"We are America's Number One Enemy": The Experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim Men College Students Navigating Higher Education in the United States

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
  	Muslim students in higher education are affected by the hardships of oppression, discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes associated with the increasing Islamophobia and xenophobia within the U.S. The current literature on Middle Eastern Muslim men college students lacks an understanding of their lived experiences on U.S. college campuses. The purpose of this study is to understand how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a university within a divisive political context. This phenomenological study conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Middle Eastern Muslim men students. Data gathered informs how participants of this study made sense of their experience navigating higher education institutions. The findings describe that Middle Eastern Muslim men college students must fight negative perceptions, face the challenge of feeling alone socially and academically, and commit to education with the support of their families. After the findings, this paper provides a discussion and a list of recommendations for research and practice to be inclusive and elevate the lived experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men students in higher education. While this study took place in the U.S., the discussion and recommendations apply to all colleges and universities worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades cultural understanding, religious tolerance, and a sense of unity have declined in the United States and the world (Arnova et al., 2013; Gordon & Rosenberg, 1989). The 2016 U.S. presidential election resulted in a noticeable increase in division and hostility towards minoritized and immigrant communities of people within the U.S. (Pollock, 2017). This hostility has notably been directed toward those of the Islamic religion and Middle Eastern descent (Zakaria, 2015). While followers of Islam, or Muslims, are the second largest religion and the fastest growing across the globe, and significantly, a growing immigrant group in the U.S. (approximately 1.1% of the U.S. population), they experience religious discrimination and racism from others of the dominant group (Jones, 2017; Lipka, 2017). The hostility towards the growing Muslim population has the potential to lead to psychological challenges that "interfere with [young Muslims'] healthy, emotional development and ethnic identity integration" (Maldonado & Epstein, 2015, p. 85). It can result in them developing "feelings of isolation and alienation" (Ali, 2019, p. 3).

Muslim people in the U.S. have experienced a shift in how society views, interact, and engages with them. Islamophobia emerged during the Iranian revolution (Jackson, 2010; Karim, 2002) and is explained as the irrational fear of Muslim communities. Islamophobia intensified partly due to the negative media portrayal of Muslim people post the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Ali, 2019; Ogan et al., 2014; Uddin et al., 2022). The association of terrorism with Islam and Muslim communities in the "war on terror" interventions, the distortion of facts by dominant and prejudiced media, and the rhetoric of hate-mongering, which dominated the presidential election of 2016, have all contributed to how society perceives Muslim communities and added to the historical Western biased views of Islam and the Arab world (Jones, 2017; Said, 1979). Muslim students are enduring the compounded effects of preconceived notions and assumptions exaggerated by these situations that have occurred during the past decades.

Muslim students in higher education are affected by the hardships of oppression, discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes associated with the increasing Islamophobia and xenophobia within the United States (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ali, 2019; Jackson, 2010; Meijer et al., 2022; Neider, 2011; Ogan et al., 2014). While a few scholars have aimed to understand the experiences of Muslim women (i.e., Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Mir, 2014), literature is absent on the experiences of Muslim men college students in the U.S. The limited literature on Middle Eastern Muslim men students lacks the depth needed to understand the lived experiences of these individuals on college campuses. Therefore, this phenomenology study aims to understand how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university within the current divisive political context. This research wants to fill a void in the literature and provide valuable information and data to continue scholarly discourse about the lived

experiences of Muslim men in higher education in the U.S. This phenomenological study aims to answer the following research question: How do Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university within the divisive political context? This study uses phenomenology research design to highlight the lived experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men in U.S. higher education.

Muslim College Students

Since September 11, 2001, preconceived notions and unfair speculation about Middle Eastern students have been a persistent problem for Muslims across college campuses in the United States (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Ali, 2019, 2014; Fiske-Rusciano, 2008). Students from Middle Eastern countries feel excluded and ostracized as their peers do not want to understand their cultures (Ali, 2014; Kymlicka & Norman, 2000). These feelings of exclusion and isolation are some of the reasons for compensating behaviors and social struggles in U.S. higher education. To begin to grasp a better idea of how to approach and combat these social and cultural stigmas is vital to understand the differential experiences of Muslim students in college (Ali, 2019, 2014). Research and data on society's effect on Muslim men's behaviorism and mental processes are lacking when it is more needed than ever.

Muslim men students' identity is multi-layered and is always questioned and negotiated (Bhatti, 2011; Ramadan, 2004; Totonchi et al., 2022). Bhatti (2011) described Muslim students' social and cultural experiences as "rich, negotiated, and multi-layered. [And] Their identities are fluid and complex" (p. 92). Furthermore, Ali (2019) explains that "Muslim life must be understood not as "religious" or "spiritual" life; rather the self-identifier of *Muslim* has served as a socially significant identification which has been racialized and functions in tandem with traditional racial schematics within the United States" (p. 7). Therefore, the intersection of their social identities in spaces of education, gender, cultural capital, and social experience, "raises the question about personal agency, resilience, and survival with dignity for Muslim young men… their acceptance by society" (Bhatti, 2011, p. 94). Muslim men's multidimensional and dynamic identities are often defined by their social, cultural, and educational locations (Ali, 2014; Uddin et al., 2022). While Muslim communities experience Islamophobia and xenophobia, they "have a youthful population with the potential to change the world for the better if educated, enabled, and better understood" by higher education stakeholders (Bhatti, 2011, p. 95). While scholars advocate that it is important to understand Middle Eastern Muslim students who attend college in the U.S. to promote their success and cultivate their possible positive impact within higher education (Maldonado & Epstein, 2015); however, Middle Eastern Muslim students often encounter discriminatory practices against them and their religious beliefs (Jones, 2017).

Middle Eastern Muslim students in the U.S. are affected by cultural factors (i.e., language, religious/faith practices, cultural customs, dietary practices, and

culturally dictated/expected gender roles and occupations) (Ali, 2019). These cultural factors often cause a division between the students' cultures of origin and the U.S. culture (Maldonado & Epstein, 2015). The differences and tension between the U.S. cultural norms and values of Middle Eastern students often result in interrupted relationships between U.S. and Middle Eastern students, in addition to interactions that are conflicted by "anti-Arab biases, covert and overt discrimination," which lead to overall isolation of Muslim students from the social community on college campuses (Ali, 2019; Maldonado & Epstein, 2015, p. 87).

A study conducted on Muslims living in Western countries showed that a cultural gap exists between Muslims' countries of origin and the Western countries of destination on three issues: 1) religiosity, 2) sexual liberalization, and 3) gender equality (Norris & Inglehart, 2012). These main contrasts in cultures and values between U.S. and Middle Eastern students may be the foundation for misunderstanding and division among the different ethnicities on campus. The perceived distance/difference between the characteristics of an individual within society and the explicit or implicit characteristics (cultural norms) of the dominant group is sometimes referred to as "cultural distance" (Iles & Kaur Hayers, 1997, p. 107). Cultural distance disadvantages minoritized communities because societal prejudices, which favor the dominant culture, can create a deep feeling of exclusion and unhappiness for these communities (e.g., Middle Eastern students) (Tineo et al., 2021). Maldonado and Epstein (2015) state that "These experiences can lead to Middle Easterners experiencing depression, isolation, and psychological distress in all facets of life" (p. 87). To combat depression, isolation, and psychological distress, colleges and universities must provide additional support, counseling support, and more culturally relevant and inclusive programming for Muslim students (Ali, 2019; Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Maldonado & Epstein, 2015; Tineo et al., 2021).

Existing literature lacks the depth and value needed to comprehend and understand the lived experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men students on U.S. college campuses. For example, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) parallel the idea that Muslim students on college campuses have not received the proper positive attention, especially during the current era where society's Islamophobia and xenophobia have dramatically risen. Therefore, this study is relevant to discern a demographic group's intricate factors that need to be understood.

Modern Political Context

As mentioned previously, September 11, 2001, was a devastating attack in U.S. history (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008). With 2,973 deaths on U.S. soil (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, n.d.), it has become clear that the ramifications of such a tragic event have established both short-term and long-term presences in emotional, social, and political contexts. Viewing these results with a circumstantial mindset, the significant changes ranging from U.S. foreign policy to the social behaviors of individuals have

molded the experiences of various Muslim American people in recent years (Ayoub, 2011; Jackson, 2010; Lipka, 2017).

The historical Western-biased views of Islam and the Arab world, which were a cause and result of imperialism (Jones, 2017; Said, 1979), expanded significantly and rapidly during the Iranian revolution and dominated the U.S. media (Jackson, 2010; Karim & Gasher, 2002) to the point that merited the emergence of the term islamophobia (Gordon & Rosenberg, 1989; Jones, 2017). After September 11, 2001, a nation-shattering event, a bifurcation of U.S. history was created, splitting into "Pre-9/11" and "Post-9/11." As a result, an additional negative shift in thinking regarding Muslims began Post-9/11 (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ogan et al., 2014; Uddin, Williams & Alcock, 2022). According to Dudziak (2011), "In the past decade, Muslims in the United States has gone from relative obscurity to a sociological dilemma" (p. 6). Events following 9/11, such as the controversy over plans to build an Islamic cultural center near the World Trade Center site, have become the subject matter for examining the political and cultural debates surrounding Muslim communities (Dudziak, 2011).

Opinions regarding Islam and Muslim communities became increasingly negative following 9/11 (Jackson, 2010; Jones, 2017; Ogan et al., 2014). According to Abu-Ras and Suarez (2009), 9/11 and the growing Muslim population within the U.S. led to a 1,700% increase in hate crimes against Arab and Muslim communities and people who were stereotyped as Arabs. The idea that all Muslim people were administering a "Jihadist" agenda against the U.S. government and its citizens was a message that spoke to many people, instilling a widespread fear for the fate of the country and a call against Islam (Gabon, 2016, p. 8). Acts of racism ranging from bias incidents to workplace and airline discrimination became prevalent against Muslims. In the wake of such racism, violent incidents, physical assaults, hate mail, vandalism of properties, and other forms of discrimination became more commonplace (Jones, 2017; Kosmin & Keysar, 2006). The effects of such racism have been regarded as a source of stress for Muslims and many other marginalized populations.

Tension levels among Muslim Americans have significantly risen because of either experiencing discrimination or witnessing discrimination against them (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Meijer et al., 2022). Results from the study show that a vast majority of Muslim American participants reporting physical or emotional symptoms of posttraumatic stress as a result of being targets of discrimination (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009). With negative psychological effects being a high possibility, the discriminatory experiences of Muslim American people can directly impact their feeling of safety within the U.S. (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008). This loss of safety can create a strong impression on their actions, ways of thinking, and sense of self (Ali, 2019; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009).

More recently, social media has become an outlet for Muslim American people to voice the discrimination they have experienced in a post-9/11 world and make their fearful feelings more accessible to the public. Following Donald Trump's

presidential victory in the 2016 election, not only did the country witness a division between Trump supporters and Trump opponents, but it also saw an increase in hate crimes against minority groups, including Muslims (Dearden, 2016). For example, between November 9, 2016, and February 9, 2017, there were 261 documented hate incidents, with 1.8% targeting Muslims (ThinkProgress, 2017). The outcry of such a response to a presidential victory can be viewed through the social media outlets of those directly affected.

Twitter, a social media platform, has been a major source of Muslim American responses to the racism experienced following Trump's presidential election. After announcing Trump's victory, various emotional tweets were posted in response. One Twitter user tweeted, "Today, leaving my home with my hijab on will be the greatest bravery I have yet done. What a shame" (Hameed, 2016). The 2016 U.S. election results spurred a revitalization of physical and verbal racism against various marginalized populations (ThinkProgress, 2017). As discussed earlier, the psychological impact of such discrimination toward Muslim Americans and their insecurity and lack of safety results in many reactions that correlate with an individualized sense of self (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

In this paper, the researchers examine the experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men on college campuses in the U.S. through the lens of social justice as redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 2001) and the Islamic philosophy of education (Hussain & Ashraf, 1979; Shah, 2006). Social justice as redistribution and recognition and the Islamic philosophy of education hold promise for fostering an understanding of Middle Eastern Muslim men's experiences on college campuses in the United States.

Social justice entails the redistribution or reallocation of resources and wealth from the haves to the have-nots and recognizing the distinctive perspectives of cultural groups while acknowledging them as equal peers in society (Fraser, 2001). An intentional focus on the recognition of Middle Eastern Muslim men as a cultural group guided this study. Recognition of minoritized cultural groups encompasses whatever the misrecognized group needs to participate equitably in society. This issue could differ based on the intersection of the group and individual needs and the context (Fraser, 2001).

Dusche (2004) argued that the yardstick and the true measure of social justice are that afforded to the cultural group, not just to the individual, because "the group offers the individual the indispensable good of being rooted in the community, and since membership in a culture is not voluntary, abolition of culture would lead to the uprooting of individuals" (p. 238). Recognition of an individual's rights, deprived of recognition of the individual's culture, is inadequate at best. Social justice is only achieved when a cultural group's rights are recognized and accepted within the social structure in which the individual resides (Dusche, 2004).

Kymlicka and Norman (2000) defined minority group rights as "a wide range of public policies, legal rights, and constitutional provisions sought by ethnic groups for the accommodation of their cultural differences" (p.2). Minority rights can include added accommodations or exemptions from policies or laws if the majority of these laws oppose the beliefs or cultural norms of the minority (Levy, 1997). In addition, a minority group has the right to recognition of its history, symbols, and specific cultural elements (Levy, 1997; Guo, 2011). Consequently, recognition of Middle Eastern Muslim men students' history, symbols, and cultural elements, by higher education institutions represents a minority right necessary for equitable and socially just practices.

The stress of seeking and acquiring knowledge is one of the foundational tenets of Islam. Islamic philosophy of education is grounded in the faith and in a belief that Allah or God is the ultimate knower "and above every one possessed of knowledge is the All-knowing One" (Quran 12:76). Accordingly, knowledge rests with God, who "has bestowed on [human beings], and [human beings] alone among all the created things, ability to recognize, understand, and emulate the attributes of God, and realize them in practice in this life" (Hussain & Ashraf, 1979, p. 10; Shah, 2006). In Islam, education aims to develop humans through knowledge and enable them to become useful members of society (Shah, 2006). Accordingly, learning has become a compulsory religious obligation for Muslims (Karim, 1938). Muslim communities perceive education as a means for advancing human experiences, developing societies, and preserving values in addition to an end that adds meaning to life. These perceptions contribute to enhanced expectations of Muslim learners (Shah, 2006). Social justice as redistribution and recognition and the Islamic philosophy of education helps the researchers of this paper to conceptualize an understanding of Middle Eastern Muslim men's experiences on college campuses in the United States.

METHODS

This qualitative study is grounded in phenomenology. Phenomenology describes the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It investigates the "essential meanings of individual experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 104) and describes, rather than explains, the phenomenon in question. This qualitative research focuses on interpreting phenomena in their natural settings to make sense of the meanings people bring to these settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university within the divisive political context in the U.S. Due to the divisive nature of the political and cultural climate, the researchers attempted to analyze and investigate the effects this context may have on Middle Eastern Muslim men students in U.S. higher education. The study aimed to answer the following research question: How do Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university within the divisive political context?

Setting and Participants

The setting of this study is a high-research activity, urban, large-size public university (Carnegie Classification, 2022) located in South Florida. Approximately 33,000 students are enrolled in the university. The university does not publicly collect information on religious affiliation and does not have data on the number of enrolled Muslim students. However, the university has a Muslim Student Association (MSA) and a serenity room available to all students to reflect and pray. All study participants are MSA members and stated that MSA has over 100 student members who identify as Muslims.

Seven self-identified Middle Eastern Muslim men students participated in this study. Four of the seven participants are seeking a major in engineering with different concentrations, one student in biology, one in business, and one in political science. Six participants are between the ages of 21-24, and one is between 18-20. Five participants indicated that they were born outside the U.S. and migrated to the U.S. with their families seeking better educational and employment opportunities. During the interview, six participants self-identified as "Men of Color" or "Brown men" because of their skin color.

In contrast, only one self-identified as white because of his lighter skin color. However, when the self-identified White participant described his experiences in the U.S., he stated, "I am a man of color because of the way I am treated in the United States." All participants self-identified as Middle Eastern regarding their race or ethnicity. To protect the identity of all participants of this study, we asked all participants to choose a pseudonym. The pseudonyms are Brock, Hussein, Ali, Bob, Mo, Henry, and Lammar. See Table 1 for participants' demographics.

Table 1. Middle Eastern Muslim men participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Country of Birth	Class Standing	Major(s)
Brock	Middle Eastern/ White	Turkey	Senior	Environmental Engineering
Hussein	Middle Eastern/ Palestinian	United States	Junior	Biology
Ali	Middle Eastern	Iran	Senior	Computer Science Engineering
Bob	Middle Eastern	Jordan	Freshman	Environmental Engineering
Mo	Middle Eastern/ Arab	Lebanon	Senior	Mechanical Engineering
Henry	Middle Eastern	Jordan	Senior	Business
Lammar	Middle Eastern	United States	Graduate Student	Political Sciences

Data Collection

This study is part of a larger study where Men of Color (i.e., Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Middle Eastern Muslim) college students participated in focus groups and individual interviews. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Due to the differences in the responses between Middle Eastern Muslim men student participants and Black/African American and Latino/Hispanic men student participants, we decided to dedicate this study to the examination and reporting on the findings specific to Middle Eastern Muslim men.

Seven self-identified Middle Eastern Muslim men college students participated in this study. Participants were invited to participate in this study via e-mail. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes long. By interviewing seven Middle Eastern Muslim men on a college campus in the U.S., the data gathered serves to understand and elevate the experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigating a four-year university in the U.S. during the divisive political context. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for findings.

Interview responses illustrated the lived experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men on a college campus in the United States. Participants were asked questions to set the context of their educational background, such as short/long-term goals and career plans; describe their personal experiences of being Middle Eastern and Muslim on a college campus and describe their perceived academic and social support within the higher education context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consists of organizing and preparing the data through coding to interpret the data into findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Second, the transcripts were cleaned and organized. Third, the transcripts were read by each researcher to make meaning of the data and consider codes. A list of codes was created to show evidence into small categories of information to make meaning of the patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013). Fourth, In Vivo code was the method used to analyze the data. In Vivo coding, direct quotes from what participants said, using quotation marks to support each code (Saldaña, 2009). Last, the researchers made meaning of the data by looking for similarities and frequency across the data to make meaning of the data and write the findings.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to understand how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university in the U.S. within a divisive political context. Three overarching themes emerged from the data describing Middle Eastern Muslim college students' lived experiences, including 1) combating negative perceptions about Middle Eastern Muslim men, 2) social and

academic challenges in U.S. higher education and 3) family support and educational commitment. Details of the three findings are presented in the following sections.

Fighting Negative Perceptions of Middle Eastern Muslim Men

Most Middle Eastern Muslim men participants learned to navigate their college campus within 1-2 years. However, societal perceptions and negative depictions of Muslim people following September 11 (9/11) caused strife in the Muslim community in the United States. However, despite mixed public opinion and microaggressions toward the Muslim culture, participants described their transition to and experience on a college campus as insightful and hopeful. When describing meeting friends in college, Ali said:

> My peers or people that I know, hopefully after meeting me, would have a positive experience…a positive image of Muslims…I know that they know I'm a Muslim, and again, they are going to know a Muslim guy, and they are going to speak to different people, and even if they hear something bad about Muslims, I hope that they tell them, "Oh, I know a Muslim, and he's not like that."

Being authentic was instrumental for Middle Eastern Muslim men participants who hoped to fight negative perceptions about Muslim students in their college and create a positive image for Muslim communities. However, extremist and radical views played a role in how students, as early as elementary school, were influenced by family and peer views of Muslims portrayed in trending news and world events. Conversations were described as "circular," leaving no voice to represent Middle Eastern Muslim men individually. Lammar expressed:

> As a child, I remember I was in first grade when 9/11 happened, and I remember at that time, I didn't understand what was going on or what was happening, and neither did my classmates because we were in the first grade. I remember somewhere around; I want to say, fourth grade, there was a palpable shift in how kids interacted with me. Moreover, that was sort around the same time when America invaded Iraq, and now I think about it, and I remember these kids, these ideas were not their ideas, right? Parents were talking about it, their friends were talking, and their friend's parents were talking about it. And it sort of became a circular go-around, and I became the other… I felt there isn't a voice that represents me or talks about me.

Participants expressed a lack of university support and cultural inclusivity for Middle Eastern Muslim students at their college.

Furthermore, participants described moments when students, and even professors, made a mockery of Muslim students. For example, Hussein and Lammar described how students mocked their prayer practices. Hussein shared, "when I was praying, and a student came up to me, he was like, 'Oh, what are you doing? Why are you putting your face down?'" Like Hussein, Lammar stated:

> One time I was praying in the library, and there were students walking by, and they were like, "What is this guy doing?" They were mocking me for praying. But other times, I would pray in the library, and people stopped, and they looked, and they just continued forth with their day. So sometimes you have to be strong in the ways people mocking, and sometimes people admire you for what you do.

Other students often mock public practices of prayer for Muslim college students. Also, these oppressive experiences came from faculty members. Lammar shared how a faculty member had negative perceptions of Islam that translated into his ability to support Lammar in academic completion. Lammar described:

> There is one professor. He is my senior professor, and he has to agree to my final senior project. I talked to him a little bit, and I don't know if it is only me he treats this way, but my other friends who are also Arabs and Muslims have the same issue with him. They say he talks down to us and belittles us. Whenever you share an idea with him, he is dismissive and does not support our ideas. He circles around the words our ideas are not good.

Hussein, Lammar, and other participants of this study indicated how they had negative experiences as Muslim men because of their religious practices and their existence in college.

Negative stereotypes and depictions of Middle Eastern Muslim men were disheartening for some participants. As participants sought groups and spaces to build a sense of community at their respective colleges, some described how the media contributes to a misrepresentation of their faith. When addressing how media impacts the perception of Muslim men, Hussein stated:

> People just know about Islam from the media; they don't know it is like anything else. So, maybe two or three times, people got, "Oh, you're Muslim? I never knew that!" That doesn't hurt me in any way; it just like surprises me that people believe whatever media says. "Okay, Muslims are bad. They're not supposed to be nice." It doesn't affect me in any way because I am who I am because that is what I am.

Like Hussein's experiences, Ali spoke about the influence media had on the perception of Middle Eastern Muslim men:

> If you believe what the media says, our representation would be angry people who are angry about everything. That is the general idea that you get from the media. We are perceived as the bad guys.

Therefore, Ali expressed that he felt responsible for representing the Muslim community in his interactions. Ali shared:

> Being a Muslim here, I am representing all of the Muslim community because people are quick to judge the entire community based on one person's actions. I have this in the back of my mind wherever I am representing a certain faith and community. People are going to judge everyone based on me.

Despite existing stereotypes, Muslim men students are passionate about establishing a voice for the Muslim community to improve racial perceptions. Over the past years, participants have experienced greater acts of hate and violence against Muslims and other oppressed groups. Participants feel that individuals discriminate more freely on and off campus because U.S. leaders act similarly in the public eye. As described by Hussein:

> Since Trump took over [office as President of the U.S.], the actions and the violence against Muslims have increased. That doesn't say more Muslims became more hated; it just says that people are hating Muslims now openly. Now they [feel they] can discriminate freely because the President is discriminating freely.

Ali shared a similar sentiment about discrimination against Muslim communities by saying, "it is more open now…it was not too public before [the 2016 presidential election], people are more free to do it and more public, open about it." When discussing the impact of the American political administration on the Muslim community, Lammar stated:

> We are America's number one enemy. America's number one threat is now the Muslim men… Chaos, death, and destruction; we don't want anything else…I hate the word normalize, but to a great extent, even though Obama did it late in his campaign, he visited a mosque and normalized Muslims. I would say his cabinet included a greater diversity. In diversity, when you show more colors, when you show more faces, when you show different people adding to the American fabric or American civilization, it shows that diversity is our strength.

Despite the perceptions of being Muslim in the U.S., participants hope to use their education and culturally relevant research to address public concerns. In hopes of creating and sustaining a positive image of the Muslim community, Lammar expressed:

> If I can empirically prove something or show something through data that shows "hey, look, we're not the boogeymen, Muslims are not the boogeymen, we're not the problem…we contribute a lot more than we take back", right to the American society.

Participants experienced negative experiences for being Middle Eastern Muslim men in the U.S; their negative experiences increased during the 2016 Presidential election.

Social and Academic Challenges in U.S. Higher Education

This finding expands on how Middle Eastern Muslim men participants of this study make meaning of their social and academic experiences in the United States and higher education. While the family is important for Muslim men in this study, not all had their families in the U.S., creating social and academic challenges. For example, Henry shared that most of his family, besides his brother, still live in Jordan. Henry stated:

> When I came here like four years ago, it was kind of rough for me because my family's back home, and I lived here by myself. I had to take care of everything by myself. My brother was there, but he wasn't always there for me; he wanted me to do my own thing and learn on my own. Socially, during the first two years in the United States, I didn't have anybody, any friends, or anything.

Like Henry, Ali lives in the U.S. with his father, while his mother and siblings reside in Pakistan. Ali shared:

> The first few months [in the U.S.] were a bit hard cause of the cultural shock…back in Pakistan; I used to live in a combined family…we were all together. Everyone was close by. But over here [in the U.S.], there wasn't much to do for me. Usually, I would go on campus, get to classes, and come back home…so the first semester was tough, but then I got used to it.

The transition to living solely with his father and having no other relatives or friends was socially challenging for Ali. Henry and Ali understood that their family was part of their social experiences, and having a few family members or friends in the U.S. limited them from being social. Like Henry and Ali, Mo indicated that he struggled socially and academically for a prolonged time as he did not have much family or know many people in the United States. For this reason, Mo spent his time at home alone studying for classes.

In addition to having limited social support, Middle Eastern Muslim men shared that they struggled academically. For example, Ali said:

> The educational system here [in the U.S.] is quite different than what I was used to. You're way too free to do anything you want, and the professors don't care about what you're doing. I was confused about the attendance or anything. Back home, you have to attend every class; your schedule is already set by the university. So, it is not like you can pick and choose what class you want to take.

Ali was confused about the U.S. higher education system, which impacted his academic experiences. Similar to other participants, Hussein described how he faced social and academic challenges during his transition from a community college to a four-year university:

> I had no idea where everything was. I had no idea how this whole educational system was. Because for my Associate's, I went to [community college], it is very similar to high school. It is small classroom; you could have one on one with the teacher. Here, no. If you don't get the material, you have to bang your head on the book or to the laptop until you understand. You have to work hard on your own. If you don't, no one's going to help you. You're alone. You're with 300-plus students in the class, and then everything can be thought of mathematically. One student's failure in a 30-person course at a state college is more impactful than one student failing in a 300-person course at the university.

Hussein associated his community college experience with his high school experience with small class sizes and more attention from teachers and faculty. However, when Hussein transferred to a four-year university, he felt disconnected from his academic experience. While all participants of this study were committed to education, they experienced academic and social challenges.

Familial Support and Educational Commitment

For Middle Eastern Muslim men participants of this study, education was portrayed as an essential practice critically upheld in their family and culture. Education was described as the way of life for Middle Eastern Muslim men, and family played a huge role in setting cultural expectations. For example, Lammar shared:

> Honestly speaking, at least in my house or just my family at large, if you don't have a degree, it is as if you're worthless. And I know it sounds harsh, but you have to understand that your parents strive and struggle so much for you and want you to live a practical life. And it is funny that I say practical because the idea of having a house and a car, and a steady paycheck, and just like something to raise your kids with, is all they want. They don't want a BMW or a Maserati. They don't dream of grandiose and big ideas. They dream, "Hey, my kid goes to college, gets a good education, establishes himself a career, and moves forward with his education."

Familial support and expectations for Middle Eastern Muslim men in education motivated them to enroll in a four-year university and earn a higher education degree.

Education was instilled at home as necessary for financial security, a fulfilling and comfortable life, and providing a sense of freedom for Middle Eastern Muslim men participants of this study. Parent(s) and caregiver(s) encouraged Middle Eastern Muslim men to advance their education to live a different and better life than the one they had growing up. Also, this study's sibling(s) of Middle Eastern Muslim men participants inspired them to pursue a degree in education, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The family was the pillar for participants when deciding their career choice and determining how they would pursue an education.

The family was a motivator for Middle Eastern Muslim men participants to pursue a higher education degree. Commitment to education is portrayed in Ali's statement:

> So, I usually have to hear from my family that my studies are not finished when I get my bachelor's. They really are focusing on and want me to get my master's, even though it's not really important if you are in the field of computer science. You don't really have to get your master's. It's more of what your experience is in that area. But still, my dad has this mentality of, "if you don't have your master's, your studies are not completed."

In addition, Brock stated, "I've always been brought up with the message that education is important because, especially in America, you cannot do much without an education in some field. That's the general message they always had for me". Henry asserted, "In order to walk through life, you have to get educated. That's their main point. They were never specific about exactly why I have to commit to school, just to get educated". The participants' familial expectation of higher education is directly connected to their desire for their children to have a fulfilling and comfortable life.

Middle Eastern Muslim men's families' emphasis on higher education is also intrinsically connected with their faith. Religious traditions, family support, and the Islamic faith played a significant role in illustrating the commitment to education for Middle Eastern Muslim students. Participants referenced Prophet Mohammed's teachings and the importance of knowing foundational principles such as reading and writing. As stated by Henry, "Our Prophet PBUH[1] says you should know how to write and read; that's just a principle. Write, read, and you have to get educated. As Muslims, you have to be educated… you have to commit and pursue an education".

Reading and writing are fundamental religious principles that laid a foundation for Middle Eastern Muslim students' educational path. Based on Middle Eastern Muslim men participants of this study's beliefs, the Muslim Prophet also emphasizes the importance of striving for the best educational or career path pursued. Hussein explained:

> Education is an important thing in my religion because you help people more. The higher up you go, the more sophisticated you become. Every person in this world has a position. It doesn't matter if he is a plumber; it doesn't matter if he is a doctor. He has his position. The Prophet said if someone wants to do a job, do it to its perfection. Religion says if you want to do something, do it to its best. So, if I want to become a veterinarian, I have to do my best. If I want to become a plumber, I have to do my best. It doesn't matter what it is that you're doing, you're doing something… and you should perfect it as much as you can.

In addition, religion helped participants stay more focused and aim for their goals despite challenges growing up or adversities. To show how the Islamic religion influenced their education, Ali expressed:

> I pray five times a day. I pray to God that I stay focused and committed and make my parents proud. So, the expectations that I have of myself help me stay focused on my studies. I know that I have this goal. I am in the U.S., and I have to get my college degree… So, I just try to stay focused and committed.

Middle Eastern Muslim men participants of this study had family support, and they maintained their faith to stay committed to education and navigated higher education.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to understand how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a university in the U.S. within a divisive political context. This research tried to fill a void and provide valuable information and data to begin a scholarly discourse about the lived experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men in U.S. higher education. The findings described that Middle Eastern Muslim men college students combat negative perceptions, face the challenge of feeling alone socially and academically, and they and their family members are committed to education. Overall, Middle Eastern Muslim men college students feel a lack of community in college, yet, they feel a responsibility to create positive imagery of Middle Eastern Muslim men.

The findings are supported by the conceptual framework utilized for this study through the theories of social justice as redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 2001) and the Islamic philosophy of education (Hussain & Ashraf, 1979; Shah, 2006). Through radical multiculturalism and social justice as redistribution and recognition, recognizing cultural rights and acknowledging the need to create equity among misrecognized groups is urgent. Social justice as redistribution and recognition along with multiculturalism are encompassed in minority group rights as requests for exemption or accommodations are sought by ethnic groups to government policies or laws of the majority. Finally, the Islamic philosophy of education further explains the meaning of education to Muslims culturally and within Islam.

The first finding of this study provided a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of Muslim men and how they experience life on campus. As noted in the findings, one participant detailed that although he was "not visibly Muslim, he was mentally Muslim," which protected him from biases – to some extent. Data showed that hate crimes and violence against Muslim communities had increased since post-9/11 (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009) and after the 2016 presidential election. Participants described that Middle Eastern Muslim men are perceived as "enemy number one" or "the boogeymen" in most of the U.S. political context. Negative stereotypes and Islamophobia leave the participants feeling the responsibility to change the negative perceptions about Middle Eastern Muslim Muslim people in the U.S., as they do not want other Muslim people to experience oppression. It is important to note that participants of the study did not report any positive experiences in U.S. higher education due to the increasing Islamophobia and xenophobia and the current political climate in the U.S.

The researchers also learned the importance of having a community on college campuses for Middle Eastern Muslim students to thrive. As previously mentioned, a 2017 survey about religious groups found that Muslim people were the most negatively viewed by non-Muslim people in the U.S. (Lipka, 2017). Muslim men college students face social and academic challenges and feel a lack of community. In order to cope and stay focused, given all the social and

academic challenges, Middle Eastern Muslim men stated that the Islamic religion influenced them to stay grounded and focused on education.

In the second finding, participants of this study shared that they had experiences of isolation and disconnected from non-Muslim people due to different cultural norms, values, and practices that resulted in social exclusion. These experiences may also be exacerbated if U.S. higher education institutions do not have culturally relevant spaces, counseling, and programming for integrating the Middle Eastern Muslim student population into college communities. However, they feel a responsibility to create positive imagery of Muslim men.

In the third finding, Middle Eastern Muslim men expressed commitment to education and how their family played a role in setting cultural expectations. Through the Islamic philosophy of education, we learn a significant connection between family support, education, and the Islamic faith. Parents want their children to get the highest education to ensure they have the greatest chances of future success.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The findings of this study, supported by the conceptual framework and literature review, offer implications for future research and practice. As the literature and findings of this study show, the views about Middle Eastern Muslim people shifted Post-9/11, and hate crimes have increased since the 2016 presidential election. Practitioners and scholars within U.S. higher education are responsible for ensuring Middle Eastern Muslim students feel social connectedness and a sense of security and belonging on campuses (Ali, 2019). The lack of published literature on Middle Eastern Muslim men's experiences in U.S. higher education proves that institutions have a long way to go in supporting this minoritized student population. Therefore, more research on Middle Eastern Muslim men's lived experiences is necessary to aid in creating best practices for institutions supporting these students.

An important implication for future practice is to have institutional practitioners from both student affairs and institutional administration investigate all services they offer Middle Eastern Muslim students on campus, followed by a dialogue with the Muslim Student Associations and Organizations regarding their needs to promote equity on campuses (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). This study's participants expressed a lack of university support and cultural inclusivity (Ali, 2019). Institutions must enter these conversations while understanding what exists on campus for Middle Eastern Muslim students, showing that they examined their existing practices before extending the conversation to see what additional practices, structures, and policies are needed to promote Middle Eastern Muslim students' success. The Islamic philosophy of education shows that Muslim students are committed to their education, and their institutions must reciprocate such commitment. Cultural awareness on campus should be integrated into all learning experiences and institutional structures.

An implication for future practice that would also support the Middle Eastern Muslim community would be creating a permanent prayer space(s). According to Chen et al. (2019), "Muslim students have found this to be a momentous sign of support on behalf of their college community that leads to an increase in morale for Muslim students and communicates to non-Muslim students' gratefulness for religious diversity" (p. 945). This implication is further supported by the conceptual framework in that it would make students feel a sense of community while providing equitable accommodations for Middle Eastern Muslim students. Part of those accommodations may also include providing institutional awareness of Muslim culture on campus. As previously noted in the findings, Middle Eastern Muslim men are responsible for positively representing the Muslim community by welcoming panels and guest speakers to engage in events on campus, perhaps surrounding religious holidays. Institutions can work with local Mosques to create relationships with the institutions and provide relevant programming. Educating non-Muslim students does not fall solely on Muslim students, as that leads to cultural taxation. Institutions can show commitment by providing funds to bring in outside education opportunities.

A final implication for future practice is peer mentor support. As previously mentioned in the findings, Middle Eastern Muslim men found socialization occurred with a sense of community and peer support. Mentorship offers an opportunity for students to build community on campus. Jacobi (1991) posited a link between mentorship and academic success and retention. Mentorship opportunities exist in higher education in myriad ways, and institutions must consider how these programs can benefit Middle Eastern Muslim men students.

Peer mentoring programs often exist as an assigned mentor to a first-year student. A study of higher education institutions discovered that students with peer mentors experienced higher levels of institutional engagement than those without peer mentors (Collings et al., 2014). Moreover, four times as many students without peer mentors considered leaving their institution (Collings et al., 2014). According to Holt and Fifer (2018),

> Peer mentors may provide academic assistance by helping mentees review course material, improve their writing, prepare for exams, and connect with campus resources (e.g., the library). Mentors also may facilitate social adjustment by familiarizing mentees with campus events and student life resources and planning social events that encourage the development of camaraderie among mentees. (p. 68)

Institutions considering peer mentor programs can cater a program to the needs of the student body. However, caution must be taken into consideration in the mentor-mentee pair assignment. As previously stated, many participants expressed a lack of university support and cultural inclusivity for Middle Eastern Muslim students at their college. Institutions must consider this in the creation of peer mentor programs. Having administration consultation with student

organizations, such as the Muslim Student Association, shows a commitment to providing a culturally relevant peer mentor program.

The implications for future research and practice offer a starting point for practitioners. Institutions must take the lead in filling the gaps as appropriate on their campuses. Continued acknowledgment of Middle Eastern Muslim men's experiences through published literature will allow for more recommendations for future practice. Continued research should be conducted to contribute to a safer and more inclusive campus community for Middle Eastern Muslim men in U.S. higher education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this phenomenological qualitative study provided insight into how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigated a university in the U.S. within the divisive political context. Middle Eastern Muslim men college students in U.S. higher education had to fight negative perceptions about Middle Eastern Muslim men and experience negative social and academic challenges. However, regardless of the challenges, Islamophobia, and xenophobia, Middle Eastern Muslim men college students expressed how their family and the Islamic religion influenced them to be committed to education. This study filled a void regarding Middle Eastern Muslim men's experiences and provided practical implications to promote institutional awareness and support for U.S. colleges and universities. These implications include open dialogue between Middle Eastern Muslim students on campus and administration, safe spaces on campus for prayer and culturally relevant programming, and peer mentor support. Middle Eastern Muslim men have the right to feel safe, supported, and valued by their institutions on campus and in the classroom.

FOOTNOTE

[1] PBUH: Peace Be Upon Him is a phrase religious Muslims say whenever they refer to the name of any prophet and any messenger.

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