providing opportunities for skill development that complement formal education. However, the gap between the desires of young people and the realities of their educational experience points to a need for more equitable access to these opportunities, which remains a challenge in the current social context.

Furthermore, the desire of 91% of young people to participate in family activities such as traveling and dining together highlights a critical aspect of family life that extends beyond formal education (Figure 13). This strong preference suggests that, while young people value the educational and developmental benefits of extracurricular activities, they also seek emotional and social engagement with their families. The literature suggests that such activities are essential for reinforcing family bonds and fostering a supportive environment conducive to learning and personal growth (Nguyen et al., 2022; Susilo, 2020).

The above findings underscore the continuing importance of the family as a foundational environment for education and value transmission in Vietnamese society, while also revealing the complex challenges posed by modern life. Although 68% of young people report regularly receiving education about family traditions and 63% have opportunities to learn extracurricular skills like music or sports, time constraints and the growing influence of digital technologies increasingly affect the depth and quality of family engagement. As highlighted by Susilo (2020) and Nguyen (2022b), while grandparents and parents remain vital sources of experience and guidance, work pressures and reliance on technology often limit meaningful face-to-face interactions. Evidence from the literature (Mackay et al., 2022; L. T. T. Nguyen et al., 2024) supports the view that digital tools, while useful, can undermine cohesion when they substitute rather than supplement real-life communication. These dynamics call for a balanced approach that leverages the benefits of modern technology while safeguarding the relational quality of family life. Furthermore, the strong desire among 91% of youth to participate in family activities like shared meals and travel signals a continued appreciation for emotional and social connection within the family. Addressing these modern challenges requires supportive policies and educational initiatives that equip families to nurture both traditional values and modern competencies. As Vietnam continues to modernize, the family's adaptive capacity will be essential for ensuring children grow into well-rounded individuals rooted in cultural heritage yet capable of navigating global complexities.

5. Economic Values and Husband-Wife Relationships in Modern Vietnamese Families

Economic values within the family have always played a crucial role in building and developing the family unit. In modern Vietnamese society, the family remains an economic unit, a business entity, and a consumer entity within the economy and society. However, the perspectives on economic values and husband-wife relationships have significantly evolved, reflecting broader socio-economic changes and shifts in gender roles.

Changing Economic Dynamics in Families

Economic roles within Vietnamese families are undergoing a profound shift, moving away from traditional models rooted in kinship-based cooperation. Historically, when Vietnam began transitioning to a market economy, family businesses operated primarily through kinship ties. Over time, however, economic activities and collaborations have extended to broader networks, including transnational and international relationships.

This trend is consistent with Nguyen (2022a), who emphasized the growing impact of international integration on labor development and economic structures in Vietnam.

Figure 13
Preferences of Young People for Participating in Family Activities
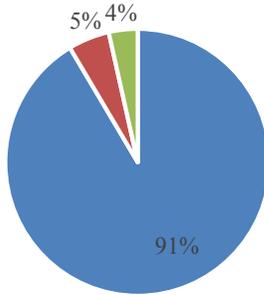
- Yes, because it is very joyful and happy
- Do not want to go, prefer to hang out with friends
- Other opinions

A key indicator of changing family economics is the evolving perception of the breadwinner role. Survey responses to Question 23 clearly reflect this transformation: 80% of participants believe that both husband and wife should share economic responsibilities, while only 18% still see the husband as the sole economic provider (Figure 14).

This shift is graphically represented in the previous figure, providing strong empirical support for the move toward gender equality in family finances. The decline of the sole male breadwinner model not only reflects a more progressive outlook but also eases the psychological burden traditionally placed on men to be the exclusive earners in the household.

Gender Roles and Economic Participation

The increased participation of women in the labor market has contributed to this shift. According to the 2019 Central Population and Housing Census, female labor accounted for 47.3%, while male labor accounted for 52.7% of the total employed labor force. This near parity in labor force participation underscores the need for a more equitable distribution of economic responsibilities within the family.

Figure 14
Perceptions of Economic Responsibilities Between Husbands and Wives
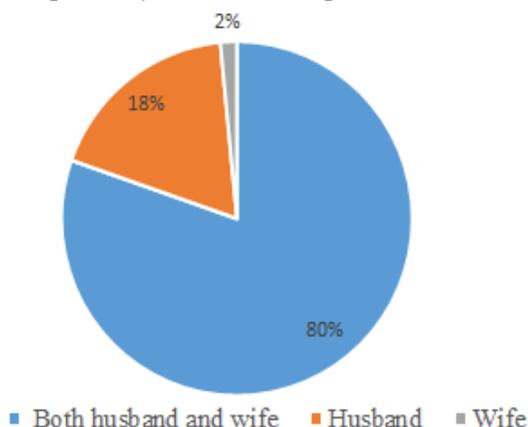
However, this shift also brings challenges. Women often face the dual burden of contributing economically while managing primary responsibilities for housekeeping and childcare. This dual burden is exacerbated by limited social services supporting families and persistent gender biases in the workplace. As highlighted by Soetan and Nguyen (2023), despite global efforts to eradicate gender disparity, systemic limitations continue to curtail women's progress.

Perspectives on Shared Responsibilities

The modern Vietnamese perspective on shared family responsibilities now goes beyond financial contributions to include housework and caregiving. Traditionally, Vietnamese culture emphasized that domestic duties were primarily the responsibility of women, a view supported by Susilo (2020), who noted that value cultivation within families often reinforced gendered divisions of labor. However, this traditional outlook is being actively challenged by younger generations. According to data from this study's structured questionnaire, specifically Question 22, 94% of respondents believe that both husband and wife should share household chores, while only 4% assigned this role solely to the husband, 1% to the wife, and 1% to other arrangements. These findings of this study—drawn from the survey of 397 Vietnamese youth aged 18–30 conducted between October 2023 and April 2024—clearly indicate a significant cultural shift toward gender equality in domestic responsibilities.

The evolving views on domestic roles are further demonstrated in the growing recognition of the economic value of unpaid household labor. According to the findings from this study's structured questionnaire—

specifically Question 25—75% of respondents (n = 299) agreed that housework contributes economically, comparable to income-generating work. In contrast, 23% (n = 90) disagreed, and 2% (n = 8) selected "Other." This acknowledgment represents a clear departure from traditional patriarchal norms in which the husband, as the primary income earner, held exclusive decision-making authority. Supporting this shift, data from Question 21 reveal that 89% of participants disagreed with the idea that the husband should make all family decisions solely because he earns the household income. These results provide solid empirical evidence of changing attitudes toward equality in economic and domestic roles within modern Vietnamese families.

Psychological and Cultural Shifts

The shift towards shared responsibilities and gender equality in family roles is also influenced by improved material living standards and the development of science and technology. These changes have enriched the spiritual lives of families and facilitated more democratic and egalitarian relationships between family members. The influence of Western family lifestyles and ideas has also contributed to this shift, promoting equality and mutual respect within families.

Previously, family relationships were hierarchical, with children expected to obey their parents unconditionally and wives to submit to their husbands' authority. Today, family dynamics are more democratic, with open communication and shared decision-making becoming the norm. This evolution aligns with the findings of Phan et al. (2024), who highlight the importance of social responsibility and the role of educational institutions in fostering inclusive and equitable values.

Addressing Challenges and Moving Forward

Despite these positive changes, challenges remain. The expectation for women to excel in both state affairs and household duties persists, creating immense pressure. Even today, more than 54% of the young people surveyed disagree with this view, while 36% agree (Figure 15). The 2019 statistics show that women spend significantly more time on unpaid caregiving work than men, with women spending nearly 39 hours a week on work plus 18.9 hours on housework, compared to men (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2020a). This disparity underscores the need for continued efforts to change perceptions and gender stereotypes. Policies and services that support women in balancing work and family responsibilities are crucial. These should include measures to reduce the double burden on women, promote gender equality, and ensure that both men and women can contribute equally to family and societal development. As Nguyen (2022b) and Nguyen, Nguyen,

et al. (2023) suggest, fostering respect, happiness, and self-expression while contributing positively to society should be the goal.

Figure 15
Women Excelling in Both State Affairs and Household Duties
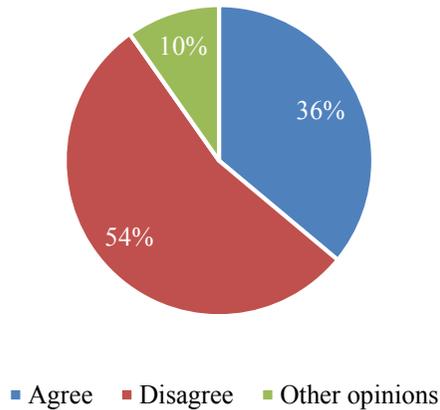
The evolving economic values and husband-wife relationships in modern Vietnamese families reflect broader socio-economic changes and shifts towards gender equality. While significant progress has been made in sharing economic and domestic responsibilities, challenges persist in addressing the dual burden on women and changing deep-seated gender stereotypes. Continued efforts are needed to support these shifts through policies and societal changes, promoting a balanced and equitable approach to family responsibilities and economic contributions.

6. Recommendations for Strengthening Family Values in Contemporary Vietnam

Building on the study's findings, which highlight the dynamic interplay between traditional values and modern influences, this section outlines key recommendations for nurturing resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking family values in Vietnam. The data reveals that while traditional values such as filial piety, respect for elders, and marital commitment remain important to Vietnamese youth, they are being reinterpreted through lenses of gender equality, personal autonomy, and shared responsibility. The challenge—and opportunity—lies in maintaining cultural continuity while adapting to evolving societal norms.

In this context, the preservation and promotion of family values must be approached as a process of thoughtful integration rather than rigid adherence to the past. As Professor Vu (2000) emphasized, tradition forms the foundation of social development, allowing each generation to build upon the achievements of its predecessors rather than beginning anew. This dialectical process of preserving, modifying, and renewing values is essential to ensure that family remains a vital institution in both cultural transmission and social development.

These recommendations aim to provide actionable strategies for educators, policymakers, and families themselves to reinforce family cohesion, promote gender equity, and balance tradition with modernity in Vietnam's rapidly transforming social landscape.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity

Fostering resilient and meaningful family values in contemporary Vietnam requires a thoughtful balance between preserving cherished traditions and integrating progressive ideals. Core traditional values—such as respecting elders, caring for parents and grandparents, cultivating personal ethics, maintaining affectionate relationships, and nurturing a harmonious family life—continue to hold significant meaning for the younger generation. This is strongly supported by data from Question 29 of the survey, where 94% of respondents either *strongly agreed* (44%) or *agreed* (50%) that these traditional values should be inherited and promoted. Only 4% disagreed, and none strongly disagreed, while 2% selected "Other."

These results affirm that while Vietnamese youth are open to modernizing family norms, they remain deeply committed to the cultural values that form the foundation of familial and social cohesion. The challenge ahead lies not in replacing tradition, but in updating and reinterpreting it to reflect the evolving realities of modern life.

At the same time, outdated practices and rigid customs must be reconsidered to align with contemporary aspirations. Practices rooted in parochialism, localism, gender inequality, and arranged marriages are increasingly viewed as incompatible with modern values. Notably, the survey results from Question 28 reveal that 94.22% of participants (n = 374) explicitly disagreed with the traditional notion expressed in the Vietnamese saying: "*Cha mẹ đặt đâu con ngồi đó*" ("Wherever parents arrange, children must sit there"), which implies unconditional obedience to parental decisions regarding major life choices such as marriage. Only 3.27% (n = 13) agreed with this view, and another 2.51% (n = 10) selected "Other." These findings strongly support the conclusion that Vietnamese youth favor greater autonomy and individual choice in shaping their personal and family lives,

marking a decisive cultural shift from obedience to mutual respect and negotiation within families.

Embracing New Values

The findings from this study clearly demonstrate that Vietnamese youth are actively shaping a new set of family values grounded in emotional responsibility, gender equality, and personal autonomy—while still rejecting behaviors they associate with moral or social breakdown. Survey results reveal strong opposition to certain non-traditional behaviors such as unjustified divorce, cohabitation without a commitment to marriage, and allowing materialism to undermine emotional bonds in the family. Participants also expressed strong disapproval of neglecting care for grandparents, elderly parents, or sick family members—reaffirming that intergenerational responsibility remains a core value even in a modern context. These positions, gathered from both closed and open-ended responses across the questionnaire and interviews, reflect a youth-driven effort to reinterpret traditional values rather than discard them.

Crucially, the younger generation also expects their evolving views to be acknowledged and respected by older generations. Data from Question 30 of the survey show that 97% of respondents expressed agreement—50% strongly agreed and 47% agreed—that their modern perspectives on family, including *equality, autonomy,* and *mutual respect*, deserve recognition and societal support. In contrast, only 2% disagreed, and none strongly disagreed, while 1% selected "Other." These figures underscore a powerful generational message: today's youth are not rejecting family values, but rather reinterpreting them in ways that align with current social realities. Their responses reflect a strong desire for intergenerational dialogue and mutual respect in shaping the future of family life in Vietnam.

Moreover, the demand for gender equality emerged as a central theme throughout the survey. For instance, while broader national data (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2020b) point to lingering gender bias—including a significant proportion of women accepting domestic violence under certain conditions—your study found that the vast majority of youth reject such views. Across multiple questions (Questions 21–25), participants consistently supported shared decision-making, equal economic and caregiving responsibilities, and recognition of unpaid domestic work. These findings signal a progressive departure from patriarchal norms and suggest that modern Vietnamese families are evolving into more inclusive, egalitarian units shaped by the values of a highly aware younger generation.

Promoting Equality and Respect

The findings from this study reveal a clear shift in how respect and equality are perceived within the modern Vietnamese family. No longer seen as privileges afforded primarily to men, respect is now viewed as a fundamental right of every family member, regardless of gender or age. This is evidenced by participant responses across multiple survey items—particularly Questions 21, 22, and 25—which highlight a widespread belief in shared decision-making, equal responsibilities, and mutual recognition of each person's views and contributions within the household.

For instance, 94% of respondents believe that both husband and wife should share domestic chores (Question 22), and 80% support shared economic responsibility between spouses (Question 23). Furthermore, 75% agree that unpaid housework contributes economically to the household (Question 25), challenging the outdated notion that financial earners alone deserve authority or respect. These results point to an emerging family model in which individual voices are heard, legitimate needs are acknowledged, and respect is earned through participation rather than dictated by traditional hierarchies.

This strong emphasis on equality and inclusion, as expressed by today's youth, reflects a deeper societal transition toward democratic family relationships—ones based on fairness, communication, and shared responsibility. These values not only redefine internal family dynamics but also serve as a foundation for broader social development rooted in justice and mutual respect.

Fostering Prosperity

Prosperity is another critical value for modern Vietnamese families and the younger generation. Prosperity is prioritized because it enables families to provide for their children's education and enjoy both material and spiritual values. Many Vietnamese families today strive to rise out of poverty and achieve wealth, recognizing that a prosperous family can better ensure security and resilience against risks. The improvement in Vietnam's quality of life ranking from 101st out of 171 countries in 2021 to 62nd out of 165 countries in 2022 (CEOWORLD Business and Trade Magazine's Quality of Life Index) reflects this focus on prosperity and its positive impact on family life.

Phan et al. (2024) emphasize the role of universities in fostering social responsibility and improving teacher satisfaction through a positive reputation and image. This underscores the importance of educational institutions in promoting values that contribute to family and societal prosperity.

Integrating Traditional and Modern Values

The integration of progressive values embraced by today's Vietnamese youth—such as gender equality, shared caregiving, personal autonomy, and mutual respect—with enduring traditional values like filial piety, respect for elders, and family cohesion is shaping a dynamic and evolving family structure. This blended approach reflects the needs and aspirations of contemporary Vietnamese society. As the foundational unit of culture and community, the family plays a central role in cultivating values that promote the emotional, moral, and social development of individuals, and by extension, the sustainable progress of the nation.

Survey results from this study consistently highlight this generational shift. For instance, while 94% of respondents support the inheritance of traditional values (Question 29), an equally strong majority believes that the perspectives of the younger generation must be respected and integrated into family life (97%, Question 30). This coexistence of respect for heritage and openness to change provides a fertile ground for building resilient, inclusive families.

The challenge, however, lies in maintaining a balance—preserving the depth and wisdom of Vietnam's cultural traditions while remaining open to modern, progressive ideals that empower all family members. Philosophical perspectives, such as the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism referenced by Nguyen et al. (2022), offer useful guidance in navigating this complexity by encouraging compassion, ethical behavior, and emotional awareness—qualities that are essential in bridging generational values.

In essence, building strong family values in Vietnam today requires thoughtful negotiation between the past and the present. This balanced integration ensures that the benefits of modernization are equitably shared across society while cultural continuity is preserved. When traditional virtues are aligned with the values of equality, inclusion, and emotional well-being, Vietnamese families can form a powerful foundation for individual growth and national development. The family remains not only the heart of social life but also the compass guiding Vietnam's future.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that while traditional family values continue to be significant for Vietnamese youth, socio-economic changes and globalization are fostering a distinct shift towards modern perspectives. Although a majority of young Vietnamese still consider marriage an important life goal, the criteria for choosing a life partner have evolved to prioritize modern factors such as education, economic stability, and personal

compatibility. This shift indicates a growing focus on individual achievement and economic security over traditional familial expectations.

Moreover, there is an increasing openness among Vietnamese youth towards alternative family structures, including cohabitation, single parenthood, and divorce, reflecting a trend towards personal autonomy and fulfillment. While filial piety remains a core value, its expression is changing, with many young people preferring independent living after marriage, emphasizing personal space and autonomy. Additionally, the rising acceptance of gender equality in caregiving roles challenges the traditional son-preference system. Despite the impact of technology on family dynamics, families continue to play a vital role in providing emotional and psychological support, though there is a reduced reliance on direct interaction due to the prevalence of digital communication.

The evolving economic roles within families, recognizing both husbands and wives as economic providers, further reflect growing gender equality. However, women often still face the dual burden of contributing economically while managing household duties, highlighting the need for a more equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities. Families also remain crucial in imparting traditional values and modern skills, emphasizing the importance of cultural education and opportunities for skill development. Integrating traditional values with modern perspectives is essential to fostering a cohesive and progressive society, with educational institutions and policy interventions playing significant roles in supporting this integration and promoting gender equality.

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The Production of Domestic Space and Gender during the COVID-19 Crisis: An Auto-ethnographic Account from a North Indian Small Town

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus-induced pandemic has scarcely left any aspect of life untouched. Against the rabid virus, the home was suggested as the site of safety by the governments worldwide. This article by married partners studies the domestic space of their small-town North Indian home, employing an autoethnographic method. The authors ask, How has the COVID crisis shaped their domestic space? With the authority male figure of the susro/father-in-law dwelling at home round the clock during the lockdowns, the domestic space became more gendered. The COVID crisis resulted in reducing the spatial agency of the 'wife'/daughter-in-law/bhu in the domestic space. However, it was also the time when she strived to make home-outside-home, thus allowing us a revisit to the idea of 'home'.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, home, space, and town

INTRODUCTION

"I could not sit outside in the verandah to have some fresh air during the (COVID-19) lockdowns as I found Papa (father-in-law) sitting there all the time". This is the statement of the *bhu[1]*, the second author, about the first lockdown period (mid-2020) induced by the COVID-19 crisis. This statement led the authors to the following research enquiry: How has COVID-19 influenced the pre-existing gendered spatial dynamics of the home, and how did it shape the agency of the *bhu* (daughter-in-law)/'housewife' (sic)? This question has been explored insufficiently in the existing literature, particularly in the context of small towns. This way, this article attempts to contribute to the body of knowledge at the intersections of the COVID-19 pandemic, small towns, the domestic sphere, gender, the dominant Other Backward Class (OBC) caste, and the aspiring middle class.

India experienced an abrupt and one of the longest and stringent lockdowns in the world, once in 2020 through a series of extended lockdowns, and further in the second wave of mid-2021 (Reuters, 2022). The first lockdown, as announced by the Prime Minister of India, came into effect at midnight on 24th March 2020. Despite a series of lockdowns, the pandemic did not offer any respite. Instead, the viral disease only exacerbated the following year. In response, another lockdown was imposed. In this seemingly never-ending spate of lockdowns, homes acquired a different meaning for their dwellers. Given the patriarchal structure of Indian society, women, already burdened with household work, received an even greater amount of work and responsibility. With this, their 'breathing spaces'[2] became even more constricted. Leela Dube (2011) uses the term "living space" for the space that women in Indian households carve out using their survival strategies and skills. Dube (2001) analyses the subordination of women and argues against the notion of women-as-passive. This article examines this "living space" (Dube, 2011) as the *bhu* yearned-out for open spaces to breathe in the hot summer lockdowns. Through the deployment of the autoethnographic method, the authors of this article, a married couple with a young child, attempt to study their domestic space in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

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[1]Depending upon the context, *bhu* may mean one's daughter-in-law or wife. With her individuality unrecognised, the *bhu* is identified in relation to her patrilocal residence and its members. Similar to a daughter, she is also considered as the repository of the family's honour. To clarify, the *bhu* or the daughter-in-law and the second author are the same person, and the terms are used interchangeably. For the sake of convenience, the authors, against the prevalent norms of autoethnography, have used the third person.

[2]The term is used figuratively.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part familiarises the readers with the background and field settings through a description of the context, a broader review of literature, and a gendered analysis of the domestic spaces—the natal and patrilocal home. After providing this background, part two broaches the problem of the study. It analyses how the COVID-19-induced lockdowns shaped the domestic space and the agency of women, here the *bhu*. For the same, the tool of body mapping is found helpful.

Part I

The context

The research is situated in Chirawa, a municipal town in Rajasthan, India. The town is located in the state's northeast and two hundred kilometres from the national capital, New Delhi. Chirawa town and the larger Chirawa sub-district are a part of the Jhunjhunu district and the Shekhawati region. The region is known for, among others, its wealthy merchants, a very high number of army personnel, and havelis with exquisite paintings.

Let us briefly look at the town's social and demographic indicators. According to the last census held, the town's total population is 43,953 (Census, 2011) and has only increased since then. The sex ratio is 925 females per 1000 males. The sex ratio for the 0-6 age group is abysmally low, that is, 846 females per 1000 males. The urban Chirawa's (town) sex ratio (897) is poorer than the rural (957). The Census of India identifies Chirawa as a key trade center within the district (Census, 2011). Chirawa is more Hindu than the average in India. The Hindu population is more than 92 per cent of the total population, while the Muslim population is around 7 per cent (Census, 2011). All other minorities, such as Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs, are negligible in numbers. In terms of caste, Jats[3] dominate the town and the Shekhawati region numerically. A caste census is not yet available; however, Jats are estimated to be around 30 per cent of the region's total population (Rediff, 1999). Other caste groups in the town include *Brahmins, Baniyas, Meghwals, Maalis, Kumhars, Khatis, Sunars*, etc. The population share of the Scheduled Castes (the Dalits) and the Scheduled Tribes is approximately 17 % and 1%, respectively.

While the state's literacy rate is 66.11 %, the literacy rate for the town stands, relatively impressively, at 78.90 %, but with a 17.45 % gap in male-female literacy rate (Census, 2011). The Jhunjhunu district, having one of the highest literacy rates in the state, is known for its relatively greater representation in certain sectors such as teaching, the armed forces and

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[3]Today, Jats are a greater social, economic and political force in the region and beyond. A good number of parliamentary seats are decided by how the Jats vote.

medical professions. The region is regarded as an aspirational one. Some of the charitable educational institutions in the region were established by the region's wealthy merchants (such as Piramal) more than a century ago. Students from far-off states flock to the region for educational attainment. The 'education town' of Pilani, housing the well-known Birla Institute of Technology and Sciences (BITS) and Birla schools, is situated in the district. Towns may often be referred to here as *shiksha nagri* (education city).

The district and the nearby district of Sikar experience significant migration, markedly driven by educational pursuits. To secure better educational opportunities for their children, people often migrate from villages to towns and cities, and from smaller towns to larger urban centers. With half of such migration occurring in smaller cities, this rural-to-urban migration is a key driver of urbanization in India. According to Partha et al. (2017), every seventh person in India resides in a town like Chirawa. Despite relocating, the migrating population maintains ties with their domiciles. They may return for, among others, agricultural activities, weddings and other significant life events. This continued connection highlights the complex relationship between migration, education, rural-urban dynamics, and belonging.

Chirawa has experienced significant growth in terms of population, economy, and human settlements. Dominated by the upper castes, such as *Brahmins* and *Baniyas* (merchant castes), Chirawa was largely circumscribed around the *bazaar* (commercial center) until a few decades ago. Education, jobs, and aspirations for better living standards are among the visible factors behind the mushrooming of settlements in the town and the larger sub-district. The migrating population has acquired the peripheral spaces of the town, engulfing the commons and villages. The real estate market in the town is regarded as performing better than that of larger cities. The expanding urban space of the town is also characterized by a notable presence of the OBC castes, particularly the Jats.

The subject matter of this research is one such upwardly mobile household in the town, the authors' home. Experiencing a shift from agriculture to the service sector in an urbanizing milieu, it is a Hindu, Other Backward Class (OBC) caste, and an aspiring middle-class household. The household is situated in one of the extensions of the town, the Chaudhary Colony, also referred to as the Jat colony. The colony rests on the erstwhile agricultural lands cut into plots by private developers around half a century ago. Jats were instrumental in establishing this settlement and remain numerically dominant till date.

Nonica Datta (1999) considers Jats an endogenous community whose identity has been formed by others and themselves. The Arya Samaj movement has been pivotal to the formation of this identity.

Although this is a *bagar* (dry) region, the Jats of this region have attained considerable prosperity. This owes to a combination of factors such as landed-ness, better educational facilities, and greater employment in the secure government sector. With the consciousness shaped by a history of reform movements and resistance, a greater focus on education and the availability of a higher number of educational institutions, the women of the town and larger region are relatively more educated and better represented in state and national services. Notwithstanding, the status of women in the region is not on par with men in various respects. The social, economic, and political disparity between the two genders is quite visible. Women's empowerment through educational and professional attainments needs to be looked at from another perspective. Women now suffer from a double burden. They must earn by securing competitive government jobs and also be the prime domestic workers at home.

It is typical for this region to still have men as the head of the household. The household in question is also a male-dominated one. The de facto head of the house is the father of the first author, and the father-in-law or *susro* of the second author. As mentioned, the second author is the wife of the first author and the '*bhu* (daughter-in-law) of the house' (sic). The following section sheds light on the authors' positionality and household composition.

Household composition and the authors' positionality

The household comprises five members: the *bhu*, her husband and three-year-old son, and her father- and mother-in-law. As experienced by the *bhu*, her mother-in-law has a non-dominating personality, yet shares the prevalent patriarchal culture norms of the present milieu. She largely empathises with the *bhu*, however, she rarely goes against her husband, the father-in-law. It is a truism that millions of women like her understand their marriage and associated responsibilities through terms such as 'duty' and *majboori* (compulsion). A woman has to *nibhana*[4] her 'duties' associated with the role of a wife, mother, daughter, *bhu*, sister, aunt, sister-in-law, and grandmother.

This autoethnography is an attempt to not merely present an account of the authors' lived experiences in COVID-19 times but also their experiences as cultural beings in the present settings. Both authors occupy several intersecting identities, including those of 'small-town' residents, aspiring middle-class individuals, and members of a dominant OBC caste lacking cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Additionally, they share the role of younger adults within the household. Being a young adult and

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[4]*Nibhana* is a Hindi word, which here, means discharging one's 'duties' and performing 'roles' in the sense of obligation or compulsion.

unemployed often makes one subordinate to the parents, especially to the male head of the household. Commonly, the position of the *bhu* is the weakest and is greatly influenced by her husband's financial situation. The wives/*bhus* of economically independent husbands may exert influence in family affairs. Such *bhus* may not be the eldest (thus their higher status) of the *bhus*, yet they may be consulted in important matters. They may be asked to do less arduous work and enjoy better status than other *bhus* in the family. The first author is educated from the country's premier institutions, however, he was unemployed during COVID-19. Along with his wife and young son, he was dependent on his parents for most of the needs. This often compelled the authors, especially the second author, the *bhu*, to 'obey' and not do anything that offended the head of the household. In other words, the authors, more so the second, had limited agency.

Above, we noted the presence of multiple intersecting identities and contexts at play. Intersectionality is an old concept. However, as a term, it was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) in the context of law and race. Later, the concept was applied in multiple contexts and in different ways. It has been employed on different international platforms and in documents such as those of the UN. Most broadly, intersectionality is about the aggregate impact of discrimination and, thus, marginalisation that a person suffers owing to her multiple intersecting identities. For instance, a black woman who is also poor. In another instance, a poor Dalit woman is triply discriminated. Her different identities work together towards her marginalisation. The framework of intersectionality can be useful in different contexts and for different identities and experiences. With its limitations and usefulness (Menon, 2015; Gopal, 2015; John, 2015; Nash, 2015), much use and misuse, intersectionality is a useful conceptual tool that helps us to understand the operation of different axes of discrimination simultaneously.

This article attempts to apply intersectionality, though not in the most appropriate context. Consider this: the *bhu* is situated in a middle caste and an aspiring middle-class setting. However, it is important to recognise that she is a woman and is in the locus of a *bhu*. Moreover, she is employed in the private sector, marked by insecurity and low wages. Further, she is an unemployed man's wife, thus having little voice in the family. As we see in this article, these aforementioned identities and locations work together to shape her agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engendering spaces

It is a truism that spaces in North India are gendered (Chowdhry, 2014; Abraham, 2010). Through her research on Haryana's society, Prem Chowdhry (2014) exposes the dichotomisation of spaces based on gender. She (2014) underscores that men dominate most of the spaces in the region—from the streets to the *chaupal*[5] and the *baithak*[6] of the house and beyond—making the presence of men in these spaces seem 'natural'. The men not only occupy most spaces, but 'their spaces' hold symbolic power, for instance, the *chaupal* and the *baithak*, where crucial decisions of the village and the house are taken, respectively. Also, such places are the spaces where much information, varying from national politics to village issues, is exchanged and discussed. Such gender-segregated spatial arrangements deprive women of socially valued knowledge; thus, their status remains low (Spain, 1993). Doreen Massey (1984) argues that it "is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too" (p. 6).

Janaki Abraham (2010) considers the private and public dichotomy as fluid. Through her analysis of the *pata* culture of the Bikaner town of Rajasthan, she finds a continuity between the houses (considered private) and the street (considered public). *Patas* are wooden beds commonly placed outside houses in the old Bikaner town. It is on these *patas* that men sit, eat, talk leisurely, and sometimes sleep at night. *Patas* are placed outside the home, and this outside space becomes an extension of the home, Abraham argues.

In the context of this dichotomy, Chowdhry (2014) discusses in her work the rural homes of typical land-owning castes (such as Jats). It generally comprises three parts: *ghar*, *gher*, and the *baithak*. The *ghar,* or the inner house, is considered the 'feminine area' where men are not expected to enter. Colloquial sayings such as "*ghar to lugaai ko hi hove hai*" (a 'house' becomes a 'home' essentially because of women) reinforce this idea. This does not mean that the women have a considerable say in household affairs, rather, they only *belong* to the home. The *baithak* is the 'men's area' where household men and guests (men) dwell. *Baithak* of the house is a part of the house but is equivalent to 'public space within the home'. It may not occupy much space in the house, but it has a symbolic significance, for it is the "nerve center of the house" (Chowdhry, 2014). The

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[5]*Chaupal* is understood as a men's public social space, where the political affairs of the village government are conducted.

[6]*Baithak* is the frontal part of the house where the men of the household, especially the head and the elderly, spend most of their time. Also, it is here that the guests (mostly male) sit, talk, eat and rest.

gher is the place for cattle, mostly tended by women, through putting in hours of arduous work. Thus, the house, according to Chowdhry (2014), is constituted of both the public and the private. The *baithak* extending to the street is the public realm of the domestic space, and the *ghar* and *gher* are the private realms. To note, Rabindranath Tagore's renowned novel *Ghare Baire* (1916, The Home and the World) delves into the meanings of *Ghare* (the domestic sphere, encompassing the *andarmahala* and *bhitarbari*) and *Baire* (the outside or public realm) in the Bengali society[7].

COVID-19 crisis and the domestic space

The pandemic scarcely left any aspect of life untouched. As we see later in this article, several academic and popular press articles have reported the uneven impact of the pandemic vis-à-vis gender, class, caste, sexual orientation, region, and so on. A large amount of literature concerning this article suggests that the COVID-19 crisis, especially the lockdowns, has exacerbated different problems for women worldwide. For instance, there is an escalation in violence against women (UN Women, n.d.; Taub, 2020). Further, there is an increase in the burden of domestic chores and care (BBC, 2020). A plethora of national and international studies have documented the increased burden of domestic work upon women in the COVID-19 times (Chauhan, 2020, 2022; Dixit & Chavan, 2020; Casey & Huq, 2022).

It was the domestic sphere/home that was projected as the only site of safety against the rabid novel coronavirus. The governments' campaigns worldwide focused on instructing people to stay home. The same is reflected in the variegated slogans such as "Stay home, Stay safe" and "Stay home, Save lives". 'Home' as a concept needs critical engagement. Home has received considerable attention across different disciplines. The idea of the home in popular imagination revolves around safety, intimacy, family (heteronormative), comfort, and so on. Home, for Alison Blunt and Robyn M. Dowling (2006), "is both material and imaginative, a site and set of meanings/emotions" (p. 22). While meditating on his concept of dwelling, Martin Heidegger (1993) asks: "…residential buildings do indeed provide lodgings; today's houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but—do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?" (p. 348). To dwell, for Heidegger (1993), is to be harmonious with the fourfold, that is, the earth and sky, divinities and mortals. For Heidegger (1993), dwelling is not merely occupying a place, but it means a harmonious existence with the

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[7]Tagore's *The Home and the World* has contributed to academic engagement across disciplines. Also, the novel has been adapted for the cinema. Two well-known adaptations are Satyajit Ray's Ghare Baire (1984) and Aparna Sen's Ghare Baire Aaj (2019).

home and the cosmos. Dwelling is being—being at home. For Gaston Bachelard (2003), home is a place of "protected intimacy" and where one can dream at peace (p. 4).

Home has also been argued as a site of power. As against the normative assumptions, Massey's (1992) work suggests home as a site, *not* beyond power. Analysing Minnie Bruce Pratt's (1984) work, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart", Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1986) contend that Pratt constructs home in two modalities, that is, being home and not being home. "'Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (Martin and Mohanty, 1986, p. 196).

As the research on young North Indian women reveals, the home may also be a space of boredom (Islam, 2020). The empirical data suggest that the home is a potential site of conflict for young women if they dwell in it for long (Islam, 2020). One can avoid this conflict, for instance, between mother and daughter, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, by spending a good amount of time outside one's domestic space (Islam, 2020). The same becomes possible for women, mostly through work or pursuing education. In the case of men, going outside one's domestic space comes naturally. Apart from work, they can go outside, with ease, for different purposes such as loitering, walking, visiting friends, smoking, buying groceries, etc.

Similarly, Blunt (2017) claims that "the home is an important and yet contested site in feminist debates about power and identity" (p. 1). A part of feminist literature suggests the home as a site of oppression. For instance, the well-known work of American feminist Betty Friedan (1963) argued the private sphere as an oppressive sphere. The Black feminist literature critiqued this argument. bell hooks is a prominent example. She (2015) argued that Black women, facing the brunt of racism in the public sphere, found solace in the private sphere, that is, their homes. She (2015) states that it is at their homes that the Black women could find and build space to love, care and nurture themselves and their families.

In the context of the COVID-19 induced pandemic, the home could be thought of variously—as a house, shelter, bunker, sanctuary, or community (Haris, 2021). Blunt and Dowling (2022), in the second edition of their work, *Home*, problematize home in a renewed manner. They (2022) critique the pandemic period's British government directive, 'stay home[8],'—an uncritical assumption suggesting the home as a place of safety. The authors (2022) critique the poster released by the United Kingdom government regarding the COVID-19 lockdown. After facing public

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[8] This is similar to the Government of India's pandemic directive, that is, 'stay home stay safe'.

criticism, the poster was withdrawn. It depicted a woman engaged in domestic chores and a man sitting idly on a sofa. Apart from greater domestic work, women faced greater domestic violence in the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, the violence against women in domestic spaces may not always manifest in the form of physical violence. Reducing and restricting a woman's mobility in spaces, including the domestic, is also a kind of violence. As we will see in this article, COVID-19 lockdowns have caused a reduction in women's agency.

There is a considerable literature on domestic spaces and gender. The said literature in the context of COVID-19-induced lockdowns is growing, yet it is negligible for small town India. Barbara Harriss-White (2016) underscores that small towns or, in her words, "middle India" are essential to understanding the country. Yet, she (2016) finds negligible studies on such spaces. The same stands true in the context of the recent pandemic. This article attempts to modestly address this research gap by offering a study on the intersections of domestic space, gender, small-town, OBC caste, and middle class.

RESEARCH METHOD

Home as a research site is challenging, especially regarding data collection. This is essentially because homes are difficult to access for long-term field immersions—the quintessential requirement of ethnography. Researching one's own home has other problems. It is not a problem about access, but the research at one's home accompanies anxieties about issues of ethics, representation, and exposing one's own life on the public platform, permanently (Wall, 2008). Besides, rendering the too familiar (one's home) as strange is a challenge in terms of overcoming personal biases.

Owing to the COVID-19-induced lockdowns, the authors could spend plenty of time with each other. They could reflect on their lives and the evolving dynamics at home. A significant impetus for the reflections came from the *bhu*, who frequently shared her experiences of negotiating the domestic sphere during the pandemic. The idea of the present study emerged from this shared immersion in domestic space. Informal conversations (in the kitchen, bed or during evening walks), observations, and collective negotiations with the in-laws provided the preliminary insights that informed the research enquiry.

The autoethnographic method was chosen to share the *story* of this home. According to Stacy Holman Jones et al. (2016), all autoethnographies use "personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience" (p. 22). Further, the autoethnographies make "contributions to existing research", embrace "vulnerability with purpose", and create "a reciprocal relationship with audiences to compel a response" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 22). For D.E. Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography is about the self (auto-) producing a sociological (-ethno-) writing (-graphy). Autoethnography can

be a challenging exercise as the questions of representation, ethics, and balance may produce anxiety (Wall, 2008). Further, autoethnography, through which researchers share their intimate stories, contributes to the advancement of sociological understanding (Wall, 2008). This is where autoethnography differs from other writing methods, such as autobiography. The challenge of writing about personal life reflexively is a daunting weight attended by autoethnography.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discerning the domestic space of Northern India

In the caste and class milieu to which the authors belong, a village home typically consists of a courtyard, an earthen cooking area, and, increasingly, a stove powered by an LPG cylinder. Along with rooms, it may also feature a *gher,* or *nohra*[9]. These spaces serve as extensions of the domestic sphere and are often used for storage, livestock, and miscellaneous household activities and purposes. In a town, the house acquires smaller dimensions. The courtyard often transforms into a small open chowk and/or verandah and a hall connecting to the inner space of the house. In the inner house, the kitchens increasingly have a raised platform in the form of a stone slab. The *chaubara*/s or the rooftop room/s meant for the younger couple/s persist. As the demands of the booming service sector leave little time, the *gher* is rarely found in urban settings. Although the materiality of the new houses has changed, however, the symbolic significance of most of the older structures remains intact. Men, as in the village, spend considerable time in the *baithak* or outside their house. Unless employed, women are seen mostly inside the *ghar*. It is in the *ghar* that men should not spend a lot of time, as their masculine status falls into danger. A man would be considered effeminate if he spent time in this space or helped his wife with domestic chores, say, cooking. He may be chided by other men with insulting words such as "*raandiya*"[10]. Often, boys are rebuked by older men and women if they are inside the kitchen, essentially considered a women's space. Preparing food, gossiping, dwelling inside the home and especially the kitchen, taking a long time to bathe, etc, are considered women's domains and behaviours, respectively.

Within the overarching patriarchal structure, specific spaces are designated as women's domains. This provides women with some respite

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[9]*Nohra,* an open space adjacent to the house, is reserved for cattle and other miscellaneous purposes.

[10] *Raandiya* has multiple meanings. It may be used for a man who is 'under the influence' of his wife. It may also be used for a man who likes the company of women, remains inside the house for longer periods, and engages in household chores.

from the overwhelming patriarchal oppression. Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar (1999) have termed such spaces as "women's significant spaces". Such spaces are significant to women and where they can exercise greater agency. The spaces may include the kitchen, courtyard, *pooja* (prayer) place, and *chaubara*. For the *bhus* in the present context, one of the women's significant spaces is the room they share with their husbands. This space may be in the form of *chaubara* or a room downstairs. This space provides *bhus* with a degree of autonomy in terms of access, privacy, and the freedom to organize the room according to their preferences. It is also a space where the *susro* (father-in-law) or other elderly male figures rarely enter, and almost never when the *bhu* (daughter-in-law) is present. Over time, new additions to this room have included, among other items, an ornate dressing table, a deluxe double bed, a television, a cooler or air conditioning system, and a *sandook*[11] or an almirah. These items are commonly part of the dowry provided by the parents of the *bhu*.

The research of Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold (1994) in rural Rajasthan documents the barring of men in the home courtyards. For instance, women performing *kesya* songs would hijack an open space. In this space, men would be scared to go for the fear of being teased, hurled abuses (in fun), or even attacked (Raheja & Gold, 1994). Also, some rituals, owing to tradition, accord women an upper hand, where men must follow the prevalent norms. For instance, in one of the wedding rituals in the present social milieu, the groom's father and grandfather would be thumped on their backs by women of the bride's family with a *thapa* (a herbal paste), and often vigorously.

In towns, the courtyard has taken the shape of a hall, verandah, and/or chowk. The hall represents an intriguing space within the household. Although both men and women use it, women tend to exert greater influence. Men, particularly the *susro* (father-in-law), typically enter this area with a purpose. In contrast, the *bhu* (daughter-in-law) and other women use the hall more freely. However, the *bhu* may prefer her room for rest and privacy. Chowk and verandah are open spaces where the men, especially the *susro,* have an upper hand. It is used by the *bhu* only when the *susro* has left the house. In the present case, the *bhu* used the chowk and the small verandah for leisurely activities such as walks and for having fresh air, albeit only after the *susro* had gone outside the house. However, on some occasions, the chowk may be taken over by women, and thus, men would avoid the same. For instance, during the rituals leading to the wedding, the chowk is the place for women to congregate, chat, sing songs, dance, and perform different rituals. Such a chowk is also a place for women to perform *tutiyo*. *Tutiyo* event takes place after the *baarat* (a bridegroom's wedding

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[11]A trunk used for storage purposes, especially for the *bhu's* gifts, special clothes and other important possessions and things.

procession, mostly consisting of men) has departed for wedding to the bride's place. Barring very young boys, it is an explicitly women's event where they enact different roles for fun and bawdy humour. Further, it is at these open spaces like the chowk that *seethna*[12] (a local form of *gaari/gaali*) songs[13] are performed. These songs are sung by women from the bride's side poking fun at the *baaratis* (bridegroom's family, relatives and friends) (Palmer, 1994; Henry, 1975). The domestic space, however, also acquires different meanings for different women in the house, say, a *bhu*/daughter-in-law, a *beti*/daughter, and a *saasu*/mother-in-law. In the following sections, we try to understand how the meanings of home change as a young girl/woman gets married and migrates from her natal home to her patrilocal home.

The rite de passage of *Beti* to *Bhu*

Women from a young age are prepared for multiple present and future roles: of a daughter, a *bhu*, a mother, and so on. A young girl understands that she is a prospective *bhu* of some other house. She is constantly told and prepared for this rite de passage. The responsibilities, roles, and behavioral expectations for both roles are different. After a daughter is 'married off' to another house, she becomes a *bhu,* and when she returns, she performs the role of a *beti*. The following sections discuss the complexities associated with both the roles and the domestic spaces.

Peer, the natal home

The house a girl is born into becomes her *peer* as soon as the marital rituals are over. During the time spent from her birth till the marriageable age, she is constantly prepared to be a *bhu*/daughter-in-law, *lugaai*/wife, and a *maa*/mother. A girl in this sub-region is often reminded that she is the "*paar ki chidi*" (literally, bird of the other house). Within this household, a girl is socialized into embodying the norms of "being a girl." She is expected to conform to the ideal of an *acche ghar ki ladki*[14], by adhering to socially prescribed codes of conduct, both in her natal home and, even more rigorously, in her marital home. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949, 2011) popular

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[12]*Seethnas* are a local version of the *gaari* or *gaali* wedding songs. One of the local *seethnas* of the region goes like this: *aadhi roti khand bina, saara janeti raand bina*. In this *seethna* song, the bride's side is making fun of the *baaratis,* that, they are so useless that no one amongst them is worthy of having a wife.

[13]These songs are risqué in their nature and function to break ice between the *baaratis* (bridegroom's side) and the *gharaatis* (bride's side).

[14] It is a proverbial phrase which literally translates as, 'a girl from a good house'. The connotations are about an ideal girl who is 'decent', 'modest', and follows the prevalent gender norms.

statement, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman", is pertinent here (p. 357). In the Indian context, girls from a younger age are socialised to be 'good daughters', 'good wives', and 'good mothers' (Dube, 2001). This happens through regular suggestions and rebukes to alter one's behavior. Moreover, girls observe their mothers closely as they perform their respective roles. This observation encompasses taking note of their mothers' attire, demeanor towards men (within the household and outside), and the nature of their domestic and social responsibilities. Through these everyday practices, girls internalize the gendered expectations associated with the ideal of 'a good girl/woman'. It is also at this house where a girl starts learning that she is lesser than her brother. Dube (2001) documents a Telugu saying, according to which, "bringing up daughter is like pouring water in sand" (p. 90).

Saasro, the patrilocal residence

Post-wedding, the newlywed women of the region migrate to the *saasro* (or *sasuraal* in Hindi), making marriage one of the most significant contributing factors to migration (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2012). *Saasro* is the patrilocal residence of the *bhu*. Most often, the *bhus* live with their husbands' parents. The husband may live with his wife at his parental home or away in a town or city for livelihood purposes. The household members may include *bhu's* father-in-law, mother-in-law; younger unmarried sister-in-law/s, brother-in-law/s, and if married, their wives; grandfather-in-law (*daad-susro*), and grandmother-in-law/(*daadas*). Being a *bhu* involves adhering to a set of prescribed and proscribed behaviors. Some of the norms, values, and roles expected of a *bhu* are internalized during her upbringing, while the rest are acquired and reinforced at her *saasro*. If she deviates—whether intentionally or unintentionally—from these explicit or implicit expectations, she is promptly made aware of her transgression, often through verbal or non-verbal cues. One may be rebuked as "*bhu-beti ke lakkhhan seekh le*" ("learn the mannerism of the daughters and daughter-in-laws"). Essentially, learn to be a 'woman'.

According to D. Jacobson (1989), the lives of Hindu women revolve around following the rules of deference, avoidance, and social distance. As per the expectations of elders, a *bhu* must be 'respectful' (read reverent and submissive), and to the younger ones, she must be caring like a mother. 'Respect' to elders is demonstrated by a *bhu* by a certain kind of deference. This is expressed by common informal dictums such as "*kabhi bhi saamne na bolna*" (not saying no to elders, and never arguing with them). A *bhu* must never raise her voice unless with children whom she may shout at or, all the greater, strike. Previously, as Raheja and Gold (1994) note, the *bhus* must carry a *ghunghat* (veil) in front of their husbands as well. Although it has become uncommon for women in the present milieu to carry a veil in front of their husbands.

Despite some change over time, the *saasro*[15] largely remains a constricting and suffocating space for the *bhus* and, therefore, the *peer* is often a respite. At her *peer*, the *bhu*, the *beti* here, may be consulted in household matters[16], offering her a sense of importance and limited agency. She is generally free to engage in work as per her preferences and remains largely unsupervised. Additionally, wearing a veil is typically relaxed, allowing her some ease and personal freedom in her natal environment. However, the *bhu* can visit her *peer*, often at the mercy of the in-laws, and, at times, only after persuasions and pleadings by her family. The daughter who is not expected to dress up like a *bhu* at her *peer[17]* enjoys much more independence than at *saasro*[18]. While travelling to her *peer* (natal home), the *bhu* removes her bindi and wears no or minimal ornaments. She maintains this unornamented state throughout her stay at her natal home.

Although a *bhu* may dress well and wear ornaments regularly, she must still observe *olah*/*purdah* at her patrilocal home. Over time, the practice has loosened its grip in the present milieu, yet at the very least, a *bhu* is expected to cover her head with a *chunni[19]* The first author's grandmother continued wearing a veil before her granddaughter's husband till her last breath. Among other things, an *olah* and a *chunni* are significant to the idea of a woman. One is rebuked either for not wearing one or for not carrying it properly. Older women may say, "*sir pe pallo to le le besharam*" (oh shameless woman! Cover your head at the least).

When the *beti* prepares to leave the natal home, she prepares to be a *bhu* again. The second author wears a new or relatively new dress; adorns

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[15]It is intriguing to note here that the husband's natal home (in relation to himself) is considered 'natural' and is not called as *peer* but *ghar*/home. Although his wife's home is *saasro* (the same word as used for husband's house) for him, where he must not stay for long, as it would lower his status as a *bateu*/son-in-law.

[16]However, at times, a married *beti's* acts and suggestions may be looked at as 'interference' and 'transgressions', especially so after the marriage of her brother/s. This way, the *beti* is never a full member of the natal home before or post her marriage.

[17]One of the proverbs goes like this: *peer beti gudad lapeti*. *Gudad* or *gudada* is a traditional slim mattress which is made of worn-out cotton clothes. *Gudada* or smaller *gudadi* are considered as simple and humble items of the house. According to this saying, the *beti* at her *peer* may even remain as simple as—figuratively—wearing a humble *gudada*.

[18]Janaki Abraham's study (2010) concludes similarly. Although both the patrilocal and natal homes are domestic spaces, however, women experience a different sense of agency in them.

[19] A thin cloth used by women to cover the upper parts of the body.

gold ornaments; and applies a streak of *sindoor*[20], among other signifiers of being a married woman. On her return, she is expected to press the legs of her mother-in-law[21], who, in return, blesses her. In the present house, the first author's mother was always blessed by her mother-in-law, orally, as "*seeeli ho… sapooti ho… bhoodh suhagan ho, teri maa ka jaaya jivanta rho*" (May you have excellent health and bear male children! May your husband have a long life! May your mother's children live long!). As observed in the aforementioned blessing, a *bhu* is burdened with providing the family a male heir. A mother of boy/s is valued among kin and the society at large. Upon giving birth to the first male child, a *bhu* feels relieved. Often, a woman having a girl child/children keeps conceiving until she has at least a baby boy.

At *saasro*, a *bhu* develops a heightened awareness of time, her body, the presence of men, and the consequences of her actions and of others. An ideal *bhu* must not wake up late; if someone does so rarely, it is hidden from the neighborhood. This is done to save the family from embarrassment. A *bhu* is expected to stay aware of her body even in her sleep. Hence, she keeps adjusting her clothes to appear 'decent'. She negotiates living with other men in the new family, her father-in-law, and her husband's brothers. In order to avoid confronting each other, the *bhu*/s and the men of the household develop a unique kind of communication. *Khakhara*, or a fake coughing, is one of the ways a typical father-in-law conveys his presence, and especially so during the night. This way, the *bhu* receives the signal and withdraws herself from that space (say, common-use spaces like lavatories) and waits till the male member vacates. *Bhus*' relations with the older men in the patrilocal home are characterised by avoidance, submission, and effacement of the self.

Predominantly, it is women who bear the responsibility of avoiding and disregarding the gaze and behaviors of men. It is commonly believed that if a woman is subjected to sexual advances, the responsibility to exercise restraint lies with her. This is because men are perceived to be "naturally shameless". This is often expressed by women of the sub-region, saying, "*aadmi ki to jaat hi isi hai*" (the tribe of men is like this only, promiscuous). The women have to perform as modest and sexless beings. A *bhu* cannot risk being 'caught' in any amorous act, for instance, an embrace with her husband. An innocuous act like this would be enough to invite a rebuke from the mother-in-law, whereas her husband goes unscathed. The *bhu* may be taunted as a "*bigdedi*" (immoral character).

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[20]*Sindoor,* a red vermillion powder, is one of the important markers of marital status for Hindu women of the region.

[21]Additionally, as a mark of deference, the *bhu* is expected to offer a *teel* (cloth gift) on behalf of her *peer*.

Ironically, a woman has two homes, yet no home. A *bhu* may be compelled to go to her natal home in a conflict situation. After the *bhu* arrives at her natal home, the natal family faces significant social pressure to send her back to her 'real home', the *saasro*. The predicament of being a woman is expressed through a Hindi proverb as "*na ghar ka na ghaat ka*" (neither here, nor there). Essentially, the *bhu*, in the present field settings, experiences what may be called as "classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 278). "[C]lassic patriarchy" refers to a kind of patriarchy where a young woman enters into a patrilocal residence after marriage as a "dispossessed individual" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279).

Part II

Analysing pre- and post-COVID-19 body dwellings

Space is not available to each one of us equally. The categories such as caste, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation manifest, among other ways, spatially. Public spaces such as streets would be used differently by a black person, a woman, a Dalit, an upper caste man, and so on. Similarly, as in the classic patriarchal contexts such as the present one, the domestic space is not democratic.

Employing body maps, this section attempts to assess the usage of the domestic space[22] by the *bhu* and the *susro* in the pre- and post-COVID-19 times. The maps depict the patterns and density of body dwellings of the *bhu*. The pre-lockdown map (Fig. 1) suggests that the *bhu* had greater access to various areas of the house and could move between them more frequently. As seen in the maps, these areas include the open spaces of the verandah and the chowk. The lockdown period body map (Fig. 2) shows that the *bhu* spent most of her domestic time in the inner house, the kitchen and her room. The *bhu* recalls the lockdown period as follows:

> *The lockdowns coincided with a hot summer, and as Papa (father-in-law) was at home most of the time, I could not access the open spaces. Papa used to sit in the verandah the most. Thus, I could not take a walk in the chowk, nor sit in the verandah to get some fresh air.*

Along with this, there was an ever-increasing burden of domestic work and care on her and the mother-in-law. The *bhu* notes:

When everyone is at home, the volume of work increases significantly. More tea is prepared, and thus more cups are to be washed. Additionally, my freedom is curtailed when Papa (father-in-law) is present. I

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[22]A: *Baithak*/Guest room/men's space; B: Another room, generally vacant; C: Room used for storage purposes; D: Authors' room; E: *Rasoi*/Kitchen; F: Toilets and Bathroom; G: Hall; H: Chowk and Verandah

cannot perform household tasks of my choosing, at my convenience, or in my preferred manner.
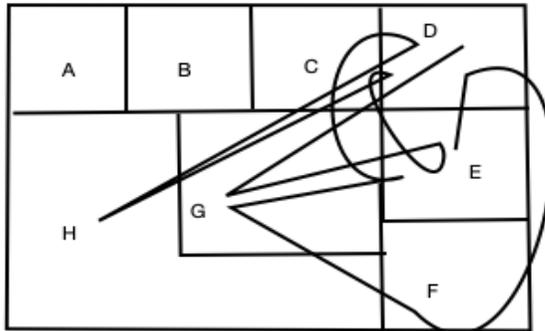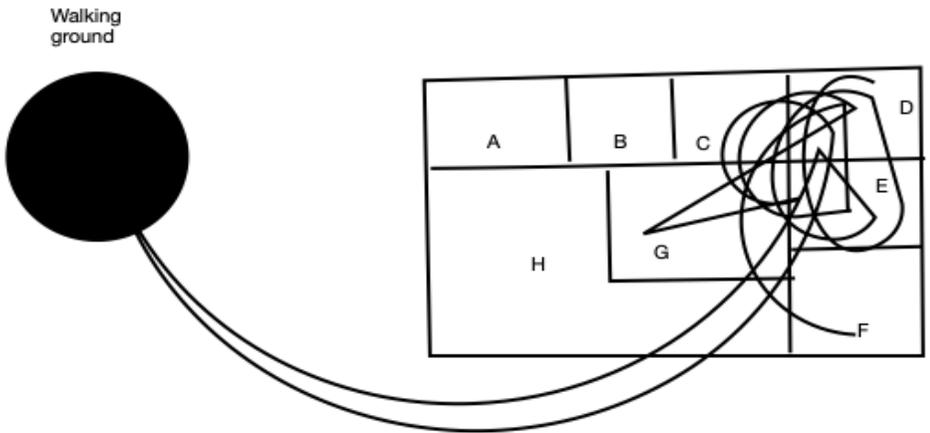

Fig 1. Pre Covid body map

Fig 2. Lockdown period body map

For instance, I must take a palla[23] while sweeping the floor. Further, I cannot listen to the music while doing household work. Wearing a chunni makes me feel particularly sweaty and hot during the summer months. A bhu is always conscious of the susro, who may occasionally enter the hall and, infrequently, the kitchen. During these visits, he may question me about, for instance, whom I am talking to on the phone and the reasons for the length of the

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[23] While an *olah* covers the face, the *palla* covers only the head.

conversation, etc. With the increasing presence of susro at home, there are greater chances of encroachments upon a bhu's privacy.

As is visible through the body maps, the dwellings of the *bhu* altered with the lockdown. With or without COVID-19, she dwelt in the space D, her room. Also, the Kitchen (E) was visited more during the COVID-19 period. Owing to the ever-increasing presence of the father-in-law, the semi- and open spaces of Hall (G), Verandah, and Chowk (H) were less visited during the lockdowns.

Discussion: COVID-19 and the *bhu's* agency

Owing to the presence of the male authority figure, the father-in-law, the *bhu* largely remained inside the inner quarters of the house and mostly in her room. Being confined inside the house for long hours not only brought discomfort to the *bhu* but also reduced her agency over the home space. With the COVID-19 lockdowns, the father-in-law, who otherwise avoided the 'women's spaces,' visited them for brief durations. These spaces included the hall and, sometimes, the kitchen[24]. This way, the "sanctuaries" and "refuge spaces" (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1999) of the *bhu* became threatened.

However, it was during the pandemic only that the *bhu* began to explore new spaces away from her domestic environment, a walking ground and a private school. Intriguingly, the COVID-19 crisis catalyzed a significant change in *bhu's* life. As her living space (Dube, 2001) at home became increasingly constrained, the *bhu* sought to establish a 'home away from home' in these new environments, finding a sense of freedom and agency.

In the pre-COVID-19 times, the *bhu* did not go out for evening walks, but it was towards the end of the first lockdown period that she successfully negotiated for outward mobility with the assistance of her husband. A *bhu* going out of the house, more so, for leisure activities such as walks, is a small act of resistance for the region in focus. In the present sociocultural milieu, leisure comes naturally to men. The women seeking leisure and pleasure are called out as 'bad women'. A woman who enjoys leisurely and recreational activities, say, going to the market frequently, eating at stalls, loitering, having unrigorous conversations with neighbourhood women, etc, is considered immoral and irresponsible. In colloquial terms, she is not a "*ghar bandhudi*" (one who makes the home). Alternatively, she is the "*ghar ujadu*" (one who destroys the home). In contrast, men are often found playing cards, loitering, chatting, smoking, drinking, and engaging in other leisurely and pleasurable activities without judgments by their family members or neighbours.

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[24] However, the father-in-law never visited the *bhu's* room, located downstairs.

Soon after the second COVID-19 wave, the *bhu* joined a private school as a primary teacher. Moving out of home for teaching was another challenge that the *bhu* faced. The father-in-law felt embarrassed at the hands of his relatives for "sending the *bhu* outside for a few thousand rupees". To note here, a *bhu* is a living and walking embodiment of honor for the whole family, and protecting the same involves following various prescriptions and proscriptions. The *bhu* succeeded in resisting the pressure from her in-laws and continued teaching at the school. Recounting the school experience, she says:

> *The job hardly pays me any money, but at least something. Moreover, I find greater freedom outside the home where I do not have anybody to tell me things—that I did not do this right or did that thing wrong. Despite being a low-paid, temporary private school teacher, I feel valued. I feel important when parents of young students listen to me eagerly in the PTM (Parent Teacher Meeting).*

CONCLUSION

With the small acts of everyday resistance (Scott, 1989), as described in the previous sections, the *bhu* is trying to make 'a room of one's own' (Woolf, 2004) in the domestic sphere and beyond. Further, borrowing from bell hooks (2015), dwelling at the patrilocal residence can be argued as "homeplace"-making. For hooks (2015), a homeplace represents a space characterized by love, care, nurturance, and dignity, contrasting sharply with the external world marked by racism and oppression. In this way, homeplace-making is also about becoming an agent, albeit in a particular space/s only. The *bhu* is attempting to make her patrilocal residence a homeplace through her 'small rebellions', such as transcending the domestic space for leisure and work. Thus, such actions contribute to the making of homeplace, both within and beyond the confines of the home. Home, therefore, may be conceived as "fluid" (Blunt & Dowling, 2022, pp. 27-28), encompassing not only physical dimensions but also mental and emotional aspects (Lal & Kumar, 2007). Finally, the 'home' for the *bhu* is a dwelling-in-progress.

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Peer-Reviewed Article

Turkish University Students` Attitudes, Contact Quantity, and Ethno-cultural Empathy toward Syrian Refugees: A Mediation Model

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating role of ethno-cultural empathy in the relationship between contact quantity and attitudes toward Syrian refugees in a sample of Turkish University students. Using a cross-sectional design in a sample of 275 university students (M_{age} = 22.46), an online measurement tool was applied that included demographic information, contact quantity, ethno-cultural empathy, and attitudes toward Syrian refugees. The results showed that ethno-cultural empathy was positively related to both contact quantity and attitude toward Syrian refugees. Moreover, ethno-cultural empathy was found to play an important mediating role in the relationship between frequency of contact and attitudes towards Syrians. This finding reveals that an increase in contact quantity is associated with an increase in ethno-cultural empathy and this relationship positively affects attitudes towards Syrians. In the attitude of the local people toward the Syrian refugees, socio-political strategies were discussed and suggestions for future work were made.

Keywords: attitude toward Syrians, contact quantity, ethno-cultural empathy, mediation model, university students

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 6.8 million Syrian refugees have had to leave their hometowns as a result of mass migration brought on by the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021a). With over 3.7 million Syrian refugees living there, Turkey is the nation that hosts the most refugees worldwide. According to the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM, 2021) data, approximately 0.7% of Syrian refugees are in temporary protection status (YUKK, art. 91) in Turkey residing in temporary shelters (99.3% in Gaziantep and Hatay, which are close to Turkey's Syrian border, and mainly in Adana and Istanbul). The fact that Syrian refugees who sought asylum in Turkey due to the conflict lived in the nation for an extended period, such as 13 years, exacerbated the issue of social cohesiveness and integration between local residents and Syrian refugees. As the length of time of Syrian refugees in Turkey increased, local residents regarded this scenario as a threat and risk (Toğral-Koca, 2016), and more disputes between the two groups became probable. A total of 181 violent court cases involving Syrian refugees occurred in Turkey in 2017, and 35 people died as a result, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2018). Previous studies reveal that the anxiety stemming from being an asylum seeker continues in the background among Syrians even after they have acquired Turkish citizenship (Akyol, 2022). In this context, it is important to explore the main factors affecting the attitudes of the local population in Turkey towards Syrians and to reveal their power of influence.

As a destination country or a country of transit, Turkey has recently seen a multiethnic migratory flow. In the migrant wave coming from Syria, the first refugee camps were established in the province of Hatay in 2011 (Güçer et al., 2013), and by 2021, there were 7 such camps (PMM, 2021). These mass movements resulted in intolerance, conflict, social unrest, and economic friction in addition to enhancing Turkey's social and cultural life (Brouwer & Boroş, 2010). The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (YUKK) No. 6458 included asylum seekers in the protection status, but they still had to reconstruct their lives in Turkey by assimilating into the local society and picking up the language. Discrimination, lack of social support, and employment difficulties are among other aspects of life in a new country (Akyol, 2022; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Due to the migrant flood that occurred in Turkey in 2011, many people anticipate that Syrians would eventually return to their home countries. However, since the Syrian civil war has grown more complex, some Turkish local residents are now

"accepting" the idea that Syrians will stay in Turkey for a while (İçduygu, 2015). To help Syrian refugees residing in Turkey adapt to Turkish society, "temporary protection" status was provided to Syrian refugees in October 2014, and the "open door" policy was maintained (Adalı & Türkyılmaz, 2019; Erdoğan, 2018). Syrian refugees with temporary protection status have exacerbated internal public criticism that, on the one hand, it has damaged Turkey's sociocultural framework and, on the other, the government has given Syrian refugees too much financial help (Erdoğan et al., 2017). As per and Kuru (2020), these public critiques strengthen the negative perceptions of the local people toward Syrian refugees and prevent the social contact between the two groups from turning into a dialogue. It is crucial to comprehend the factors that underlie these judgments since local residents' hostile attitudes toward Syrian refugees have recently grown more overt. Moreover, the fact that Syrians in Turkey are becoming an increasingly closed society (Uslu, 2022) may lead to marginalization, the riskiest form of acculturation. Similarly, minority group students at universities in Turkey encounter social experiences that evoke marginalization and stigmatization (Ateşok et al., 2020). This study intends to explore crucial ideas with a holistic perspective, such as contact quantity, empathy for other cultures, and political/religious orientations, which are supposed to influence attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Turkey. It is anticipated that this study will make significant additions to the literature by using the following practical and theoretical framework as a guide.

Contact quantity and attitude toward Syrian refugees

Recent scientific research has highlighted the possible role of social interaction in decreasing intergroup prejudice. *Intergroup Interaction Theory*, a traditional social psychology method for eliminating intergroup bias, proposes evidence for the positive effects of contact with members of disadvantaged groups (Allport, 1954, 1979). One of the primary factors in this study, "contact quantity", quantifies how frequently individuals with various identities interact with one another (Akbaş, 2010). One of the settings in Turkey where persons of Syrian ancestry are seen most frequently is at universities. Based on this aspect, the formation of views about Syrian refugees was examined in this study using university students, who essentially represent the varied structure of society. Furthermore, given that university students exhibit greater levels of cultural awareness (Erişen, 2018) and empathy (Dizer & İyigün, 2009; Wen et al., 2013), it was anticipated that there would be more frequent interaction and, thus, more reliable information on how much an attitude was impacted. Every day, more and more Syrian students are enrolling in Turkish universities. While there were roughly

10.000 Syrian university students registered in Turkish universities in 2015-2016, this number rose to 37.001 in 2020-21 (UNCHR, 2021b). In addition, 392 Syrian academics are known to work at various Turkish universities (Migration and Integration Report, 2018). In this context, university students are thought to be a vital bridge in the process of harmonization and integration between local residents and Syrian refugees, and universities might have a microcosmic effect in terms of Turkish sociology. Therefore, it is anticipated that this study, which is carried out with university students who have frequent interaction with Syrian refugees, will shine a spotlight on a significant problem area. It is now necessary to address ideas like multicultural psychological counseling and immigration/immigrant psychology on a practical level due to recent large-scale migratory movements on a worldwide scale. It is found that there are not enough large-scale integration studies for immigrant integration in Turkey.

Cultural empathy is strengthened as one develops a tolerance for other cultures and individuals (Human Library, 2021). Nevertheless, when it comes to Syrian refugees living in Turkey, the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM, 2021) data shows that the majority of Syrian refugees reside in Istanbul (total population in Istanbul = 534.000; ratio to Istanbul population: 3.36%). Despite the high frequency of encounters, 78% of Istanbul residents said they had no close contact with any Syrian refugees (Şar & Kuru, 2020). The issue of socialization and integration between local residents and Syrian refugees is brought up by this circumstance. A social psychology notion called the "exposure effect" (Zajonc, 1968) should now be considered. The development of a favorable attitude toward those individuals who are not part of the causal chain in the process following exposure to someone they had previously been neutral toward is known as the exposure effect. With increased contact quantity, a favorable attitude toward Syrian refugees may emerge in this context, regardless of ethno-cultural empathy. In this study, a robust linear link between the frequency of interaction and attitudes against Syrian refugees was expected.

Ethno-cultural empathy as a mediating variable

The term "ethno-cultural empathy" refers to the emotional and cognitive sensitivity needed to foster mutually beneficial understanding between distinct racial and ethnic structures (Batson et al., 1997; Carell, 1997). By including communicative empathy in the cognitive and emotional conceptual dilemma of empathy, Ridley and Lingle (1996) created the first comprehensive model of cultural empathy. In this conceptualization, one of the crucial aspects of the asylum seeker/refugee issue is ethno cultural empathy (Wang et al., 2003). Social interaction with people of out-of-group

social contact can have a significant impact on one's (ethno) cultural sensitivity. The fear of encountering individuals who do not share your ethnicity or your ideals lessens as the frequency of interaction increases. Reduced bias toward these individuals and an increase in empathy are results of greater awareness of these people and the capacity to interpret events from outside one's own group (Eller & Abrams, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). As a result, increased contact quantity enhances the capacity to perceive the emotional intensity (i.e., ethno-cultural empathy) of the fragile and vulnerable asylum seeker/refugee status. Empathy with a member of the stigmatized group has the benefit of lowering prejudice toward the group as a whole (Hewstone, 2009). Strengthening cultural empathy by eradicating biases against other social identities is crucial to lowering intergroup anxiety and fostering positive out-of-group attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). When one cannot comprehend an ethnic minority group on an emotional or cognitive level, it is sometimes believed to be hard to adopt a good attitude toward them. Cultural empathy is thus one of the crucial prerequisites for a concern/condition-free approach to Syrians. The inability of Turkish university students to comprehend Syrian students and to adopt favorable attitudes is considered a significant integration issue, and as a result, typical student social cohesion requirements cannot be met (Türk et al., 2018). In this framework, the theoretical and empirical findings that the relationship between contact quantity and attitudes towards Syrians will be largely mediated through ethno-cultural empathy provided additional evidence for the designed model. In other words, it was hypothesized that an increase in the contact quantity would increase ethno-cultural empathy and an increase in ethno-cultural empathy would significantly affect attitudes towards Syrians.

Current Research

When the literature has been examined in general on the research topic, mediation effects have also been looked at in addition to direct approaches. A theoretical foundation for mediation has now been established by the current study. For instance, face-to-face intergroup interaction lowers bias toward the person or group contacted, according to meta-analysis research of 515 papers by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006). Intergroup contact is seen as one of psychology's most successful methods for fostering better intergroup connections within this paradigm (Dovidio et al., 2003). It is common knowledge that exposure to any ethnicity or minority group helps people have a deeper understanding of them. Because it is abundantly obvious that empathy has a significant predictive role in determining how Syrian refugees' social distance is perceived (Ekşi et al., 2020). Due to this

circumstance, the ethno-cultural empathetic propensity will strengthen with increased interaction, and attitudes toward the target group will improve. Based on the aforementioned theoretical and experimental framework, this study is anticipated to add to the body of knowledge on the possible benefits and drawbacks of intergroup contact as a medium for social interchange between local residents and Syrian refugees.

Hypothesis 1: Contact quantity is positively associated with ethno-cultural empathy.

Hypothesis 2: Ethno-cultural empathy is positively related to attitude towards Syrian refugees.

Hypothesis 3: Contact quantity is positively related to attitude towards Syrian refugees.

Hypothesis 4: Ethno-cultural empathy has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between the contact quantity and the attitude toward Syrian refugees.

Figure 1.
*The coefficients shown are unstandardized regression coefficients. Dotted lines indicate non-significant effects. *p < .05. ***p < .001.*
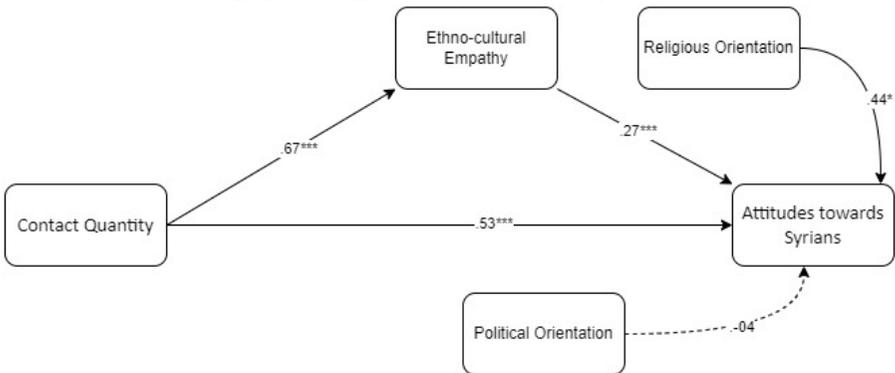
Control variable

To members of the host society, immigrants frequently express opposite viewpoints. While some hosts see migration as an egalitarian force that encourages group participation, others see it as a natural danger (Pratto et al., 2006). Social Dominance Theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) highlights that it should be regarded in terms of people having distinct psychological orientations about perceiving diversity as a societal burden or as a benefit. Turkey has seen that political and religious orientations play a significant role in determining whether Syrian refugees are viewed as a threat

or a resource (Deslandes & Anderson, 2019; Kındap-Tepe et al., 2019). In fact, among 46 nations, Turkey was evaluated to have the third-highest level of political prejudice (Çakır, 2019). According to this framework, supporters of the Ak Party (Justice and Development Party), one of the political parties in Turkey that represents the right-wing political orientation, view Syrian refugees as "coreligionists" and interact with them more favorably than supporters of other political parties (Şar & Kuru, 2020). Similar to this, "Ansar and Muhajir" (helpers, and immigrants) are conceptualized as one of the primary sources of inspiration for local citizens who consider themselves religious, and the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey represent the Sunni Muslim school (Schneider, 2008; Şar & Kuru, 2020). Metropoll, a national survey company, found that in Turkey favorable attitudes toward Syrian refugees had dramatically decreased and the percentage of people who supported their repatriation had risen to 82% in 2021 (Sencar, 2022). The fact that world perspective (e.g., political view) is already a significant factor in determining how people across the world and in Turkey feel about asylum seekers and refugees, however, cannot be disregarded (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; UNHCR, 2009). Political and religious orientations were therefore designated as control variables in this study to investigate the major variables predicted by the model from a comprehensive standpoint and to provide more reliable results.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants and Procedures

This study is a quantitative research based on a cross-sectional design. In the study, being a student of Turkish origin in Turkish universities was defined as an inclusion criterion. The study data were gathered in November 2021. After receiving approval from the institution's Scientific Ethics Review Board, instruments was sent online (through Google forms) to university students ($Age_{range} = 18 – 33$, $M_{age} = 22.47$, $SD_{age} = 5.65$) who were studying in Istanbul. In surveys conducted before the pandemic, information was frequently gathered through in-person interviews. Due to the pandemic's beginning, quarantine regulations, and other local governments' health procedures, this method grew extremely challenging to accomplish. Due to these restrictions, we collected our data for this study via online methods. Convenience sampling method was used to access the participants. Istanbul is the province having the most Syrian residents in Turkey. Students at universities in Istanbul, where we believe that engagement and contact with Syrian refugees would be more common, were given access to Google Forms documents by the researchers through WhatsApp groups the students had

made for themselves. In the initial round, 302 college students from nine different institutions of higher learning answered the online questionnaires. Although face-to-face measurements are safer, it is thought that the control items used in online measurements and the provision of good preliminary information to the participants will significantly reduce this disadvantageous situation. The researcher used the control item ("for this question, please tick '3'") as one of the exclusion criteria, and 27 students were eliminated from the study as a result. Finally, the sample used for the analyses included 275 university students, 69.1% of whom were female and 30.9% of whom were male. No money or additional points were provided to the students during the data collection phase. They were asked to contribute to a scientific study on a voluntary basis.

Instruments

Demographic Information Form. Participants' gender, age, and institution of higher education were all recorded on this form. An 11-point rating scale with scores ranging from 0 (*I am entirely left-wing*) to 10 (*I am entirely right-wing*) was used to ascertain the participants' political orientation. Similarly, the participants' religious orientation was also assessed using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*I am not religious at all*) to 10 (*I am completely religious*).

Social Contact Scale (SCS). The Social Contact Scale is a 10-item Likert-type scale with response options ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*quite often*) that was created by Islam and Hewnstone in 1993 and translated into Turkish by Akbaş in 2010. SCS, which has sub-dimensions for contact quantity and contact quality, was created to assess the frequency and quality of interaction with minority groups. Only the 5-item contact quantity sub-dimension of the scale was utilized in this study. Example question: "*How frequently do you communicate as close friends with Syrian refugees?*" High scores suggest frequent interaction. Previous research has shown that SCS demonstrated evidence for its reliability (α = .83; Akbaş, 2010). SCS further demonstrated good internal consistency and the current study has strong reliability (α = .83).

Ethno-cultural Empathy Scale (EES). The Ethno-cultural Empathy Scale (EES; Wang et al., 2003) is a 30-item scale that has been translated into Turkish (Özdikmenli-Demir & Demir, 2014) and used to evaluate a person's propensity for empathizing with cultures of other ethnicities. Sample item: "*I will help members of different ethnic groups if I believe they are being discriminated against.*" It is a Likert-type scale, with a score range of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). High scores show a strong capacity for empathy across cultures. In its original research, EES was shown to have

acceptable reliability (α = .91; Wang et al., 2003) and outstanding reliability (α = .93; Özdikmenli-Demir & Demir, 2014) in its Turkish translation. EES also displayed high reliability in the current study (α = .90).

The Scale of Attitudes toward Syrians (SATS). The Scale of Attitudes toward Syrians (SATS; Özüdogru et al., 2018) is a 26-item, 3-dimensional (accept, threaten, reject) scale created to assess the frequency and quality of local residents' positive/negative attitudes toward Syrians. Only the acceptability sub-dimension was employed in the current study to assess attitudes toward Syrian refugees. Example: "*I think Syrians enrich our culture with their variety.*" The rating ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) on a Likert-type scale. In its initial investigation, SATS was shown to have excellent reliability (α = .94; Özüdoğru et al., 2018). SATS also showed high reliability in the current investigation (α = .95).

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

Missing data and normality assumptions were initially analyzed before the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analyses were tested. In the examination of missing data, 27 data were lost across all research measures (SCS, EES, and SATS). Observations with more than 5% missing data for any variable or more than 10% of the total number of items in the study were eliminated from the dataset (Kline, 2011). The total sample for the study consisted of 275 datasets. The data provided multivariate (VIF value and Mahalanobis) assumptions of normality (Weston & Gore, 2006). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

Ethno-cultural empathy was positively correlated with contact quantity in Hypothesis 1, and it was hypothesized that attitudes toward Syrian refugees would also positively correlate with ethno-cultural empathy in Hypothesis 2. When Table 1 is analyzed, it is discovered that there is a positive link between contact quantity and ethno-cultural empathy ($r = .20, p < .01$). It is also discovered that there is a positive ($r = .56, p < .01$) association between ethno-cultural empathy and attitudes about Syrian refugees. The findings support Hypotheses 1 and 2. As per Hypothesis 3, the amount of interaction will have a favorable impact on how people feel toward Syrians. Correlation between the contact quantity and attitudes toward Syrian refugees of a positive nature ($r = .40, p < .01$). This result supports Hypothesis 3. The association between political orientation and attitude toward Syrian refugees is positive ($r = .14, p < .05$) and the relationship between religious orientation and attitude toward Syrian refugees is also positive ($r = .18, p < .01$), among the control variables.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviation, Scoring Ranges, Internal Consistency Coefficients and Correlation Coefficients of their Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	*M*	*SD*	Range	α
1. CQ	—					1.90	1.14	1-5	.83
2. EE	.20**	—				3.79	.63	1-5	.90
3. ATS	.40**	.56**	—			2.82	.93	1-5	.95
4. PO	.14*	.14*	.14*	—		5.41	2.86	0-10	
5. RT	.13*	.07	.18**	.36**	—	7.18	2.44	0-10	

Note. CQ = contact quantity; EE = ethno-cultural empathy; ATS = attitude towards Syrian; PO = political orientation; RT = religious orientation. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Data Analytic Plan

The IBM SPSS 23 statistic program in PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) and AMOS version 20 tested the mediator models in the research paper. With 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effects, the indirect effects analysis of the current study was carried out using 5.000 bootstrapping resampling procedures. In the mediation analyses of this study, indirect effects were considered significant if their 95% confidence interval did not contain zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Figure 1 displays the independent variable (X) as contact quantity, the dependent variable (Y) as attitude toward Syrian refugees, and the ethno-cultural empathy-mediating variable (M). As control variables, political and religious orientations were added to the model.

While there was no correlation between political orientation and attitude toward Syrian refugees, there was a positive correlation between religious orientations and attitude toward Syrian refugees in the interaction between the control variables (religious and political orientation) and the outcome variable. With the conditional influence of political and religious orientations variables, all study hypotheses were tested. In Hypothesis 4, it was hypothesized that the effect of contact quantity on views toward Syrian refugees would be positively moderated by ethno-cultural empathy. The contact quantity is positively connected with both attitudes toward Syrian refugees ($ß = .53$, $p < .001$) and ethno-cultural empathy ($ß = .67$, $p < .001$). Syrian refugees' attitudes are positively associated with ethno-cultural

empathy (β = .27, p < .001). Finally, the indirect impact of contact quantity on attitudes toward Syrian refugees through ethno-cultural empathy is positively significant as a result of the mediation analysis utilizing the bootstrapping (bias-corrected bootstrapping) approach (β = .18, SE = .05, [BC] 95% CI [.072; .280]). These findings are consistent with Hypothesis 4, which states that the relationship between contact quantity and attitudes toward Syrian refugees through ethno-cultural empathy accounted for 41% of the variation (The R^2 mediation effect size). Table 2 provides an overview of the findings.

Table 2
Direct and indirect effects of contact quantity on attitudes towards Syrians

Model paths	β	SE	P	95% CI [LB; UB]
Direct effect				
CQ → EE	.67	.19	.000	[.284; 1.059]
EE→ ATS	.27	.25	.000	[.218; .319]
CQ → ATS	.54	.08	.000	[.377; .713]
Indirect effect				
CQ → EE → ATS	.18	.05	.000	[.072; .280]
Control variables				
PO → ATS	-.04	.19	.805	[-.331; .324]
RO → ATS	.44	.19	.033	[.135; .758]
R^2	.41**		.000	

Note: CQ = contact quantity; EE = ethno-cultural empathy; ATS = attitude towards Syrian; PO = political orientation; RT = religious orientation; ß = unstandardized coefficients; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; LB = lower bound; UB = upper bound. **p < .001.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study's objective is to examine the role of ethno-cultural empathy as a mediating role in the association between contact quantity and attitudes toward Syrian refugees. As anticipated, contact quantity and attitudes toward Syrian refugees were positively correlated with ethno-cultural empathy. These findings in the ethno-cultural empathy variable corroborate the research on ethno-cultural empathy's favorable mediation function in contact quantity attitudes about immigrants (Allport, 1954, 1979; Batson et al., 1997; Carell, 1997; Eller & Abrams, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The finding that contact quantity positively affects attitudes toward Syrians is also in accordance with the research (Brophy, 1946; Dovidio et al., 2003; Hewstone, 2009; Zajonc, 1968). While religious orientation, one of the control factors,

positively influences attitudes toward Syrian refugees, political orientation was shown to have no significant link with attitudes toward Syrian refugees. The literature demonstrates that political and religious orientation is a significant factor in how one feels toward immigration (Anderson, 2018; Deslandes & Anderson, 2019; Güney & Konak, 2016; Kındap-Tepe et al., 2019; Schneider, 2008; Şar & Kuru, 2020). As a result, this finding is only partly consistent with the literature. In light of all these findings, it is believed that this study, which develops a model with current data and evaluates it in relation to the problem of immigrants/refugees, which is characterized as a political, economic, social, and legal sector, might be a source for interdisciplinary approaches.

Results from the model confirm the beneficial indirect impact of contact quantity on attitudes toward Syrian refugees through ethno-cultural empathy. Interacting with individuals from marginalized or stigmatized groups is a successful strategy in this situation for enhancing intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). It was noted that white sailors' racial attitudes improved when they cruised with blacks once the U.S. Merchant Marine started to desegregate (Brophy, 1946). Similarly, it was proposed in Allport's (1954) study that, under ideal conditions, intergroup interaction successfully diminishes unfavorable views. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that social interaction might amplify unfavorable attitudes (Padır, 2019; Tropp et al., 2012). This study demonstrates that a key factor in forming a favorable opinion of Syrian refugees is an increase in the frequency of interaction among university students. Additionally, this research demonstrates that college students are more sensitive to cultural variety and that deep conversations may develop during social interactions. The "exposure effect" (Zajonc, 1968), which is described as the formation of a favorable attitude without any justification when a person is exposed to a person (or an item) to which they were indifferent for a long time, exhibits positive outcomes in the current study as a consequence. Independent of ethno-cultural empathy, a significant linear association between the contact quantity and attitudes toward Syrian refugees was discovered in this study. As a result, the intermediary model, which was supported by its theoretical infrastructure, was validated in the study's model setting.

In the research of Batson et al. (1993), it is underlined that interaction with members of the outgroup lowers anxiety caused by uncertainty and enhances people's capacity for empathy. In the experimental study of Stephan et al. (2005), a group of Rwandan students who were subjected to manipulation that living in the US implies large costs to the government and that Rwandans were particularly prone to violence. In addition, a second

group that fostered empathy with Rwandan students was also defined in this study. Because of the experimental investigation, it was found that although the second group showed a good deal of empathy with Rwandan pupils, the first group had unfavorable attitudes against them (Stephan et al., 2005). This empirical study shows that there are several ways to distort local inhabitants' perceptions of the truth about immigration. Because, according to a study performed by Şar and Kuru (2020), social interaction with Syrian refugees does not result in favorable effects until it becomes a discourse. It is evident, therefore, that intimate communication between immigrants and social contacts results in data that more accurately represent the field. In the present research, it was shown that social interaction in the same physical setting significantly predicted ethno-cultural empathetic propensity and exhibited favorable opinions about Syrian refugees.

Being open to other life experiences and having empathy for prejudice that is focused on culture are two of the most efficient ways to build the intricate web of social and interpersonal interactions that characterizes a multicultural society (Vescio et al., 2003). Currently, research points to cultural empathy as one of the most useful indicators of favorable or unfavorable opinions toward Syrian refugees (Karaoğlu, 2015). This study found a significant relationship between the frequency of interaction and attitudes toward Syrian refugees and ethno-cultural empathy. In other words, it is evident that as the frequency of interaction rises, so does ethno-cultural empathy, and as a result, so does the attitude toward Syrian refugees.

Mass migration has an impact on a region's social and economic equilibrium, according to social psychology. The current state of affairs could make it more difficult for locals and migrants to develop positive relationships (Stephan, 2012). As a result, it promotes the growth of negative attitudes and intensifies the impression of threat in particular social groupings. Studies suggest that certain demographic traits, such as political, religious, and ethnic affiliation, may have a role in the development of views toward refugees and asylum seekers in this environment (Pedersen et al., 2005). Intergroup interaction has the potential to both foster positive attitudes and, in some circumstances, enhance relationships. Afro-Americans and Latinos who befriended white people showed a drop in their ethnic activism, according to the study by Tropp et al. (2012); however, Asian Americans with better status did not show a similar trend. Therefore, it is impossible to disregard the possibility that certain demographic patterns have an impact on how people feel toward refugees and asylum seekers. Currently, when we examine the literature, we can find that political and religious orientations stand out as significant demographic factors (Deslandes & Anderson, 2019; Kındap-Tepe

et al., 2019). Because it is clear from the perspective of political orientation that having a strong national identity and right-wing political orientations are helpful in the formation of misleading ideas and attitudes against asylum seekers (Anderson, 2018). Given that Turkey has the third-highest level of partisanship out of 46 nations (Çakır, 2019), it was believed that adding political orientations to the hypothetical model would allow the study to yield more thorough and reliable results. Political orientations, however, were found to be a weak predictor of attitudes toward Syrian refugees in this study. Additionally, it was discovered that the political orientations of the research participants were primarily centered (mean value = 5.41). Yet, in Şar and Kuru's (2020) study with the general public on the size of Istanbul, it was found that the participants' political orientation was heterogeneously distributed and that political orientation was one of the primary variables influencing attitudes toward Syrian refugees. There are allegedly two crucial paradigms at play here. First, young people in Turkey do not identify themselves with the extremes of the left or right (Tanyaş, 2015); second, participants' assessments of the perceived danger (economic and social; Padır, 2019) posed by Syrian refugees go beyond political orientations.

In the eyes of refugees and asylum seekers, a person's worldview and degree of religiosity are also significant factors. In this study, it was discovered that the religious orientation of participating university students was strong (mean value = 7.18). There is the fact that 88.4 per cent of Turks consider themselves to have strong religious beliefs (EVS/WVS, 2021). Additionally, it has been reported in studies conducted in the Turkish context that local citizens who identify as religious approach Syrian refugees based on their religious kinship (Güney & Konak, 2016; Kındap-Tepe et al., 2019). The fact that most of the Syrian refugees represent the Sunni Muslim school and adopt a conservative-religious lifestyle facilitates the local residents to develop a positive attitude (Schneider, 2008; Şar & Kuru, 2020). This study came up with the conclusion that people's attitudes regarding Syrian refugees are influenced by their religious orientations. Contrary to political trends, local inhabitants' attitudes toward Syrian refugees are favorably impacted by the "Ansar and Muhajir" (helpers and immigrants) understanding of Islamic teachings. According to the results of the current study, local residents' adoption of Muslim identity is therefore considered a crucial protective factor for the integration of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, it has been shown in a study that the asylum seeker/refugee phenomena are primarily defined by ethnic and religious (Ethnoreligious) identities and that political orientation is developed within this framework. Based on these

findings, we may offer a number of suggestions to policymakers, university administrations, and psychological counselors working with immigrants.

The establishment of the "Ministry of Immigration and Integration" should be one of Turkey's top priorities in the near future so that issues like contact quantity, contact quality, and microaggression can be thoroughly addressed through administrative and bureaucratic structures while avoiding sociologically marginalizing Syrian refugees. The fact that contact quantity, ethno-cultural empathy, religious and political orientation, as well as other social, psychological and political processes may be influential in the process of discovering the factors affecting attitudes towards Syrians should be on the agenda of policymakers. Because Syrians' perception of local people can accelerate integration, which is one of the elements of acculturation, but it can also open the door to marginalization.

Counseling centers that will strengthen social cohesion between Syrian students and Turkish students can be established. Focus group studies can be conducted on inclusive education. Orientation training can be given importance in the academic and administrative structuring of universities because the societal structure is micro-cosmically impacted by universities. Finally, limitations in personnel and technical equipment in university-based guidance and psychological counseling units (Erkan et al., 2011) interrupt clinical-level psychological counseling services. An ethnographic study on the issue areas of international students in Turkey discovered that students, although having problems, are unaware that they can seek help from the university's guidance and psychological counseling section (Bilgili, 2016). However, research to strengthen behavioral repertoires, such as marathon group work and assertiveness training with international students, will increase the frequency of interaction. With more frequent interaction, there is little doubt that attitudes toward Syrian refugees will improve. Furthermore, interaction groups to be developed under the leadership of the guidance and psychological counseling center can perform integration studies that will be a model for society at the university level, by uncovering the dynamics that impede contact between locals and foreigners from converting into social discourse and by breaking down potential resistances.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study contains several limitations. First, the study's cross-sectional design does not entirely permit evaluating the causal order of the variables developed in accordance with the theoretical framework. Thus, a longitudinal or experimental design is required to investigate the theories that are believed to influence attitudes toward Syrian refugees in a causal manner. Second, the study evaluated a hypothetical design on a sample of college

students. But research that includes unemployed people, those working in the public and private sectors, and retirees in the sample would provide more inclusive results since the hypothetical model has to reflect local citizens holistically. However, we were only able to examine a small area/audience in the current study (i.e., university students). Third, this study investigates the limiting conceptions of attitudes regarding Syrian refugees. Future research might study the impact of contextual factors, such as nomophobia, age, language, gender, and the use of social media for specific purposes. Fourth, this study employed a quantitative research methodology. In future studies, we propose undertaking in-depth qualitative research on the substance of local residents' meetings with Syrian refugees in Turkey, as well as how their attitudes and views about the process impact their attitudes toward them. Fifth, there was little social interaction with the four million Syrian refugees living in Turkey in previous investigations (Şar & Kuru, 2020) and the current study. With the help of this study, it has been clear that the issue of social integration may be effectively solved by increasing contact quantity. Researchers can thus conduct investigations that will show the causal and mediating chain that will identify the factors that influence the frequency of interaction. The participants may not have felt comfortable discussing their political beliefs on the internet because the data for this study was gathered online. It is commonly understood in Turkey that expressing political opinions online will prohibit one from being followed or from advancing one's profession in the future, particularly among young people. Given that face-to-face data collection using paper and pencil allows participants to disguise themselves more readily (as opposed to the potential of online data collection leaving a trail), we propose that research data involving political views in countries such as Turkey not be gathered online.

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