Reconciling Hyphenated Identities: Muslim American Youth Reflect on College Life in the Midst of Islamophobia

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RECONCILING HYPHENATED IDENTITIES: MUSLIM AMERICAN YOUTH REFLECT ON COLLEGE LIFE IN THE MIDST OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

A Dissertation Presented
to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Department of International & Multicultural Education
Human Rights Education Concentration

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
Diba Ataie
San Francisco, California
December 2019
Reconciling Hyphenated Identities: Muslim American Youth Reflect on College Life in the Midst of Islamophobia

Muslims make up more than 1.8 billion people of the world population and have been displaced globally in waves due to the geopolitical tension in their homeland. The tragedy of 9/11 forever changed the landscape of this nation for Muslim Americans and created hostility and fear. Islamophobia has been on the rise since the post-9/11 era, but due to the 2016 election cycle Muslim Americans have been placed under direct scrutiny. Muslim Americans were targeted and threatened with a Muslim registry and implementation of a Muslim Ban to further ostracize them. The post-9/11 generation of Muslim American youth were the subjects of this study. The qualitative case study of UC Berkeley’s Muslim American college students focused on the impact as well as the responses to Islamophobia. The framework of this paper includes the effects of Islamophobia at the macro-level (national policies), at the meso-level (local campus culture), and micro-level (individual responses). This project documents the complex reconciliation process of Muslim American youth as they brilliantly negotiate their nuanced hyphenated identity. The study also highlights their experience both inside and outside the Muslim community. The testimonials of the respondents are articulate and unapologetic and provide unprecedented access and information about the challenges of a poly-cultural identity. The study also focuses on the protective factors such as the details of creating the grant that funded the Muslim Mental Health Initiative and other coping strategies. Ultimately this dissertation documents the process of reclaiming the honor and dignity of the Muslim community through means of political activism, teaching research, publications and mental
health services. It also directs scholars to fill gaps in research among a burgeoning population of the post-9/11 generations to come as well as the need for studies on social media and males.

Diba Ataie, Author

Dr. Monisha Bajaj, Chairperson, Dissertation Committee
DEDICATION

I begin my dedication in the name of Allah SWT as I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to undertake such a challenge. Second, I am indebted to my parents, Mariam Amini Ataie and Gul Mohammad Ataie, as you both have instilled service and sacrifice to help others achieve their dreams through education. Thank you both for trusting me in pursuing my passion and dream of serving my Muslim community through psychological services and education. I have also met the love of my life throughout my dissertation journey, Ahmadreza Hatamipour, and have felt supported and inspired by your mentorship and know that I would not have completed this last stage of the dissertation if it wasn’t for your constant encouragement and positive role modeling. To my new parents, Shahla Jalayer and Manucher Hatamipour, you both have nourished me and praised my intention of serving my Muslim community when I felt depleted and almost lost myself in this massive endeavor. To my womb-mate and twin sister, Wajma Ataie, I am so appreciative of your time and dedication to helping me push through the final phase. Thank you for seeing the success at times when I didn’t, but more importantly, thank you for reminding me of the application of Islam and moving through each moment with humility. I am so proud of your accomplishments of serving refugees and easing the pain of others through your work in public schools and through your passion of re-building community through interfaith work. To my baby sister, Yalda Ataie, even though you now have your own baby Ozan, you will always be my baby. I am awestruck by your generosity and giving nature as an MD, thank you for all your love and care in everything that you do! To my older sisters, Marina and Frishta, thank you for introducing me to USF and paving the path for academic excellence. To my friends who have held me strong and helped me laugh when I wanted to cry! I love you all and thank you Gihad, Gulpana, Manizha, Tuba, Cuynet, Kerem (for your success
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SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate’s dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Diba Ataie,                                December 5, 2019
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**DISSERTATION ABSTRACT** ................................................................. 1  
**DEDICATION** .............................................................................. 3  
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ............................................................... 5  
**SIGNATURE PAGE** ...................................................................... 6  
**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ................................................................. 7  
**CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM** ........................................... 10  
  Statement of the Problem .............................................................. 10  
  Background and Need .................................................................. 13  
  Purpose of the Study .................................................................... 16  
  Theoretical Framework ................................................................. 16  
  Social identity theory .................................................................. 16  
  Identity denial ............................................................................... 17  
  Self-investment: Solidarity, centrality and satisfaction ..................... 19  
  Research Questions ....................................................................... 20  
  Educational Significance ............................................................... 21  
  Definition of Terms ..................................................................... 23  
**CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW** ................................................. 25  
  Introduction ................................................................................. 25  
  Historical Background: Muslims in the Americas ......................... 26  
  First wave Muslims in the U.S. .................................................... 26  
  Second wave Muslims in the U.S. ................................................ 30  
  Third wave of Muslims in the U.S ............................................... 31  
  Current Figures and Demographics of Muslims ............................. 33  
  Racialization of Muslims ............................................................... 34  
  History of exclusion ..................................................................... 34  
  Orientalism and Postcolonial identity ......................................... 36  
  From traditional racism to Islamophobia .................................... 38  
  9/11 impact on Muslims in the U.S ............................................. 40  
  Islamophobia in contemporary U.S. society ............................... 42  
  Studies of Muslim Youth .............................................................. 44  
  Demographics of Muslim youth ................................................ 44  
  Social media and youth agency .................................................. 46  
  Muslim Youth Identity Formation .............................................. 48  
  Campus life and identity formation ............................................ 48  
  Revival of Muslim Student Associations .................................... 48  
  Marginalized Muslim American youth identity ........................... 49  
  From youth ethnic identity to religious affiliation ....................... 51  
  Identity formation and psychological stressors ............................ 52
Muslim Student Associations and other Protective Factors ........................................ 55
Youth Agency and mobility .......................................................................................... 56
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 57

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 59
Overview ....................................................................................................................... 60
Research Setting ......................................................................................................... 61
Research Questions ..................................................................................................... 61
Participants ................................................................................................................... 62
Data Collection ............................................................................................................ 63
Focus Groups ............................................................................................................... 65
Follow-up Interviews .................................................................................................. 65
Data Analysis .............................................................................................................. 66
Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................... 66
Confidentiality ............................................................................................................. 66
Voluntary Participation ............................................................................................... 68
Informed Consent ....................................................................................................... 68
Background and Positionality of Researcher ............................................................. 69
  Background .............................................................................................................. 69
  Positionality of the Researcher ............................................................................... 73

CHAPTER IV: MACRO-LEVEL EFFECTS: ISLAMOPHOBIA ....................... 75
Introduction ................................................................................................................... 75
Focus Groups Participants ......................................................................................... 75
Table 1: Participant Demographics ........................................................................... 77
Burden of Muslims as Global Ambassadors ............................................................... 80
  Beyond Civic Duty .................................................................................................. 80
Ambassadors of Islam and Muslims .......................................................................... 82
Risks of Extreme Vetting and Proving Loyalty ........................................................... 83
National Hate Crimes Against Muslims ................................................................... 86
Hypervisibility and Backlash Toward Hijabis ............................................................. 92

CHAPTER V: MESO-LEVEL EFFECTS: SPACES OF INCLUSION & EXCLUSION .98
Contested Muslim Spaces ......................................................................................... 99
  Islam as the Foundation ......................................................................................... 99
  Gendered Experiences in the MSA ....................................................................... 100
  MSA and the Essentializing of Muslim-ness .......................................................... 104
  The Danger of Haram Policing the Community .................................................. 108
  Rejection of Muslims Inside and Outside the Community .................................. 113
Recent Occurrences and Alternative Spaces of Solidarity ...................................... 119

CHAPTER VI: MICRO-LEVEL EFFECTS: NEW SPACES OF RESISTANCE & AGENCY .......................................................................................................................... 125
Protective Factors and Coping Strategies ................................................................ 125
  The Need for a Rise of Alternative Spaces ............................................................ 125
Responses to Islamophobia ....................................................................................... 130
Unconventional forms of Activism and Resilience .................................................... 130
  Muslims Apply Islamic Values ............................................................................... 130
Language as Liberation and Political Activism.................................134
Muslims as Educators and Scholars............................................138
Academic Contributions to Society Build Resilience........................140
Expressive Muslim Publication...................................................141
Healing as an Act of Resistance...................................................144
MMHI Dismantles Mental Health Stigmas......................................144
Creating Safe Spaces of Connection.............................................149
Summary of Findings....................................................................149
CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION.................................................................155
Summary, Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion......................155
Summary of Findings....................................................................155
Discussion......................................................................................156
Centrality and the Impact on Mental Health.................................159
Solidarity and the Impact on Mental Health................................160
Satisfaction and the Impact of Advocacy and Activism..................162
Satisfaction Protective Factors and Coping Strategies....................164
Limitations of the Research Study.................................................166
Recommendations for Future Areas of Investigation......................169
Conclusion......................................................................................171
Researcher’s Reflections and Suggestions.....................................172
REFERENCES..................................................................................177
APPENDICES
Appendix A: Consent to Participate in a Research Study....................181
Appendix B: Focus Group Questions & Semi-structured Interview Questions........182
Appendix C: Revised Research Timeline..........................................186
Appendix D: Archive of Faculty Letter to Ban Right Wing Speakers........187
Appendix E: Archive of Threads: Losing Touch: Islam and Tradition.........190
Appendix F: Archive of Threads: Beauty in the Struggle....................197
Appendix G: Archive of Threads: Intersectionality in the MSA...............202
Appendix H: Archive of Events Hosted by MMHI...............................209
Appendix I: Archive of The Daily Californian...................................214
Appendix J: Identity Formation Flow Chart.....................................215
CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Statement of the Problem

Islam is a religion of more than 1.8 billion people across the globe (Pew Research Center, 2015). Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds find a way of life through Islam that is rooted in peace, honesty, trustworthiness, and strong moral character. As stated in the Quran, Islam is anchored in social justice and has its priorities focused on ending all forms of oppression, “Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression” (Holy Quran: 16, p. 90). Islam encourages adherents to explore their complex identities and offers free will; according to the Quran, “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion” (Holy Quran: 2, p. 256). In other words, each individual can choose how to be represented in this world. Due to the fact that the Quranic teaching leaves certain verses open to the interpretation of the reader, some messages are misunderstood, manipulated, and even co-opted for political gain.

Moreover, the ramifications of the political impact on young Muslim Americans is particularly challenging, as they are in the midst of developing their identity within this perplexing social fabric of the West. In a research paper by Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, and Desai (2016), the authors implemented a hierarchical structure from the macro- to meso- to micro-level. The aim was to categorize the impact of government policies to explain how macro-level forces, such as U.S. foreign policy, impacts the meso-level, which is associated with the impact of such stereotypes in school settings, and finally, the micro-level where geopolitics impacts the individual level, resulting in harassment and hate crimes (p. 488). For example, youth report being bullied with attackers yelling “ISIS” and “terrorist,” while perpetrators of tragic hate crimes, such as the 2016 killing of an Indian immigrant man in Kansas, was preceded by the
attacker asking to see his immigration papers. Thus, larger narratives influence individual interactions and can put Muslim youth - and anyone perceived to be Muslim - at great risk and feelings of insecurity.

Given this, what happens if Muslims are no longer the narrators of their own story? In the United States, the dominant discourse of Islamophobia has hijacked the Muslim narrative, inevitably shaping the perspectives of millions of people. To explore this phenomena, this case study highlighted the current political discourse in the United States (macro-level) and the impact it has had on the lived experiences of Muslims who reside here. In particular, this study is focused on the local culture of UC Berkeley students (meso-level) and their campus experience -- its aim was to explore their identity formation process (micro-level), which is affected by Islamophobia.

The way in which the current political climate is shaping the discourse on Islam in the United States is most evident in the post-9/11 era and further in the 2016 presidential election cycle when hateful speech plagued the Muslim community. Attestation of this fact lies in a study by Abdelkader (2016) on the impact of hate speech which revealed that the number of violent outbursts in 2015 against Muslim Americans increased six to nine times as compared to pre-9/11 era. This study also found that using an anti-Muslim fear tactic led to greater violence against Muslims. The political rhetoric against Islam alone, which has become increasingly aggressive and intolerant of Muslims, serves as a physical manifestation of a prejudiced belief system. Consequently, according to Gallup’s survey in 2017, 60% of Muslim Americans expressed that they perceive fellow Americans to be “prejudiced” against them (p. 7).

Fear, whether real or perceived, elicits an insidious emotion used by some politicians to advocate for a certain negative outcome against Muslims. Most politicians have come to learn
the expediency of using fear-mongering to gain votes as well as the perpetual discourse on the war against Islam as well as anyone identifying as a Muslim. For example, sociologist Christopher Bail (2012) analyzed 1,084 press releases and 50,407 articles and television transcripts from 2001 to 2008 after the media’s coverage of the September 11th attacks. Bail (2012) found that the minority (15%) of reports driven by anger and fear, received the most news coverage, whereas more balanced media outlets (85% of reports) were ignored (p. 2). This particular media strategy is driven by the fact that “emotions get attention” by news followers but it skews perceptions of reality and fuels prejudice (Bail 2012). Islamophobic rhetoric is not a new tactic used in politics, as history reveals. In fact, it is simply being repackaged and resold with a new label to media consumers who then become victims of a singular view. Notably, the majority of the individuals with a negative perception of Islam have never even been in contact with Muslims, nor have they set foot in a mosque. YouGov (2015) found that 74% of Americans had never worked with a Muslim individual, 68% did not have a Muslim friend, and a staggering 87% had never set foot in a mosque. This YouGov (2015) poll also revealed that a shocking 55% of Americans surveyed had unsympathetic opinions of Islam.

In the face of the current political climate post-9/11, Muslims who are living in the United States and abroad are once again challenged with how to peacefully interact and appease Westerners who are continuously conditioned by the media and dominant discourse to be apprehensive about anyone identifying as Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2011). For many Muslims, this experience evokes the memories of the September 11th attacks in which thousands of civilians were tragically killed and the backlash in which countless more innocent Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim, were further attacked in the months and years that led to devastating hate crimes.
The macro- to meso- to micro-level framework used by Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, and Desai (2016) is instrumental in understanding the Muslim American experience post-9/11. As such, when we consider the presidential election cycles and proposed Muslim travel bans, we are able to recognize that government policies (macro-level) can have a large impact on marginalized communities living in the United States. On the meso-level, this study included a detailed discussion about the experiences of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley’s campus. Finally, at the micro-level, this research study addressed the cumulative impact of macro and meso-level influences on the identity formation among Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Background and Need**

Over the past two decades, research has focused on the challenges of Muslim Americans as they navigate larger discourses and debates about U.S. foreign policy, Islam, and transnational identities (Abu El-Haj 2007, 2009; Ahmad, 2002; Ali, 2014; Ibish, 2003, 2008; Kamal, 2014; Maira 2009, 2016; Sirin & Fine, 2007; Volpp, 2002:). This macro-level body of research offers a sense of the impact of September 11th on Muslims living in America, especially pertaining to Muslim American identity. As Maira’s (2016) book title suggests, *The 9/11 generation: Youth, rights, and solidarity in the war on terror*, these participants are considered the post-9/11 generation as they have never experienced a world pre-9/11; hence, their designation as a new generation of individuals who have not personally lived through 9/11, but they have been greatly impacted by it. In this case, young Muslim Americans are born into a stigmatized community living in the shadow of 9-11 without having a memory of the event or an identity conceived before it. Therefore, ethnic and religious identity is intertwined with political identity. The current political climate, particularly students attending UC Berkeley where free speech debates have
become fiery and in the broader Bay Area where a large and diverse population of Muslim Americans reside, offers a *meso*-level understanding on the identity formation of the post-9/11 of Muslim American youth. Bay Area Muslim youth are faced with reconciling two opposing identities (their American identity and the Muslim identity), neither of which can be completely disregarded. The dominant narrative continues with the defamation of Islam and threatens the affiliation to a religion that is, paradoxically, rooted in peace and social justice: “O You who believe! Enter absolutely into peace (Islam)” (Holy Quran: 2, p. 208), a daunting task looms ahead for Muslim Americans. To explore this further, this research focused on students’ understandings of their identity as Muslim, an identifier viewed by the dominant society as contentious.

In sum, this case study started by considering the identity formation of college students from UC Berkeley, particularly during the post-2016 election period when Muslim communities have been under increasing attack. The focus was placed on UC Berkeley students because not only did they experience the same *macro*-level challenges most young Muslim Americans face, but their campus environment provided a unique *meso*-level challenge as well. Over the past few years, culture wars have played out at Berkeley - campus riots, Islamophobic rhetoric, as well as hate crimes experienced by Muslim students have unfolded and Muslim American students have had to grapple with the complexity of their lived realities. One specific example: the campus erupted when right wing activist UCB students on campus invited Milo Yiannopoulos, a news editor for Breibart who supports far-right ideology. He was later removed from UC Berkeley’s list of speakers due to his hate speech. In response, on February 1, 2017, UC Berkeley experienced the shutdown of entire buildings which led to cancelling the event. In light of these
incidents and the current political climate, Muslim students’ experiences at UC Berkeley reflect the paradox of belonging and not belonging at the same time.

This transition is way too rough. In recognition of being part of a marginalized community, it is also important to evaluate some of the support systems both at the local and campus community level that have been provided to Muslim American students. Considering the protective factors for Muslim students, such as providing safe spaces and other more recent trends and strategies for support, was one dimension of the study. Student-created programs have also provided protection for young Muslims; these young brave members of society took initiative as active participants to narrate their own stories rather than passively waiting for others to tell their stories for them.

Furthermore, the extent to which Muslim Student Associations (MSA) at UC Berkeley serve their students was another focus of the research study. MSAs are ostensibly available as a means to connect Muslims to each other in most high school and college campuses across the US. This study explored the impact of the larger backdrop Islamophobia as well as the local climate and Muslim spaces at UC Berkeley have had on the formation of Muslim American identity. Through their own voices, we can see how Muslim American youth are active participants in shaping their own identities and are determined to serve as agents of change with the deeper purpose of changing macro and meso discourse.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American college students through a case study of UC Berkeley students’ identity formation and its challenges. The research questions included inquiry into the protective strategies and coping mechanisms that Muslim American youth implemented while studying at UC Berkeley and
striving to develop a healthy sense of identity. This research offered perspective on the challenges faced by Muslim American youth by providing the participants with a platform to verbalize and process their personal experiences of being Muslim and American in a college campus setting, thus serving as a collection of counter-narratives. In the space below, I discuss several identity theories and findings as they relate to the current population of my study and to build my research questions. These identity theories provide useful ways to analyze some of the responses received by my participants.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Social identity theory by Tajfel*

When considering the appropriate theoretical framework to utilize for this study, it is crucial to look at how identity is formed by the individual and how social groups impact such an identity. Social psychology has long focused on the fundamental human drive of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Henri Tajfel coined Social Identity Theory in 1979. This theory was used in this study to describe the impact of development and how socially constructed groups affect one another. For example, an in-group is the group that is part of the dominant narrative (US mainstream society in this case) and the out-groups is the marginalized group, Muslim Americans, who have not been accepted by the in-group, which impacts the identity formation and ultimately the well-being of the out-group. When the individual experiences being in an out-group, the individual can be adversely affected by being considered part of an out-group through means of ostracization. However, the layers of complexity soon become more convoluted as the out-group or Muslim Americans in this case experience out-right rejection as an outgroup member when they actually feel like they are a part of the in-group or dominant American in-group. Muslim
Americans can also feel this sense of ambivalence by their own out-group and when both their identity groups deny them access, it lead to detrimental effects. Given the current political climate and Islamophobic tendencies and rhetoric, Social Identity Theory provides an understanding of how macro-level forces permeate across meso-level experiences and ultimately impact the micro-level (an individual’s understanding of their own identity).

**Identity denial**

A more recent theory borrowed from social psychology is identity denial, defined as a rejection of identity by others, which is a type of “social identity threat” according to Huynh (2013, p. 1). Cheryan and Monin (2005) made similar claims after conducting research and recognizing that “A crucial threat for Asian Americans is to be denied their national identity” (p. 718). Expanding this concept to other marginalized groups becomes relevant because there is a dearth of representation of minority groups; thus, more attention needs to be dedicated to understanding the impact on in-group and out-group dynamics to support Muslims including inter-group conflict (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Shelton, 2002).

Furthermore, marginalized groups must come to terms with the negative outlook of the dominant society towards second class citizens (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Turner, 1987; Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber, & Waldzus, 2003;). To consider this phenomenon, this study focused on how Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley perceived their social identity and whether they were motivated to move towards a “positive social identity” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The out-group may potentially move toward “identity assertion,” which is a reclaiming of their identity toward an in-group that blatantly denies the out-group member or Muslim American access. Some individuals may do this by concealing their out-group identity by removing the hijab or hiding their religious obligations such as daily
prayers. Others may be wearing a hijab with an American flag on it, which is courageous but can potentially be harmful both to the individual’s physical and mental health and threaten their sense of belonging as it makes them an easy target and hyper-visible (Cheryan & Monin, 2005, p. 718).

While a burgeoning field of research is dedicated to understanding identity denial for Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinx populations (Huynh, 2013), very little of this knowledge has been applied to the Muslim American community in research. The term “racial microaggressions” (Sue et al., 2007, p.1) is a related idea that can be ascribed to the experiences of the above-stated racial groups that further affirms the concept of othering. Wu (2002) has famously coined this actual phenomenon of othering as the “perpetual foreigner,” which essentially explains the experiences of individuals who feel that they are not fully accepted as Americans (p. 14).

More recently, scholars are coming to terms with the detrimental effects of microaggressions and how they impact the mental health of the victimized out-groups. Inevitably, some individuals will actually leave the out-group due to the threat, while others will try to “pass” as religiously ambiguous and others still choose to become more involved and more visible in their expression of identity. For example, the expression of Islam through the hijab in the U.S. has made Muslim Americans stand out and so some have decided to remove it.

This area of focus on identity enriches my research as I hypothesized that the external imposition of negative labels on Muslim American college students adversely affects their mental health. Furthermore, I was also deeply interested in how Muslim American college students make use of mental health services and other affiliations as protective strategies to overcome their challenges, particularly when those services are culturally relevant and tailored to
their specific challenges. The following section explores how certain components of identification shaped this study; as there are many possible different approaches, the researcher decided to draw from an existing study to gain an understanding of in-group and out-group identification as will be discussed in the next section of the paper.

**Self-investment: Solidarity, centrality, and satisfaction**

A substantial amount of research considers the psychological and social implications in regard to studying in-group and out-groups. Moreover, a recent study by Leach, C.W., Van Zomeren, M., Zebel, S., Vliek, M.L., Pennekamp, S.F., Doosje, B., Ouwerkerk, J.W. and Spears, R. (2008) assessed distinctive identification factors pertaining to group identification as a way of combining themes into core components. Leach et al. (2008) focused on the theme of self-investment, which the authors described as “one’s positive feelings or sense of bond with the in-group” and can be further broken down into: (a) satisfaction which is defined as the “positive feelings about the group,” (b) solidarity which is described as “one’s psychological bond or commitment to the group” whereas (c) centrality is “the salience and importance of one’s in-group membership to the self” (Leach et al, 2008).

When considering the context of the study described above, it may be helpful to elucidate how these concepts of satisfaction, centrality, and solidarity correlate to Muslim identity formation as pertaining to their multifaceted identity. These core concepts were useful to explain the reactions of the Muslim community since a gap exists in the scholarly literature on the impact and response of Muslim American students as the out-group; thus these terms helped to further explore the reaction of the Muslim community. Leach et al. (2008) explained the importance of solidarity as being tied to having a sense of belonging. Since the Muslim community is ostracized from the dominant society, the level of solidarity of the Muslim American youth was
explored in this study as they were in a vulnerable state of developing their independent identity on a college campus for the first time.

Another component explored in this dissertation was whether Muslim American youth would feel more connected to their community as a way of considering centrality and satisfaction. These concepts related to the research study because centrality and solidarity and satisfaction impact the identity of out-groups. Thus, the research questions helped inform the level of impact of the consequences of being a Muslim American student while attending UC Berkeley.

**Research Questions**

Muslim American youth were presented with the unique challenge of reconciling their identity while navigating college life. The following questions guided this study:

1. How has the rise of Islamophobia after the election of 2016 impacted the mental health of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley?
2. In what ways have Muslim American students at UC Berkeley engaged in advocacy and activism related to the campus climate and larger political climate?
3. What individual and collective protective factors and coping strategies are identified by Muslim American UC Berkeley students as they navigate their multiple identities on campus?

**Educational Significance**

Given the previous discussion and the fact that this contested political campus climate became hostile, this study uncovered the impact of the social dynamics on Muslim American college students lives who were attending UC Berkeley, acclaimed to be the number one public institution in the nation. The hope was for this research to contribute to the existing literature on Muslim American identity formation, as this scholarship is very limited due to the degree of
controversy and sensitivity of this topic. Ultimately, the goal of the study was to offer a safe space for Muslim Americans to take back their narratives and to allow them to author their own stories as active participants rather than as passive bystanders watching their story being co-opted, repackaged, and sold to an unassuming audience.

This study considered identity formation as related to the topic of being Muslim American students who were attending UC Berkeley and experiencing sometimes challenging and threatening situations. The study focused on the impact that stigmatization, marginalization, and scapegoating have had on the identity formation of Muslim American youth, and how Islamophobia endangered these young college students’ lives. Subsequently, researchers, educators, community liaisons, and mental health professionals may further use this information because they interact directly with Muslim American students and could thereby support students/clients with their complex identity formation. Overall, this study had the intention to add to the scarce body of knowledge on the topic of the identity of Muslim Americans and their complex college experiences as related to Islamophobia.
Definition of Terms

**Internalized oppression:** Internalized oppression is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society. Internalized oppression is likely to consist of self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive. Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups (Pheterson, 1986, p.146).

**Dominant Narrative:** The stories told by the dominant culture that reflect the ideologies of those who have the most power in the society; they define our reality and guide our lives like an invisible hand, and when the dominant culture is oppressive, so are its narratives (Joy, 2013, p.1).

**Perpetual foreigner:** Coined by Wu (2002) and more recently others have defined it as: “The perpetual foreigner stereotype posits that members of ethnic minorities will always be seen as the “other” in the White Anglo-Saxon dominant society of the United States (Devos & Banaji, 2005), which may have negative implications for them” (Huynh, et al., 2011, p. 1).

**Post Traumatic Growth:** the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1).

**Islamophobia:** first introduced as a concept in a 1991 Runnymede Trust Report and defined as “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Altschiller, 2015, p. 355).
**Xenophobia:** Fear or hatred of foreigners, people from different cultures, or strangers: fear or dislike of the customs, dress, etc., of people who are culturally different from oneself.

(Harris, 2002, p. 2).
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter addresses issues related to Muslim American identity in three sections. The first section explains the macro-level impact and history of Muslims in the U.S. from the past to the present, including current figures by describing the racial diversity of Muslims living in America. The experience of 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia and the racialization of Muslims are further discussed. The second section focuses on studies related to the meso-level influence on Muslim youth campus experiences, particularly with a psychological lens, leading us into existing empirical studies of the micro-level impact on the identity formation of youth. The last section furthers the discussion of youth self-agency, including protective factors and recent trends in social media usage as a form of resistance, to help the reader understand the very rich history of Islamic resistance.

Since the inception of the religion of Islam in the 7th century AD, the Muslim community faced discrimination simply by choosing to align with Islam and was forcefully displaced to locations across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Therefore, this chapter begins by studying the first wave of migration of Muslims to the Americas - African Muslims - who were captured and shipped to the United States as slaves in the fifteenth century. The second wave of Muslims emigrated from the Arab nations and came for economic reasons in the nineteenth century. The third wave included South Asian (some of which were Muslim) laborers who migrated to the United States to be farmers, traders and merchants, also as early as the nineteenth century. We consider the racialization of Muslims and xenophobia to understand the impact these forces have on the Muslim American population.
Next, special attention is placed on Muslim American youth and the impact migration has on their identity formation, with a discussion of the shift from an ethnic affiliation toward one that is broader and related to religion. Muslim American youth must reconcile and constantly re-negotiate their “hyphenated identities” with a nation that has yet to grant them that permission (Sirin and Fine, 2008). Thus, we must consider their complex identity formation drawing on literature from the field of psychology to gain a better understanding of the complexity of their lived realities. Finally, this chapter discusses protective factors and a comprehensive analysis of “safe spaces” such as Muslim Student Associations and other more recent trends and strategies for support like ethnic clubs or multi-ethnic clubs.

**Historical Background: Muslims in the Americas**

*First wave Muslims in the U.S.: African Muslims on indigenous land*

On the *macro*-level, as evidence of the pre-Columbian arrival of Muslim sailors and navigators to the Americas began emerging, historians engaged in an unceasing discourse regarding the timeline of the first Muslims who appeared on this continent. The most extensive scholarly work on Muslims in the United States was done by Dr. Michael Angelo Gomez, professor at New York University. In 2005, Dr. Gomez published his extensive (almost 400 pages of text) contribution to the narrative of African Muslims in the New World, entitled *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*. Scrupulously researched and recovered from what seemed like fossilized text, this book sheds light on a more inclusive counter-narrative of Muslims in the Americas and offers attestation of West African Muslims “importation” to the New World, traceable to the records of the Portuguese Inquisition (Gomez, 2005).
Six years later, in 2011, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, published his book, *A History of Islam in America*, which fills the gaps in the historical timeline of an early Muslim arrival. Based on the research of Muslim scholars and geographers, GhaneaBassiri’s (2011) argues that the first Muslims arrived on the American shores as early as the late ninth century, prior to European colonization and settlement of the Americas. This study is unique in that it accounts for historical references made by Muslim individuals embedded within the larger American religious framework. Ultimately, the book provides historical context for the contributions of Muslim Americans to American organizations as well as making a strong case for the diversity of the Muslim American experience.

Dr. Hatem Bazian is a scholar who challenges the existing western narrative. Bazian takes his students through a comprehensive timeline regarding the first Muslim arrival in the Americas in his courses at UC Berkeley and Zaytuna College (an Islamic higher education institution based in Berkeley, California). Most scholars agree that the “discovery” of the Americas and the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain in 1492 coincide with the arrival of Muslim populations in the New World (Bazian, 2014; Daulatzai, 2012; Gomez, 2005 Grosfoguel, 2006). In addition, Sohail Daulatzai, in his book *Black Star Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America*, echoes other scholars such as Anouar Majid, Gil Anidjar, Talal Asad, and Junaid Rana, who contend that the rise of Western exploration and settlement is inextricably tied to the displacement and expulsion of Muslims (Moors) from Spain in 1492 (Daulatzai, 2012).

Since not all Muslims arrived as slaves to the Americas, scholars debate as to how many Muslims actually arrived through slavery, with an ostensibly modest count in the thousands referenced by Gomez (Alryyes, 2011). Less controversial perhaps is the idea that West and North
Africans, some of whom were Muslim, were forcefully brought on ships to be “servants” for the Europeans who landed in the “New World” (GhaneaBassiri, 2011). There is also wide controversy over whether Estevanico de Dorantes, a Moroccan (North African), was the first Muslim to reach the shores of the Americas; whether he was a Moor (Muslim) is also under sharp historical debate (GhaneaBassiri, 2011; Simour, 2013). The ignorance and exclusion of records and the reluctance on the part of the slaves to reveal their true identity for their protection added fuel to the controversy (Alryyes, 2011; Gomez, 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to examine migration trends through a historical lens to gain an understanding of the first wave of Muslims.

Historians agree that the first wave of Muslims involuntarily landed on the shores of the Americas. About at least 10-15 percent of enslaved Africans were Muslims, and the majority of them came during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Lapidus, 2002). Dr. Sylviane A. Diouf (2013) presents historical evidence of African Muslims who were enslaved more than 350 years ago and traces them back to their motherland. Diouf challenges the dominant narrative that African Muslim slaves rapidly shed their religious affiliation upon arrival to the New World. The trans-Atlantic slave trade caused Muslims to be forcefully displaced and they miraculously salvaged and preserved their religious affiliations with Islam. Diouf (2013) explains that, on the contrary, there exists evidence of a “disproportionate” number of voluntary Muslims who recorded their lives and noted their tenacious attempts - against all odds - to maintain a communal identity with a grounding in Islam. Another counter-narrative that she offers is to the distorted image that history books use to portray Africans as savages and illiterate; Diouf (1998) references texts in her book with relation to the level of intellectual sophistication as well as
literacy rates of those enslaved, reclaiming the agency and dignity of enslaved people despite the harsh circumstances that prohibited their education.

Dr. Ala Alryyes has translated from Arabic to English the only surviving autobiography of a prominent Muslim man who was forced into slavery in Africa and shipped to what is now the United States. Omar Ibn Said was not only literate in Arabic, but he was also a teacher who became well-known years after being enslaved and imprisoned, and then again enslaved until his death in 1864 (Alryyes, 2011; Austin, 1997; Osman & Forbes, 2004). Alryyes’s (2011) research includes other scholars who have worked extensively on this historical treasure, which underlines the importance of the documentation concerning enslaved Africans and also serves as “... a timely reminder that ‘Islam’ and ‘America’ are not mutually exclusive terms” (p. 1). Dr. Alryyes’s (2011) translation has served to empower the Muslim American community and provides important evidence of Muslim presence and contributions during the early American period. This particular narrative is the only surviving autobiography written by an African enslaved Muslim and therefore offers historical clues that may have otherwise been obliterated. Professor Simour (2013) further explains the reason for the controversy with regards to the influence of the global West on history; explaining that the West systematically “... refused to interpret the Other’s past, it is extremely important to bring to the fore the narratives, histories, influences and contributions of those people who vanished behind the official discourses of coloniality” (p. 346). Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate narratives and scrupulously examine the evidence, which may debunk current U.S. history books. These early migrants—whether voluntary or involuntary—form the basis for the second wave of migration of Muslims.

*Second wave migration of Muslims to the U.S.: Turks, Syrians and other Asians*
On a macro-level, a burgeoning flow of data has been collected on the next wave of Muslim “émigrés” from various nations, primarily consisting of Arabs during the nineteenth century. Lapidus (2002) reports they mainly migrated for economic reasons from the 1870s until World War II, from what was once referred to as Greater Syria (present-day Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Yemen). Arab laborers from these regions migrated to the Midwestern states such as Illinois and Michigan (Lapidus, 2002; Suleiman, 2010). Among the Arab migrants, Kernal Karpat’s figure states that just 15-20 percent were Muslim with Christians making up the majority of Arabs (Moore, 1995).

Greeks, Armenians, and Turks were once clustered together with Arabs in census data which resulted in ambiguity as to how many Arabs actually immigrated and how many were Muslims (Moore, 1995). Estimates range from a modest number of 130,000 to more than double that at 350,000 by the late 1930s (Suleiman, 2010). With its restrictive regulations, the Immigration Act of 1924 caused a deceleration of immigration (discussed later in this chapter) to the United States (Lapidus, 2002; Suleiman, 2010).

The next wave of Arabs began to enter after World War II until the present. The Immigration Act of 1947 allowed for students and professionals to migrate; the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 also abolished the set quota of migrants per nation, opening up migration from many parts of the world including South and West Asia (West Asia is another way to refer to the Middle East) (Lapidus, 2002). Although we lack dependable statistics of Muslims in the United States, one can extrapolate that the Palestine War of 1948 (against the formation of the State of Israel) greatly impacted the displacement and subsequent migration of Palestinians, many of whom are Muslim (Bazian, 2016; Lapidus, 2002; Suleiman, 2010).
Suleiman (2010) noted the nostalgia of the auto industry and how it brought Arabs to Detroit in waves seeking jobs. By the 1960s, the socio-economic status of Muslim Arabs in Michigan improved exponentially. Academic achievements in higher education fueled political activism in the younger generation of Muslim Americans (Suleiman, 2010). Suleiman (2010) reported that the number of Arabs during the 1990’s was conservatively estimated at less than a million ranging to as high as three million. Since migration trends influence the classification of ethnic groups, the racialization of Arabs, often categorized as “white” in Census records, has affected naturalization in that they are less likely to receive resources due to this racialization process (Moore, 1995). The next wave of immigration continues to effect migration in the U.S. to this day and further elucidates the presence and impact of Islam in the United States.

**Third wave of Muslims in the U.S.: South Asian and Asia Pacific Muslims and beyond**

South Asian Muslims (from the present-day nations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh primarily) have been migrating to the U.S. since the 19th century (Mohammed-Arif, 2000). However, Indians were erroneously thought to all be “Hindoo” and not from different religious backgrounds such as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, etc. (Moore, 1995; Bajaj et al., 2016). By the early twentieth century, South Asian Muslims comprised 10 percent of Indian immigrants. Migrating to the agricultural valleys of California or jumping ship as traders on the East Coast (Bald, 2013), many migrants faced xenophobic violence from those who saw them as economic and racial threats. Another wave of South Asians migrated after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 because the U.S. opened the gates to immigration that was fought for by Civil Rights activists who resisted racist national migration quotas. These new policies were especially beneficial for highly educated migrants who could contribute to Cold War efforts to increase scientific capacity, resulting in a wave of Indian, Pakistani, Bengali, Palestinian, Lebanese,
Egyptian, Iranian, Kuwaiti, Iraqi, and Sudanese immigrants to enter the U.S., populations that included many Muslims (Lapidus, 2002). Due to the reformed migration laws, these individuals, once naturalized as U.S. citizens, could also sponsor family members to come to the U.S. which increased the numbers of immigrants from South and West Asia.

In the last five decades, Muslim refugees fleeing protracted wars, due to political turmoil and deteriorating living conditions, also have immigrated from countries like: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, Syria, Iraq and Sudan (Lapidus, 2002). These refugees often belong to higher social classes (Lapidus, 2002), primarily due to having the financial means to flee from their homelands with borders heaving with internally displaced people. These more affluent groups have often revived the local Muslim community in their own neighborhoods, forming Islamic schools, cultural centers, and forging a sustainable and lasting presence in today’s American pluralistic culture (Moore, 1995).

In 2015, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) published a report to support the upcoming data collection for the 2020 CENSUS stating that from 2000 to 2010, South Asians became the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S. with over 4.3 million people consisting of national backgrounds such as from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (CENSUS, 2010; SAALT Report, 2015). South Asians also have diverse religious backgrounds including Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Jain, and Zoroastrian. South Asians have a complex history: their diasporic backgrounds can be traced to nations other than their own ancestral lands such as the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, Canada and the Middle East, as well as other parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands (SAALT Report, 2015). Mohammed-Arif (2000) affirms the complexity of this ethnic group, stating that “Today, South Asian Muslim communities in the US are a sizeable group, characterized by remarkable internal diversity, at an
economic and social level, as well as at a cultural and sectarian level” (p. 67) and argues that further studies are needed on this population.

**Current figures and demographics of Muslims**

On a macro-level, given that the U.S. Census Bureau is not allowed to ask about religious affiliation, the current unofficial number of Muslims is estimated to be approximately 3.3 million, from at least 77 different countries (Pew Research, 2016). In terms of global figures, 1.8 billion Muslims comprise 24% of the world’s population, the second largest religion worldwide; Islam is said to be “the fastest growing major-religion” and projected as the major religious group by 2050 (Pew Research, 2017 p. 1). The most recent disaggregation of the Muslim population in the U.S., shows that close to 64.5 percent are foreign-born, and 35.5 percent were born as citizens in the United States (Pew Research, 2011). Muslims in America interestingly represent various races such as: “white (30 percent), African American (23 percent), Asian (21 percent), Hispanic (6 percent), and other races (19 percent)” (Pew Research, 2011, p. 1). Currently the largest number of Muslims consist of Pakistani Muslims; however, regionally the Middle East and North African communities make up the bulk of Muslims in the U.S., followed by South Asians, including Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis and Afghans (Pew Research, 2017). Next we will consider the migration process for Muslims who migrated to the U.S. and how they were received by the host nation.

**Racialization of Muslims**

**History of exclusion**

Islam has been facing challenges since it was first introduced to the Arab world more than 1400 years ago. Grosfoguel (2006) argues that very little discourse addresses the challenge of plurality of religion; not many are aware of the fact that Muslims and Jews as well as
Christians were able to live peacefully in Spain prior to 1492 as well as in pre-colonial Palestine and India. Grosfoguel (2006) describes the strategy of the Western powers to exploit in order to reinvent new forms of discrimination as follows: “It is this inferiorization below the ‘human,’ to the level of animals, which turned indigenous peoples in the Americas into the first racialized subject of the modern/colonial world inaugurated in 1492” (Grosfoguel, 2006, p. 12).

Gomez (2005) explained that in Europe the term “Moor” was not initially associated with a race but rather with Islam, and yet historically. “The last thing the Spanish wanted was for the New World to evolve into another theater of war in their protracted and costly struggle with Islam. A 1501 decree therefore banned Jews, Moors, heretics, and ‘New Christians’ from entering the Americas” (Gomez, 2005, p. 18). Muslims were therefore banned prior to the formation of the independent nation of the United States of America.

Race and religion intersected in many ways that have deeply impacted colonialism. When considering the formation of racialization, Daulatzai (2012) notes, “As Europe and the idea of ‘the West’ began to cohere around concepts of whiteness and Christianity, race and religion deeply informed each other, so as European expansion led to colonialism and slavery” (p. xviii). America served as a platform for Europeans to practice their hierarchy of racism and prejudice. For example, Hatem Bazian (2017) challenges the irony of the U.S. Constitution since it starts with: “We the People,” but “we” was never meant to originally include Africans and Native Americans. Dr. Bazian also references W.E.B. Du Bois’s timeless scholarly contribution of the term he coined, double consciousness, which refers to a complex identity where the individual can feel internally conflicted and disjointed. Dr. Du Bois’s (1903) book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which Dr. Bazian (2013) revives, correlates to the Muslim experience and explains the hegemonic structures devised by the “Eurocentric knowledge production” machine (p. 3). Other
scholars are also concerned about the experiences of the Muslim community, as will be discussed below.

In his book, *Terrifying Muslims*, anthropologist Junaid Rana (2011) discusses the neocolonial forces that impact Muslims, and are a reverberation of a globally oppressive system which artificially clusters diverse groups of Muslims into a “terrifying” race with a singular face. This oversimplified misrepresentation of Muslims is repeatedly portrayed in mass media which neglects the diversity of the 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, a majority of which live peacefully. Rana (2011) succinctly points to archives as evidence of the history of the exclusion of migrants. He explains that only 22 years after the United States was named a nation in 1776, it passed the first exclusion act called the Alien and Seditions Acts of 1798. This was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Palmer Raids, the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, the internment of Japanese American immigrants during WWII, and “the red scare,” referring to Russian communism. This helps to put the marginalization of so-called ‘others’ on a map, making it difficult to deny the history of exclusion. Lapidus (2002) adds to Dr. Rana’s point as he refers back to the 1921 and 1924 exclusion acts which also impacted immigrant migration trends as well as serving as a reminder of the role of racism (p. 803).

When considering a more recent image of Muslims as a “race,” Rana (2011) brings the Palestine-Israel conflict into this discourse stating that the “apparent symbolism of Palestine recasts conflict, struggle, and autonomy as the perils and threats of immorality, violence, and terrorism. Palestine is the embedded symbol of terror in the complex associations that figure Islam and Muslims into a racial formation” (p. 85). He clarifies how the Muslim “race” became associated with terms such as “terrorist” and “dangerous” and “other” and how this opened the path for Islamophobia, as explained in more detail in the following section.
**Orientalism and postcolonial identity**

As a founding scholar of postcolonial studies, Edward Said (1935-2003) wrote about the ideology of orientalism and identity. He defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’ which is seen as the clash of the east and west (Said, 1978, p. 10). He has written extensively on conflictual identity because his very own identity was a physical manifestation of this internal battle as he describes; “just how paradoxical and constructed all identity is, particularly that of people scattered throughout the world away from their homeland” (p. 2). Even though more research on Muslim Americans is needed, Said’s groundbreaking work is crucial in understanding the layout and foundation of identity formation for Muslims. Though he was not a scholar of Islamic Studies specifically, he dedicated his life to Middle Eastern Studies and political affairs in order to have a greater understanding and offer more authentic discourse of the geopolitical situation on the western global influence.

Said also focused on demystifying the misrepresentation of Muslims as being homogenous. In his book on Islam, Said (1981) eloquently wrote that, “Islam defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world, which numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages, and of course an infinite number of different experiences” (p. xvi). Said spoke about a religion that he admittedly did not follow, yet had such deep empathy and understanding for the struggle for justice, particularly in relation to analyzing the Palestine-Israel conflict. Scholar Sunaina Maira (2009) astutely contributed to Said’s point about identity, saying, “Muslims themselves are not a monolithic group: they have varying ways of expressing their religious identity and responding to conditions in the United States…” (p. 230).
Said (1981) echoed claims about Muslim Americans in an eerily similar tone written in the early 1980’s stating: “…that her or his faith, culture, and people are seen as a source of threat, and that she or he has been deterministically associated with terrorism, violence, and ‘fundamentalism’” (p. xxi). His writings from 1981 are eerily prescient for the present day in which youth today face trauma and exclusion in the only society they have ever known. When we consider the concept of identity denial we can understand how these youth may feel excluded because they are deemed to be “threatening” and, therefore, face ostracism.

Identity and religion are perhaps the most challenging topics to focus on due to their multiplicity and ever-changing features. Reza Aslan (2016), author and scholar of religious studies explains this dichotomy as follows: “There is a fundamental misunderstanding of what we mean when we say religious. We get caught in this polarization...Religion, it's important to recognize, is not just an order of belief and practices. Religion, above all, is a matter of identity” (p. 1). This is a crucial message that needs to be part of the discourse when we consider identity; however, because identity is such an intimate and personal topic, many people feel attacked and respond in a reactionary mode. Aslan (2016) further explains that it is an internal process, and “It's about how you are, how you identify yourself in an indeterminate world...It is not a faith statement; it is an identity statement” (p. 1). However, our identification with an out-group that is perceived as dangerous can have real life repercussions.

This political and historic moment presents an opportune time to study the identity formation processes of Muslim American youth, as this dissertation seeks to do. The conflictual relationship that Muslims have with themselves and their complex identity needs to be studied, since dominant narratives demonize Muslims, and Muslim youth espouse a diversity of responses to these larger forces of exclusion. Said (1978) has expressed his concerns related to
“distortion and inaccuracy” of an entire demographic and even more so, that these sweeping remarks then define an entire population (p. 16). Next, we consider how racism is re-packaged as Islamophobia and how this impacts the political landscape of the United States government.

*From traditional racism to Islamophobia*

The term “Islamophobia” was coined in the 1970s in Europe to put a word to the hostility and fear experienced by the Muslim immigrant community (Rana, 2011). Most literally, Islamophobia is defined as fear or dislike of Muslims. Scholars have linked the rise of Islamophobia to the fluidity of racist exclusionary policies in the U.S. in mass media and dominant political discourse (Grosfoguel, 2012; Rana, 2011; Sayyied, 2014). Mohammad Tamdgidi (2012) considers the following question to shed light on the socially constructed reality of colonialism: “What would the heart, and face, of Islam be like, if the West had not conducted significant, covert and overt, direct or indirect, interference in the lives of Muslims in the Middle East and beyond” (Tamdgidi, 2012, p. 69)? This is a rhetorical question, of course, as it addresses the harsh reality of the impact of global invasions as a form of neo-colonialism.

Scholars have asserted that Islamophobia is an outgrowth of racism and racialization. Since traditional forms of racism were too blatant and socially unacceptable, another strategy needed to be taken. Salman Sayyid (2014), a scholar of social theory and “decolonial” thought argues that “Islamophobia is a concept that emerges precisely to do the work that categories like racism were not doing” (p. 11). Grosfoguel (2012) shares similar views about the term stating: “While the biological racist discourse declines, cultural racism became the hegemonic form of racism in the late world-system” (p. 13). Islamophobia has been utilized in multiple ways, and Rana (2011) posits that the capitalistic agenda succeeded at re-inventing colonization by branding it as ‘national defense’ and ‘homeland security.’
Rana (2011) questions the underlying motives of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for demonizing Muslims under the banner of the ‘War on Terror’ and how this might have implications for the government’s short- and long-term neoliberal agenda (Rana, 2011). For example, after the 9/11 attacks on U.S. soil, invasions were justified not only in Afghanistan, where the perpetrators of the attack were trained, but also in Iraq without any connection to the incident. These invasions, arguably, led to the complete destabilization of the countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, up to the present moment. Furthermore, the term “terror” must be dissected to reveal the ulterior motives that serve to “manufacture” fear and insecurity within dominant Western society. This term is also used to perpetuate the narrative of the “dangerous” Muslim (Bayoumi, 2006; Rana 2011).

9/11 impact on Muslims in the U.S.

The United States experienced the largest attack on its soil on September 11, 2001, with the tragic loss of thousands of lives. Since the post-9/11 era, hate crimes against Muslims living in the US have drastically increased, affecting the Muslim community (and anyone perceived to be Muslim) and impacted the relationship people have with Islam due to the media’s negative coverage of Muslims. One of the largest national organizations in the U.S., the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), serves as a Muslim civil rights and advocacy group with its headquarters in Washington D.C. CAIR also has collected independent data, showing that at least 700 hate crimes, four homicides, 960 racial profiling incidents occurred within just five weeks of 9/11 - a 1600 percent increase in hate crimes (according to the FBI) impacting South Asians, Arab and Muslim Americans at large (Associated Press, 2002; Maira, 2009).

In fact, few know that the first “revenge killing” four days after the 9/11 attacks was on a Sikh man, a gas station manager, Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was gunned down in Mesa, Arizona
(Lampman 2001; Maira 2009). Notably, this particular murder proved that Muslims are not the only community members who are targets of hate; anyone who fits the “ambiguous” profile of someone perceived to be Muslim or foreign can become a victim of hate. In addition, in October 2001, (one month after 9/11), the United States rushed to create the Patriot Act, described by the ACLU (2015) as follows: “Congress hastily passed the Patriot Act after 9/11 with virtually no debate, giving the government unprecedented powers to spy on innocent people” (p. 1). The impact of this policy on the future of the Muslim community is discussed next.

The devastation that the nation felt after the 9/11 attacks left many people fearful and uncertain, especially the Muslim community in the United States, which faced the brunt of anti-Muslim hate crimes (Associated Press, 2002). Bazian (2014) has widely published condemnations of the arbitrary detention of Muslims across the United States under the guise of the immigration policy since 9/11. In a collaborative effort to comply with Congress, the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security created yet a new process of legalized “Special Registration,” named The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) to “capture” the “terrorists” (Bazian, 2014). As Bazian (2014) explains:

As a nation, we have previous encounters with this approach; the Japanese, Chinese, and Mexican immigrants all have tasted this cup of poison before and are familiar with the winds of racism and selective use of law as an instrument of coercion. (p. 95)

Bazian (2014) analogizes actions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in “defense of homeland security” to other immigrant groups with similar experiences. He expressed that due to the Patriot Act, one year later, the INS Special Registration process “managed to register more than 113,000 individuals and deported 13,400” without ever finding a single individual linked to the attacks or any terrorist threat (p. 97). This inevitably created a
sense of fear among Muslims when traveling, considering the danger of being deported or far worse - detained indefinitely.

Another challenge that the nation faced post-9/11 was the impact on the U.S. legal system, which began to see the Muslim community with a suspicious and sometimes hateful eye. Smith and Hung (2010) explain this as follows: “Once it became statutory, the Patriot Act gave the legal authorities the unfettered right to detain foreigners for an unlimited length of time, based solely on distrust, without the detainees having due process of law” (p. 32). Since its passage, any individual can be held against their will without any reasonable evidence except that the individual presents as distrustful, leading to hostility and ambiguity at airports (ACLU, 2001). Thus, ACLU (2015) argues that the Patriot Act violates due process in that it leaves it open to a person’s subjective interpretation and the discretion of the defense system which makes it both questionable. Rana (2011) also asserts the same point by referring to the humiliation faced by Muslims in these forms of both temporary and “indefinite detention” camps across the globe in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; Bagram, Afghanistan; and Abu Ghraib, Iraq.

Outside of deportation, Bazian (2014) explains how the National Security Agency (NSA) now has the capacity for much more sophisticated surveillance, even when in violation of U.S. constitutional rights. The next section explores how surveillance, detention centers, and the negative portrayal of Muslims impact the Muslim community (and those who appear Muslim) on U.S. soil and how the media covers these stories.

**Islamophobia in contemporary U.S. society**

Although racial profiling was not justified among 80 percent of Americans prior to 9/11, according to opinion polls 60 percent of respondents actually expressed approval as long as the demographic was Muslim and Arab post-9/11; with 30 percent of Americans going so far as
wanting them to be detained solely based on their Muslim identity (Sirin & Fine, 2008). These polls show that the public trend toward Muslim exclusionism is not only acceptable, but also that this vilification of Muslims is used by politicians during election cycles to increase support among voters.

Similarly, SAALT (2014) conducted their own independent study between 2011 and 2014 of South Asian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Middle Eastern, and Arab Communities in America and documented that of the Muslims who were attacked, “84% of the hateful and violent incidents documented were motivated by anti-Muslim sentiment...where over 90% of the comments were based on anti-Muslim sentiment” (p. 3). This report serves as a reminder that solidarity is needed now more than ever as non-Muslims are mistaken and even killed due to ignorance of the attackers. The Muslim and other ethnic communities in the U.S. perceived to be Muslim are facing unprecedented levels of harassment and surveillance since 9/11 with spikes in hate crimes after the 2016 election of the president. The global War on Terror, the Patriot Act, and new policies banning visitors from Muslim-majority countries have all contributed to the increasing distrust of Muslims along with rampant Islamophobia.

When we consider the danger of these normalized human rights violations and how they shape the trajectory of U.S. policies, we are able to draw pertinent conclusions. As Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, and Desai (2016) explain: “singular narratives about wars overseas (e.g., the namelessness of citizens of other nations killed by drones) have given rise to the construction of those people of brown skin as Other, terrorist, and enemy” (p. 483). The authors astutely point to the fact that the media rarely covers attacks on civilian Muslim lives, thereby perpetuating the narrative that Muslims are not fully human. In his book, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity by Talal Asad (2003) dedicates an entire chapter to the discourse on human
rights, redefining it as “redeeming the ‘human’ through human rights” (p. 127). Asad (2003) evocatively points to the importance of how “learning to see certain practices as insupportable that were not previously viewed as such, and organizing social opposition to them, are steps in reconstruction of the human” (p. 154). There is a trickle down affect when Muslim Americans are disproportionately targeted because it affects not just their generation, but the next generation of children that have not known anything outside of their lived realities in the United States. Next, we consider how Muslim American youth have been impacted by Islamophobia.

**Studies of Muslim Youth**

**Demographics of Muslim youth**

Globally, Muslim youth demographics show a global median age of 24, a sizable median age of seven years younger than that of non-Muslims; this will likely drive the population growth as these youth prepare to marry and have children, particularly considering the often high fertility rates among Muslims (Pew Research, 2017). The Muslim American youth population has been understudied, and as the population is growing, it is crucial to gain a sense of their polycultural and religious contributions to the United States.

Sirin and Fine (2007) conducted the one of largest studies thus far on Muslim American youth and their hyphenated identities. Their study of 70 Muslim American students, aged 12 to 18 years old, consisted of a mixed methods design that included surveys, interviews, and visual identity maps. The results illustrated the challenges of the post-9/11 generation of Muslim American youth. Interestingly, while the males faced challenges predominantly attributable to acculturation, the female experiences were marked more by anxiety (Sirin & Fine, 2007). Overall, the study revealed that the impact of 9/11 on Muslim American youth was characterized by the formation of a complex hyphenated identity.
Sirin and Fine (2008) conducted extensive work and crucial research on the social and psychological aspects of the identity of Muslim American youth. The researchers applied multiple methods to gain a better understanding of the complex negotiating process that Muslim American youth experienced at their young age while balancing their hyphenated identities. Two-thirds of Muslims in the U.S. are youth (first generation Muslim youth born outside the U.S. and second generation Muslim youth born in the U.S), and only one-third make up the non-youth populace (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Therefore, the youth are largely impacted by the global phenomena and thus there is a need to gain an understanding of their experiences.

The findings of Sirin and Fine’s (2008) study on Muslim American youth challenged the dominant narrative because they revealed that the youth actually did not believe that being a “good” Muslim and a “good” American were mutually exclusive terms. Moreover, the youth felt “well integrated into the mainstream culture” as it is the only nation that they have ever known. Ironically, some western intellectuals and Muslim fundamentalists actually agree on the point that one must choose between being a “good” Muslim or a “good” American, which was disputed by youth who maintained their “creativity, resilience, and hope” throughout the study regardless of such intrusive and binary views imposed on them (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 3).

When considering the term “youth,” a more traditional definition describes adolescent males and females as having a unique set of characteristics and behaviors and ‘interests’ as it was first developed in the United States in the 1950s (Howe, 2015). However, it is irrefutable that due to the vast diversity of the Muslim American youth community, a more “expansive” and inclusive definition is needed. Howe (2015) further explains this phenomenon as follows: “American Muslims who are well into their thirties remain critical actors in the production of American Muslim youth cultures in the United States” (p. 300). These Muslim Americans have
been raised in the United States and challenge the monolithic view of Muslims by taking an expressive role as “artists, activists, and academics” thereby laying the foundation as mentors for the succeeding generations of Muslim American youth (Howe, 2015, p. 300).

In fact, Howe (2015) references some scholars, such as Su’ad Abdul Khaibee (2016) and author of *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, whose work examines Muslim American hip-hop culture. Maytha Alhassen who works as a social justice artist and is known for having written and performed Hijabi Monologues (2009), argue that Muslim American youth in the U.S. challenge the limited scope of the dominant culture by forging a presence through blogs and social media thereby authoring, molding and impacting their diverse cultures. The next section delves into the global responses through social media of Muslim American youth who expressed their frustrations of particular hate crimes.

**Social media and youth agency**

Muslim American youth have taken to social media to express their concerns and even inspired global attention. On February 10th, 2015, social media took the forefront on the news of a tragedy, in North Carolina. A young man and humanitarian, Deah Shaddy Barakat, was brutally shot execution-style in his own home which was followed immediately by shots in the head of his new bride, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and his sister-in-law, Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Dr. Susan Barakat, a medical doctor, at the University of California, San Francisco, the older sister of the young murdered man, took it upon herself to go on Cable Network News (CNN), asserting that the attack was a hate crime and urging the Muslim community to get involved through civic engagement and social justice in her plea to the nation on the ramifications of Islamophobia. The Muslim community was outraged by the mass media’s delayed response as well as challenging the motive of the murder of ‘Our
Three Winners’ because the official police report documented it as a “parking dispute” rather than a hate crime, which the family urged officials to reconsider, according to NPR (Peralta, E., & Chappel, B., 2015, February 11).

The mainstream society did not even broadcast news of the murder until it went viral on social media, after which the Chapel Hill shooting began to take center stage. However, eventually it was announced to be a parking dispute and not a hate crime, thus serving as further evidence of Islamophobia among the larger Muslim community. This event confirmed what postcolonial theorist Edward Said (1981) had long before argued - Muslims do not receive authentic media coverage. Decades ago, Said constantly challenged news stations for their skewed representation of Muslims. With regards to media, he stated, “The cultural reimagining and political persecution of Muslims and Arabs as suspect citizens in the War on Terror have roots in Orientalist views of Islam and the Middle East that have long been tied to imperial engagements with the region” (Said, 1981, p. 11). Here Said (1981) unpacked how the global West has antagonized the Muslim community and spread animosity.

According to Hamza et al. (2009), they also echo the above statement through their study that was conducted on media outlets which revealed some rather unsettling statistics. While 53 percent of the participants believed that Arab Muslims faced prejudice in the U.S. and another 56 percent were “aware” of the media bias, a staggering 76 percent would continue to watch the same news outlet (Hamza et al., 2009, p. 29). Thus, as is also evidenced by the anti-Muslim sentiments evoked during the 2016 election cycle, injustices faced by Muslim Americans are not significant enough for many Americans to change their views, practices, or voting preferences. This inevitably sends a message to the youth who have been either born or raised in the United States about the value assigned to their lives. The fact that the police reports repeatedly
undermine the true motives of the nefarious crimes sends a subliminal message about the value of a Muslim American’s human life as they enter college life.

**Muslim Youth Identity Formation**

*Campus life and identity formation*

At the *meso*-level, the local campus life experience for Muslim American youth deserves examination. Over the past decades, scholars have found that the concept of a socially constructed and historicized identity of Muslims has offered a distinctive lens for viewing the emergence of a unique Muslim American identity (Ashmore, Deauz, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Cushman, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Sirin & Fine 2008). Ironically, after 9/11, more Muslims identified with the designation of Muslim American rather than an ethnic association (Grewal, 2003; Sirin & Fine, 2008). In line with Tajfel’s theory, stigmatized group members either leave the group or find new ways to assert in group pride through even greater identification so that there is community strength in numbers; also previously referred to as identity assertion. Prior to 9/11, the Muslim American community was categorized by ethnicity, which was especially evident on college campuses with the presence of organizations affiliated by ethnic backgrounds alone. More recently, however, the strategy of uniting forces of the same religious affiliation is gaining popularity, especially on academic college campuses and even high schools (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

**Revival of Muslim Student Associations**

Muslim Student Associations were first founded in 1963 and have since been replicated all across the nation and even globally. These organizations have attempted to create a space, offering inclusivity with the “official” representation of Muslims as an organizing unit on college campuses (Mohammed-Arif, 2000). Sirin and Fine (2008) also highlight this impact of the post-
9/11 era, which has served to unify Muslims regardless of their immensely varying ethnic, social, racial, and geographic backgrounds. The authors assert that the need to emerge as a collective unit was because “...these young Muslim Americans share the profound formative experience of coming of age in the United States at a time of tremendous tension and hyper-surveillance” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 5). Similarly, Cote and Levin (2002) claim that “...identity has now become a popular concept for understanding the impact of the economic, social, and political upheavals of the 20th century” (p. 10). Saera Khan (2014) further expands that due to the post-9/11 era, Muslim Americans have actually been under attack, “Although it is personally costly to have a heightened awareness of stigma associated with their group, Muslim Americans must remain vigilant” (p.581). The repercussions of 9/11 thus need further assessment as it pertains to a hyper-visible identity.

**Marginalized Muslim American youth identity**

Identity formation is a complex process, heightened when the identity of the person is under real or perceived attack and threat by the dominant society. It is crucial to consider that the person’s well-being is related to feeling a sense of autonomy and the freedom to choose one’s own identity. Cote and Levine (2002) remind us that throughout history the definition of identity has been rooted in the quest of a community of others who offer validation. It becomes even more crucial to look at the impact of identity, when under direct attack. Maira (2016) notes that “American and European notions of adolescence and psychological theories of stage-based development have produced an association of youth with liminality and identity crisis” (Erikson 1968, p. 17). In regard to Muslim American youth, Maira (2009) expresses the following: “Given the intensified politicization of Muslim Identity in the public sphere after 9/11, some wonder if this will lead to the emergence of a new ‘political generation’” (p. 209). Therefore, one can
correlate the politicization of Muslims to the experience of being constantly misrepresented in the media and feeling the need to defend one’s own identity. Nevertheless, some youth may also seek assimilation and attempt to distance themselves from Islam as a response for coping with marginalization.

Due to media coverage of foreign relations with Muslim majority nations, Muslim identity has been under attack within and outside the U.S. borders, which undoubtedly impacts the image of young Muslims from both an external and internal view. More than ever before, substantial misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and misperceptions of Muslims plague the community. Sirin and Fine (2008) remind us that throughout most of the Western world, Muslims are “designated Others” serving as the targets of “reflexive hatred” (p. xiv); thus, it is crucial to seek a deeper understanding of the experiences of the post-9/11 generation.

Contributing to the scholarship on identity formation for Muslim American youth, Arshad Ali (2014) conducted a qualitative research study for his dissertation at the University of California, Los Angeles, specifically looking at 24 youth who self-identified as Muslim. Ali (2014) expressed that “beyond simply feeling culturally dislocated and isolated, the students stated that they were treated as if they embodied a singular, unchanging ‘Muslim other’ (p. 1257). Ali (2014) further warned of the danger in making such assumptions: “The virulent public discourse addressing Muslim communities, and Muslim youth specifically, are further pushing members of these targeted communities to the margins of American society and culture” (p. 1244). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the impact that this discourse has on Muslim American youth’s sense of identity.

Shabana Mir (2014), in her award-winning book, *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*, examined both the pressure within and outside the
Muslim community. Of particular concern was the negotiation process and the multi-dimensionality of the Muslim female social identity on college campuses. Mir (2014) also looked at the pressure felt by Muslim female college students living in a pluralistic society who wanted to express that Muslims are not a monolithic group. Mir (2014) considered the females’ visibility as the participants forged their identity as American during their formative years when most college students are exposed to peer pressure related to dating, drinking and sexuality. In her study, Mir (2014) essentially revealed the diversity of the Muslim identity whether pertaining to religious attire (modest covering such as the hijab) or religious affiliation (mainly related to MSAs on college campuses).

**From youth ethnic identity to religious affiliation**

When we consider the tragedy of 9/11, we enter into the heart of the impact on a meso-level, with the complex equation of the development of youth experimenting with their fluid identity. We are now able to see the dramatic impact of the post-9/11 era on Muslims. In fact, many scholars have reflected on the idea that being Muslim and American are two seemingly opposing symbols (Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban 1999; Ajrouch 1999; Eisenlohr 1996; Swanson 1996; Sarroub 2001, Maira 2009, 2016). Ali (2014) challenged us to consider a common theme emerging from a number of scholars as well as Pew Research - namely that a person’s ethnicity was being replaced by their Muslim identity (p. 1246). Maira (2016) explained the dichotomous nature of the terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘American’ as being attached to one another, causing controversy within and outside of the Muslim community. Scholars have further affirmed that as a consequence of 9/11, Muslims actually became drawn towards a movement uniting through the title as Muslim American (Kibria 2008, 2011; Maira, 2016; Naber 2005, 2008). One likely reason may be that the Muslim community is seen as made up of ‘perpetual foreigners’

Another challenge faced by the Muslim community is related to conflicts between parents (usually immigrants) and their children (usually U.S. born/raised). Parents often want to preserve their cultural heritage and practices, while youth are left with feelings of ambivalence in choosing between cultural and religious affiliation (Mohammed-Arif, 2000). In summary, the aftermath of the post-9/11 era changed the course of identity among Muslims, especially among youth.

**Identity formation and psychological stressors**

The impact of 9/11 is an amalgamation of *macro*-level and *meso*-level effects on Muslims. Identity formation has its roots in many different types of fields such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Identity can be seen from a “social psychological perspective” (p.1) as noted by Cote and Levine (2002) who explain it as follows: “...where choice has replaced obligation as the basis of self-definition, identity formation has become a more difficult, precarious, and solitary process for which many people are unprepared in terms of their phylogenetic background” (p. 1). The authors remind us of the challenge of the journey of solidarity, which has become more of an individual rather than collective process.

Maira (2009) also described how “chilling the community” (p. 116) of Muslims into “fear and self-censorship” has impacted the Muslims and South Asian community members due to experiences of extreme forms of “surveillance, detentions and deportations” that became common (p. 116). This dynamic leads to a level of mistrust in the community because its
members worry that someone within the community could be an undercover agent. The state of fear and hypervigilance for Muslims, Arabs, and the South Asian community is heightened because they have been under government surveillance and vigilante attacks from hate crimes since 9/11 regardless of any actual evidence of being “dangerous” (Abu El-Haj, 2007, 2009; Ahmad, 2002; Ibish, 2003, 2008; Volpp, 2002).

Muslim youth in the U.S. are psychologically impacted by the diaspora and ties to their homeland, while constantly proving their allegiance to their multilayered and complex identity of being “transnational and homeless” and “culturally grounded and nationally uprooted” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 2). While some studies referenced above find that Muslim American youth report not feeling conflicted between their identities at home and outside (Sirin & Fine, 2008), recent publications demonstrate that social exclusion greatly impacts Muslim American youth identity (Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, & Desai, 2016).

Maira (2009), for example, asseses these notions with her statement that redirects the question of how youth are perceived due to media portrayals of Muslims, “If Muslim youth are understood as potential terrorists, religious fundamentalists, or ‘anti-American’ subjects, it is because of the story the U.S. tells about them through its policies and discourse, and the ways this is filtered through its policies and discourse…” (p. 27). Here the author clarifies that the narrative has influence and can dominate the false perception of Muslims as dangerous and ultimately change policies to restrict the Muslim American community.

When we consider the psyche of the Muslim community, it is crucial to have an in-depth discourse about how migration impacts Muslims. Thea Abu El-Haj (2009) references the attachment that immigrant communities have to their nation of origin with respect to their finances, cultural loyalty, and psychological impact. When the host community does not have an
awareness of the complexity of the multiplicity and the psychological impact on immigrants, it can create tension. In her work with Palestinian American youth, Abu El-Haj (2009) documented lived testimonials of students who felt unsafe due to hateful remarks or bullying, or even worse, attacks against Muslims. She noted in her research that students even experienced teachers who atrociously joined in on the hateful speech, complicating the dynamic because of the role as an “authority” (Abu El-Haj, 2009). The struggle of Muslims can be characterized as follows “Not-quite-white … not-quite-free … ‘subject to the hyphen that never ends’” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p.19). When we focus on Muslim American youth, it is not surprising that they are struggling to integrate into mainstream society. As Mustafa (2014) explained, “One minority group for whom experiences of discrimination have been associated with negative general outcomes is American Muslim youth” (p. 1).

This was most evident right after the incident of 9/11, but has since led to more chronic identity struggles due to the stigmatized socio-political status that the U.S. holds with Islamic majority nations, which influences how all Muslims are conflated and represented in dehumanizing ways through mainstream media. As Ali (2014) noted, the media has ingrained a certain thinking in the minds of Americans and how “Every Muslim is seen as running the risk of being ‘radicalized,’ young Muslims more so” (pp. 1246-1247). The youth are seen as even more “dangerous” because of their rebellious nature and thus need a sanctuary (Maira, 2016).

**Muslim Student Associations and Youth Activism**

Muslim adults are generally not confronted about their Muslim identity on a daily basis in the same way as youth because of the unique access and interactions with peers at school, which affects them on a *meso*-level due to campus life obligations. However, the Pew Research Center (2017) shows, “Roughly seven-in-ten U.S. Muslims (69%) say religion is very important in their
lives,” and thus religious affiliation may serve as a protective force for the psycho-social well-being of Muslims in the face of discrimination (p. 1). Ahmed (2009) conducted a study to consider whether “Religiosity may serve as a protective factor because of meaningful interpersonal connections through religious involvement” (p. 109). If support through one’s Muslim community can lead to a healthier self-image, further research is needed on the ways that collective coping and resilience is structured and can be supported for youth.

MSAs on high school and college campuses have actually become a space where (some) Muslims have felt a sense of comfort and camaraderie in expressing their opinions, or simply in feeling accepted. Although such spaces have also become contentious among those whose religious affiliation or level of religiosity does not match. As Rana (2011) explains, one survival mechanism is that, “Some have been able to use a strategy of dissimulation-that is disguising or concealing religious difference-to keep themselves from being interpreted in racial terms” (p. 28). Certain members of the Muslim community have felt the need to camouflage their identity not because they reject it, but simply to protect it; yet the psychological burden is not fully alleviated as there is a new pressure of switching between both. At the same time, others intentionally seek out Muslim-identified spaces as an act of resistance in order to demonstrate rejection of larger forces of exclusion and marginalization.

One such space consists of Muslim Student Associations in both high schools and colleges; “MSAs on college campuses represent, mobilize, educate, and connect Muslims in unprecedented ways” (Kamal, 2014, p. 257). Kamal’s (2014) research has found that the MSA leaders wanted a more diverse representation of the Muslim community, one that was not dominated by males or the media’s misrepresentation of Muslims. Kamal also discovered that Muslim American youth were interested in U.S. national and community-wide responsibility and
not only focused on the struggles of their motherland as an effort to show their commitment to social services within their current community. Furthermore, Kamal (2014) noted that the Muslim youth were taking a leadership role in countering both racial and ethnic barriers which have traditionally impacted Muslim spaces. Similarly, this dissertation seeks to understand the dynamics and identity formation of Muslim college students who congregate under the official banner of non-masjid spaces. This research will hopefully contribute to the growing interest in these pseudo-religious spaces.

Youth agency and mobility

In reaction to these macro-level and meso-level effects, Muslim American youth have responded in unconventional ways on a micro-level. Mir (2014) has expressed that Muslim youth have taken it upon themselves to “create third spaces of identity” (p. 6). More studies are now being conducted to explain the involvement of youth when it comes to mobilizing and getting active. As Maira (2009) notes, “Since 9/11 and the war on Afghanistan, young people have been engaged in anti-war politics in various ways, from engaging in civil disobedience actions and organizing rallies to producing and participating in alternative media” (p. 20). Maira (2009) further found that “Arab American youth across the United States have continually confronted beliefs that Arabs and Muslims are terrorists and enemy-aliens” (p. 278). In fact, Maira (2016) problematizes this notion of submissiveness by conducting fieldwork which honors the hard work of Muslims: “Solidarity is processural, emerging from cultural and historical processes and in the midst of shifting political events, violence, despair, and hope” (p. 260). She challenges the dominant discourse on Muslims by explaining that it takes patience and persistence to make long-term changes.
Other scholars, such as Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, and Desai (2016), are building bridges through their construction of humanizing curriculum. They address their concern for students facing xenophobia and Islamophobia in the following excerpt: “In particular, we resist the idea that some people have full human status and others do not through learning opportunities that offer common ground and enable students to make connections between migration stories, to develop empathy, and to act as allies” (p. 494). In taking a critical lens and challenging dominant discourses, scholarship can further explore how youth act as agents in resisting and coping with larger forces of Islamophobia and exclusion through creating spaces such as ethnic clubs. This dissertation examined the impact and the responses of Muslim American youth.

Summary

This chapter explored seminal studies on Muslims in the U.S. (macro-level), Muslim American youth experiences on school campuses (meso-level), and Muslim American identity formation (micro-level). It also presented a case for the diversity of Muslim Americans and how Muslims fall on a wide spectrum. As the research documents, Muslim American youth seek to forge their own narrative and reject the notion of a monolithic representation of Muslims. This particular study aimed to build upon this literature by recording the diversity of the lived experiences of Muslim American youth who are in the midst of developing their fluid and multifacted identities.

Specifically, Muslim American youth must reconcile the awareness of their own inherently dignified identities with the externally-imposed negative perception of the dominant society. Thus, the study considers the shift from an ethnic affiliation to one that is much more expansive; Muslim American youth must constantly negotiate their “hyphenated selves” with a nation that has yet to grant them their inherent right to be recognized as fully human (Sirin &
Moreover, Muslim students also happen to share another important common denominator in that they have “hyphenated identities.” Renshon (2011) explains this concept of hyphenated identity as follows: “Yet a hyphenated identities flexibility extends beyond the movement toward an American identity in the intergenerational process of assimilation” (p. 1).

The other side of that can be true as well, for example, having two identities, both of which are discriminated against in the U.S. (such as being both Muslim and African-American). In this dissertation study, this dynamic is discussed further in the following methodology chapter since participants discussed various intersectional identities as Muslim American college students and how they navigated Islamophobic discourse given the current political climate.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to identify the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley and to explore its influence on their identity formation. The research questions also included inquiry on the protective strategies and coping mechanisms implemented by these Muslim American students while attempting to develop a healthy sense of identity. This research offered perspectives on the challenges that Muslim American students faced at UC Berkeley, by providing the participants with a platform to verbalize and process their personal experiences of being Muslim-American at a college campus like UC Berkeley.

The research design implemented was a case study approach, using qualitative methods. A case study was selected since this research was grounded in the specific context of UC Berkeley’s political climate as a result of the 2016 election season and resulting in activism on a campus with the rich history of the 1960s Free Speech Movement. Creswell (2013) argues that case studies are most useful when the setting is crucial to the study, as is the case in this particular study. Moreover, a case study is the most appropriate methodological approach for the data collection of this research because of the application of diverse sources of data such as: “interviews, observations, documents and artifacts” (Creswell, 2013, p. 104). Archival data was also used in this study to broaden the findings.

The way in which the data was gathered in this case study was unique in that a specific string of events, such as campus protests and riots, took place in the Spring 2017, and an analysis of these events was included. Since the setting of the event was as crucial a component as the broad topic being discussed, it will be described in detail below. This particular case study design best fits the research due to the fact that the exploratory category offers a broader scope
with respect to the setting. Thus, this methodological approach best fit the experiences of Muslim American students who happened to have something in common in that they were all in the midst of exploring their identity development as adults for the first time. Also, compounding development with a setting that was away from their parents on UC Berkeley’s contested campus, which is deemed as a liberal campus. At the same time this university has been nationally followed by mass media due to the invitation of far right conservative Republicans.

**Research Setting**

The selected research site played a key role as the students who attended UC Berkeley’s college campus had very unique experiences in regard to their developing identity. These factors included UC Berkeley’s reputation of political activism on campus, from being the birthplace of the 1960s Free Speech Movement as well as being the location of multiple protests ever since. The inflammatory statements made by Milo more recently triggered riots and building shut-downs during the 2017 protests. Sproul Plaza has historical significance as the site of free speech opportunities and social justice movements and activism. However, it is important to consider the speakers who have been invited in recent years since they espouse conservatism and hateful worldviews and the resulting protests have had detrimental impacts on student safety. Therefore, the time of this research was an opportune moment to conduct a case study on the political climate at UC Berkeley around Islamophobia and its impact on the identity formation and coping strategies of Muslim American college students.

The first wave of Islamophobic sentiment flared up during the election season prior to the 2017 inauguration of the president of the United States. Anti-Muslim rhetoric spewed by the presidential candidate during the election season was at its peak in the media, which caused a trickle-down effect on public institutions such as campuses like UC Berkeley. Thus, interviewing
Muslim American students was crucial to consider their reactions to the political landscape. The second wave of Islamophobic violence occurred in 2017 when the Muslim Ban and Muslim registry was introduced and Muslim American students spoke out against it. The third wave included an Anti-Muslim right wing political panel invited to UC Berkeley in February 2017 to speak out against the Muslim community, which led to riots and shutting down campus buildings. The researcher invited the Muslim American students in their interviews to consider how their campus life was impacted by these waves of events and to share their personal experiences.

Through this case study, crucial information emerged to understand the context of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley and how they navigated their complex identities at a politicized institution where Islamophobia, activism, and violence were part of their daily experiences as college students.

**Research Questions**

Muslim American youth were presented with the unique challenge of reconciling their identity while navigating college life. The following questions guided this study:

1. How has the rise of Islamophobia after the election of 2016 impacted the mental health of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley?
2. In what ways have Muslim American students at UC Berkeley engaged in advocacy and activism related to the campus climate and larger political climate?
3. What individual and collective protective factors and coping strategies are identified by Muslim American UC Berkeley students as they navigate their multiple identities on campus?

**Participants**
The participants included Muslim-American college students consisting of 12 volunteer respondents who were all enrolled at UC Berkeley, as undergraduate or graduate students during the time of the study. The participants were contacted through direct communication using google forms which was posted on Facebook by the Muslim Mental Health Initiative in collaboration with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at UC Berkeley and other campus affiliates.

The research participants were identified and recruited through correspondence with the google forms where the president/board of directors of each campus organization had access to the invitation. The official Facebook webpage for the Muslim Mental Health Initiative was used at UC Berkeley, inviting the Board of Directors from non-religiously ethnic affiliated organizations as well as the religiously affiliated MSA.

In order to gain interest and participation, the consent form was included in the google forms for the sake of transparency and to obtain informed consent. The researcher attended meetings to invite students to participate or ask questions in case they had any reservations about their participation in the study. The participants were asked to contact the researcher directly if interested in participating in this study in order to avoid intermediaries; the google forms proved to be very instrumental and the participants filled out the application interest form so there was no need to print flyers. Upon receiving the research description, a mass Facebook invitation had been sent, which included active and inactive members and affiliates of the different campus clubs. The students were invited by the researcher’s personal e-mail address and phone number, making it simple to decide which day of the focus group they wanted to join for the purpose of this study. Therefore it became unnecessary to contact any other associations because the google form was very successful and quickly filled up.
Participants then began to correspond directly with the researcher and expressed their interest in participating in the study. Some had questions and were directed to the informed consent; these questions were mostly related to the types of questions that would be asked at the time of the study. There was also a need to reassure the participants that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity due to an understandable fear of Muslim surveillance. The participants were directly contacted via text message with the phone number that each participant provided. The researcher invited the participants of each focus group for a follow-up appointment to be scheduled at a convenient time and location for each individual. Below is a detailed summary of the procedures that were implemented as well as a rationale for the use of multiple sources for the data collection process.

**Data Collection**

The research included multiple data sources to gain a holistic sense of the participants’ experiences in this case study. This study’s aim was to draw from the following data sources: two sets of focus groups; follow-up interviews with interested participants, the clinical director of the Khalil Center, and one staff member at the UC Berkeley Tang Center; review of archival documents, local and campus newspaper articles, and blogs; observations; field notes; and the researcher’s journal. These are all qualitative components which will further add to the study.

The most prominent documents included the UC Berkeley local publication named *Threads* to consider the experiences of Muslim American students. Also the researcher examined relevant information from the UC Berkeley newspaper from 2016-2018 to pull articles, opinion pieces, and other content related to Islamophobia, Muslim students, and activism. The archival documentation included meeting notes from MSAs such as board meetings and meetings for
events. The researcher also reviewed the MSA Facebook page, which was replete with archival data and responses to local events.

This study utilized three different instruments for data collection purposes. The first involved the facilitation of two focus groups which consisted of six students in each group with a total of twelve participants. Secondly, the researcher conducted individual interviews with volunteers from the focus groups who were interested in a follow-up. The main individuals who were interviewed in addition to the focus group included Yasmeen Ahmed, the founder of the Muslim Mental Health Initiative (MMHI). She wrote the grant in 2016 and directed me to other individuals who were involved with the creation of MMHI. Next, I interviewed Dr. Susan Bell, who was a core staff member at the UC Berkeley Tang Center and helped develop the contract for the Khalil Center collaboration project. Another staff member included Dr. Rania Awaad, who serves as the clinical director of the Khalil Center. I held quarterly meetings to discuss the progress of the collaboration and emailed them individually to request an interview with each of them about their involvement on UC Berkeley’s campus. The research questions, as well as the guiding questions, were field-tested with volunteers for clarity and to assure that the open-ended questions were relevant.

**Focus groups**

The targeted demographic included 12 Muslim-American college students, who were enrolled at UC Berkeley as undergraduate or graduate students. The twelve students were divided into two focus groups of six participants each in order to facilitate dialogue around identity and campus climate in a more intimate setting. The researcher asked each of these twelve participants if she could contact them for follow-up questions. The students were asked
several open-ended guiding questions while the researcher observed and redirected the discussion to ensure all participants had a chance to speak and to cover the main topics for about one to two hours. The interview questions guided the participants to speak openly about their personal experiences of being Muslim-American on the UC Berkeley campus. Before beginning any interviews, the researcher distributed the printed informed consent forms and discussed the principles for maintaining anonymity before collecting everyone’s signatures.

Follow-up individual interviews

After the focus group interviews, the researcher made an announcement and asked for volunteers to give individual follow-up one-on-one interviews in order to assess and gain further insights about the participants’ experiences and feedback related to the focus groups. The participants were encouraged to reach out to the researcher with additional reflections. These interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes to an hour and the questions related to the participants’ personal responses during the focus group about their college campus experience. The participants were also asked to reflect on how being Muslim, specifically at UC Berkeley, impacted their identity. In addition to the students, the researcher also reached out to selected faculty and staff members at the TANG Center and Khalil Center for individual interviews. The next section delves into the data analysis section of the study.

Data Analysis

To help inform the interview questions, the researcher gained a sense of how to make the best use of the time allotted for the focus groups. These questions were field-tested with volunteers, as mentioned above. The researcher privately and personally transcribed all the interviews, both from the focus group and the follow-up individual interviews, instead of using transcription equipment so as to engage with the recording in such a way to draw out the themes.
Next, the researcher used coding to identify themes. In personally transcribing the interviews and coding for themes, a tally was created of terms that were used repeatedly to describe the participants’ experiences.

The researcher provided participants with an opportunity for a follow-up interview. This follow-up interview provided the participants with a chance to add, remove, or change their personal responses, if they wished to do so, or if they wanted to offer additional comments that came up after the focus group. The researcher applied for IRB approval and received approval as of January 9, 2018, and collected data from the focus group during the Spring 2018 at UC Berkeley and extended the data collection timeline to Spring of 2019 for follow-ups.

**Ethical Considerations**

*Confidentiality*

All the information given by study participants was kept confidential. All data were stored in a confidential, secure location accessible only by the researcher. Audio-recordings and all other documentation submitted did not include any of the participants’ names, but instead, each participant was identified on the recordings and in the transcript by a specified participant code only. All data and notes were kept in a locked electronic file on the researcher’s laptop for the duration of the research process. The researcher selected quotes from the interview process, but the personal information was not divulged unless the participant offered approval and a pseudonym was used so others could not decipher the participant based on the quotation provided. Upon completion of the final study, all audio recordings and paper trails of data were destroyed including the code form that matches the participant’s codes to each participant’s name. Anonymity was discussed throughout the study in order to protect the privacy of
participants, given the sensitivity of the matter specifically due to being Muslim as discussed throughout the study.

The researcher provided flexibility of time for the interviews so they were conducted in a manner that was most convenient for the participants and in a comfortable environment. The questions were provided to the students prior to beginning the interviews. The researcher received consent to use an audio recording device of the actual conversations and consent from the participants after reading the consent form. All the interviewees were encouraged and given permission to pause or turn off the recording at any point in time if they began to feel uncomfortable and they were given the opportunity to delete parts of the transcription if they felt uncomfortable after the interview about what was disclosed. The questions for the interviews were designed to be open-ended which allowed the participants to elaborate on the topics without bias or without feeling judged or swayed in any way or feeling that they had to answer a certain way.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and participants were free to change their minds at any time; they were reminded that they were able to withdraw and discontinue even after signing the consent form. However, the participants expressed a high-level of comfort due to the fact that they were all reassured that their responses would remain anonymous unless the participant wanted to use their own name. Also, the participants were asked not to provide any self-identifying information that would help a reader identify or figure out who they were in terms of current residence, job location, and so forth. Even the students who initially were open to being identified, were ultimately kept anonymous for their own protection as they were youth who still had to pursue higher education or professional endeavors.
Informed Consent

Human participants were protected in accordance with the ethical standards taken from the Institutional Review Board for the Public Health (IRBPHS) and the APA Code of Conduct. Informed consent documents emphasizing confidentiality were provided to each participant and discussed in detail prior to the interview. The researcher also verified that the participants understood the documentation and the interview process. Participants were offered sufficient time to read the consent form. The researcher assigned pseudonyms so each participant’s identification remained confidential.

All participants who responded affirmatively to the invitation to participate in the study were requested to sign the informed consent form. The consent form explained the above statement - that participation in the study was completely voluntary. The participants were also free to change their mind at any time, even after signing and submitting the consent form; if they decided to withdraw their responses from the research at any point in time, they simply had to respond to the researcher’s message regarding responses. The signed informed consent also explained that the information provided during participation in the study would remain confidential unless the participant was open to sharing their personal information.

At the conclusion of the study, each of the 12 participants were thanked for their time, and given the researcher's contact information should they have any questions in the future. If the participant felt uncomfortable and/or disturbed in any way after the session, free mental health counseling resources would be arranged for the participant such as the UHS Tang Center in Berkeley and UC Berkeley’s MMHI as well as the Islamically-integrated psychological services of the Khalil Center.

Background and Positionality of Researcher

Background

The background of the researcher is pertinent to include as it pertains to the study and the participants. I was born in a Muslim majority nation in the city of Kabul, Afghanistan. Due to the
Soviet invasion, my large family of seven was forced to leave the country in 1987 with my parents and my four sisters. My father had worked in a prominent hospital in Kabul named Char-sad-bistar and my mother was a teacher of math and physics. Education was oxygen for my parents and having five young daughters living under constant rockets led them to leave their homeland. As a result, our family began our journey as refugees seeking asylum. We temporarily moved to New Delhi, India because my father was able to forge documents to seek medical support for my family, which essentially saved our lives.

We next moved to Bremen, Germany, because my uncle had previously moved there and we lived there on temporary visas from 1988 until 1996. Muslims and immigrants, in general, felt unsafe in Germany due to the prevalence of racism and Islamophobia. I had a memory of my mother being hit by a car while biking to work, victim of an act of a hate crime and a homicidal attempt.

We moved to the United States during the Clinton administration in 1996, at a time when Afghanistan was incessantly on the news due to the Taliban and how women were inhumanely treated due to having to wear burqas and being restricted from attending school. I recall not disclosing that I was Afghan to most people because I feared how they may perceive me as “a terrorist.” I also recall how many Afghans were changing their names and deflected their true identity to protect themselves from discrimination and suspicion. In this land of opportunity, I quickly felt I was forced to comply by shedding my religious and cultural heritage to assimilate; yet simultaneously I knew I was not comfortable to blindly follow my peers.

When I was a junior in high school, I was sitting in economics and political government class when 9/11 happened. In my school, most people assumed that I was Latina and so I was essentially an undercover Muslim. I still recall when my Mexican American classmate said in
class that we should just "nuke 'em" referring to bombing Afghanistan after 9/11. This situation silenced me because I felt that I did not have the words to speak up and felt outnumbered and isolated.

When I entered college, I took a world religions class, and for the first time saw Islam portrayed in a beautiful way. I recall that it was my favorite class, because until then I always carried this heavy burden of invisible shame with me. This was due to the negative portrayal of first Afghans and then Muslims as a whole in mass media.

I decided to pursue a career in helping early on in my academic career with a major in biology and with an emphasis on molecular biology and a minor in philosophy and chemistry. However, by the time I enrolled in graduate school, I knew that I wanted to help my community through healing my Afghan community. I decided to help the Muslim community through therapeutic mental wellness services.

In 2013, I was traveling to Cyrus, a tiny island near Cyprus in Greece with my twin and younger sister. A man approached us with unmarked police gear and asked for our passports. I came out of shock mode as he was suspicious of our identity. We were obvious tourists dressed in harmless neon colors and summer hats. Yet, we were paraded in their police car throughout their small town, eventually, we arrived at the police station. We entered the room and the chief officer says, “Take the three Afghanis into the other room.” What does that mean? What is in the other room? I was scared but had no choice but to follow him. We sat down, all of us strategic about where we placed ourselves in the office, which was bare except for some chairs and a table that separated us from the cop we first met.

I began to use my sense of humor and led the conversation into a new direction. I fully realize now that this was an act of survival, not knowing what he was capable of in the comfort
of his own niche. Just then, the chief detective entered the room and yelled at him to leave; he did so but only after shooting a last suspecting glance our way.

He explained that they had never experienced any terrorist attacks, as of yet. “We never had problems with terrorism before, but you never know!” That was it, I had had enough. First, we were targeted by a drunken man because he suspected that we were Roma (nomadic gypsies--although that term is derogatory towards the Romanian people) and now we are sitting inside this high ceiling police station for questioning about terrorist acts! I was appalled, but simultaneously admired the brave act of being so blatant with his act of racism; this was an act of racial profiling I stated. Never before had I experienced this overt expression of xenophobia and it was so raw and matter-of-fact.

Much to our surprise, they had no moral compass about whether racial profiling was good or bad, for them it served the purpose of protecting their people as he said, “our island, it is white and we would like to keep it that way!” He was unsure why we were offended and I began to recognize a certain kind of appreciation for their level of blatant honest racism. I was curious and asked whether he ever experienced racism. When he shared his story of being mistaken for a terrorist in Athens, he saw nothing wrong with that. I explained, “We are in your territory, we are women, we are from Afghanistan, we do not understand your language, nor do we hold the ranking of a chief police officer, don’t you think that could put us at a disadvantage when questioned by a complete stranger in “undercover clothing” asking us to hand over our passports?”

It was at that particular moment that I recognized a shared allegiance I had with my undocumented clients and families. I felt empathy for my clients in a whole new way. How can another being have this level of control over another? I was dependent on a complete stranger for
my own survival; all the while I had no clue what the police were capable of and how corrupt they really were. After having my own fundamental human rights violated, I used this incident to motivate me to apply to the University of San Francisco’s International & Multicultural Education Department with a concentration in Human Rights Education program in 2013. This was my way of taking back my narrative as a Muslim American and to let the world know how Islamophobia impacts all of us either directly as victims or indirectly as perpetrators of violence through ignorance. It is through this dissertation I seek to further understand Muslim youth identity formation and the processes and safe spaces in which youth navigate their acts of resilience, survival, and hope amidst Islamophobia in the U.S.

**Positionality**

Since 2009, I have been working within the Muslim community and worked as a Licensed Marriage Family Therapist (LMFT) offering therapeutic consultations to students at UC Berkeley through a unique collaboration with the Khalil Center and a student-led Muslim Mental Health Initiative at UC Berkeley. Thus, I have provided clinical services in the form of healing circles, workshops, support groups, and individualized therapeutic services.

The strengths for this study of being immersed in the Muslim community are that I have already established a sense of community and trust within the Muslim student population since most of the referrals in our community are through word of mouth. Also, this has presented me with opportunities to offer speaking engagements for the other affiliated associations, such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA) etc.

One of the drawbacks is that my strong affiliation with the Muslim community during the time of the study might have intimidated some of the students who don’t feel a strong affiliation with the religious community. Therefore, I also reached out to students who were involved in
ethnic associations such as the Afghan Student Association (ASA), Irani Student Association (ISA), Pakistani Student Association (PSA), Bears for Palestine (BFP), Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), and Students Organize for Syria (SOS) and many others.

Another limitation exists for students who fall in the margins either being from an ethnic group that is not largely represented on campus (such as someone from Mauritius) or not affiliating with the Muslim community directly due to being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ). The Muslim Mental Health Initiative is, therefore, attempting to bridge the gap by offering therapeutic services with no prerequisite for a certain level of religiosity and invites students with a lack of religious or ethnic affiliation to join.

Since I am a Muslim American graduate student myself, the research might impact the researcher’s positionality. Thus, Baxter and Jack (2008) discuss the importance of maintaining a researcher’s journal in order to process and discuss the reflections as it helps the researcher manage the positionality (p. 553). Another form of processing the information is to consult with mentors in the community to ensure that the researcher is able to build awareness of the positionality. The data collection was positively affected by my identity because the students were very open to sharing their most personal experiences of being Muslim, and I believe part of that became evident when the students included me as part of their community.

Currently, Muslim American college students are provided with scarce opportunities to address Islamophobia, which is generally disregarded in dominant discourse much like xenophobia. This phenomenon has led to further stigmatization of Muslim American youth as they attend colleges across the country and this may impact the researcher and student involvement due to fear of association as a Muslim and the implications of that connection.

The following data chapters present key findings of this study and discussions of their
significance to the research questions on how Muslim American youth are navigating identity formation at University of California, Berkeley in the Northern California Bay Area.
CHAPTER IV: MACRO-LEVEL EFFECTS: ISLAMOPHOBIA

Introduction

In order to honor and respect the voices of the participants, it is crucial to compartmentalize the outcomes of this research into three main categories. Chapter IV involves the macro-level (national level) impact that Islamophobia has had on the UCB students' lives. Chapter V is focused on how the participants responded to Islamophobia on a meso-level (campus level) and their micro-level (individual level) coping strategies to reconcile their Muslim-American identity on the UC Berkeley campus. The real life experiences of the participants however, remind us that the macro, meso, micro-levels are in reality often enmeshed.

Focus Group Participants

This chapter begins with the focus groups and the main themes related to in-group versus out-group dynamics and the social implications of that process. The two focus groups consisted of six respondents in each group --with a total of twelve study respondents-- which were convened within the same week period. The focus group was designed to create a safe space with an opportunity for dialogue, relatability, healing, and growth. Serendipitously, the focus group’s ethnic diversity was matched by location as we met in the Multicultural Center of the Martin Luther King Jr. building on the UC Berkeley campus. It was instantly visible that the ethnic diversity of the group further enriched the discussion on the identity of Muslim Americans on campus. Both groups were vocal and unapologetic about their responses and spoke with eloquence and clarity about their lived experiences. The groups discussed the blatant contradictions of living in the US while following Islam and their belief in Allah SWT\(^1\) and how that impacted their worldview. The participants focused on these main themes which included

\(^1\) Allah SWT (Arabic: ﷺ) - “God. Worshipped by Muslims, Christians, and Jews to the exclusion of all others. Revealed Himself in the Quran” -Oxford Dictionary of Islam. SWT = 'Subh'anaHu Wa Ta-A'la. All Praise is to Allah
the burden of Muslims as global ambassadors of Islam, the impact of spaces of inclusion and exclusion, the unique forms of resistance and activism, and finally the diverse coping strategies that built resilience.

The first group of participants that joined day one of the focus groups was composed of all female and undergraduate students at UC Berkeley. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, a pseudonym was assigned to each of them.

Alaa: The first participant is of Palestinian descent, and was born in the United States and grew up in the South Bay; she was a graduate of UC Berkeley’s Spring 2018 class and majored in public health. Alaa was involved with the Muslim community and she actually decided to start wearing hijab\(^2\) during her final year at UC Berkeley: she explained her motivation to do so, which will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

Aminah: The second participant is ethnically from Pakistan, and was born in the United States and is from the South Bay. She has been heavily involved within the Muslim community since her parents and siblings have a strong grounding and influence in their Muslim community. She has also been speaking out on behalf of Muslims by protesting against Islamophobia and she majored in media studies. Aminah was a hijabi and explained in the focus group what ultimately caused her to remove her hijab.

Hadiyyah: The third participant is hijabi, and ethnically mixed Malaysian and Sri Lankan. She was born in the United States and is an architect major at UC Berkeley. Her primary schooling was in a Bay Area local Muslim school called Granada in the city of Santa Clara and she describes the way this experience has influenced her.

\(^2\) Hijab (حجاب) *Arabic text* “Traditional Muslim women's head, face, or body covering, of numerous varieties across time and space, often referred to as the “veil” - Oxford Islamic Dictionary
Manal: The fourth participant is hijabi and a public health student at UC Berkeley from southern California. She has a mixed Arab background which includes Palestinian and Syrian and was born in the United States. Manal led religious discussions before the morning prayer and offered her experiences in leading that as well as her experiences in MSA during college.

Sultana: The fifth participant is ethnically Indian. She was born in the United States, but then moved out of the country until college when she enrolled at UC Berkeley. She grew up in Dubai, a Muslim majority country and part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). She explained how that influenced her upbringing and American identity. She is also very heavily involved in the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC)3, which is the student government body at UC Berkeley and shared her experiences with that process.

Zakkiya: The sixth participant, also from southern California, joined UC Berkeley’s Muslim Student Association (MSA) as a freshman. She described her process as a Bangladeshi student and explained the influence of MSA while living away from home for the first time after having been raised in a strong Muslim household in Southern California.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Day 1: April 24, 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaa*</td>
<td>Palestinian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aminah*</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Media Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadiyyah*</td>
<td>Malaysian Sri Lankan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manal*</td>
<td>Palestinian-Syrian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 The Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC) is the ‘officially recognized student association at the University of California, Berkeley.’ [https://asuc.org/](https://asuc.org/)
The second focus group also had a total of six participants, including one male and five female participants. Thus, there was a very strong female response to the research as it was challenging to receive equal participation from males. This may suggest the important role gender plays in the holistic understanding of the impact of Islamphobia on Muslim males in the United States (a possible subject of a future follow-up study discussed further in the Conclusion).

Aliyah: The first participant is Aliyah and she was born in the United States, however she strongly identifies as Kashmiri and grew up in the Central Valley, specifically Fresno. She was teaching a decal course on Islamophobia and explained how she arrived at that role.

Hussein: The second participant is Hussain and his background is Bangladeshi, and he is an active member of MSA and takes an active role in the Muslim community events.

Kamila: The third participant, Kamila is of Palestinian background and lived throughout the United States and attended UC Berkeley. She was heavily involved with the Palestinian
community, and Palastinian associations on campus and described her identity formation and the influence of the MSA on her Muslim identity.

Nadia: The fourth student, Nadia, was actually the only graduate student, as all the other students were in the process of completing their undergraduate degrees. Her graduate studies involved the field of social work, while she took part in this research. She is of Syrian and Mexican descent, born in Saudi Arabia.

Rihana: The fifth participant is named Rihana and is ethnically from Libya, raised in Southern California and was an English major at UC Berkeley but had a very minimal involvement with the Muslim community at UC Berkeley, however, she had been immersed in quite a few different Muslim communities and unique academic settings.

Zafira: The sixth participant is Zafira and even though she grew up in the Central Valley she is ethnically from Yemen. She had immense involvement with the MSA and was the founder of the Muslim Mental Health Initiative (MMHI). She collaborated with the MSA and various other associations on campus and openly shared her experience of that process.

The following section delves into the research study’s themes, emphasizing the participants’ voices and documenting their lived experiences. The focus group’s commentary on their positionality as Muslim Americans at UC Berkeley begins with the backdrop and impact of the election cycle of 2016. The intersectionality of the unique developmental stage of a young student transitioning into adulthood while developing an identity that is stigmatized and demonized in the mass media has real-life consequences; it is a heavy burden that transcends the civic responsibility of having to justify one’s background and existence.

**Burden of Muslims as Global Ambassadors**

*Beyond civic duty*
Due to the rise of Islamophobia, many of the Muslim American students at UC Berkeley were faced with the challenge of reconciling their contested Muslim and American identities. At this point we re-enter the macro-level, as research findings show that the majority of the participants had a fierce connection to their Muslim heritage. However, the students also expressed that this came with a price - the heavy burden of representing 1.8 billion Muslims across the globe during a time of political tension. For example, one participant, Manal, spoke passionately about an uncomfortable conversation she had with medical doctors while shadowing them “...but just because I’m a hijabi, I should know everything? I’m this huge representation. ‘I’m not a substitute for your ignorance’” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018)!

Here the participant, Manal, while explaining her unnerving experience of being interrogated by the attending medical doctor about the political situation in Iran (a country she is not from), is expressing the fluid connection between the macro-level effects for many Muslim American youth who are burdened with the heavy task of debating geopolitics in professional settings. While many components are unethical about this situation, what is concerning here is that speaking about the heavy political tension around Muslim majority nations with Manal who is not from Iran has become normalized. This can leave the young Muslim American generation feeling frustrated, conflicted and even pressured to have to make a choice to mask their identity rather than organically letting their complex identity develop. This relates back to what scholars have discussed in terms of the risk factors of the hypervisibility of Muslim-Americans,

The focus group participants also put emphasis on the pressure of representation of Muslims as “ethereal” to appease the general population. When it comes to representation, it is important to remember that Muslims come from all parts of the world with infinitely unique experiences. Aminah said that “being Muslim American for me was just all about, honestly, representation, and how I could change the perceptions of others” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). It appears that Aminah initially took it on as a personal challenge to leave a positive influence on others, but she describes the impact of doing this. Aminah walked us through her thoughts:

I think when I wore hijab, I thought about it a lot more because as a hijabi, you’re walking around and you’re representing Islam and when you’re representing Islam you’re so conscious of what you look like: do I represent Islam, am I wearing the right things? Am I modest enough? Am I smiling? Do I look like I’m nice? Do I look approachable and my identity (Muslim American) was always on my mind (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

The pressure the dominant group places on these youth is unrelenting and many students expressed that they felt that there was no room to be a human being who makes mistakes.

Aminah felt the need to be less visible due to the challenge of being a “token hijabi” at her high school; therefore, she focused on using this as a way of having a positive impact; yet she was conscious of the hypervisibility both in the political arena and in the general public.

Ambassadors of Islam and Muslims

Theology is a rich and highly sophisticated field of study within a very rich and complex historical context that goes back thousands of years, which helps guide people and serves to
fulfill individuals who seek deeper meaning in their lives. Countless scholars have dedicated their entire lives to analyzing rich religious texts, therefore, it is unfair and unrealistic to expect everyday Muslim Americans to know every facet of the religion of Islam. The participants expressed their frustration with being put in a position to educate others on even basic facts about Muslims. It was shocking to them how little people knew about Muslims or misunderstood, as Aliyah describes: “I feel that there are less people that are aware about, say issues facing Muslims, than other groups that are traditionally marginalized” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019). The participant further explained that at least on UC Berkeley’s campus, she attributed this anecdotal evidence to fear of being perceived as “offensive.” However, even when the participants are approached, the process is laborious since the majority of people who do ask questions have done virtually no research based on credible sources to learn about Muslims. Thus, they expect whatever Muslim they casually encounter to answer all of their questions, thereby ignoring the complexity of the community. Aliyah sighed with discontent and said, “so there’s a lot of explaining that has to be done” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019).

Hadiyyah explains the contradiction of being associated with a religious identity alone:

I think it’s fascinating to say Muslim American, because when you think of American mixed with something else Asian American, or African American, but for Muslim Americans...you don’t say Christian American or you don’t say Jewish American (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Hadiyyah has an ethnically diverse background with mixed heritage from Malaysia and Sri Lanka and had an interesting insight on how “Muslim American” has been used. She astutely remarked that people from other religious backgrounds actually have invisibility and privacy of their religious life, so they face less risk of direct exposure due to the fact that they are
religiously ambiguous. This becomes an important factor during times of tension, as their identity is directly rejected.

*Risks of extreme vetting and proving loyalty*

In this section, we revisit the same phenomenon; the interconnection between *macro*-level and the *micro*-level forces. Many participants discussed feeling pressured of to prove their identity. The hypervisibility of Muslims who choose to wear the hijab is a very interesting notion. It was evident in the group discussion that for many participants being American was not understood by their non-Muslim American counterparts. One hijabi participant, Manal, explained how intrusive it was to be challenged by Americans, “... how can a Muslim be natively American or be born in America, that doesn’t make sense to them. Like no one would ever ask a Christian or a Jewish person, where are you really from” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Then Manal explained that she would go through this long explanation of her religion and culture for the benefit of complete strangers, while noting that the exchange was not reciprocal. She further added, “A Caucasian isn’t gonna say, oh I think my great-great-great grandmother is from Germany, no! People won’t say that, but they expect that from us” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This response concurs with Cheryan & Monin (2005) findings, further asserting the fact that marginalized members of western society constantly face rejection, while White Americans will not face the same form of scrutiny or interrogation—purely based on phenotype.

Many participants echoed this frustration of “proving” your identity. Manal said “...it shouldn’t be my responsibility to prove to other people that I am Muslim American” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Another participant, Zakkiya, admitted that while she was in high school, she went as far as making other excuses instead of overtly excusing herself to go pray in order to blend in with her peers. By senior year Zakkiya realized, “I feel like the opposite
spectrum where I no longer want to have to prove myself” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Proving her allegiance to the American identity can lead to unexpected new challenges from others making assumptions about the representation of that particular person’s identity, which ultimately leads to the experience of identity denial. This respondent is expressing the taxing process of feeling compelled to justify that she truly does belong to the in-group and out-group and her reactionary response of feeling rejected was to initially give in and conceal her out-group or Muslim American identity by outwardly “playing it cool” with her high school friends so as to fit into the western in-group. Although it appears that living a “double life” was so draining that eventually she was hoping to end that and to just be able to assert her own identity, which ultimately aligned with the out-group that accepts her (Cheryan & Monin, 2005).

One danger of proving your identity as an American is that non-Muslims make other assumptions and judgements about the Muslim participants’ level of religiousity. As Zakkiya explains, “one of my friends once told me, she was an atheist, ‘oh but Zakkiya is not that religious’” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This caused Zakkiya to have to reconsider her intention of “portraying” herself as less religious to be a “cool Muslim,” even though she was wearing hijab and praying; Zakkiya felt offended that she wasn’t considered Muslim enough.

Sultana expressed the assumption about her religiosity in the following way:

I’ve never worn hijab and so I’ve never been visibly Muslim and I also have a lot of non-Muslim friends at Cal, so when I’m in social settings the assumption is never that I’m Muslim, or the assumption is never that I’m a religious Muslim. Like people will always assume that I drink, until I specify that ‘oh actually no,’ ‘oh are you not getting drunk tonight ‘cause you have an assignment?’ ‘Like no I actually just don’t drink’ (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Sultana was complaining that non-Muslim students, upon finding out that she’s Muslim moved to the other end of the spectrum and glorified her, putting her on a “pedestal” and asking her
about situations as if she were a moral compass. She responded in the group discussion saying, “And it’s like I don’t have the answer for you! I do bad things” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018)! This was her way of asserting her human side and relating to her peers as a normal college student with flaws.

Alaa had a similar experience with blatant ignorance of her peers about her exposure to American culture, even though she was born and raised in the United States, “They assume I’ve never been to a party, or I don’t know what drugs are (laughter) or something like that” (follow-up from focus group 1: May 23, 2018)!

Thus, it was tricky for the participants to navigate their in-group and out-group identity because they seemed to be labeled in terms of binaries that were externally imposed by the dominant narrative. At the same time, the alternative of being associated with Muslims ended up triggering the participants, due to the media’s negative portrayal, which left the participants vulnerable to the risk of internalized oppression and the participants reacted in their own unique way to this struggle. Ultimately, some of the participants had loyalty towards both their in-group and out-group and felt frustrated by the external pressure to have to choose one over the other.

**National Hate Crimes Against Muslims**

The topic of hate crimes shifted the energy of the focus group in such a way that some requested not to participate, explaining that they did not want to get too “emotional.” One participant, Hadiyyah, however, expressed “Oh yea, it never hits me,” referring to how she protects herself from violence directed towards Muslims caused by the media, global events and “...days like 9/11, days that would incite some rage toward Muslims, or after a shooting and Muslims were accused of it” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Although Hadiyyah sounded
reassured, it’s possible that she was justifiably employing her defense mechanism as she is a hijabi.

Zakkiya described her response to the hate crime of “Our Three Winners” that occurred where three young college students in North Carolina were shot in their apartment by a neighbor — execution style — reportedly due to their religious affiliation. This was a traumatic experience for Zakkiya because it occurred when Zakkiya’s sister was in college.

Zakkiya noted:

She called home crying, she was just really scared because that was the first time it happened, such a big Islamophobia attack happened to people we really connected to, as an American Muslim college girl (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Aminah explained that her brother was also in dental school at the time (like two of the victims), and so she had this eerily parallel experience with this family. As she explained, “It just hurt a lot to see that they had done nothing and all she did was open the door, you know” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018)? Aminah revealed that she experiences anxiety any time the doorbell rings now; she cannot open the door in her own home so someone else has to step in. The real-life implications of these macro-level hate crimes on the lives, mental health, and well-being of the focus group participants were palpable at this moment as they shared their emotional journey.

Hussain recalled a healing circle he participated in after Nabra from Loudoun County, Virginia, was raped and killed, while returning from a restaurant before dawn on June 18, 2017, during the holy month of Ramadan. While Nabra was walking back to the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) mosque with a group of friends, a man drove toward the group and pulled out a baseball bat. He began to chase them and, according to BBC news, he “attacked Nabra and pulled her into his car.” Then he drove off and raped her, murdering her and throwing her body in a pond. The news drew national attention because investigators reported it as a “road
rage incident” rather than a hate crime targeting a specific demographic. Nabra’s parents urged the media to consider it a hate crime (as did the family of Our Three Winners) to no avail. This incident refreshed the wounds that had yet to be healed for young Muslim Americans since the execution style murder of “Our Three Winners,” which also occurred on the East Coast in North Carolina in 2015, just two years prior. This crime was also reported as a vehicular issue and ultimately was documented as a parking dispute.

Hussain recalled his mental process after the “Punish a Muslim Day” (see Figure 1). A letter was written in London announcing “Punish a Muslim Day” that created an ascending point system for acting out on escalating violent acts against Muslims and includes “nuke Mecca” as the highest possible points to receive on the list. This letter created a sense of fear in the United States as well because it was publicly posted on the internet and quickly went viral, mostly as a warning to Muslims.
Hussain recounted the impact that these incidents had on him:

**Figure 1:** “Punish a Muslim Day” letter sent out in the Spring of 2018 to incite violence which coincides with the birthday of an American white supremacist.
So when you hear horror stories happen, there’s a little voice in the back of your head that starts all the anxiety and paranoia, you know? I remember during “Punish a Muslim day,” it was really telling that you know all the worries just like “man just shut up, it’ll be fine inshaAllah like nothings gonna happen, she goes to a good school, there’s security guards, just... she’ll be fine.’ But my mom actually had like a legitimate break down, she was so worried (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Hussain was visibly uncomfortable as he described his fear of his younger sister getting hurt because of the string of hate crimes. He was afraid she would be easily identifiable as a visible Muslim because of her hijab. He was trying to rationalize the situation to himself, saying that she would be fine, but his tone of voice conveyed doubt and fear nonetheless. He even disclosed that his mother suffered from this threat of violence to such a degree that she had a mental “breakdown.” The reality is that creating a public challenge with a point system incentivizes the perpetrators, much like a video game, to get as many points as possible for scoring purposes. The point system was designed in such a way that verbal abuse was given 10 points and torturing a Muslim was given 250 points with 2500 points given to nuke Mecca. This potentially risks the safety of the general public because perpetrators tend to be very ignorant about who Muslims are as in the case of the post-9/11 murder of the Sikh man wearing a turban, falsely assumed to be or stereotyped as being Muslim.

Another incident that caused fear of retaliation against the Muslim community was the mass shooting by a Muslim couple who were extremists and opened fire at the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health at the Inland Regional Center on December 2, 2015. Focus group participant, Zakkiya, was worried because she was living in the area at the time. When recounting the San Bernardino incident Zakkiya described:

My community had an interfaith vigil for it and people were talking about the backlash their Muslim families were having. And that’s when I felt it that’s when I felt anyone can shoot my mom just because she is walking in a hijab, in a burqa or an abaya. And I don’t know what the difference was,
if it was age or just the passing of time, but after that I really felt I was in more danger, and my family was in more danger (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Zakkiya explained that it was terrifying to know that you could be completely innocent and yet still be a target of someone else’s hate or ignorance. Aliyah mentioned her fear for her younger sister, “And she has a lot of people that bully her as well and so I feel that if someone feels empowered enough to do so they could definitely attack her if they wanted to” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Also, Zafira shared the closeness of her relationship with her sister, “I see her like my child and I consider myself, I consider myself to be her second mom” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). These young students take on a parental role while attempting to get through college and leading a student’s life at UC Berkeley. But they also had their minds on their family’s physical and mental well-being. The mother of one of the participants, Aminah, had so much anxiety and fear that she even requested that her daughters wear a hoodie or a beanie to school in fear that her two daughters could be attacked on the day of “Punish a Muslim.”

When it came to the topic of national hate crimes, the conversation became heavy and emotional. Zafira further added, “But also if I was at that location at that exact same time, I have no doubt in my mind that it would have been me or if that was my family” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). She mentioned that she could easily place herself in the shoes of Nabra or Our Three Winners. Kamila agreed to this saying, “the first thought that comes to mind is ‘that it could have been me’ because reiterating what Alaa said, they all see us as one and the same” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Another participant described that she often speaks to her younger siblings from southern California about incidents that they face on a regular basis. Rihana explained how often
Islamophobia comes up in Orange County in an eerily casual way and that she has normalized the trauma:

I guess often just because me and my siblings will share with each other what happened to us that day, what stranger said something really weird or who shoved us or who told us something really racist or whatever (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Rihana also explained that while she was at an all Muslim school, she sensed the cohesive energy and felt she could talk to her peers about racism and being called a “raghead.” However, once she moved to a public high school, she felt more ostracized and had to cope on her own. Although this experience helped build resilience, she also shared her sad reality as a hijabi that, “it’s just gonna happen to me for the rest of my life” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

**Hypervisibility and backlash toward hijabis**

In the focus group, two participants phenotypically battled with their identity. Alaa put the hijab on to make a statement and Aminah removed it as a consequence of the pressure placed on her. It was intriguing to hear Alaa express her reason for putting on the hijab: “I feel like my decision for wearing the hijab, my faith is definitely a part of it, but at the same time it’s my political motives is why I decided to wear it” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). She also explained the impact of putting on the hijab, “So, it’s nice now that I’m visibly Muslim I do feel a lot more connected” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Here was an individual who was perfectly conscious of the impact and using it to her own benefit; she did realize that she was no longer ethnically or religiously ambiguous. Now most people assumed she was Arab immediately, even though Muslims are extremely diverse internationally. In 2015, the MSA at UC Berkeley sent a meme

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4 A humorous image, video, piece of text, etc., that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users. (Oxford Definition)
(see Figure 4) to sport the hijab for February 1, known as World Hijab Day, and included a discussion.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 4:** Memo sent out by UC Berkeley in 2015 to garner support for World Hijab Day.

Therefore, the hijab has become the subject and symbol of a very controversial discussion, leading us again to recognize the ongoing entanglement between the *macro, meso* and *micro*, level effects. The MSA led a discussion to inform the general public about the significance behind this piece of cloth. Muslims who choose to wear the hijab may have an extra layer of pressure because in school and in society as a whole, it causes the students to stand out. Kamila explained the pressure of how it affected her, “... (it) goes back to me wearing a hijab... I gotta represent you know what I have on me. And so sometimes it’s not fair because people expect so much of you because you basically wear your religion on you (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).” This description can be taken both literally and metaphorically; in essence Kamila explains the unrealistic demands of being a hijabi Muslim female in the United States.

The amount of pressure each person can handle is based on the person’s capacity. Aminah explained, “I didn’t have room to make mistakes, and because I was always seen for my Muslim identity, when I wore hijab and... honestly after I took it off, which was for my own personal reasons... I almost stopped thinking about it” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). In this case, the expectations were unrealistic and essentially became impossible to live up to for this
participant who did not want to feel burdened with it. At the same time, it becomes a contested
topic within the community and creates new risks.

Alaa who decided to put on the hijab said:

I don’t know how to describe it, but ummm...what you were saying
definitely resonated with me it’s this ‘double consciousness’ that’s been
described before. Where it’s just like if I’m at this protest, and I wanna do
stupid shit, like break a sign as a hijabi, the repercussions are gonna be so
different (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Alaa honestly expressed the burden of carrying the *ummah*\(^5\) which can be defined as the Muslim
collective and wearing a label as a Muslim, which she expressed in some ways also limited her
because she didn’t want to further stigmatize all Muslims. Others felt it was important to play a
mentor role or act as a role model for the younger generation of girls, like Zakkiya who said, “I
did feel like I set an example to younger girls who wanna be hijabi or keep on hijab” (focus
group 1: April 24, 2018).

However, Zafira, a hijabi, knew her pre-teen baby sister wanted to wear hijab to emulate
her as the older sister, but she discouraged her. Zafira explained the moral dilemma:

But there was a lot more Islamophobia and also Republican folks and
rhetoric where some of the houses had ‘make America great again’ signs
right in front of the school. And I remember seriously being so worried
about her and her safety. And I was like ‘Zara, honestly, I know you
wanna wear hijab but I don’t think right now is a good time. I don’t think
you should…you shouldn’t wear the hijab right now (focus group 2: April
26, 2018).

This was a precaution due to the fact that the community where her sister was going to school
was extremely divided with many intolerant Republican students on one side and Latinx students
on the other. While her sister was too young to be wearing the hijab, among the Yemeni
community, there was much positivity and celebration around the decision, almost as if it were a

\(^5\) *Ummah* (Arabic: ﻋُﻣْٰﻩ) “Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and
theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings”—*The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*
transition into womanhood. So for Zafira, the moral dilemma was choosing between the history and the beauty of the hijab for her sister and her sister’s safety: “but it’s just a very dangerous time (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).” The compromise was that when her younger sister would come to visit her in college, she could wear the hijab, but not in their home town because it wasn’t safe. Even her parents agreed, which Zafira reiterated was a big deal.

This issue is indiscriminate when it comes to age and not just a worry for those who have younger siblings. Many participants expressed the fear that one or both of their immigrant parents could easily be targeted because they are older immigrants, and, therefore, more vulnerable to being targeted. One participant, Nadia, who wanted her mother to visit her, described the meticulous actions she took when her mother actually came. Nadia was worried that something could happen to her:

I mean you don’t know what’s gonna happen, but I guess I was just imagining the worst case scenario and I didn’t want anything to happen to my mom because...And my mom wears a hijab, yea nobody else none of the other girls in my family do, so I guess I think about my mom more than I think about the rest of my sisters, especially my younger sisters, my younger sisters are very white passing (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

It was clear that these young Muslim Americans understood that the hijab became a threat to the safety of their mothers and sisters. However, not everyone understood this predicament in the same way. One unexpected response from within the community was that a religious leader wrote a judgmental and intrusive social media post questioning the personal decision to remove the hijab, “After I took off my hijab a local imam had written a status about me taking off the hijab and saying that I justified it and ‘I was like cool, awesome, thanks imam (sarcastically spoken)” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

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6 **Imam** (Arabic: إمام) “One who stands in front; a role model for the Muslim community in all its spiritual and secular undertakings” - *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*
It was apparent that Aminah was deeply hurt by this very public post because the Imam was explaining in his message that people have to persevere. Aminah described that overall what led her to stop wearing the hijab was the pressure on Muslim women both inside and outside of the Muslim community of always having to represent Islam in the perfect way. This was causing undue anxiety for Aminah since everyone makes mistakes, and it just became too taxing to constantly defend her religion to the general public.

Aminah was burdened with overcompensating for the negative portrayal of Muslims by the media. She describes below how taking media studies courses helped her understand how she was impacted:

In media studies there is a term that’s called a panopticon. And so it’s like being watched, and it’s constantly being watched like a camera and that’s what I always had in the back of my head that no matter what I was doing, even if no one was looking at me, that I am being watched (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Aminah drew from her lecture and explained essentially the dangers of hypervisibility. As mentioned above, one of the dangers of attributing this new title with Muslims was the hypervisibility that had its own implications. Among the participants there was consensus about the dangers of the hypervisibility of Muslims as they explained the constant pressure of being watched. Kamila thought that her Muslim community was also using surveillance as a way of creating consequences:

To be accepted in the Muslim community and then if you do one mistake *khalas* (finished) you’re shunned you’re not accepted. So there’s that and maybe if you have different thinking or ideologies they’ll shunn you because of that. It’s just there are a lot of things that factors in... you know? And then, gender I feel does factor in (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

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7 *Khalas* (Arabic: خلاص) Colloquial way of implying “that’s it, or “it’s finished”
As the individual here is publicly shamed, others begin to remove themselves from the person, so now the individual has lost her or his Muslim community; but, also potentially lost their close circle of friendships. In the following section the participants share their experiences of spaces that were traditionally designed to create unity among the Muslim community and how that compared to the actual lived experiences of the participants.

This chapter highlighted the macro-level effects or impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American students and mainly focused on the challenges of being excluded by the dominant narrative. The burden of representation led the discussion and included the risks of hypervisibility. The invisibilization of Muslim Americans was a direct consequence of national hate crimes, prejudice, and profiling. In the next chapter, we take a closer look at how this impacted the “in-group” involving the Muslim community at a meso-level. The collective spaces include UC Berkeley’s MSA as well as ethnic clubs at the university and other pockets within the larger Muslim community.
CHAPTER V: MESO-LEVEL EFFECTS: SPACES OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

The innate need for belonging and acceptance drives people in different ways in search of a niche that is inviting and inclusive. It can lead a person to blend in by adding or removing behaviors and attributes in order to be accepted. However, in this case study it has left the community of Muslim American UC Berkeley students feeling conflicted at the *meso*-level effects or in other words the local level, as we will discuss throughout this chapter.

The participants expressed that the pressure of proving that the Muslim community was ‘safe’ and ‘belonged’ to the United States was exhausting to maintain. This caused the Muslim American UC Berkeley youth to seek support from the in-group, the Muslim community itself, rather than the dominant U.S. society. Many Muslim American students reported that they chose to go back to their roots as Muslims and, therefore, decided to join in spaces such as the MSA to feel a sense of belonging.

However, the participants found that this shift was not a smooth and fluid transition, as their real life experiences revealed a sense of tension even inside Muslim spaces. This added to another layer of complexity in their identity because most felt that as they escaped one system of oppression and discrimination, they fell into another cycle of oppression and discrimination based on a different set of standards. We begin this chapter by first delving into the practice of Islam, which is about inclusivity and allowing anyone to enter into the faith with an unconditional positive regard. We will specifically focus on the respondents who implemented Islam in their daily lives.
Contested Muslim Spaces

Islam as the foundation

As noted in Chapter II, many Muslims began associating as Muslim Americans as a way of unifying forces and building allies in order to demonstrate the diversity of religious groups and to overcome threats against them. Some participants responded to this issue by saying that it was less confusing to be identified as Muslim American rather than having to deal with the complexity of all their different ethnic associations. So they substituted religion for ethnicity because they were repeatedly challenged by others about not being ethnic enough-- both inside and outside of the community. Manal explained this experience as follows: “I see Islam as something that’s like my base, my foundation, and, for Americans, I’m not American enough... But Islam is something, I can relate to, I can relate with anyone regardless of cultural identity” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). While Sultana expressed, “my Muslim identity has always been like a bedrock, that’s always been the constant, it’s something that I’ve never really had to question growing up, which I know is really a privileged position to be in” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Another participant, Zakkiya, presented an interesting idea of how she created an internal place of inclusion: “I would definitely fall more into a Muslim identity, ‘cause I consider other people Muslims, the people I consider Muslim also consider me Muslim, so in that sense the ummah is like a nation in my mind” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This was a powerful way of
internalizing her community and finding a source of belonging during a time when Muslims have been facing many threats. As Alaa explained:

When I am on campus I am so used to just going to the meditation room and seeing Muslims everywhere, going to the Berkeley masjid⁸ and everyone is there praying like doing what you’re doing. There are always classes, whether it’s Zaytuna; there are a lot of opportunities to practice your faith. Whereas when you’re in the real world (or whatever) you have to really go out of your way to stay attached to your practice and your Muslim community (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Alaa appreciated the unique opportunity of having Muslim scholars and professors next door at Zaytuna College in the close proximity to UC Berkeley, which is nationally recognized as the first accredited Muslim undergraduate college founded in 2008. Alaa ultimately understood that she needed to feel a sense of support, which was readily made available to her while a student at UC Berkeley; yet she didn’t take that for granted. Many other students expressed that they aligned more naturally with their Muslim identity and hence became interested in groups like MSA at UCB as it was their first exposure to a formal Muslim associations in college.

**Gendered experiences in the MSA**

The historical relevance and birth of MSAs were designed as a space of inclusion where Muslims could practice their religion freely and safely, as previously discussed in Chapter II. However, many participants mentioned the pressure of having to choose between their Muslim and American identity. Alaa explained the contradiction in the following way, “whether it’s the fact that Friday is the day to ‘turn up’ or it’s the day of prayer and reflection” (focus group 1:

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⁸ **Masjid** or mosque (Arabic: مسجد) The English word mosque comes from the Arabic word masjid, which means “place for (ritual) prostration” - *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*
April 24, 2018). The other conflicted feelings that came up for Alaa was “...it’s like the way we deal with romantic relationships, or drinking, it’s almost everything that’s valued in the U.S. goes against my Islamic beliefs” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This quote perfectly represents the dichotomy and ambivalence of the participants who have to make a very complex decision at such a fragile stage of their development. The participants expressed the sentiment that they were in search of a place of learning and relatability to others. As Alaa stated: “I’ve become so much more attached to my faith and learned so much about Islam ‘cause I’ve just had so much access to all these speakers in the MSA and the community itself” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Zafira described her freshman experience at UC Berkeley with a tone of nostalgia as she noted the cohesion that she had felt when she was first invited to join MSA sisters’ social. She shared her first exposure to Muslim sisters and the MSA community in this way:

And she made me feel so welcomed she invited me to this thing, to this lunch, it was a sister’s social right before... a day or two before school started. And 50 sisters were all crammed into this one small apartment across from Clark Kerr, I think I got lost on the way there and I just remember the walk being really long. But seeing that people were really sweet and everything, I thought ‘wow this is a good community’... that’s what was in my thoughts and then I definitely became invested in the community (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Zafira was initially very excited about the MSA and the sisters’ group, although she had also branched out to other groups at UCB such as People of Color (POC) since she really wanted to break the barriers, she invested and became involved; however, like the vast majority of participants, she didn’t have an overall positive experience at the MSA. For example, Nadia explained how her personality affected her:
I feel like I’m a very introverted person and so if people don’t make the effort to reach out to me than it’s very hard for me to feel that connection to others and then if I try and then I get rejected, I don’t wanna try again because I don’t wanna deal with that...Yeah, but even though it’s been hard, I still feel more connected to Muslims than non-Muslim (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Nadia was stuck because she felt that as an undergraduate at UC Irvine, she was able to make connections more easily with Muslims, even while being more reclusive. However, she sensed that the Muslims at UC Berkeley put forward less effort to make her feel welcome and invited, even though she was a mature graduate student.

Kamila explained that the Muslim community was not as welcoming as she had initially presumed. She passionately described her evolution from a freshman to a senior Muslim American on the UC Berkeley campus and described how she reacted to MSA as follows:

...as I went through from freshman to senior year...I slowly backed away from the Muslim community. When I first came here I needed something...I gravitated towards that community because those are the people that are most like me, those are the people that will accept me the most; but then I think this happens in every community, there’s a lot of cliques and there’s a lot of competition and it’s like a game. Sometimes you’re pitted against each other... (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Here Kamila describes Muslims both inside and outside the MSA. She explains why she ultimately moved away from the Muslim community, while relaying a deeper understanding to the focus group that all communities have their flaws. Another participant, Rihana, also shared that she had many years of experiences in Muslim spaces, but she decided to give MSA a chance at UC Berkeley.

How could you be in MSA when you’re not inclusive of all these different kinds of people, all these different kinds of Muslims, they literally sometimes won’t even acknowledge ‘their’ existence in a way. Certain Muslims say ‘oh they’re not Muslim, or they’re not actually’ ‘oh those type of people don’t exist kind of thing’ (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).
Rihana was bringing up an important point that the MSA leadership decided to take executive action in deciding who did or did not deserve to belong in MSA. Kamila also shared the same sentiment, commenting about the MSA committee, “And in positions of power, they will manipulate... they will abuse that power…” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

When the discussion turned to gender, Zafira was quick to say that in fact men are given special privileges to join the MSA group and are immediately elevated above women—especially by females. Zafira added to this sentiment that even so, ultimately, “Women do all the work” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). In regards to other participants and the topic of gender, Rihana, divulged, “I find it weird that I’m more comfortable around non-Muslim guys than I am comfortable around Muslim guys, it’s ridiculous” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). The group began to snap their fingers in unison and Rihana continued on, “Literally, they will either be awkward around you or just deny your existence in the room…”(focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

This discussion revolved around the social skills, or lack thereof, of some of the male Muslim American students at UC Berkeley. Kamila added, “I feel like they treat non-Muslim women better than they do Muslim women” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). Here Zafira exclaimed, “They do” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018)! Kamila now got a little more heated explaining, “I feel like in this community whatever a guy says is worth more than whatever a woman says” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). It is clear that gender dynamics did take a toll on the young women in the focus group, and others validated this fact as they expressed their frustrations. Therefore, the complex social dynamics between the genders was evident which can actually lead to the branding and elevation of a particular “type” of Muslim. This can lead to further ostracization and “otherizing” of the female Muslim American students, because the
MSA gives preferential treatment to the male over the female members due to their scarcity or lack of interest in MSA involvement.

**MSA and the essentializing of Muslim-ness**

The focus group participants had heavy discussions around the point that while the MSA theoretically was their first organized space of inclusion, it ultimately became a place of ambivalence, at best. Although designed as a safe space for Muslims, the MSA did not provide all the participants with a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Some even said that they experienced feeling judged by the MSA. Hadiyyah was brutally honest about her experience, saying, “I mean I do feel connected to some Muslims, but at the same time, for example the MSA here, I don’t give a damn about it” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

The other students concurred that the MSA was a very cliquish or “close-knit” group and that only a particular “brand” of Muslims, based on ethnicity, were actually accepted. Another participant expressed that MSA events do not always represent the diversity of the Muslim community. Rihana said, “Every time they’re like, ‘oh we’re gonna celebrate our Muslimness, we’re gonna celebrate different kinds of Muslims’ or whatever, but we’re only gonna celebrate a certain ‘type’ of Muslim, obviously” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). Being from Libya and a member of a minority group on campus, Rihana was left disillusioned by the exclusion of her own Muslim community. With this comment, the rest of the group snapped their fingers to show their agreement with this experience.

Kamila revealed that there was a prototypical Muslim who gets easily accepted in Muslim spaces. Kamila explained, “...a lot of times it’s either Arab or Desi (South Asian) and then if you’re not one of those, not part of that, then you’re outcasted” (focus group 2: April 26,
2018). Zafira also felt that as a Yemeni, she was not welcome because she didn’t fit the stereotypical Muslim image.

With the uplifting of the white Arabs and also Desis and I mean certain types of Desi’s because even Bengalis get tossed aside by the Muslim community too…Like non-traditional Desis, or traditional Desis. If you don’t fit that mold then you are pushed aside and so like Yemeni’s have faced a lot of violence within the Muslim community, especially from other Arabs and also Desis (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

For Zafira, her first exposure to a large group of Muslim college students was disheartening, as she quickly felt the sobering reaction of being unwelcomed. These occurrences were not blatant, but she was able to draw connections when she realized that almost every president of the MSA had been either Arab or Desi, not part of a minority Muslim group. Zafira experienced “culture shock” in her own Muslim community because she had entered the MSA wide-eyed and ready to create impact, but she soon noticed that others would often “back-bite” and further marginalize her Yemeni heritage.

Zafira explained that even though she had high hopes to make changes to the broken system, the process was meticulous and it was quickly undone which became very frustrating.

I saw an experience of violence that the community does to other folks and to other identities and I tried my best to try fixing that and I felt like we were trying our best to be very intentional, but even if you try to do that work and you do that work, that doesn’t mean that it stays (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Zafira’s statement shows that even with the best intentions, it is hard to continue to invest in a particular group when the impact is not longstanding. She also explained that while she was doing the brunt of the work, Zafira was not receiving any acknowledgement and ended up taking on multiple roles. Zafira was not given any credit for taking on the heavy burden of work for those who had the authority. As these leaders continued to push the work onto her, she realized
that she was essentially doing other people’s jobs without recognition or compensation or promotion.

As Zafira expressed:

And then I realized how often I was reached out to, to do all the work... but then the fact that they would never uplift those Muslims, not even recognition because yes you’re supposed to do the work without recognition, but gratitude-- just like saying-- thank you (focus group 2: April 26, 2018)

Zafira was referring to Arabs and Desis as the “traditional” representation of Muslims. As a Yemeni, she didn’t feel uplifted by the community or supported by them. Rather she experienced the burden of being a member of a marginalized group doing the heavy lifting, while being discriminated against and not being given due acknowledgement or the respectable status she diligently earned. Zafira also discussed that while the MSA had this facade of diversity, the real challenge was that in actuality there was an issue of “tokenization” of Muslims who were black, Yemeni, converts to Islam, or Chicanx Muslims to name a few. Most likely there was also a gender dimension to her experience of doing a large load of work without recognition.

Other participants agreed with Zafira that ultimately ethnic identity plays a key role in the identity of the Muslim American culture and essentially dictates the worth of that particular group. As Kamila described:

And it’s like in Muslim community’s identity has a huge role in everything. It shouldn’t be that way because we’re all Muslims... but your identity is like put into focus where like it shouldn’t matter what you are, but like you’re forced to label yourself and I think you mentioned this earlier with people that are mixed, what are they gonna call themselves? (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Here the two participants were explaining how Muslims with mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds are deemed as having less “worth” and are, thus, forced to choose between their black identity
and their Muslim identity. Zafira shared that since their black identity was rejected by the MSA, the individuals then felt coerced through subversive means to have to choose between the two.

Therefore, it appears that as the students felt excluded from the MSA space, some of them created their own spaces of support (this point is discussed further in the next chapter). Zafira took on a mentor role and supported the young Muslim Americans who did not feel welcomed. Zafira gives them the following reminder:

‘Listen, MSA ultimately is supposed to serve every single type of Muslim and if you do not feel safe or you do not feel comfortable in that space then they are doing something wrong. You are not doing something wrong ‘cause ultimately they’re supposed to make a space for you as a Muslim, even non-Muslims cause technically the constitution says Muslim and non-Muslims, but they’re supposed to make sure that everyone feels comfortable and feels safe in that space (focus group 2: April 26, 2018)!

Actually, as a senior on campus, Zafira is giving these newcomers to MSA the language and knowledge of the rights that they have as members of the MSA. This was refreshing to hear for the participants; it can feel intimidating for Muslim American college students to be in Muslim spaces with such a power differential in regard to the leadership committee, especially at a vulnerable stage in their identity development.

As Kamila expressed:

I think we all have high expectations, we expect people to stand by what’s right, but people disappoint you and time and time again we expect these individuals, our peers to do the right thing, stand up for the right thing, and they fail us and I don’t know for whatever reason, but it’s hard to keep... it’s hard to stay hopeful, it’s like if you’re own people don’t stick up for you who’s gonna stick up for you? Or if the people that represent you are not doing the right, then, ‘what are you doing?’ ‘what do you stand for?’ Like how can you claim to be part of this group (focus group 2: April 26, 2018)?

Kamila was holding the MSA leadership body accountable while gracefully balancing this with her awareness of her high expectations. Yet these individuals are briefed about the importance of
their roles in the MSA community, which should not be taken lightly. The leaders ultimately serve the MSA members; if the majority of Muslim students do not feel represented, then the organization faces a larger challenge of role clarity and transparency of leadership as well as the necessity for leadership oversight and evaluation.

**The danger of haram policing the community**

As mentioned above, some students decided that they were going to get involved in the larger Muslim community, for example at the local mosque: the Berkeley masjid. The mosque is a *meso*-level space where Muslims in the community decompress, recharge, and connect with Allah SWT⁹ and other Muslims. Alaa expressed her frustration when she is challenged by Muslims stating, “I’ll have to prove my Muslimness... there’s so many more important things on how to practice your faith. I know my iman,¹⁰ I have my iman. I know what my relationship is with God” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Here is an example of a Muslim who didn’t appreciate being judged because her shirt was not long enough. She expressed that she was already working on her connection with God, which was an intimate relationship with which no one should interfere. Alaa was very proud of her Muslim identity and wanted to show the world with her hijab, but was still getting criticized.

Manal expressed in an irritated tone, “I often get asked questions like I mentioned before, ‘where are you from, where are you really from’” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018)? As previously described, Wu (2002) refers to this experience as the “perpetual foreigner” where an

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⁹ Allah SWT (Arabic: الله) - God in Arabic for Christian Arabs. SWT "Subhanahu wa ta'alā" translates as "Glorious and Exalted Is He."

¹⁰ Iman (Arabic: إيمان) - Term used to describe the faith or belief of a believer
individual who is born here is questioned about their identity and then challenged when practicing their right to identity assertion (as explained in chapter two). Manal distinguished these questions from those asked by Muslims: “Those questions really bother me when they’re not coming from other Muslims, ‘cause I know when other Muslims or Arabs ask me they’re just trying to make a cultural connection” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018)? For this participant, being in the masjid allows her to just let her guard down when others try to ask her about who she is. So she did not mind when asked at the masjid. However, as mentioned previously, not everyone shared the same sentiments.

As with the MSA, the Muslim community, just like any other, has much room for improvement and has its imperfections. To some students, the issue related to the policing of the “aunties” and “uncles” (essentially Muslim elderly women and men), but mostly women who pried into the lives of others (Subramanian, 2013). Aminah described a conversation with her mom:

And she would tell me, ‘oh I heard this today- and it’s really funny,’ but then that also stuck to me, well no matter what I do, no matter where I am, I’m always being watched. And that could go for being from the Muslim community, from the students, or from anyone who sees me as-- the Muslim (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

For this student, what was disturbing her sense of peace was essentially an internal surveillance mechanism. Aminah later disclosed that this factor contributed to removing her hijab because the pressure became intolerable-- from both the Muslims in the community and non-Muslims that were outside, constantly judging her.

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11 Auntie refers informally to elderly females in the community; to address elder females respectfully.
12 Uncle refers informally to elderly males in the community; to address elder males respectfully.
Sadly, this pressure not only represented a generational gap, as peers also were taunting

one another in a much more pervasive manner both on and off campus. Manal expressed

discomfort within the community, stating “I would go to a party or just being out at night with

friends and having fun, but then someone would tell me, ‘oh don’t you lead tahajud\textsuperscript{13}

discussion’” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Even within the Muslim community, there was this

notion that Islam and fun were mutually exclusive; therefore, judgements were strong for anyone

who challenged the norm. Manal asked, “Why do I need to fit in this certain…(box)?” (focus

group 1: April 24, 2018):

So I felt disconnected on many levels and I have also felt connected on

many levels, but I think as of recently there has been more

disconnection than connection and that’s upsetting as for someone

who’s really trying to stick to her deen\textsuperscript{14} despite taking off my hijab, I
don’t think that’s changing my faith...I’m still praying five times a day,

I still read Quran everyday...I’m still reading...any book I can to

strengthen my knowledge of Islam and reading duas\textsuperscript{15} and reading

hadiths\textsuperscript{16} and talking and discussing about Islam. Even though I’m doing all that, it’s like I’m still being detached from the Muslim

religion and it’s really hard to stick to the religion when everyone is

pushing you out (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

This sentiment succinctly challenges the feelings of rejection by the Muslim community. It was

disheartening for Aminah to have put so much effort into maintaining her connection to Islam

and then have people in her own Muslim community ostracize her and reduce her connection to

Islam simply to her hijab.

\textsuperscript{13} Tahajjud (Arabic: تَهَاجُد), meaning the “night prayer” which is not mandatory but rather voluntary prayers

\textsuperscript{14} Din (Arabic: دَين, or Deen) meaning adherence to religion

\textsuperscript{15} Du’ā’ (Arabic: دعاء) “An appeal or invocation; usually refers to supplicatory prayers in Islam” - The Oxford Dictionary of Islam

\textsuperscript{16} Hadith (Arabic: أحاديث) “Report of the words and deeds of Muhammad and other early Muslims; considered an

authoritative source of revelation, second only to the Quran” - The Oxford Dictionary of Islam
Ironically when the conversation shifted to policing of the Muslim American students on campus, the focus group became very heated about the hypocrisy of the MSA leadership committee. As Kamila explained:

The thing is, the same people that call you out, they’ve done the same thing! Like they see a girl with a guy, they’d give you crap about it, but they have a boyfriend on the side or a girlfriend. Why are you judging people? (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

This statement represents a larger issue of double standards within the community; while the MSA leadership is calling out members of the Muslim community, at Cal, they face the same challenges. Unfortunately, they do not have open dialogue about it, instead pointing fingers and making assumptions and judgements. Kamila passionately expressed, “We think we have this moral ground but honestly, let’s be real, we don’t, we don’t! We make mistakes just like everyone else” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Rihana explained that shaming Muslims went against the religion and actually contributed to her moving away from such spaces of tension. She explained that there was a certain type of “conservative” Muslim group with harsh expectations which somehow appointed themselves as the haram17- police always ready to catch you doing something inappropriate. Rihana says:

...but conservative Muslims of a certain mindset. Like you can’t do certain things or you’re not Muslim anymore, even though like the only thing to be Muslim is, you have to believe in Allah that’s it, but for them it’s like you have to do all these other things to be Muslim...And they’re always on the watch for you (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

A larger looming issue is internal surveillance. The Muslim community not only faces surveillance by the larger United States government body; now it is even internal to the point that the same Islam that teaches kindness and respect for others has become a mere mirage. The

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17 Haram (Arabic: حرام), an Arabic term meaning ‘forbidden’ or colloquially synonymous with inappropriate.
danger is that if these young Muslim Americans attempt to make connections and the community continues to respond with harshness, the Muslim leaders may inadvertently and paradoxically one day be responsible for rejecting the very foundation of Islam and the core population of Muslims.

Rejection of Muslims inside and outside the community

Rejection left Muslim American students feeling conflicted and confused about their identity, especially with the hatred and Islamophobia directed at Muslims in the media and larger social context. Aliyah described the results of the 2016 presidential elections and her then ten year-old brother’s response, “He said, ‘is something bad gonna happen to us?’ He asked my dad and then my dad got mad and said, ‘no we’re fine’” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). In actuality, many Muslims began to fear the impact that the election results would have for good reasons. Zafira, for example, shared the impact of U.S. foreign policy after the president’s inauguration in 2017 on her family, “And that can be from the Muslim ban, my family members can’t get in. It was such a struggle just to get back here from Yemen” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). The political decisions made without the democratic process of U.S. citizens have real-life implications. Ismael Farooqui was a staff member at the Daily Californian and wrote about his post-election experience, “What shocked me about the president’s actions was that it presented ordinary Muslims as a threat. This was beyond ‘radical Islamic terrorists’ — the administration’s favorite tripartite.”

The students understood that they were not somehow impervious to becoming victims of hate crimes based solely on geographic region or being “good” Muslims and that they had the potential to be attacked. Zafira stated that “I’ve still faced hate incidents or hate crimes and it’s

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18 Born Muslim, raised American was posted under the Columns section in Off the Beat on December 12th, 2017. https://www.dailycal.org/2017/12/12/born-muslim-raised-american/
just been all throughout California, it’s not like Berkeley is a safe place. I’ve experienced that with being just spit at on Sproul this year-because I’m a Muslim woman” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

This account shatters the common image of California and Berkeley, specifically, as being exempt from hate free state or city. Alaa expressed this about UC Berkeley: “(Deep sigh) Seeing that this place wasn't a place that was safe for Muslims” (follow-up from focus group 1: May 23, 2018). Alaa realized that UC Berkeley wasn’t a space that was safe so she began to speak out about it, offering examples: “Welcoming Islamophobic speakers, to our campus who are openly Islamophobic” and the protests that ensued caused parts of the campus to get shut down (follow-up from focus group 1: May 23, 2018). The news covered the right-wing Milo Yiannopoulos event at UC Berkeley, which was cancelled on February 1, 2017, due a massive violent protest on campus against him.
This article discusses a protest that was led by BAMN-Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration, and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary to stop Milo Yiannopoulos who was known to be a divisive “provocateur” who wanted to take on the president.

Another controversial speaker, Ann Coulter, was initially invited but then cancelled on April 26, 2017, due to security threats which led to campus shut downs because the speaker ultimately lost support of students. Alaa has a very vivid memory of the impact these events left on her college life experience, as she describes below:

It was a really really dark horrible time. So just seeing that our university was not here to welcome us, was not here to support us, was not here to fight back. Just made me wanna fight back, show them that I am here, I’m thriving, like I’m a student of the sciences, I’m a public health major, I’m here contributing to your prestige and I’m succeeding in your campus, and I’m a
Muslim......support me (sarcastic laughter). You know (follow-up from focus group 1: May 23, 2018)?

Clearly, Alaa had heavy emotions around this topic. Because she was so vocal about her experience, Vice News followed her on campus at the time of the protests and interviewed her about her experience as a Muslim. In Fall 2017, UC Berkeley faculty responded with a letter in support of students to ban the right-wing Islamophobes (see Figure 3).

![BOYCOTT THE ALT-RIGHT @UCBerkeley September 24-27th A letter from UCB Faculty to the Campus and Berkeley Community](image)

**Figure 3:** UC Berkeley faculty joined forces to write a petition to urge to rescind the invitation to the right-wing speakers that were lined up to speak during Free Speech week and included Ann Coulter, Milo Yiannopoulous, Stephen K. Bannon and Breitbart media. **See full version in Appendix B**

By September 24, 2017, Milo eventually came to speak on UC Berkeley’s campus to a scarce crowd of 50 supporters and 150 protestors during Free Speech Week (according to the *Daily Cal*), but the sponsorship was pulled so the rest of the week’s events and speakers were all cancelled.

It is important, therefore, to recognize the impact that these events have on marginalized students. Kamila gave an example about another incident at UC Berkeley saying: “Even here on campus I remember sophomore year, one of our MSA Muslim girls, I dunno if she was wearing hijab at the time but she was held at gunpoint” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). Zafira mentioned that this particular girl was actually not wearing hijab, but that she was Muslim and with MSA. Zafira then described another recent incident that was extremely disturbing to her Yemeni
community, occurring in broad daylight on UC Berkeley’s college campus. Zafira explained the incident as follows:

Another sister, she’s Yemeni and wears hijab and abaya...giving a tour on campus with her little cousin, who just came straight out of Yemen, twelve year old little girl, they’re walking by Tolman Hall when she gets stoned by like a stranger on campus and someone’s yelling… ‘death to you...death to you’ ...all these profanities in Arabic repeating the same words as the words of this...at the time there was a viral video of this Palestinian little boy being beaten half to death by Israeli civilians and they were saying the same words as the civilians yelling at this little boy in Arabic (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

This traumatic event was disturbing to the Muslim community, because these participants believed that they shared a common fate with the other victims of violent crimes. However, as Aliyah, Zafira and Kamila were talking about their younger siblings, they stated that they did not want their younger siblings to be vocal because they were very protective of them and didn’t want any harm to come their way. As Zafira expressed, “When it comes to my baby sister, I’m super protective of her. I don’t want anything coming to harm her” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). The conversation turned toward being less about portrayal of Muslims and more about its impact on the participants and their family members, filled with fear, anxiety, depression, repression and even suppression.

However, rejection can also come from within the Muslim community, which can be very challenging when students are desperately longing for a place of belonging. As Manal said, “I’ve recently been feeling not really welcomed to Muslim spaces” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Discussing identity in the focus groups helped elucidate the diverse responses of Muslim American students to these feelings of hostility both outside and inside the Muslim community.

Kamila also described racism in the community:

...Muslims come from all over, they have different backgrounds. So a lot of times in Muslim communities, some cultures or some ethnicities are
uplifted more than others, or just more welcomed than others. And I have a lot of privilege in my community because I’m Palestinian, I’m considered light skinned and this applies everywhere I feel because in every community they have... what is it called-- colorism. It’s like the closer you are to white the better (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Kamila was able to see the blatant racism in the community and the preference for those Muslims who could pass as white, admitting that she was among the privileged group. Zafira chimed in and explained that shadism and colorism were ultimately all creative ways of expressing racism, “Colorism is anti-black which is racism” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). The group was having a very intellectual and transparent discussion about the flaws in the community such as xenophobia and how this led to challenges and even competition among members of the Muslim community.

Another core issue that Kamila elucidated during the focus group related to her experience with the MSA in regard to political involvement as she spoke with disappointment.

Kamila explained her strife as follows:

I never thought I would see this day, but Palestinians are ostracized from the community because they’re political and that is a problem. I never thought Muslims would stand on the other side of what’s right ‘cause in our Islam we’re supposed to, we’re obligated to fight for justice and recently I have seen, this is not the case (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Kamila was disheartened because while Islam was founded on social justice and ending all forms of oppression, the MSA community at UC Berkeley was not doing enough to show their active participation and solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Kamila was also disgusted by general issues in the Muslim community in terms of the hierarchical system of deciding human worth, for which she was holding the community responsible.

Kamila nostalgically recalled her freshman year, stating that “Back in the day, MSA was right behind Students for Justice in Palestine, my freshman year, MSA was the first to be in the front of Sproul advocating for Palestinians” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). However, recently
MSA wasn’t open to collaborations with the Students for Justice in Palestine and attempted to stay away from more politically charged, “controversial” topics, including those involving countries like Palestine, Yemen, Syria, and, most recently, Kashmir.

**Recent occurrences and alternative spaces of solidarity**

The participants faced many challenges while being students and experienced a lack of response from the MSA with respect to hate crimes. Interestingly, each MSA board has taken shape and another iteration appears, some that are more representative of the community, while some that are less representative of the broader community issues. In 2019, a year after the focus groups, the MSA has become more involved with global and national events. Statements posted recently have focused on showing solidarity with victims of current events. For example, the MSA hosted a “Prayer (Duaa) for Victims of Christchurch Mosque Shootings” at Sproul Plaza on March 15, 2019, as an act of solidarity within the Muslim community (see Figure 6 below):

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*In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful*

Our hearts are filled with grief and anguish for those killed or affected by the mass shootings targeting two mosques in New Zealand. We condemn the heinous and cowardly acts of terror perpetrated against our brothers and sisters gathered for Friday prayers. Dozens of worshippers have lost their lives, with many more having been injured by these targeted and coordinated acts of terrorism.

While the extent of the tragedies is still unfolding, it is already clear that the terrorists involved in these shootings were deliberate and had extensively prepared for this. It is no coincidence that the shooters chose to commit these heinous acts during the Jumma, or Friday prayers, a time of worship and spiritual significance for Muslims.

We urge everyone to refrain from sharing any graphic images, videos, and descriptions of violence. By circulating such horrible videos, we are falling into the trap of giving these terrorists, as well as others potentially seeking recognition, a platform to spread fear and hate.

This tragedy, unfortunately, only highlights the rapid rise of Islamophobia and senseless anti-Muslim sentiment. As communities, we must unite together in standing against not only Islamophobia, but racism and bigotry targeting all vulnerable minorities. In these uncertain and dangerous times, we cannot allow rifts and suspicions to divide us. We call on everyone to denounce these acts of terrorism and join us in praying for the innocents affected.

*Figure 6:* UC Berkeley Muslim Student Association Statement on Christchurch Shootings. This was a tragedy so the MSA sent out a message in support of the victims and their family.
While the MSA decided not to get involved politically with events in Kashmir, the Indian Student Association and the Pakistani Student Association have responded (See Figure 7 below). Thus, it appears that the MSA is still not getting involved with geopolitical situations, and so the Muslim students are forced to compartmentalize and conform to this divisiveness. This inaction has left students at a loss because the protective factor and upholding of social justice, that is the responsibility of MSA, has become diminished by its overlooking mass atrocities and not taking a stance against genocide. The Muslim community is responsible for ensuring that social justice is the priority; however, students may be left feeling disillusioned by the lack of MSA’s response. The participants shared that the political issues tying them to their ethnic backgrounds have been essentially erased.
Figure 7: Flyer created by The Pakistani Student Associations of UC Berkeley and UC Davis in response to the political and humanitarian crisis in Kashmir.

Zafira explained that she believes the MSA moved away from political ties as they were fearful of being associated with “radicalism.” The MSA was, in a sense, emulating the lack of support for Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and most recently Kashmir - in line with the geopolitics of the United States. Kamila elaborated: “I feel our community is just like all a front for the outside, we keep doing this so the white man would accept us, they would see us. ‘Oh we’re this great society’” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). Here Kamila was critically engaging with her observation of the MSA seeking approval from the dominant society. As Kamila explained:

Yeah, there are hierarchies! It sucks because we repeat the same thing that’s happening to us in general. We talk about these institutions where the white man is on top? And then in our same communities... we repeat
the same thing, who’s on top really? It’s usually the light skinned Arabs or Desi and not the rest (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Kamila was exposing how the community was inadvertently perpetuating and even re-enacting the same discriminatory systems in the U.S. that target Muslims.

Another major topic of contention that the participants discussed is blindness of Muslims to certain challenges, such as xenophobia, when they come from within a marginalized community. However, many participants said racism exists. For example, Kamila shared her growth at UC Berkeley:

Muslims think they’re not racist, they’re not anti-black, but really they are and they don’t realize... I make mistakes too...and I feel like my time here did help me see it more and I feel like I’ve grown as a person (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Kamila is openly discussing the lack of awareness about racism within MSA and other larger Muslim communities. In fact, she explained that she once shared these prejudiced views; while she was not conscious when she first attended UC Berkeley, by her senior year her awareness of these gaps in her own community had been raised. She said she appreciated UC Berkeley because her studies challenged her perspective and helped her see herself more honestly.

Zafira also shared her experience with Muslims and described how she didn’t have much involvement with Muslims until she moved to attend UC Berkeley. While she was a student at UC Berkeley, her parents actually gave her a pep talk about how to interact with Muslims. Her parents approved for their daughter to move away from home for college; allowing their daughter to live outside of the nuclear family’s home, and living alone, which was not deemed common by the Yemeni community. Zafira’s parents realized that she would not let go of this dream, they had a serious conversation with her that surprised her and Zafira shared it:

I know something that my parents said, ‘cause when I came to Cal, at first my parents didn’t approve, but when they saw that I was gonna go no
matter what, they were like ok, khalas, it’s fine go ahead... go but be careful, just one thing that I remember them saying is be careful with the Arabs and be careful of the Muslims. Make sure you don’t house with them and the reason why is what Kamila mentioned was that, in the Muslim community there is violence perpetrated by our very own community members (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Zafira’s family had “warned” her due to their own first-hand negative experiences as Yemeni immigrants; thus, they wanted to protect their daughter from any potential threat. As she further elucidates, she had those experiences herself:

I remember even here in Cal one of my Syrian friends, was saying ‘you know Syrians will say, when they’re talking to other people, ‘oh we’re the good Muslims and those are the bad Muslims’... ‘we’re not those Muslims and when they say those Muslims they mean Yemenis...because Yemenis are traditionally more conservative, they dress conservatively, well not myself (but generally) with abaya,\(^{19}\) niqab\(^{20}\) hijab (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Zafira spoke passionately of the complexity of internalized oppression, where certain Muslim groups believe that they are somehow more progressive because they don’t dress as conservatively. Also, colorism played a role where preference was given to students in leadership roles based on the lightness of skin complexion, resulting in the ostracization of the Muslim groups that tended to be more traditional in their choice of wardrobe and their practice of Islam. This threatens Muslims because it creates disunity within a group already stigmatized and threatened. It also reveals internalized oppression and conformity to the West by stating that they don’t associate with Muslims who appear to be “extreme.” Once the participants decided that they would justifiably leave rigid spaces and in turn make use of their experience, after many

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\(^{19}\) **Abaya** (Arabic: عباية), “a loose, silky outer robe worn over another complete set of clothes” - *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women*

\(^{20}\) **Niqab** (Arabic: نiqāb), “refers to a face veil, which in its contemporary form covers the nose and lower face, but not the eyes” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*
negative experiences of toiling away without acknowledgment from the community, these young ambitious students turned to new ideas.

In this chapter the participants discussed the *meso*-level effects of their involvement in the local culture at UCB and gave honest, direct and unapologetic feedback about their personal experiences within the MSA and discussed areas for improvement. Highlighted features included ethnic discrimination and the tension that emerged when the MSA decided not to participate in political issues, even those involving human rights violations. This inaction led to the Muslim students dissent, based upon their fundamental understanding of Islam; that it was the responsibility of the Muslims to uphold social justice. Others believed it was an issue of nationality and left it to the ethnic associations and other social justice groups to step in.

The following chapter addresses the *micro*-level effects, focusing on the students’ personal responses to exclusion, based primarily on ethnicity and other in-group dynamics. The unconventional responses of the participants included: application of Islamic teachings, political activism, thriving as educators, documentation through a Muslim publication, and focusing on the integration of Islam and mental health through psycho-education and *khutbas*.21

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21 *Khutbah* (Arabic: خُطبة) serve as weekly friday congregations or sermons prior to the friday prayer.
CHAPTER VI: MICRO-LEVEL EFFECTS: NEW SPACES OF RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

Protective Factors and Coping Strategies

The need for a rise of alternative spaces

This chapter presents and analyzes findings, including the micro-level effects of Islamophobia. When any system is corrupt, the observer has the option of simply shutting down and accepting the system, trying to fix the system that is broken, or remove themselves from the space and create a new one. The respondents spoke to a need for growth in the Muslim community based on their personal individual experiences, and courageously developed their own innovations. For example, Manal revealed her experience with MSA in stating, “I don’t feel like I need to conform to anything. That’s why I kind of stepped back from the MSA this year and started getting really involved with the Berkeley masjid” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This participant responded by creating her own space to express her Muslim origin and identity, and even took up a leadership role in the community offering tahajjud salat (pre-morning prayer) courses.

Some of the Muslim American youth decided to join ethnic associations since they were not accepted in the MSA, reflecting somewhat of a reversion to pre-9/11 life (when Muslims had put more emphasis on ethnic associations). Kamila explained her reversion to ethnicity as follows: “throughout my time at Berkeley I started off being more Muslim and now I’m more Palestinians...I used to be Muslim-Palestinian now I’m Palestinian-Muslim” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). This shift was due to feelings of rejection from the MSA; Kamila’s reaction was related to the fact that she felt pressured to choose between her Palestinian struggle and her Muslim identity and admitted that she became “jaded” due to MSA’s lack of support. Kamila
also explained that she joined different groups while at UC Berkeley: “I didn’t just join MSA, but I joined SJP, I joined some art group, I joined a dance team like the Bhangra group” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). The participants had the opportunity to belong to other less contested spaces since UC Berkeley had so many different opportunities and communities, which alleviated some of the pain while concomitantly developing their leadership skills.

Later Kamila applied her leadership skills and personally contributed on a micro-level scale by reviving Bears for Palestine (BFP), a student created association on UCB campus, and collaborated with Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). Below, is a flyer of a collaborative effort between BFP and SJP. The MSA had decided not to post any political events on their page. Students who previously knew MSA when it was on the front lines in resisting human rights violations and global atrocities began to feel confused and ostracized. As a result, they eventually became heavily involved in other groups that represented them fully (see Figure 5 below).

Kamila therefore not only resuscitated Bears for Palestine, as she was one of the founders, but also spearheaded a unique Palestinian gala to showcase the local talent of Palestinians through art, debke, poetry, and comedy (follow-up personal interview of focus group 2: September, 28 2019). In honor and solidarity of the Me Too movement, Kamila led and organized Heroes of Resistance: Palestinian Women in November 2017. The immense planning required to organize a culture show, banquet, gala, or any other public event is a challenging feat. Yet these young brave Muslim American students were balancing their academic endeavors with their sense of responsibility to social justice and raising awareness. Additionally, monetary funds were raised with the mission of raising awareness of social justice challenges.

22 The Me Too movement began in October of 2017 and addressed the plight of victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault and led to a revolutionary support internationally
Kamila made progress on another issue: the invisible measure of the level of religiosity of a Muslim, “So I see this a lot with PSA, it’s like if you’re not...you don’t reach this threshold of Muslim level...Muslim-ness, you go to the PSA, then you’re part of the PSA and they don’t really mix” (focus group 2: April 26, 2018). She explained that basically most students feel compelled to choose either their ethnic or religious affiliation, but not both, reflecting back on the binary modes of thinking in a dominant society that seeps into the Muslim American college student experience. Kamila further explained that she became more comfortable in settings without a label or an affiliation because the mere label restricted her identity. The participants spoke passionately about the importance of needing a place of belonging, yet they had little consensus on what these spaces of inclusivity looked like (more details in Chapter VII).

Part of the reason why there is a need to form new spaces of inclusion is that the very fabric of the existing systems were tainted and maintained the status quo that perpetuated relics
of systematic oppression that previous generations also faced. Hadiyyah explained the difference between her older sister and herself in the community. Hadiyyah’s sister “plays the role” by:

Staying in line...being safe... ‘I’m like nahhh, it’s good’....‘cause if anyone is gonna judge me or treat me differently because of how I act or who I am then they’re not, they don’t deserve to have me in their life (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Clearly, conformity is not the norm when it comes to Hadiyyah, who happens to represent a larger generation z (Gen Z)\(^2\) as compared to her sister’s older generation because Gen Z is spicing things up and being more transparent instead of splitting their identity and falling in line with each different community. Zakkiya said as a matter of fact, “I am American, what else could I be?” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). That statement shows so much conviction.

Similarly, Hadiyyah got especially charged up and excited when she said, “So being American doesn’t make me any less Muslim...people are gonna question it, that’s their problem, I know what I am, I don’t need validation from them” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Three other participants exclaimed “Yeah!” in unison as this concept really resonated with them; being American and being Muslim were not mutually exclusive concepts, as earlier referenced by Dr. Alryyes (2011).

Within the larger context of the United States government, many participants rejected the claim that their political views had to align with the government body’s foreign policy and foreign affairs, as a way of proving their American nationalism and allegiance. In fact, Manal stated, “I cringe at the American part...America has done so much stuff, they’re bombing my home country right now” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Others chimed in, in agreement,

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\(^{23}\) **Generation Z** (often abbreviated as **Gen Z**) “the generation of people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Generally, members of **Generation Z** are tech-savvy, pragmatic, open-minded, individualistic but also socially responsible” Merriam-Webster Dictionary
leading to a deeper conversation where Hadiyyah held the group accountable by stating there is actually “no innocent country out there...So you can’t say America is the sole perpetrator of something like that” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Hadiyyah impressed the group by citing Sara Ahmed’s 2007 scholarly article, *Multiculturalism and the promise of happiness*, in referring to how our emotions are highly subjective: “How we see the world is painted by how we feel” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Hadiyyah continued by explaining her own philosophy as “...we’re trying to fight this corrupt society that keeps rejecting us, this corrupt country that keeps rejecting us-- together” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

In essence, the Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley walked us through their complex identity formation process amidst the struggles of facing Islamophobia (for some, on a daily basis). The Muslims were critiquing their national identity as well as their American and Muslim identities, holding both communities accountable for the exclusion that they have faced. Thus, their existence has been a contested one at best.

Next, we consider how the participants chose to rise up and respond to the challenges through resistance, resilience, and reconciliation. Some forms of resistance include the art of using discourse and becoming politically active, including allyship. Others chose a different path, namely one that involved the education sector; yet others became involved as scholars and research assistants in order to accurately represent the Muslim community or to minimally insert the Muslim American narrative.
Responses to Micro-level Islamophobia

This section, addresses the micro-level causes and the unique coping mechanisms of the participants in response to the challenges that the Muslim American students faced due to Islamophobia. Some of these responses were unique to particular participants, while others were common among several students. The following sections begin with the application of the Islamic faith and then focus on the language-related tools that students acquired to become vocally active in the community. The language that the Muslim American students developed in turn empowered them to become politically active. These students played an unexpected new role in becoming involved in fields such as education and research. Ultimately, the coping mechanisms included different forms of healing to build resilience and to overcome the stigmatization that the Muslim American students faced. Religion has been a key and very instrumental component for many of the Muslim American students on UC Berkeley’s campus as discussed further.

Unconventional Forms of Activism and Resilience

Muslims apply their Islamic values

When the discussion turned to Islam, many participants described their outlook on the religion and shared their religious values as well as how to apply it to the current systematic forms of oppression that they were facing. Manal, for example, performed the voluntary pilgrimage to Mecca and had a transformational experience. This pilgrimage that is held outside of the sacred month of hajj, which is the time of the year when pilgrimage is mandatory (to those who have met the financial means and other qualifications), is named umrah, and Manal had the opportunity to visit during winter break.

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24 Umrah (Arabic: ُمرة) is an Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.
Manal explained her transformation in full detail:

I did umrah in December and literally people from all over the world, all Muslims, that kind of connection I’ve never felt...that kind of unity in the bay, I mean I’ve felt it to a certain extent during jumma prayer. But the fact that this was millions of people coming here for one reason...it was overwhelming but in the most beautiful way possible. I certainly feel like Islam always provides that connection no matter where you come from, no matter what your beliefs... what you’ve done in the past, what kind of person you are, what your profession is, you still have that connection that, I am Muslim. ‘Inna illahi wa inallah-e-raji’oon’ we’re all gonna come back to Allah the same way we came (into the world)” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Manal essentially explained the spiritual awakening that she experienced, like the experience of Malcolm X, where he saw beyond color and creed. She described humanity in its full glory and potential for good, revealing that she always has a sense of connection in that way --to the highest entity-- Allah SWT.

During the focus group Aminah expressed her Islamic value of showing gratitude for being able to live in the Bay Area; this allowed her to appreciate some of the challenges that other Muslim communities faced nationally. Aminah shared the following, “Well that does not happen here, we have not faced that alhamdulillah, in the Bay Area we do have diversity” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This was an interesting reframe by the participant, Aminah, who explained that her Muslim friends in the South faced much more blatant stigmatization. Therefore, she was still thankful, which helped her get in touch with her religious values of practicing gratitude.

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25 ‘Inna illahi wa inallah-e-raji’oon’ - We belong to God and to Him we shall return.
26 Alhamdulillah (Arabic: ﺎَﻟْﺣَمْدُ ﷽) “All praise is due to God” The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women
Some of the participants discussed the importance of healing this nation. It was therapeutic for others to be in the mere presence of the participants in the focus group. They were absorbing and listening intently to a script of her internal dialogue that one specific participant expressed out loud in the group. Aminah eloquently shared her vision, “I love this country, but I can definitely recognize its flaws, and that’s why I think I can proudly call myself American...so I still love America, but I still see that it’s such a corrupt country” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This contribution reconstructed the ideology of the group, where the other participants responded and gave their reactions. Manal said, “America has done so much stuff, they’re bombing my home country right now” with a tone that sounded hopeless and helpless about the state of this country (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). This quote validated Aminah’s emotions of feeling the corruption; yet, she still held the group with a sense of hope and ownership, further stating “that’s an identity that I’m working to fix you know, that's an identity, but I’m working to fix my community and this is the idea I grew up with” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

In this context, Aminah was discussing not only her Muslim community, but also her alliance to her American community as she was born in the United States. Alaa participated saying, “Because it’s something that made us who we are…” as she was referencing the undeniable ties to being born in the United States (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). Another participant, Hadiyyah added, “We all say ‘oh America is so bad, look at how they treat Blacks and Asians,’ but you go to an Arab country, look at how they treat everyone else” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). The conversation became rich with self-disclosure and insight, and the initially
hopeless participant expressed great appreciation of this new perspective that she had not reflected on. Aminah continued by stating: “it’s more like, I can be a part of something that creates a larger movement, maybe? I mean civil rights movement started right here” (focus group 1: April 24, 2018). It was quite astonishing to hear how optimistic and positive these young Muslim American students were despite their traumatic experiences. This attitude reaffirms he basic fact, that Islam is founded in hope and peace. As Alaa describes “it’s like a universal love,” a deeper universal connection (focus group 1: April 24, 2018).

Hussain described the connection in his way:

We’re united by a common belief and a higher power and the practices that follow through that. That’s an insanely powerful thing to be unified by. It’s not some artificial borders drawn out by some white dude 300 years ago, right? It’s something that’s everlasting (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

This added another dimension to the conversation, namely emphasizing the deeper connection that Muslims have to one another and that galvanizing force has the potential to create unity. Kamila added by noting the diversity component among Muslim Americans. Zafira mentioned Prophet Mohammad, peace and blessings be upon him (PBUH), and his last sermon that essentially expressed that Islam’s strength lies in the diversity of Muslims and liberating those who have been oppressed (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

**Language as liberation and political activism**

While each participant had unique responses to micro-level Islamophobia, certain general themes emerged. Some of the students found that resistance came from language, because for the first time they were able to articulate the experiences that were respectful, productive, and

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27 PBUH an acronym for Peace Be Upon Him
meaningful. They recognized the benefits of being at a campus like UC Berkeley – the birthplace of the Free Speech Movement -- in that the students were able to acquire language about the history and experiences of other marginalized communities. As Aliyah said: “So when I first got to Berkeley I did a lot of sitting back and observing and then I kind of started also absorbing everything that I was hearing about all these different people who were really well versed in different social issues affecting different groups” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019).

Aliyah further explained the process of “observing” and “absorbing” information as follows: “I was able to draw parallels and increase my empathy for other groups and also feel a sense of camaraderie and also feel a sense of gratitude...” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019). Aliyah mentioned that the “gratitude and humility” stemmed from this newfound awareness of the struggle of other marginalized community members. This young nation is tied to a disturbing history, and almost every group has faced systemic and institutional racism and discrimination at some point in time.

As Aliyah expressed:

I think Berkeley is the type of place which has the type of people that will make you feel proud to be who you are...I didn’t have the language or the identity or the ideas from academia to help me understand why my community was the way it was and why we faced the things that we did. Or why people thought of us the way that they did and so coming to Berkeley, I then gained all those things, I was more sure about who I was as a Muslim American (focus group 2: April 26, 2018).

Aliyah essentially walked us through her complex identity formation process. She explained how language contributed to helping her gain a positive sense of pride and confidence to challenge the social construct of Muslims. This process, in turn, led to ultimately reclaiming her narrative using her own voice.
Due to the academically rich environment that Berkeley offers, many students have access to subjects that might otherwise not be covered, whether in their formal or informal learning settings. The students have borrowed from learned scholars around them, many of whom are young and thriving students just like them. This has empowered the Muslim American student population to also speak out about acts of Islamophobia both globally and nationally--and now even locally.

Alaa described how she was mentored by a professor to become more active, “So he was the one who sparked my activism...public speaking” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). She also explained that she became aware of the “privilege” of not wearing the hijab at this time, commenting, “So for me you could not tell that I was Muslim, so I just felt like I had a duty to defend, you know my Muslims sisters and all that.” She stated that she no longer wanted to live with that privilege of not being hijabi (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26, 2019).

Some participants thought that it was their responsibility to stand up for others since they were comfortable with public speaking. As Aminah explained: “I want to and I also have the responsibility to be vocal about everything and to take my rights and take advantage of it....” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). This statement shows that unlike the portrayal of the media of Muslim women as oppressed, these young Muslim American youth are defying stereotypes of Muslim women, raising awareness and constructing their own image as Muslim American female academicians.

Alaa tried something unique:
I mean last year after Trump’s election, I had the idea to hold a public prayer on Sproul and I think it was almost two hundred, a hundred (maybe) people, Muslims came out to that. And it was like again, the fact that it has become such a political statement (focus group 1, April 24, 2018).

Alaa didn’t intend on being politically active by announcing a public outdoor prayer; however, the outcome was that her act became very much politicized since it happened around the election cycle of 2016. She explained that one unexpected component of the prayer was that non-Muslims asked to join by standing behind the individuals who prayed acting as a human shield by protecting them and showing their allyship and solidarity. That’s when Alaa noticed that, “It’s such a political statement being Muslim—being visibly Muslim” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018).

As students began to openly discuss Islam in different settings, they also noticed a dearth of basic foundational knowledge on Muslims and their challenges. Zafira added that it was crucial not only to be supported by other marginalized groups, but also to be supportive of their causes because they fit the same profile, according to perpetrators--she also represents a marginalized Muslim demographic. Zafira explained this as follows:

... and not just when it’s a Muslim, even if it’s a person of color, black or brown. ‘Cause not knowing that ultimately, America as an institution wasn’t... it was not built for black and brown bodies and ultimately it was built at the cost of black and brown bodies (focus group 2, April 26, 2018).

As an activist, Zafira recognized that she could also be targeted for her skin color.

Kamila also expressed that one of the real-life repercussions of being politically active was that her family, especially her father, was worried about her. This is because she is of Palestinian descent and very outspoken about human rights violations and global atrocities. As Kamila shared:

You’re also worried about not ever being able to go back to your home country, so that relates, and it goes back to being Muslim. So if you’re Muslim, a Muslim Palestinian, it’s different than if you are a Christian Palestinian (focus group 2, April 26, 2018).
In this case, Kamila was noting the disparity between the privilege that Christian Palestinians have over Muslim Palestinians. Therefore, as Zafira said, they felt an immense need to humanize Muslims and build alliances with other marginalized groups.

The power of validation and acknowledgment are rarely used when it comes to global atrocities. Consequently, it was refreshing to hear the dialogue of these young and brilliant Muslim Americans as they spoke so earnestly with each other of the ambivalence of identity. Aminah offered validation to Zafira, “This place is ruining your family’s land, you know? And that’s heartbreaking and I can’t say anything that fixes that. Nobody can. So it’s valid” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). Another participant, Alaa, expressed her outlook as follows, “And it’s just kind of this agreement, like we’re in this shit together, we’re trying to fight this corrupt society that keeps rejecting us, this corrupt country that keeps rejecting us-- together” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). Alaa was making a profound statement when she said “together”; she was referring not only to the Muslim community, but also to any marginalized community members who have historically faced oppression and rejection.

*Muslims as educators and scholars*

This section relates to how the *micro*-level impacts the *macro*-level. The opportunity to have a platform to inform the general public and the student population of the unique challenges of the Muslim community is quite essential to analyze. Therefore, once given the chance to speak out about the challenges, the students took advantage of the situation to offer a new outlook. They realized that not only does the general public lack basic information, but a larger issue was that many people were completely misinformed about Muslims. One participant, Aliyah, had the opportunity to teach in Oakland elementary schools; once she noticed that her
Muslim students were targeted and bullied, she decided to “to insert educational pieces on Islamophobia” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019). Aliyah expressed that although discussing Islamophobia was not directly connected to the subject she was teaching, she explained that – as a hijabi – she thought it was her responsibility to discuss the topic to raise the awareness of the students and leave an impact on a previously prejudiced outlook.

This same participant, Aliyah, also explained her academic journey at UC Berkeley as a teacher’s assistant for a human rights and social justice DeCal.28 The following semester, in the Spring of 2016 she decided to teach her own DeCal on Islamophobia. This left a lasting impression on the UC Berkeley students she taught, as Aliyah described: “It ended up all in all, I think it was 500 students, over the course of seven semesters” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019). This academic platform was crucial for her as she became more aware of the impact she could have with her role as an educator, where she had the authority to speak on the experiences of Muslims, based on empirical research.

When an experience is perceived as anecdotal, it is given less credibility in the eyes of the public; therefore, it is often taken as the exception rather than the rule. The Muslim American students quickly realized in their academic journey that ultimately statistics and empirical data would help non-Muslim students learn more about the challenges that Muslims have experienced. One participant relied heavily on research in order to educate and create more awareness among non-Muslims. Ala referenced empirical research findings to educate herself and others for at

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28 DeCal Program (DeCal) “is an aggregate of student-run courses at the University of California, Berkeley.”
https://decal.berkeley.edu/
least three different settings, stating that “I was able to add a class topic on Islamophobia...going through statistics and research studies...” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019). This process helped her gain the confidence to teach her own DeCal class. She had the unique opportunity to join a team, “I was part of a research group on educational pedagogies…” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019).

Although Aliyah explained in the follow-up interview that these spaces weren’t traditionally designed for topics on Islam, she was able to “insert that perspective.” Aliyah had come to the realization that this was her chance to leave an impact, “So I always took that opportunity, because I also feel like I had a responsibility” (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019). Aliyah created multiple platforms while in college to educate herself and others. Through raising awareness by citing raw data and empirical research, she began to feel confident and qualified to empower others to support the Muslim community through bridge-building (follow-up of focus group 1, June 26th, 2019).

**Academic contributions to society build resilience**

The power of academic excellence for immigrant communities has historically been an essential ingredient in achieving economic security. However, one unique outcome for some of the students is that they have also found a creative and logical way of proving their allegiance to America. Thus, accolades have served as tools and instruments that immigrants cite to declare their contributions to the American society.

As Alaa explained:
The way I prove my level of Americanism is, I am a UC Berkeley student, I’ve done research at UCSF, I’m pursuing a master’s degree. I know that my academic success...that’s my (go-to)...if anyone questions my American identity (focus group 1, April 24, 2018).

This participant had enough awareness to recognize the societal value of reputable institutions. Therefore, Alaa concluded, “I think what makes me feel I belong here is equated with my academic success” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). This discussion excited the group as others began to snap their fingers in unison as a form of validating her and expressing that this statement resonated with them as well. It was also this same participant, Alaa, who wanted to make sure her own academic success was a counter-narrative to the global stigmatization of Muslims as illiterate, “Muslims are educated badass professionals” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018)! She continued with her logic that since education is an American value, then if you follow the same value system, you identify as American. Zakkiya added to the topic of academics, stating that “I feel like I’m more American because I’m contributing more to America and I feel that’s what other people consider American” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018).

Yet another participant, Aminah, challenged the “need” to prove her allegiance through her professional background, “Why can’t I just be a stay-at-home mom living in America? What’s wrong with that” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). The discourse was very informative and helped to tap into the unique perspectives brought into the discussion. It was quite refreshing to experience the confidence and reflectiveness of these young professionals.

Expressive Muslim publication

A new alternative space that has been attracting attention lately is a publication named Threads, which was rebranded from the original name of Al-Bayan.29 The publication features personal stories and events and focuses on the micro-level effects of Islamophobia on Muslim

29 Al Bayan (in Arabic البيان) defined in English as ‘the Statement’ or ‘newspaper’
identity formation. Several events were associated with this publication and the inaugural Spring 2013 launch party is featured below (see Figure 8A & 8B below).

On February, 9, 2017, the rebranding of Threads led to a new mission and a new vision:

*Threads* is a student-produced semesterly publication at the University of California, Berkeley whose mission is to be a creative cultural outlet in the form of a lifestyle magazine for the Cal Muslim community, and the greater collegiate Muslim community. Its scope includes, but is not limited to, the arts, opinion, technology, spirituality, and travel, as is reflective of and pertinent to the Muslim community.

The rebranding from Al-Bayan to *Threads* preserved the story of Muslims who wanted to express their individual Muslim identity through the arts and in unique visual and written forms. This space invited Muslims who felt unaccepted in traditional spaces.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 8B:** Al-bayan - The Muslim Student Publication at the University of California, Berkeley.

*Threads* publishes powerful messages written by Muslim students of personal experiences, including taboo topics such as mental health and women’s rights. It promotes a unique exposure of art within the community to address the lack of expression in many journals prioritizing academic excellence over the arts (see Figure 9a & 9b below).
threads

Last December, my family and I had the privilege of exploring the northwest coast of Morocco. In these days, we managed to experience the increasingly cosmopolitan Tangier, the hustle and bustle of Tiznout, the cool, serenity of Asilah, and lastly, the cerulean streets of Chefchaouen.

Chefchaouen’s charm by far captivated me the most. From the moment I first stepped foot in the city, I was mesmerized. Every street, alleyway, and building is touched by some hue of blue, with every shade working together to produce a place that looks like an abstract artist’s wildest fantasy. Vendors crowd the city selling colorful trinkets and handmade rugs. Mint tea is plentiful. Children play freely, laughing and unsupervised.

With my camera, I tried my best to utilize whatever skills I have to capture the city’s undeniable beauty. I hope that through my photos, you too can catch a glimpse of the splendor of Chefchaouen.

Figure 9a: Threads Volume XX, Issue 1 Photography

Figure 9b: Threads Volume XX, Issue 1 - Muslim identity through the arts and in unique and abstract visual and written forms such as poetry and photography.

*Threads* appears to be a space for Muslim students who want to share their personal lived experiences and identity challenges inside and outside the Muslim community. The struggle of Muslims is also highlighted, allowing the future Muslim youth to better understand the unexpected gifts that a life of struggle can bring. One Muslim American UC Berkeley student, Sarah Bellal wrote about her Islamic values as follows, “The fact that ‘times are changing’ doesn’t disprove the truth behind Islam. If anything, it proves how little we can rely on social practices formed by our fellow flawed human beings” (Full version in Appendix E).30 This

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30 *Losing Touch: Islam & Tradition* published in Threads on December 15, 2015 by Sarah Bellal
student is using the medium of a publication to express her outlook on Islam and challenges the dominant narrative on Islam.

*Threads* also does not shy away from political issues; for example, it published a narrative by Salam Awwad, *Beauty in the Struggle* (full version in Appendix F), who documented her travels to Palestine and the unexpected experiences she had “I am reminded that even in what seem like the ugliest moments of life, beauty blooms: Allah’s beauty manifests (December 2, 2015).” The reliance on Allah SWT helped her find gratitude because she was approached by a youth, who was there helping in a time of distress and fear with the threat of teargas and tanks around and frankly the potential harm to their lives.

Khwaja Ahmed took a different approach to personally combat Islamophobia and organized the first Muslim caucus at the annual University of California Students of Color Conference and published an editorial about this experience, referring to Malcolm X (full version in Appendix G), “His role is so central to the creation of our identity in countless regards, and yet so many Muslims push away others because they share the same skin tone as Malcolm” (December 8, 2015). Therefore students have creatively used publications as a way of expressing their own narratives and outlook on Islam, next we will consider other initiatives.

**Healing as an Act of Resistance**

*MMHI dismantles mental health stigmas*

The next section delves into the different forms of healing which Muslim American youth utlilize to cope with the challenges of their hyphenated identity. Healing can come in many forms, and the Muslim community has attempted to bring in healing, using a multitude of different modalities. Yasmeen Ahmed dismantled the *micro*-level effects of Islamophobia which

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31 *Intersectionality in the MSA* was published by *Threads* which is a student led Muslim publication.
she personally experienced by creating her own innovative program, when she was faced with a lack of safe spaces. After trying to work against the insufficient existing systems and confronting the internal corruption at the MSA, she chose to create her own space. Yasmeen decided that if her hard work would go unrecognized and minimized as a way of silencing her, she needed to create a new safe space. Yasmeen had invested enough in the MSA to have learned about the funding source for programs on UC Berkeley’s campus. As a result, she decided that she would write a grant to get the funding necessary for a new cause--mental health and wellness. This effort presented an upstream battle for Yasmeen because she realized that mental health services were highly stigmatized in the Muslim community. Yasmeen also realized that the UC Berkeley campus already had existing mental health services for students of marginalized groups. After being dissatisfied with the mental health services of the campus, she created her own niche since the clinicians were not representative of her own community.

Yasmeen further explained:

...the most I’m involved with the Muslim community is through Muslim Mental Health Initiative, because I founded that...it was being intentional...it doesn’t matter what ‘type’ of Muslim you are, MMHI provides a service to you (personal interview, April 23, 2018).

Therefore, Yasmeen realized that by writing a grant and requesting funding to serve the Muslim community with their wellness, she could get to the root of the issues plaguing the community. Yasmeen also shared that as the founder, she wanted to ensure that she took in feedback from the community, “I feel like with MMHI at least that can be a resource where anyone can come and utilize it without barriers and we’re always changing to be better”
(personal interview, April 23, 2018). At the end of this comment she ended with “InshaAllah” that they get to stay because it is a grant-funded program. Therefore, the Muslim Mental Health Initiative (MMHI)\(^{32}\) turned out to be one of the highlighted new spaces featured in the past few years, since its inception in the fall semester of 2016. The participants were blessed that one of the respondents who was in the focus group, Yasmeen, also was the founder and grant writer for MMHI. The story of MMHI is an example of post traumatic growth, where Yasmeen took the traumatizing experiences that directly impacted her as a marginalized Muslim and yet this was the impetus for the creation of MMHI as she left a positive impact on her community (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The following section includes interviews with the key professional advocates who helped make MMHI possible. This program actually became grant funded in that it was able to secure mental health services for the Muslim community for a three-year projected time frame beginning in the year 2018 to 2021, thereby receiving over $300,000 of funding for the three years. Other universities, like UC Santa Cruz, even contacted UC Berkeley to ask how they could adopt such a program at their institution.

Dr. Susan Bell, described her role as the assistant director and outreach manager at the Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) and mentioned that it is part of the Tang Center,\(^{33}\) and she explained that Yasmeen had reached out to her for guidance. Dr. Bell explained that the

\(^{32}\) I was professionally involved with MMHI since its inception as my area of focus was working with Muslim American youth. I started collaborating with Yasmeen on UC Berkeley’s campus since the Fall of 2016.

\(^{33}\) The University Health Services, “Tang Center provides comprehensive medical, mental health, insurance and health promotion services to all Berkeley students, and a variety of health programs for faculty and staff.”

[https://uhs.berkeley.edu/about](https://uhs.berkeley.edu/about)
initial motivation was to get support with the, “dearth of Muslim identified or Muslim sensitive counselors available to the student population.” Dr. Bell described the proposal that Zafira wrote:

... Mental health is stigmatized and mental health resources are not prioritized in Muslim households. So the idea was to use workshops and informal work on ways to destigmatize mental resources and encourage the Muslim community to go to drop in hours as a way to address this. She talks about Islamophobia being at an all time high, Muslims being targeted throughout the nation. She talks about the importance of having counselors that understand the community (professional individual interview June 11, 2018).

Therefore, the proposal was designed to create a safe space for the Muslim community to seek services anonymously in order to protect the identity of clients while addressing a taboo topic. Dr. Bell explained that MMHI had other iterations called “Let’s Talk,” which started at Cornell University as a way of introducing therapy through consultations with no strings attached (professional individual interview, June 11, 2018). The established Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) involved the Khalil Center and UC Berkeley’s CPS. However, Dr. Bell stressed the importance of collaboration between the two entities: “To have Muslim identified counselors on staff at the counseling center and to have Muslim identified staff doing Let’s Talk, and drop-in and destigmatizing, so that you’re out in the community” (professional individual interview June 11, 2018).

In essence, this program theoretically represented an ideal way to create a streamlined process and warm hand-off of the client to the counselors to provide a smooth transition. However, the students felt uncomfortable with the challenge of transitioning once they shared their personal story and then to have to move on and start fresh. Nevertheless, there was an
overall benefit in having a professional from inside the Muslim community discuss the pressure of topics like Islamophobia, academics, and relationships.

Another key feature of MMHI was ensuring that the anonymity of the students would be respected, especially due to the political tension at the time. The 2016 election season spread threats of a Muslim registry as well as Muslim ban. Dr. Awaad, clinical director for the Khalil Center, explained MMHI values during the process of becoming a vendor for UC Berkeley.

They really wanted an anonymous drop in model specifically because of the whole idea of a Muslim registry and later when the Muslim ban went into effect as well it continued. The students really felt like they didn't wanna go somewhere, where they were gonna be targeted for their Muslim identity and eventually somehow the very reason they were coming was because they felt so alienated as Muslims...but they were worried that, that, if put into implementation or electronic medical record that would somehow work against them later (professional individual interview: June 13, 2018).

Dr. Awaad was aware of the challenges that the Muslim students faced while attempting to seek counseling services. The timing was serendipitous because when the students needed the most support, the grant was approved in September 2016. The following year two Muslim therapists were also hired at CPS along with two professionals at the Khalil Center to provide consultations at MMHI as the need to serve the Muslim community was rising. Over time the number of events, groups, and sessions increased; essentially, services relevant to the community were rolled out based on participant feedback. The students were also able to provide feedback so that the sessions were tailed specifically to the needs of the students and relatable to their personal experiences of Muslim American youth in college.
**Creating safe spaces of connection**

The Muslim Mental Health Initiative (MMHI) actually initiated their services by providing the first healing circles to support Muslims during the political upheaval around the Fall 2016 election season and thereafter, in addition to following hate crimes that occurred nationally. Hussain said he recalls, “Healing circles when tragedies to other people happen. Like I remember over the summer like Nabra (Rahimullah) right” (focus group 2, April 26, 2018). He described how the community came together and held vigils nationally in order to support the family and represent Muslim unity. They also created a safe space for the Muslim students to express their frustration with the fact that yet another crime was repeatedly reported as anything other than a “hate crime.” Prime examples included the supposed ‘road rage’ in the case of Nabra or the ‘ongoing parking dispute” in the case of the Our Three Winners as introduced earlier. In the focus group, Hussain paraphrased that in any act of oppression according to Islam, “the ummah is like one body, when one part of it hurts all of it hurts” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018).

In reaction to their previous lack of connection with existing therapists, the students also requested to have personalized therapeutic services from a clinician with the same religious background and who had cultural competency. Manal asked, “Isn’t that the whole reason why we have MMHI? Cuz we can’t connect to American therapists” (focus group 2, April 26, 2018). Manal explained that having someone from the larger Muslim community gives instant connection and “On a foundational level, we don’t need to explain anything, to have that
immediate connection…” (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). The students were resourceful and were able to advocate on behalf of Muslims to encourage CPS to hire multiple clinicians through a grant that they had written. This laborious process was far from common.

The benefit of receiving therapy from a clinician with a Muslim background serves the need of the students because they don’t have to explain or justify the basic tenets of the religion and collectivistic culture. Instead, they experience an instant rapport that is created with a fellow Muslim. This connection became crucial because they often feared being reported or being under FBI or NSA surveillance. One of the participants, Hadiyyah, half-joked about this even during the focus group, stating, “Like NSA/FBI... don’t quote me on this...(laughter)” but the fact that it came to mind was telling that these youth were aware of surveillance (focus group 1, April 24, 2018). Therefore, when someone from the community who can represent Muslims is made available, more students are willing to get involved because they don’t have a fear of being further stigmatized or stereotyped by speaking about their trauma or family dynamics. The participants have a natural tendency to hold back information with non-Muslims because they don’t want to give Muslims a bad or worse reputation, given all the propaganda already infiltrating mass media.

Another key component of the MMHI vision was to have workshops incorporating Islam and psychology, As Dr. Awaad shared, psychology is a prophetic profession. She meant that there is nothing un-Islamic about seeking counseling services as Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), served as a counselor within his community. Therefore, scholars of Islam or students on the path
of becoming religious scholars in Islam who were simultaneously seeking a degree in psychology were invited to speak and uplift the Muslim community and demystify stigmas.

MMHI has been hosting a series of events under *UmmahTalks* where the community chooses the topics (refer to Appendix X for a full schedule of events). The topics come from a wide spectrum of current issues selected by individuals such as: political issues like the Muslim ban, a three part series on *Queens of Islam* (prominent female leaders during the birth of Islam), self-care tools and tips, relationship rights and responsibilities, women’s support groups, survivors of violence and sexual health for women, male support groups, social and eating etiquettes, rights and responsibilities in Islam, problem resolution and demystifying mental health stigmas (anxiety, depression and PTSD). These new programs for the community intended to create a sense of validation and support as well as an opportunity for growth and learning.

Alaa summed up her years at Cal as follows:

So, it’s just interesting, to see that once you get to college (being a Muslim American) you can either totally forget that part of your identity and abandon it or you have the opportunity to like totally express it and become closer with it (focus group 1, April 24, 2018).

The participant was aware of the choice that the students had to turn to the Muslim community; but also that some were deterred which led to a new awakening among students to get their needs met through mental health services.

**Summary of Findings**

Muslims have a burgeoning need to have alternative opportunities for expression of their identity and to reject the *micro*-level discrimination on an individual scale. Since UC Berkeley
appears to be a contested space at best for the Muslim community, the participants expressed ambivalence about their overall experience. Many Muslim American students at UC Berkeley have taken it upon themselves to create spaces of inclusion. In contrast, others have chosen to represent and create counter-narratives to reject the prejudiced and bigoted outlook that the dominant society has adopted. Therefore, it is evident that these young students are instrumental in finding niches of belonging and constructing these social buffer zones such as mental health services through MMHI. The beauty of MMHI is that mental health has been student led and thus used as a gateway to address social and community dynamics through discourse on the integration of Islam and psychology. There is also a focus on spirituality and connection to Allah SWT, which helps to elevate the *taqwa*\(^\text{34}\) of a person. The participants raised other topics focused on building *tawakkul*\(^\text{35}\) in Allah SWT and learning to trust the process.

MMHI has held a unique role because it has facilitated the building of a sustainable support network thanks to a special grant that secured three years of funding. The Muslim community was thus able to receive healing in an anonymous manner, and the students are not left to their own devices to seek out therapeutic services. The funding of MMHI has allowed us to invite guest speakers to address taboo topics and to allow for religious enrichment programs. Also, since psychology and seeking mental health services have been taboo topics, students who have been ostracized in other Muslim spaces were more likely to take advantage of the services. Rabia Shere contributed to the Daily Californian in an Op-Ed addressing the stigma of mental health, while courageously disclosing her own struggles with mental health (Appendix H).

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\(^{34}\) *Taqwa* (Arabic: تقوى / *taqwā*) “God-consciousness or God-fearing piety. Also rendered as "god-fearing," "right conduct," "virtue," “wariness.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*

\(^{35}\) *Tawakkul* (Arabic: تواكل) Ultimate reliance and putting our faith in Allah SWT
Some Muslim American students confronted micro-level effects of Islamophobia by returning to their ethnic associations to receive the support lacking from the MSA. Others have chosen to join politically affiliated groups or associations with strong stances against global atrocities. Others yet have created and hosted their own events, such as public prayers, and joined with allies to show the UCB campus the beauty of Islam.

The cultural banquets have been a unique and wonderful contribution by students to raise awareness of the issues among Muslim majority nations. While serving to educate the larger Bay Area community about the challenges Muslims face, they also offer an amalgamation of culturally expressive and entertaining events. These events, which also serve as fundraisers, require months- if not a whole year - of preparations to book the venues and invitations of prominent guest speakers throughout the country and performers who are experts in the field.

Another avenue of expression which UC Berkeley offers is well-known on campus as DeCals, which provides an opportunity to obtain academic credits through a scholastic approach. Not only do the courses offer units of credit for graduation requirements, but the topics can be especially nuanced and create deeper meaning for the students who enroll. Some students have become professionally involved with research to place Muslims on the map, while other students
have chosen to become involved with the Muslim publication on campus to promote dialogue. The focus on resistance and self-agency is crucial because the political climate has posed many unique challenges for Muslim Americans, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Therefore, the healing and support networks are more crucial than ever to overcome the hardships of Islamophobia.

In the final chapter we discuss the findings based on the research questions as viewed through the prism of the following core components: centrality, solidarity and satisfaction. This chapter also includes a discussion of the limitations of the study and areas for future research. The conclusion is followed by the researcher’s reflections and suggestions to offer the Muslim community greater cohesion and to maximize inclusion.
CHAPTER VII:
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

In this study, the investigation examined the impact of Islamophobia on the post-9/11 generation of Muslim American students’ mental health at UC Berkeley, as this developmental stage of their lives plays a key role in identity formation. This study focused on the Muslim American students’ responses of turning to traditional Muslim spaces like the MSA and ethnic associations such as: Bears for Palestine, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Pakistani Student Association. The findings were derived from the participants’ experiences in two focus groups, including personal follow-up interviews. In order to highlight the narratives of the Muslim American youth who turned to their Muslim community for support. The study also focused on the protective factors that the students implemented to shield themselves through directly creating new spaces of inclusion and representation. The discussion of the primary and secondary findings are categorized by three core components of self-investment:36 centrality, solidarity and satisfaction (Wang et al., 2013, p. 603). Again the three research questions of this study are:

1. How has the rise of Islamophobia after the election cycle of 2016 impacted the mental health of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley?

2. In what ways have Muslim American students at UC Berkeley engaged in advocacy and activism related to the campus climate and the larger political climate?

3. What individual and collective protective factors and coping strategies are identified by Muslim American UC Berkeley students as they navigate their multiple identities on campus?

36 Self-investment is “one’s positive feelings or sense of bond with the in-group” (Wang et al., 2013, p. 603)
Discussion

An abundance of empirical data exists in relation to the psychological and social impact of in-versus out-groups. The discussion regarding self-investment as it pertains to Muslim-Americans (the out-group) and their challenge to integrate into American society (in-group) is underscored by the psychological effects experienced by these individuals. The out-group had a very strong bond to their Muslim identity with relation to centrality; yet their American identity was challenged with consequences of adverse mental health effects.

Islamophobia affected the mental health of the participants, but hypervisibility --whether by wearing the hijab or simply having a beard-- further exacerbated the problem. Some participants reported feelings of social anxiety from having to overcompensate in an effort to appease non-Muslims. The westerner’s expectation of having to justify their religious identity and symbolizing perfection caused one participant to remove her hijab. The undue burden of the responsibility to educate suspicious non-Muslims while proving their identity and justifying their nation of origin was frustrating and complicated; this was especially true when the individual’s identity was of mixed ethnicity. The unique polycultural identity that the participants represented taps into the complexity and difficulty of developing a cohesive identity as a young college student, as discussed by Mir (2014). The participants are tasked with the heavy burden of navigating the in-group and out-group barriers to forge their cohesive identity.

This sense of solidarity was strongly impacted by hate crimes perpetrated by the in-group, and left the Muslim American, out-group, participants with a weakened psychological bond. The community had an especially challenging impact on the mental health of Muslim American UC Berkeley students because it influenced their sense of safety on campus. This left the students preoccupied with the fear of being in danger due to their justifiably heightened sense of
awareness. Dr. Khan (2014) revealed in her research that Muslim Americans must stay *hypervigilant* even though this causes undue mental distress. My research similarly reflects the students’ fears of losing their own lives, and secondarily, they were now faced with a dilemma as they placed higher value on the lives of their loved ones, especially younger siblings and elderly parents, as they are considered more vulnerable among members of society.

The disturbance caused by the series of post-9/11 hate crimes throughout the country, even before the 2016 election cycle, was deeply impacting the Muslim students at UC Berkeley, as scholars referenced in their work on the post-9/11 era (Abu El-Haj, 2007, 2009; Ahmad, 2002; Ibish, 2003, 2008; Volpp, 2002). The victims of hate crimes represented a striking resemblance to the participants being that they were also students—which made them eerily relatable. The participants’ responses demonstrate that the Muslim Americans realized they were not immune to the danger of hate crimes, even with all their accolades and acts of service like *Our Three Winners*. In both criminal cases following the murders of Muslim American youth on the East Coast, the victims were innocent. In the case of the adult victims of the Chapel Hill Shooting, *Our Three Winners*, they were also thriving college students, proving that academic and international humanitarian contributions to society were not protective buffers. The Muslim community seems to be under interminable siege because when the shooting in San Bernardino County happened, the Muslim American students were also put in danger. Therefore, the general Muslim American community suffered whether the crime was perpetrated by a Muslim or whether the Muslim students were the victims. In either case, the Muslim community was under attack.

The second research question focused on advocacy and activism pertaining to the lack of satisfaction of the out-group due to the ostracization that the students experienced in the MSA.
Therefore, the Muslim American participants turned to other spaces of belonging. One outcome relates to the emphasis on their ethnic association and public events that these groups organized. The focus on academic advancement through creative forms of expression such as the DeCal courses on Islamophobia, or the Muslim publication, *Threads*, and lastly contributions to the Daily Cal are some examples that offered an outlet to voice the narratives of Muslim Americans. Political activism through protests and public prayers also played a key role in creating expressive and innovative forms of resistance.

The third research question addresses the satisfaction component, which involves the protective factors, and coping strategies implemented by the Muslim American participants (out-group). MMHI offered a variety of services, commencing with a healing circle to discuss the political climate during the 2016 election cycle. This event evolved to provide anonymous psychological consultations and UmmahTalks (Islamic workshops) by 2017. The fusion of psychology and Islamic theology was tremendously instrumental to the Muslim American youth as it helped to provide space to process and gain psycho-education and knowledge on Islamic theology taught by qualified professionals in both psychology and Islamic theology. The following sections discuss the chronology of the core components of self-investment through centrality, solidarity and satisfaction.

*Centrality and the impact on mental health*

The focus group was guided by the first research question pertaining to the topic of Islamophobia and how this impacted the mental health of the Muslim American students (out-group). Since centrality\(^\text{37}\) initiated the dialogue, it resulted in powerful responses by the participants which helped to draw out the primary findings. One primary finding was related to

\(^{37}\) Centrality is “the salience and importance of one’s in-group membership to the self” (Wang et al., 2013, p. 603) and was adapted from (Leach et al., 2008).
the psychological distress from the undue burden of being a Muslim American student at UC Berkeley. While the Muslim American students agreed that the Muslim part of their identity was immensely meaningful to them, there was a common theme of undue distress from having to represent all 1.8 billion Muslims. Similarly, because the participants were constantly challenged by the dominant society to prove their allegiance to their American identity, they carried a burden of justifying their American identity to the in-group, while also being burdened with having to prove that their Muslim identity didn’t pose a threat, constantly appeasing. This expectation was especially frustrating for the hyper-visible Muslim American participants, to such an extent that one participant felt pressured to remove the hijab as this expectation was psychologically depleting. This was due to the pressure of representing Muslims as perfect or even angelic to overcompensate for the media’s distorted misrepresentation of Muslims (Abu El-Haj 2007, 2009; Ahmad, 2002; Ali, 2014; Kamal, 2014; Maira 2009, 2016; Rana, 2011; Sirin & Fine, 2007).

In the United States, no other group is predominantly linked to their religious affiliation; therefore, the Muslim American students feel the compounded pressure of representing their identity while recognizing that Muslims are demonized. Also, justifying their national American identity can be burdensome, especially when the media promulgates misinformation about Muslims. The Muslim American students also face the unfair pressure of being interrogated about their complex identity by complete strangers who don’t offer reciprocality in regards to divulging their own identity. This leaves the students with a feeling of being accused of being tied to terrorists until they prove their innocence and allegiance to the United States.

Additionally, theological discussions are generally left to scholars who have dedicated their entire professional and academic careers to advancing the analysis of religious texts.
However, Muslim American youth are casually approached about questions regarding the complex geopolitical affairs related to Islam. Some participants complained about the sense of entitlement of these ill-informed individuals who unjustifiably made false assumptions and then demanded a response. The implication is that Muslim Americans are polarized as terrorists or the other extreme, experts in Middle East political affairs, Islamic theology, and their transnational ties. This dilemma results in Muslim American youth feeling targeted through means of microaggressions which usually leads to an uncomfortable line of questioning and the students then absorb these microaggressions rooted in ignorance on a subconscious psychological level (Sue et al., 2007, p.1). The next section discusses the impact of recent hate crimes on the mental health and wellness of the Muslim American students attending UC Berkeley.

**Solidarity and the impact on mental health**

The first research question also measured the adverse effects of Islamophobia on the mental health of Muslim American students. The consequence of being part of the out-group, leads to the exposure to hate crimes across the nation. These findings are addressed through the prism of solidarity. When asked whether the participants shared a common fate with victims of hate crimes, the group had very intense reactions. The anxiety that the participants experienced in the aftermath of the execution style murder of *Our Three Winners* and the *Killing of Nabra Hassanen* seemed to elicit the largest response. For some participants these events bore an uncanny resemblance and familiarity to their own lives as they could easily place themselves in their shoes since the victims were youth and university students (of dentistry). The false sense of security that academic excellence or model citizenship somehow safeguards the students from attacks was shattered as this did not shield the innocent young victims, which left the participants feeling helpless.

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38 Solidarity is “one’s psychological bond or commitment to the group” (Wang et al., 2013, p. 603).
The room was filled with tension while the participants discussed how they became anxious of the *Punish a Muslim Day*, which had just been announced a couple of weeks prior to the focus group that was held that day. In response, some described feeling hypervigilant and feared that their lives were on the line. Others expressed feeling overwhelmed and worried that their younger siblings or parents were at risk of becoming targets as they belong to a more vulnerable demographic of Muslims. Many parents urged the participants to be cautious, while some participants reported that their parents were so impacted that their parents personally experienced intense fear or even a psychological breakdown in response to the *Punish a Muslim Day*. When the San Bernardino shooting occurred by Muslim extremists, these innocent participants also reported feeling that they were *in* danger of being the target of someone’s ignorant and raging hatred. These feelings led to adverse psychological effects that the participants experienced first hand due to *macro*-level Islamophobia.

The *meso*-level effects of the campus culture also led to feelings of fear and isolation. The series of violent protests at UC Berkeley’s campus to reject the right wing Islamophobic speakers made the Muslim Americans feel unsafe and unsupported by their university’s administration. Some participants were direct targets of hate crimes, which crushed their view of Muslim American’s sense of safety at a University of California campus especially Berkeley, given the campus’s reputation as the birthplace of free speech.

The psychological impact of hate crimes on and off campus have led to experiences analogous to the vicarious trauma experienced by clinicians, whereby the therapist absorbs the trauma of survivors. It appears that some of the participants were so deeply impacted by the hate crimes that these events even interfered with their mental health and daily functioning. This coincides with the largest study on Muslim American youth by Sirin and Fine (2008) which
found that after the 9/11 tragedy, Muslim American females reported feeling anxious while males felt the pressure to conform to western norms to mask their Muslim identity. The following section documents the Muslim American college students’ responses to the mental health crisis due to the political climate and its impact on advocacy and activism.

**Satisfaction and the impact of advocacy and activism**

The second research question highlighted the responses of the Muslim American participants to the *meso*-level effects of Islamophobia through advocacy and activism. The unique responses of the Muslim American students (out-group) resulted from a lack of satisfaction\(^\text{39}\) with the MSA - the official representative of the Muslim student body at UC Berkeley. UC Berkeley’s MSA regularly invites prominent Muslim scholars, and the participants reported being grateful for the value of being neighbors with Zaytuna College and Berkeley Masjid. However, some of the Muslims, representing ethnic minorities, reported that the impact of the continuous struggle of the social politics, discrimination based on race and ethnicity, and lack of cohesiveness ultimately pushed them out of such spaces.

Some Muslim students turned to the application of Islam and focused predominantly on strengthening their connection with Allah SWT. One participant described her experience of going to *umrah* and shared the deep impact this left on her in feeling a greater sense of connection with the global Muslim community. Others shared a similar sentiment that there was an invisible global Muslim national collective or *ummah* or beyond man-made borders which related to a higher connection derived from a sense of belonging to Allah SWT through an eternal shared faith.

Advocacy on behalf of the Muslim American community came directly from participants who were striving for academic excellence as an American value and insertion into spaces of

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\(^{39}\) Satisfaction is “positive feelings about the group” (Wang et al., 2013, p. 603).
influence such as research. Others decided to engage in educational DeCal courses on UC Berkeley’s campus as it pertains to social justice and Islamophobia. This allowed for the voices of Muslims to be represented professionally and was documented through empirical data to compensate for the misinformation present in mass media. *Threads* serves as a student-led publication which includes UC Berkeley and yet represents a larger demographic of Muslims in colleges across California, addressing taboo topics through poetry, art, fashion, and speech and offers biannual launch parties. The ethnic associations have also organized events such as galas and annual banquets, to provide cultural enrichment and to raise awareness and provide advocacy for celebration of multi-cultural heritage. More recently, Bears for Palestine hosted their second annual gala and dedicated the event to females; *Heroes of Resistance: Palestinian Women*.

Other primary findings include the unique opportunity presented at UC Berkeley on acquiring the language necessary to create discourse, as many other marginalized groups shared their plight in public spaces, and allowed for Muslim Americans to process and reflect on the parallels of having similar experiences. A powerful primary finding includes the results of an experience related to a public prayer that a participant hosted. What made this public prayer unique was that non-Muslim allies of the Muslim American students came to protect them by serving as human shields when the Muslim students transitioned into prayer. This experience helped the participants realize that they had a shared experience of oppression with their marginalized allies and an erasure of their history by the dominant society that perpetually rejected them. The protective factors and coping strategies allowed for the students to feel a sense of satisfaction and belonging in the out-group, the Muslim American youth understood the importance of stepping into roles to provide protection and belonging.
Satisfaction and protective factors and coping strategies

As a result of the third research question, based on the participant responses, the MMHI - this newly funded program that addresses the mental health of Muslims in a new space -- was found to be one of the protective factors against much of the Islamophobia experienced by Muslim American students at UC Berkeley’s campus. MMHI served as a substitute for Muslims who felt disconnected and unsupported in the MSA led spaces. Certain controversial and taboo topics within Islam were complex for the students to grapple with and thus were included in the discussion by MMHI.

The MMHI findings showed that this new initiative met the needs of these students and served the spectrum of young, diverse, groups of Muslim Americans by giving them an outlet of expression, thus, serving as a protection from Islamophobic rhetoric. MMHI also created healing circles where political issues such as the Muslim Ban were directly addressed and processed. This served to empower the Muslim students with emotional validation and also by providing language and counter-narratives as well as psycho-education. The criticism of MSA was that it did not offer a space to address political issues, so MMHI invited Muslim American students to the healing circles to address these polycultural taboos. The venue also impacted the demographic as many of the events were held outside of the traditional Muslim spaces, thereby being more inclusive of a wider spectrum of Muslims who became skeptical of Muslim spaces and their sometimes rigid requirements. Gender dynamics also played a large role as many Muslim women rarely felt represented in Muslim discussions outside of the conversation on the hijab and their attire. Kamal (2014) referenced the growing need to offer alternative leadership roles and these UCB female youth were innovative in creating their own niches of unique resistance.
Therefore, MMHI launched a series of three talks in Spring 2018, *Queens of Islam*, on the towering influence of Muslim females since the inception of Islam. The talk included the wife of the prophet Mohammad PBUH, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, who was the first woman of Islam, but more importantly, as a prominent businesswoman, she was also considered the financier of Islam. The series served to empower Muslim American students in understanding the legacy of the renowned female figures in Islam to counter-balance the stigma against the Muslim women who are represented as oppressed in mass media. For Muslim American men and women who are in the midst of developing their gender identity, these topics play a key role in informing Muslims of the holistic representation of the history of Islam. This exposure serves to dismantle the fixed gender stereotypes portrayed in mass media and offers a more equitable, balanced outlook of gender roles.

The audacious vision and innovation of MMHI to disrupt the stigma on mental health, especially in the Muslim community, has also attracted a wide audience as it offers psycho-education on anxiety, depression, PTSD and other mental health challenges, while providing tools to support students in coping with emotions and their relationship with Islam. This study uncovered many gaps in the research on Muslim Americans, which is discussed in the following section.

**Limitations of the Research Study**

The overall outcome of the research had heavy involvement from the post-9/11 female generation since there was only one male out respondent of the twelve students who participated in the two focus groups. Thus, the gender component may have affected the research, because even though the invitation was sent out to both males and females, only one male ultimately participated. This may suggest, as previously mentioned in the findings, that hypervisibility and
the demonization of the Muslim males in the media, due to the resemblance of their names (with terrorists) and the shared features in their phenotype as a result of a beard, may explain limited involvement.

Muslim males are typically misrepresented and villianized in mass media; therefore, males may be less likely to be in social settings where they could be profiled as “extremists.” Due to the misrepresentation of the bearded Middle Eastern Muslim males, who are highly associated in mass media as terrorists; Muslim men may be cautious of being profiled or under surveillance and may distance themselves from Muslim groups to circumvent further ostracization or even documentation based on religious affiliation. This fear may be as a result of the history of the arbitrary detainment of Muslims (especially men) after the post-9/11 era that Bazian (2014) discusses with relation to a Muslim registry (NSEERS). During the 2016 election cycle the Muslim American community faced a scare of creating a public Muslim registry, so these policies do flare up during elections. Males may, therefore, take additional precautions to avoid the risk of profiling as a result of the religious obligation to be a provider and to maintain job security in the future. This fact raises the stakes higher than ever and leads to the dearth of scholarly research on the experiences of Muslim American male college students.

The participants also confirmed that male involvement in the different associations was not as likely as female involvement. This suggests that the lack of male involvement in the MSA due to perhaps the fear of being a victim of surveillance, which has real life consequences, may detrimentally affect their need to secure a career, as males suffer from being profiled as terrorists (due to their phenotypic resemblance). Alternatively, it may be due to a challenge that Muslim American males have as they are developing their identity formation and the need to assimilate, as referenced by Sirin and Fine (2008), to the Western social norms as a way of proving their
rejection of Muslim extremism. Hence, males may be experiencing a unique challenge of proving their allegiance to the United States by giving into peer-pressure to participate in westernized social activities as a way of proving their patriotism through their masculinity. Yet another explanation pertains to the independence that males sense in college and wanting to experience American norms such as dating, clubbing and partying. Perhaps as a way of gaining popularity and the unconscious need for the approval of their non-Muslim peers who belong to the in-group or the larger dominant society. Speculation alone proves that Muslim males are potentially misrepresented and misunderstood, so there is a large need to address this gap.

Future research could also specifically involve the MSA, their board members, and perhaps other leadership members of different associations on UC Berkeley’s campus as related to their understanding of the role of the board members. These future participants could discuss their experiences in the focus groups, therefore expanding on the understanding of the perspective of the organizers. Although the participants of the second focus group did admit that their expectations of the MSA may be high, the focus groups exposed the dearth of knowledge on the role of MSA’s and understanding of the unique challenges from the board members’ perspective.

Another limitation relates to the in depth assessment of the level of differentiation and association with an ethnic rather than a religious identity. In previous years, scholars reported that Muslims from all ethnic backgrounds united under the title of Muslim American (Grewal, 2003; Kibria 2008, 2011; Maira, 2016; Naber 2005, 2008; Sirin & Fine 2008). However, due to tension and lack of a sense of belonging in Muslim spaces, some respondents reported reverting to their ethnic identity in terms of joining ethnic associations on campus, but also by identifying
themselves primarily through their ethnic identity. Therefore, further research is needed to consider the resonance this has with other Muslim Americans on a national level. The polyethnic identity further adds complexity as participants felt the need to choose between their ethnic affiliations and as we move toward a more diverse Muslim community, polycultural studies will be instrumental in the identity formation process. Edward Said (1978) has dedicated his academic profession to the understanding of the conflictual identity.

When it comes to American values versus Muslim values Mir (2014) discussed the contradictory social norms related to dress style, dating, drinking and sexuality, yet this study exposed the psychological tension that the participants held, but this needs to be further assessed. Thus, future research could take several directions to further the understanding of Muslim American students, as discussed in the next section.

**Recommendations for Future Areas of Investigation**

This study unearthed the gaps of existing studies on Muslim American youth and their unique identity formation challenges. While this study addressed the impact of the national, local and individual experiences of Muslim Americans, a major gap includes the national effects on Muslim Americans. The framework used in this paper on the macro, meso, and micro-level effects of Islamophobia and to what extent it impacts the mental wellness and health of Muslim Americans is yet to be addressed (Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, & Desai, 2016).

Another gap involves the gender component and the identity struggles of Muslim American male experiences as it pertains to their college life and the reasons underlying their limited involvement with religious and cultural affiliations. Research on gender dynamics, which was briefly touched on by the participants, is extremely limited. In particular, in regard to the identity formation and the integration of relationship skills (both romantic and platonic), Muslim
American college students face challenges over the appropriate approach to show interest in another student, even when just trying to form a friendship. Research is scarce on the controversy of Muslim Americans as pertaining to a spectrum of gender identities, such as LGBTQQ, gender fluidity, and non-binary gender roles.

As briefly mentioned, the nuanced role and immense pressure of running a political campaign as a Muslim American through the ASUC (the student government body at UC Berkeley as mentioned in the findings) has great potential of creating a platform to represent Muslims. Muslim representation on the discourse on policies that impact Muslims on UC Berkeley's campus through the ASUC should be egalitarian. However, there might be a lack of agreement on who truly represents the Muslim student body, which could lead to disaggregation of votes as was mentioned with the “preference” of Desis and Arabs as MSA board representatives and this challenge infiltrates the election process at UC Berkeley as well.

Another component that was not discussed relates to the interfaith dialogue and intrafaith dialogue within the Muslim community. There are multiple sects of Islam such as: Sunni, Shia and Sufi and different schools of thought, in short interfaith dialogue is crucial as many youth reclaim their larger Muslim identity and want to unify and be represented as “just Muslim.”

The recent trend of Muslim American youth using social media as platforms of resistance also needs to be investigated further as to the benefits of a broader audience. However, social media also creates a risk of exploitation of students through the same technology (data analytics) as well as surveillance of Muslim Americans who openly share their lived experiences with platforms such as Facebook. The consequences of these actions are often not calculated by Muslim American youth who are particularly vulnerable due to the potential systematic use of social media against them. Finding virtual spaces of belonging through famous Youtubers and
Instagram famous influencers who create a voice for the Muslim American demographic in the United States, may yield benefits for Muslim Americans, but further research is needed.

The impact of literary art and the visual arts in particular by combining satirical political commentary through comedy by famous comedians and actors, such as Maziar “Maz” Jobrani’s global tour of *Axis of Evil* and Hasan Minhaj’s *Patriot Act*, could also be further explored. UC Berkeley’s Dr. Hatem Bazian took the initiative in founding the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project (IRDP)\(^{40}\) in 2009 by collecting and recording the empirical research to accurately represent and reflect the Muslim American community along with hosting international speakers to the annual Islamophobia Conference. Therefore, the need for further research is high, and UC Berkeley’s Dr. Hatem Bazian has initiated the process by establishing a bi-annual *Islamophobia Studies Journal* since 2012 to address these unique challenges. In the next section, the researcher offers concluding thoughts.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to document the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American student participants at UC Berkeley during and aftermath of the presidential campaign of 2016, which included the threat of a Muslim registry and the implementation of a Muslim ban. The study also investigated the participants’ responses to explore their mental wellness and psychological resilience despite the hostile social and political environment toward Muslim Americans. The protective factors and coping strategies employed by the participants enabled them to find ways of resistance through creative media like *Threads*, DeCals, protests, and cultural banquets, as well as via seeking out mental health services, such as MMHI.

The Muslim community in the United States is especially impacted by hate crimes and deserving of mental wellness programs due to the history of trauma as a result of the geopolitical

\(^{40}\) The Center for Race & Gender supports the IRDP at the University of California, Berkeley.
situation in their Muslim majority nations of origin—which continue to plague communities. Since many of the Muslim families have left their nation of origin behind, the community protection that was once there is no longer present. This reality suggests the importance and necessity of MMHI to provide a sense of protection and a sense of belonging as a social buffer for Muslims against Islamophobia replete in our society today. The intersectionality of psychology and Islam has offered a unique blend of topics that serve to broaden and enrich the conversation as well as to ultimately address the challenges relevant to the UC Berkeley Muslim student population. Moreover, the primary findings included the emergence of a universal Muslim collective as more than a national identity transcending physical borders related to a universal love for a global community and a virtual place of belonging.

This universal love was also evidenced by the unexpected alliance with other marginalized non-Muslims that helped shield the Muslim American students during a public prayer on UC Berkeley’s Sproul Hall. The significance of building solidarity and alliances among oppressed and marginalized groups in America may serve as a protective factor as an even stronger unifier.

**Researcher’s reflections and suggestions**

The unique opportunity of having played a key role as the first clinician offering consultations in the pilot program for MMHI inspired me to use UC Berkeley as a case study since my involvement with UCB began in 2016. The main purpose of documenting the process and experiences of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley was to inspire other campuses across the nation and even internationally to promote the mental well-being of their university campus communities. The scale of funding for this mental health pilot program tailored to the Muslim community is unprecedented and turned into a full three-year grant of over
$300,000 to serve the Muslim American students on campus while ensuring religious and culturally competent care by hiring Muslim clinicians. And consistent events and workshops. Many students from other campuses approached me in spaces such as the MSA West conference to find a way to duplicate these services in their respective institutions; thus, this documentation process was designed to provide a rough blue-print for students.

As a clinician and researcher, it is worth noting that the study may have influenced my positionality in terms of the findings. The exposure to me as a clinician also benefited the process because the students had a connection with me prior to the research; this helped to establish the deep trust necessary to be open to disclosing much more intimate and personal information during a time when surveillance and profiling of Muslims presents a high risk factor. Therefore, I felt an obligation at the very least to document these experiences and to offer suggestions to the community to help address some of the current challenges.

The responsibility of the MSA board members is especially high as they are held accountable for the entire Muslim student body at UC Berkeley. Quite possibly they may face an issue of role clarity and need to create space for further dialogue to change their reputation. Many of the board members are obligated to take on different tasks, even though some roles are out of their scope. Therefore, conflict resolution skills as well as role clarity trainings for the board members may be helpful in the future. The leadership personnel may be too overwhelmed with the pressure of representing their community and thus have limited capacity for dialogue. Therefore, they may benefit from reconciliation and restorative justice practices facilitated by a neutral party such as a professional clinician and/or a faculty sponsor or community leader.

The participants also expressed that the focus groups felt more like a support group, and they wished that they would have more opportunities to have ongoing and consistent support
groups in the future. Due to the complex social politics of the Muslim community, it might be beneficial to have a professional who is not tied to the students to facilitate the support group, thereby addressing the issue of exclusion. Especially in regard to the MSA, it is crucial to repair the loss of trust that the Muslim community experienced either directly or indirectly. Therefore, holding consistent and meaningful healing circles may help in restoring justice and creating peaceful dialogue among the members and the leadership team which is crucial to re-establish a space of belonging and the likelihood of sustainability of the MSA.

Overall, the participants bravely and constructively revealed the lack of cohesion among the Muslim American student body at UC Berkeley’s MSA. Therefore, it is crucial to address the experiences of discrimination and racism that Muslims experienced at UC Berkeley, especially in Muslim spaces (which are already scarce). The lack of male contribution in Muslim spaces also suggests a lack of understanding of the unique challenges of males; thus, holding a consistent male support group may also be of benefit. MMHI has been addressing some of the challenges by hosting exclusively male support groups as well as female support groups. My suggestion is to host a weekly support group that is closed (new members cannot join after the first/second week) to allow for trust building and a sense of rapport in the group. This can be accomplished through professional facilitation to serve as a moderator in discussions on the complex identity formation of Muslim American youth. It is clear that there is an enormous need for the continual innovation and analysis of these “unmosqued” spaces.

In summary, we began with a discussion of the experiences of Muslim American UC Berkeley students as tied to the development of their complex Muslim American identity. The burdensome challenges that these young Muslims face have been strain by the pressure of overcompensating for the negative portrayal of Muslims across the globe. The Muslim students
also held their own Muslim community and their larger national U.S. community accountable, which for some is the only home they have ever known. Yet at best this is a contested existence.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the scholarly literature in that it has revealed the real-life implications for Muslim Americans. The unrelenting fear and danger that Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley confront daily, is starkly juxtaposed by their peers natural developmental stage of identity formation. Even though the reputation of UC Berkeley is that of a liberal campus, many participants shared their experiences of being targeted or ostracized either directly or indirectly.

This pressure has caused the Muslim American college students to seek support from within the MSA community; however, they continue to struggle to find a space of inclusivity. The growing tension in Muslim spaces around the standards of belonging appear to be unconsciously re-enacted by Muslim leaders who project their own internalized oppression by rejecting others in their own community. These spaces have merely emulated the larger dominant society’s approach of exclusivity and gross miscalculations of worthiness. The Muslim community at UC Berkeley is faced with the task of dismantling the monolithic myth of Muslims as dangerous or terrorists because they are also in danger Maira (2009).

Nevertheless, the participants continue to be resilient and tenacious in challenging the dominant narrative by forging new paths of Muslim representation in the realm of research, education, publications, and political activism; most recently, they have prioritized and even tackled Islamically integrated mental wellness.

Dehumanized and historically disenfranchised communities undergoing similar struggles have, in the past, been galvanized by historic figures such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.. These audacious UC Berkeley Muslim American college students also act as social leaders
and understand that their power comes through unified resistance, healing, and recognizing the inherent value of each and every single human—to promote a universal love that transcends borders, colors and labels.
REFERENCES


Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 20(1), 67-87.


CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Diba Ataie, a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Monisha Bajaj, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to gather information about the experiences of Muslim American college students at UC Berkeley and to identify the impact of Islamophobia. This study provides an opportunity to verbalize and process the personal experiences of being Muslim and American in a college campus setting.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
Step 1: Introduction and description of the study and researcher will hand out participation form.
Step 2: Conduct focus group which will be led by the researcher alone and will not exceed 6 participants.
   a. 5 Minutes: Researcher instructions, detailing process of focus group with an overview of questions.
   b. 40 Minutes: Participants describe their experiences of campus life on UC Berkeley’s campus.
   c. 5 Minutes: Researcher facilities closing remarks and provides opportunity for questions and comments.
   d. Each participant will be contacted to offer an opportunity to make corrections to the transcription.
Step 3: Conduct follow up interviews with volunteers who want to participate in the one-on-one research study.
Step 4: Remind participants of the free resources to mental health services at the TANG Center & Khalil Center.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve a one-hour and one-time-session in a focus group with 5 other participants. If you choose to participate in the one-on-one follow-up interview, we can arrange a thirty minute session. The study will take place UC Berkeley’s Multicultural Center of the Martin Luther King Jr. building.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

We do not anticipate any risks or discomforts to you from participating in this research. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. However, if the participant feels uncomfortable in any way after the session, mental health counseling resources will be arranged for the participant such as the UHS Tang Center at UC Berkeley and UC Berkeley’s Muslim Mental Health Initiative as well as the Islamically integrated psychological services of the Khalil Center.

BENEFITS:

The students can contribute to the existing studies on Muslim American identity formation, as this scholarship is very limited due to the degree of controversy/sensitivity of this topic. Ultimately, the goal of the study is to offer a safe space for Muslim Americans to take back their narratives and author their own stories as active participants in their own lives. The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are that professors, community educators, and mental health professionals could further use this information because they interact directly with Muslim American students and could thereby support students/clients with their complex identity formation.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, the researcher will be the only person with access to all documentation. She will create a master list that includes the participant’s name and a code linking the name to the data and the master list will be kept secure in the office by double locking the doors and the filing cabinet and will be kept in a filing cabinet separately from the collected data for three years. The master list will be destroyed so that there’s no ability to link the participants' data to identifying information.

AUDIO RECORDINGS: For studies audio recording of participants are needed for the research to ensure accuracy of responses, which will be stored electronically on my laptop (they will be stored and identified based on date and time, and upon completion of the research they will be archived after transcription.
COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:
There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Dr. Monisha Bajaj at mibajaj@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

______________________________

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE
Appendix B

Focus Group Questions & Semi-structured Interview Questions

Data will be collected in the form of focus groups and follow-up interview questions in the order below:

Step 1: Hand out research invitation flyers at social events detailing the study and how to become a participant for study.

Step 2: Conduct focus groups which will be led in 2 separate focus groups of 6 participants each.
   A. 5 Minutes: Researcher instructions, detailing process of focus group and questions and answers.
   B. 40 Minutes: Participants describe their experiences of campus life on UC Berkeley’s campus.

Dialogue Questions:
1. **Centrality** question adapted from Leach et al., 2008)
   a. Being Muslim and American is an important part of how I see myself. If so, to what extent?
   b. I often think about the fact that I am Muslim and American. How often does it come up?
   c. The fact that I am Muslim and American is an important part of my identity. Please expand on this.

2. **Solidarity** question: (Wang, et al., 2013, p.606) and was (adapted from Leach et al., 2008)
   a. “To what extent do you feel you belong to America?” Why or why not? Can you provide examples?
   b. “How connected do you feel to Americans?” What examples might you offer?
   c. "Do you feel like you share a common fate with Americans (Muslims) ? For example, when something bad happens to an American (Muslim) person, do you feel worried that it can happen to you or your family?

3. How connected do you feel to other Muslims? What examples do you have of this form of connection?
   a. How active are you in the community with regards to Muslim social events? (ie Cultural shows & gatherings)
   b. How active are you in Muslim community organizations? (i.e. non-profit or professional networks)

4. To what extent has your sense of connection or identity changed since coming to UC Berkeley?(follow up: why do you think that is?)
   a. How comfortable do you feel to express your Muslim identity on UCB’s campus? What makes you feel this way?
b. How comfortable do you feel to express your American identity on UCB’s campus? What makes you feel this way?

c.”Do you ever feel like you have to defend being part of this group to others at UCB (Muslim/American)?

5. **Satisfaction** question: (Wang, et al., 2013, p.606) and was (adapted from Leach et al., 2008)

At UCB, do you ever feel embarrassed by your ethnic or religious background? Why or why not?

   a. How attached are you to your identity as Muslim?
   b. How attached are you to your identity as an American?

6. What are the most important aspects of your identity at this stage of your life?

   a. How much do you feel that you belong to the Muslim community? Can you give specific examples?
   b. How much do you feel that you belong to the American community? Can you give specific examples?

7. Are there any other pieces of information you’d like to share with me?

C. 5 Minutes: Researcher facilities closing remarks and provides opportunity for questions and comments.

D. Researcher will communicate with participants in case he/she wants to make corrections to the transcription.

Step 3: Conduct follow up interviews with individuals who want further involvement in the research study.

Step 4: Interview selected faculty and TANG (one from TANG center) /Khalil Center staff members (one from KC)
Appendix C

Revised Research Timeline

The institution where the study will be conducted is at UC Berkeley, Berkeley, California and held in the Multicultural Center of the Martin Luther King Jr. building

Week 1: The study will begin in April 22nd of 2018: The first week will involve focus group A. (Interviews with UCB staff).

Week 2: The researcher will follow-up with volunteers who want to give further one-on-one details.

Week 3: The second focus group B will be to get further details from the community. (Interviews with KC staff).

Week 4: The researcher will follow-up with volunteers who want to give further one-on-one details.

Week 5: The researcher will transcribe all of the notes and send to participants for review and incorporate the revisions.

Week 6: The researcher will work on thematic coding.

Week 7: The researcher will conduct a final analysis. Completion of the research study is June 15th 2018.
BOYCOTT THE ALT-RIGHT @UC

Berkeley September 24-27th A letter from UC Berkeley Faculty to the Campus and Berkeley Community

While there has still not been an official announcement from campus administrators, we are learning that from September 24th to 27th, the University of California at Berkeley will provide a platform to Milo Yiannopoulos, Ann Coulter, Stephen K. Bannon, Breitbart media and their far right audience. A series of explicitly violent Alt-Right, militia and pro-Fascist events are also, again, being scheduled for Civic Center / MLK park in downtown Berkeley on those days.

Once more, signs point towards an escalated and uncontrollable confrontation both on and off campus during these four days. The history of these events has been chilling. Since Inauguration Day, Alt-Right followers have shot someone at the University of Washington, stabbed two people to death on public transport in Portland, stabbed to death a college senior in Maryland, beaten numerous nonviolent protesters at the University of Virginia, and most recently murdered a peaceful protester with an automobile in Charlottesville. Most immediately troubling, given Trump’s decision to end DACA, is that these forces have
publicly expressed their intent to specifically target "sanctuary campuses" and disclose the identity of undocumented students. As concerned faculty members, we cannot remain silent while students, staff, colleagues, and fellow community members are threatened.

Therefore, as faculty committed to the safety of our students and our campus, we are calling for a complete boycott of all classes and campus activities while these Alt-Right events are taking place at the very center of UC Berkeley’s campus. As faculty we cannot ask students and staff to choose between risking their physical and mental safety in order to attend class or come to work in an environment of harassment, intimidation, violence, and militarized policing. The reality is that particularly vulnerable populations (DACA students, non-white, gender queer, Muslims, disabled, feminists, and others) have already been harmed, and are reporting increased levels of fear and anxiety about the upcoming events, the increased police presence on our campus, and how all this will impact their lives and their studies.

It is not just physical violence that our campus faces from this media circus. Many of these provocateurs’ most committed audiences are online, and the Breitbart media machine uses that audience to harass, cyberbully, and threaten anyone who speaks out against them. Students and faculty on our campus have already had their lives threatened for speaking out against Milo and his followers. Online threats are real threats, and if we allow this intolerant and bullying version of free speech to take over our campus, then it can only but come at the expense of the free speech rights of the Berkeley community as a whole. In fact, campus safety concerns have already forced the Anthropology Department to cancel a public talk during “free speech week.” This makes clear that the administration understands the imminent threat to campus safety while also revealing that the loud demands of the Alt-Right has the effect of silencing members of our campus community.

We recognize that as a public institution, we are legally bound by the Constitution to allow all viewpoints on campus. However, there are forms of speech that are not protected under the First Amendment. These include speech that presents imminent physical danger and speech that disrupts the university’s mission to educate. Milo, Coulter and Bannon do not
come to educate; they and their followers come to humiliate and incite. If the administration insists upon allowing the Alt-Right to occupy the center of our campus for four days to harass, threaten and intimidate us, as they did during Milo's visit in February, then faculty cannot teach, staff cannot work and students cannot learn.

We refuse to grant the Alt-Right the media spectacle that they so desperately desire. This strategy responds to the concerns voiced in the letter authored by the chairs of the three departments most impacted -- Gender & Women’s Studies, African American Studies and Ethnic Studies -- and also follows the lead of the SPLC advice to ignore these agitators. As faculty, we reject both the administration's rhetoric of false equivalency that all speech -- including “hate speech” -- merits value and respect and also the impulse to see direct confrontation as the only strategy of resistance. A boycott of all campus activities during these days is the only responsible course of action.

Therefore we are calling upon faculty to take the following steps:

1. **Cancel classes and tell students to stay home.** A boycott of classes affirms that our fundamental responsibility as faculty is to protect the safety and well being of all our students. While we understand the argument that canceling classes might be seen as a penalty to students who want to learn -- by holding class when some students **CAN NOT** attend by virtue of their DACA status and the imminent threat that these campus events hold, faculty who **DO** hold classes are disadvantaging DACA students and others who will feel threatened by being on campus.

2. **Close buildings, close departments and let staff stay home.** If the campus is unsafe for student learning then it is unsafe for staff members to work. We should work with campus maintenance and building managers to close as many departments and buildings as possible, starting with those in the immediate vicinity of Sproul Plaza. No one should be forced to work surrounded by men with clubs, police with guns and the sting of teargas.
3. Faculty who decide to hold class during this week, in the face of these explicit threats, should not penalize students who are afraid to come to campus. It is unfair and discriminatory for faculty to schedule exams or require attendance during this week. Such an expectation forces students to choose between their physical safety, their mental well-being, and a grade. Consider making a video lecture available, give the students a take-home assignment, or creating another alternative class plan. If you decide you must hold class, please do it away from campus, away from the Telegraph Avenue point of campus entry, and away from Downtown.

The Administration, in failing to halt these events, has left concerned faculty with no other choice than to act to prevent further harm to our community. We urge you to join us in keeping our students and our campus safe by signing on to this call for a campus-wide-boycott.

In Solidarity,

Retrieved from original google doc (includes signatures)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfQ0Hk9Y8hQXV375RgQgSBwYS6LpaUanOFc4m4ZV4OKI6gNNw/viewform?fbclid=IwAR09K0j0puGpY1YaX8bdlf8Gvvel_Cv9aMI7nLeKfy15a2_qVTDU9xa3E
I sat on a rock on the coast of Tamanar, Algeria. It was the summer before college, and my first visit home in three years. With my legs in the water of the Mediterranean, facing North, I pictured France nearly five hundred miles ahead and my motherland behind me. It seemed my people saw things the same way, only not so literally; Eurocentrism was the modern pursuit, and our own culture and traditions were falling by the wayside.

As I got older and was exposed to increased diversity, I often felt very out of touch with my family’s cultural heritage. I wondered, what was my version of the Palestinian's *hatta* and *dabke*, of the Moroccan’s *kaftan*, of the Yemeni’s *jambiya*? I asked my mother if there were any good books I could read on our history. She responded that they were all in French.

I took two years of high school French with a significant amount of resentment. I refused to sing the French national anthem, no matter how many dirty glances I received from Monsieur Wallace. He, in turn, refused to give me full credit on a single assignment.

Walking around my hometown of Setif, Algeria was like witnessing a people trying to erase history; everyone I encountered was trying to be more “Western.” Clothing stores attempted to mimic French fashion. Restaurants marketed “fast food” and teenagers drenched their social media timelines with American slang phrases. It’s almost physically painful how problematic it
was seeing a kid’s pink t-shirt printed with “Friends with Benefits” in blue, sparkly writing. The culture washing wasn’t even being fact checked.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of this self-inflicted cultural cleansing was that there didn’t seem to be anyone trying to combat it. The voices of our grandmothers telling the youth to eat with the rest of the family and spend more time at the masjid faded into the background. It is difficult to explain to a generation that every movie, every talk show, and every textbook that told them that Algerian traditions were inferior to those of the rising West was lying to them. Brainwashing isn’t easily reversible, especially when it isn’t obvious to its victims.

More so, this brainwashing was deeply rooted in the minds of young Algerians. Every source of culture and media made the typically Algerian action akin to savagery, while French customs were modern, civilized, and refined. French textbooks used in Algeria show pictures of Ahmed being disrespectful, unclean, and idiotic, while Pierre shows students the correct way to behave.

I had a particularly heated argument with my uncle’s wife this past summer when I visited Setif. She refused to accept that we had racist beauty standards engrained in our social fabric. A word we use to describe beautiful people, “zine” or “zina,” literally means fair-skinned. My grandmother was always disappointed to see that I had come back from the beach with a tan. Getting blonde highlights is an increasingly popular trend back home, seen as a symbol of beauty and youthfulness.

A lot of what I observed about this cultural cleansing was confusing, probably because it was still in the process of happening. Remnants of tradition were still celebrated, although decreasingly so. My aunts and cousins always admired the color of my hair, saying it was “ekhel
tout”—like blackberries. Then they proceeded to make me straighten out my curls for every family wedding.

I found it astonishing how many people refused to identify with Africa. I heard someone refer to the Malian refugees that have been growing in number in Algeria as “those people who came from Africa.” It was as though there was an invisible border dividing North Africans from the rest of the continent, somehow establishing their false superiority as well.

I myself found it difficult to pinpoint my place on either side of this cultural phenomenon. My American peers saw me as the “other” for as long I could remember, but it didn’t feel so bad because I thought there was still a place where I was normal, where I represented aspects of the default person: Algeria. I can honestly say that the most painful thing I experienced during my most recent visit was when my uncle’s wife referred to me as “guerre,” a term we use to refer to white foreigners. A term that I had only previously heard used in ridicule or when discussing politics. It was difficult to hide how offended I was; how could this woman, who has been part of this family for only a fraction of the time that I had, call me that? How could she call me that when Arabic was the first language I learned, even though I was born in the U.S.? How, when my whole life Americans referred to me as their own version of “guerre”? I was suddenly very confused as to what then constituted as “Algerian,” since I apparently did not. Wasn’t the American culture that I grew up with the one that they were all so actively pursuing? Whatever made me guerria was what they aspired to.

This begs the question, simply put: why? Why are Algerians choosing to wear GAP instead of gandouras and ditching faremsa for french fries? For one, the forced indoctrination of French culture by colonialism has its lasting effects. But also, the misperception of modernity in
everything that’s made in the U.S.A. has very real consequences. From the other side of the Atlantic, everything here looks shiny and new. Sadly, mirages are nothing more than optical illusions.

In short, the ever increasing influx of American and French influence distorts the Algerian identity. What we once took pride in is becoming shameful and embarrassing. Granted, this isn’t to say that every Algerian thinks this way; this is merely an observation of patterns and trends.

These patterns are imprinted on more than just the cultural fabric; our faith, meant to be solidified and forever uniform, is witnessing people’s attempted imprints of change. Now more than ever, Muslims have to be cautious of societal standards that conflict with Islam, despite how rooted they may be in our surroundings. We must constantly ask ourselves as Muslims, particularly American ones: how are we allowing society’s ever-changing norms and traditions to warp our view of Islam and its teachings?

Hearing Muslim millennials refer to Islamic teachings as dated is deeply troubling. What legitimacy do morals hold if they are not constant? If the way we decided what was right or wrong was based on where and when we lived, right versus wrong would become what we feel like doing versus what is inconvenient. Our actions would be based on the established norms of whoever happened to have the most influence at that point in time.

So if standards and norms evolve with generations, what do we choose as our frame of reference? Is there something out there that lays out standards for morality and justice that has never changed? This is when you expect me to answer my own question, but you already know the
answer: Islam. This is perhaps one of the most beautiful things about this religion. A verse from Surat Al-Saba’ reads, “We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to people, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most people understand not,” (34:28).

We regard Muhammad (saw) as a messenger for all humankind. No matter how far you go, geographically, forwards or backwards in time, the Qur’an and Sunnah will always be applicable. They will always be the truth.

Winston Churchill postulated that, “The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride, but in the end, there it is.” There have been several malicious attempts in history to change the permanent language of the Qur’an, all of which were unsuccessful. Interestingly, the Arabic words “kafir” and “kufr” come from a root that literally means to hide. However, denying the existence of the truth has no metaphysical nor tangible consequence to it.

The fact that “times are changing” doesn’t disprove the truth behind Islam. If anything, it proves how little we can rely on social practices formed by our fellow flawed human beings. A hundred years from now, people may decide that modesty is indeed important and that crocs are an acceptable form of footwear, and a century later they may once again go back on their word. The word of Allah, however, is immune to inconsistency. It is protected from plagiarism, and unbending in the face of untruth.

It’s important to keep in mind that newer isn’t necessarily better, in both our culture and our faith. We are told they are backwards; what can be backwards about carrying tradition forward?

In the case of Islam, newer definitely isn’t better. Not when we are blessed with the perfect book and the perfect teacher. Not now, not ever.
GLOSSARY:

hatta - checkered scarf that has become the symbol for Palestinians

dabke - traditional dance

kaftan - long, flowy dress

jambiya - curved dagger

gandouras - traditional Algerian men’s clothing; also refers to women’s dresses in certain regions

faremsa - Algerian dish

Posted in Narratives and tagged with identity, islam and culture, algeria, gandouras, arab americans, muslim american, tamanar, eurocentrism, white-washing, roots, french colonization

http://threadsatcal.org/about-1

Threads © 2019
Appendix F: Archive of Threads: Beauty in the Struggle

Beauty in the Struggle

December 2, 2015
by Salam Awwad

I shield my eyes from the sun that is scorching everyone beneath it. It is another day of the heat wave that has hit Palestine. After over a week of temperatures easily above 100 degrees—most places void of air conditioners and fans—my body becomes accustomed to the heat and I learn to endure it just as the locals do. I squint, trying to catch a better view of what was happening in the valley far ahead of me. I can make out the colors of the Palestinian flag—the red, green, black, and white dancing through the air as the hot wind flirted with them. I can hear the cries of protest ringing in the distance as the group of a hundred individuals—Palestinians, internationals, and even some Israelis—diligently march toward the other side of the village.

We are in Bil’in, a small farming village on the outskirts of Ramallah located in the West Bank. For the past 10 years, every single Friday after jumm’a* prayer, the people of the village march to the “forbidden” end of the village. Here, the apartheid wall cuts through their farmland splitting their village. My friend Hamde, a local to the village, would often tell me stories about grazing his father’s sheep on the hills of Bil’in as a young boy—hills that could no longer be seen as they have been razed, and in their place stand illegal Israeli settlements. Every Friday these people march to defy the rules and restrictions that are enforced upon them on their own land.

I stand back that Friday, not joining in the march due to my swollen ankle. Having hurt it the day before while walking down make-shift roads of the village, I know I won’t be able to run on it to
escape danger if it comes, so I watch from a distance. Before the protesters even near the wall, I can see three Israeli tanks set up at the end, each manned with at least six soldiers. I continue to stare, anticipating what I know will come, having experienced it the week before. My focus is suddenly disrupted by a little Palestinian boy who notices the improvised wrap on my ankle and asks me if I would like to have the EMTs in the ambulance wrap it properly. I walk with him to the ambulance nearby; every Friday, this ambulance stays out here to treat any injuries that may ensue from the protest.

I climb inside and am greeted by two EMTs, who are also eagerly watching the demonstration. One of them moves to the back and sits in front of me; I take my sock and shoe off as he lifts my leg up next to him. As he wraps my ankle, he asks how it got hurt. When I explain to him that I hurt it the day before, he jokingly says in Arabic: “If you hurt it yesterday that means it is not my responsibility to treat it! I only treat people who get hurt in the demonstration.” After exchanging laughs and answering the same questions I get from everyone in Palestine: “What village are you from?”, “From what family are you?”, “How long have you lived in America?”, the mood in the ambulance shifts from light-hearted conversation to seriousness. I see the clouds of white tear gas start to fill the air around us as the EMT sitting in the front seat tells me to quickly shut the door before any gas gets in.

It begins.

I hear the pounding footsteps in the distance, accompanied by rubber bullets and the blast of tear gas canisters being launched from the tanks. My thoughts go back to the week before, recalling how I had been caught in it, desperately trying to run back up the hill on an unpaved road as the tanks continued to drive closer and closer while increasing the amount of tear gas canisters they launched. The tanks and soldiers had gotten so close that multiple canisters had started to land at my feet, tear gas spraying
straight into my face—the canisters not more than an inch away from hitting me. I had forced myself
to keep moving, knowing that if one of the canisters were to hit me from a close distance, it could be
the end of my life. It would burn right through my skin and into my body, just like it did to Hamde’s
cousin a few years earlier, burning hole in his chest and killing him.

Here I was today, sitting in the ambulance and hoping that everyone was safe—or as safe as they
could be, at least. The ambulance needs to drive down into the demonstration, in case anyone is hurt
and can’t make their way up, but I tell them I want to get out first. After a few minutes, the gas clears
and the EMT says I can open the door. I get out as they drive away, leaving me standing there, now
surrounded by a dozen or so people who had run all the way up from the dip of the valley. Most were
doubled over, coughing from gas inhalation, trying to catch their breath. Before I could even think to
help anyone, the familiar sound starts to fill the air again; more gas was being launched, and the tanks
had driven closer than any of us had noticed. They start launching the canisters in a direction so that
the wind will carry the gas towards us, and within seconds I find myself gasping for air. The heat and
dryness of the air make the tear gas even worse. I can hardly see as my eyes blur and my skin starts to
burn from the contact with the gas. The gas fills my lungs and burns my chest. My insides feel like
they are ablaze and as I eagerly try to suck in air, I am met with suffocation. I can’t move.

Through the thick white clouds of gas that surround me, a hand reaches out and grabs mine.
AbdelKhaliq, a 15 year-old local that I befriended on my previous visits to Bil’in holds tight to my
hand, running, leading me to safety. He pulls me into a car, closing the door behind me as he gets into
the front seat. He turns with a worried look on his face, asking me if I’m okay. I try to answer that I
am fine, but can’t make a sound as the words are trapped in my burning throat and my concentration is
focused on getting myself to breathe. He stares at me for a few moments before getting out of the car.
I can still hear the sound of tear gas canisters being launched as I sit in the car that, although filled with hot and thick air, was free from any gas. A few minutes pass when I see AbdelKhaliq walking back towards the car. He sits once again in the front seat and turns with a big smile on his face, hand extended towards me: he is holding an ice cream cone. He nudges with his head for me to take it, still keeping the smile on his face. I stare at him before gradually taking it from his hand; I can’t help but to burst out in laughter.

In that moment, as our laughter fills the car, I am reminded that Allah’s beauty has no boundaries. Here I was in what seems like one of life’s ugliest moments, under apartheid and occupation, surrounded by people that are abused and mistreated, who have every justification to resent the world they live in that ignores their plight. Here I was sitting in a car with a kid who has lived every year of his entire life surrounded by violence and hatred from his oppressors, and he is smiling. He is laughing. He is caring and compassionate, despite the environment of hatred and racism that he is forced to live and grow up in. I am reminded that even in what seem like the ugliest moments of life, beauty blooms: Allah’s beauty manifests. In that moment, with my ankle swollen and throbbing, my clothes covered in dirt and dust, my eyes and nose still burning, and my throat partly closed from inhaling tear gas, struggling to breathe as I sit in a random car where outside the window Palestinian flags wave through the thick, white clouds of gas filling the air, with a rainbow ice cream cone in my hand and a 15 year-old boy smiling and urging me to eat it, I find myself in one of the most beautiful moments of my entire life, and no amount of teargas sting could ever make me regret being there.

*jumm’a - congregation prayer performed every Friday amongst Muslims

Photograph by Hamde AbuManal
Posted in Narratives and tagged with beauty, palestine, israeli, palestine and israel, tear gas, studying abroad, beir zeit, beir zeit university, ice cream, ambulance, Bil'in, palestinians, apartheid, villages, palestinian villages, protest, palestinian protest, jumm'a, Hamde AbuManal, occupation, Palestinian occupation

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Appendix G: Archive of Threads: Intersectionality in the MSA

Intersectionality in the MSA

December 8, 2015
by Khwaja Ahmed

A Muslim caucus was held for the first time at the Students of Color Conference this past November. The conference has been held by the UC system for 27 years. It acts as a powerful tool for different minorities to come together, share stories and begin the move towards social change on a UC-wide level.

What makes this specific year so ground-breaking is that it held its first caucus, specifically geared towards Muslim minorities. The caucuses discuss issues pertinent to the community at hand, usually as a collective group, and then split off into smaller groups for more personalized takes on the issues. The overarching theme that was examined by the Muslim caucus was the role of intersectionality in Muslim Student Association(s)—more specifically, the dilemma of not properly understanding the importance of intersectionality in an MSA space.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand the meaning of the word intersectionality. As tends to happen in Berkeley, sometimes foreign terminology is adopted without a true grasp of the nature of the word—I do this as well. To avoid the cliché of Berkeley intellectual culture, intersectionality is when two different spheres of viewing the world
come together to combine a mixed outlook, with the default being a white, male perspective. One example of this is being Muslim and also being American; these identities do not contradict one another, but rather influence each other. This is the default for humanity; we are all made up of varying identities, but only until around the Civil Rights Era has this been adopted into the academic realm. The term brings with it a pull of popularity by being able to address people in a more nuanced sense by respecting backgrounds that are usually lumped together by the larger demarcation of identity. Something the caucus members recognized was that the Muslim community across campuses fails to do this at a very fundamental level.

Throughout the room, the resounding feeling was that each member had faced exclusion or had known someone who was pushed to the perimeter unfairly. Muslims throughout the UC-system shared similar stories on not feeling included within their regional MSAs. The exclusion took many forms, but the two most common were about wearing hijab and difference in skin tones. Some women spoke of being judged for not practicing physical hijab, and Muslims of African descent discussed being treated poorly based on pigmentation of their skin. Not being from either group, I personally cannot claim to understand this struggle, nor speak on their behalf as to personal afflictions caused by this. I have never been judged for my attire by the Muslim community, nor has my skin tone been a factor in my treatment, making it inappropriate for me to act as their voice on the issue. But this does not disclude me from realizing why this is a problem at an individual
and a group level, along with it being a perversion of the practice of Islam as an institutional body. Intersectionality is not a production of modern thought—though classifications may be—and has existed in humanity from the time of the Prophet. The issue is not the diversity of backgrounds that coexist in MSAs, but it is the recognition of these backgrounds and responses to them. I am also not here to propagate the ‘don’t judge me’ culture, which many times acts as a baseless justification for an unwillingness to change. Rather, this medium is to discuss the problems associated with pushing people out of the MSA space and potential solutions to this problem.

Starting first with the intersection of women and Islam, the common theme that arose was judging women on the physical hijab as outlined by the Qur’an. This runs both ways, as some women undergo discrimination based off of not adhering to guidelines, while others are pushed away for adhering too strictly. This interesting yet contradictory dichotomy exists because of a lack of firm understanding of Islam and its implementation. On one hand, women are being told their faith is incomplete for not abiding by the rules laid out to them, while others are criticized for abiding by them. The issue can be traced many times to practicing Islam as a culture rather than a religion. Culture many times plays identity politics, making an ‘us vs. them’ paradigm for the people to adopt. Islam does not preach an all-or-nothing view; it allows for growth, disagreement and conversation. With culture, a critical lens is not applied as liberally. There is more stagnation in a culture towards understanding foreign concepts. This delay makes space uncomfortable for those who do
not ascribe to the dominant lifestyle. Islam was not taught like this; the Prophet (PBUH) made sure to include those Muslims who varied in levels of practicing the guidelines that were spelled out for them. The masjid, which was the main form institutions took at the time, was open to all believers who walked in. The intersectionality of women and Islam balances on notions of morality as dictated by culture rather than Islam itself. This sort of intersectionality is more so limited in an insular way to the MSA, while the intersection of race and Islam influences the outside community as well.

The second issue that arises from not properly addressing intersectionality is the treatment of African American Muslims in Muslim spaces. What makes this unique from the discrimination of women is the origination of why this exists, along with the implications. The intersectionality of women and Islam is not properly understood due to a mixture of Qur’anic perversion and cultural preferences. Anti-black racism and colorism that exists in Muslim spaces is rooted nowhere in the Qur’an, and rises from the historical developments of colonialism and racist views held even prior to European invasions. It can mostly be attributed to jahilliyyah, which implants the notion of bigotry in the hearts of Muslims. This corrupts not only individual Muslims, but also the institutions that are set up by Muslims. Anti-black sentiment also pours beyond the boundaries of these institutes and affects the relations Muslims have with other groups. But first and foremost, those affected by this sort of mentality are the Black Muslims in these spaces. Long ago, Muslims of lighter skin looked down on their African American brethren based solely on how they looked; these
views, many times stemming from *jahiliyyah*, were deeply mixed in with the culture of the people who held these attitudes. This is still present now, where Black Muslims are either outside the folds or uncomfortably in the corners of Muslim institutions. Already many times a minority in the organization, now they are an unwanted demographic. This ideology does more than burn internal bridges; it influences external politics of the MSA. When issues of race arise where African Americans are robbed of their rights, it should be the Muslims who take an active role in reaffirming the rights of the oppressed. Yet, so many times, it is the Muslims who are silent on these issues. Here, one should, again, look at the life of the Prophet to deal with these issues. The treatment of Bilal (PBUH) by the Prophet was one of high esteem; he gave him the rank of *mu’adhin* of the *ka’ba*. The other important development to notice is the influence of Malcolm X into the psyche of the modern American Muslim identity. His role is so central to the creation of our identity in countless regards, and yet so many Muslims push away others because they share the same skin tone as Malcolm. Lastly, it should be noticed that other Muslims who are not of African descent but share dark skin colors are also incorporated into this bigotry. The irrationality of this is so ironic—it punishes those who follow this paradigm, yet look the same as those they demean.

These were the dominating conversations in the brief meeting at the Muslim caucus. It is clear that as a community across the UCs, Muslims are very much unincorporating of those who don’t fit into their idea of a Muslim. From women who don’t practice hijab to
Muslims with darker complexions, there is a complete lack of understanding of these
groups of Muslims. This undersight arises from the poor understanding of backgrounds
that exists in the minds of many Muslims. Notice, the Prophet never bent Islam itself to
allow it to make those around him comfortable. Instead, he softened the institutions and
hearts of other believers to make a space for those who were not fully practicing or were
rejected by larger society. Accepting them on the basis of their religion and potential for
growth, our Prophet never excluded those who accepted his message, and only helped
them grow. Now, it is up the Muslims across the UCs to help elevate their fellow Muslims
as the Prophet of Islam did.

A collection of photos from the Students of Color Conference this past November. All
photos courtesy of the ASUC student union.

jahiliyah - ignorance

mu’adh - person who makes the call to prayer

ka’ba - holiest shrine and site of pilgrimage for Muslims

Posted in Editorials and tagged with students of color conference, socc, uc berkeley, uc berkeley
socc, muslims at socc, msa, intersectionality, khwaja ahmed, diversity at uc berkeley, cal msa,
intersectionality at uc berkeley, students of color, activism at berkeley, african americans and
msa, black in the msa

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### Appendix H: Archive of Events Hosted by MMHI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Title</th>
<th>Date and Time</th>
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<td>Mon 6:15 PM PDT</td>
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<td>MMHI Open House</td>
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Mental health and being Muslim — can the two coexist?

BY RABIAH SHERE | SPECIAL TO THE DAILY CAL

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Walking in as a fall 2017 transfer student, the only thing I worried about was the UC Berkeley environment. It wasn’t so comforting having to hear your dream school described as stressful, cutthroat, intimidating and incredibly pressuring. And what scared me most was the question I consistently asked myself: “Will I survive?”

You see, four months before I moved to Berkeley and started the semester, I was diagnosed with anxiety and clinical depression. Two months before starting the semester, I had just became accustomed to my pills and was becoming so dependent on my therapist, who allowed me to release and express myself in ways I never thought I could. Usually, making time to see my therapist also forced me to make time for self-care right after, which meant an hour to myself at a café. But moving to Berkeley meant I wouldn’t have the opportunity to physically see my therapist and that I didn’t have a safe space to cry in; being far meant that I wouldn’t make that time for myself anymore. So when I asked myself, “Will I survive?” I wasn’t questioning if I would continue with the
school — I genuinely wondered if my depression was going to consume me and make me commit to a permanent decision that I wouldn’t even be alive to regret.

I wasn’t far from wrong. After a month of experiencing the environment, trying to adjust to change and attempting to find my place in the school, my anxiety was out the roof, and my depression was at an all-time low. After an incredibly draining depressive breakdown, I was told by a friend to look into the Muslim Mental Health Initiative, or MMHI, which she described as an organization that offers Muslim therapists for the Muslim community at UC Berkeley.

I was at a loss for words at the idea that an organization like this could exist. Why? Because mental health is a taboo topic in the Muslim community. It’s not talked about, it’s not acknowledged, and it’s very rare to find resources for mental health that are specifically targeted toward Muslims. At first, hearing about this made me weary, as I inquired whether the therapists were qualified or if they were just community members volunteering their time. I was concerned about whether or not they were taking mental health issues seriously and realized that a therapist is not just a job that anyone can do. After talking to my friend Yasmin Ahmed, a member of the organization, I realized that MMHI was everything I needed it to be.

It’s a campus organization that teams up with Khalil Center, a foundation that is able to provide social, psychological, familial, relational and spiritual wellness within the Muslim community through trained therapists. With the budget that MMHI is given from the school, the organization is able to financially support the services of Diba Ataie and Jabir Tarin, two therapists who work with Khalil Center. Both therapists offer their time, ears, empathy, advice and acceptance during individual and group therapy, which they call “Ummah Talks.” So essentially, MMHI is enabling a student’s mental health by giving access to therapists without cost or insurance requirements, and with the simplicity of booking an appointment online.
After learning about all of this and even experiencing a therapy session that I was able to schedule in between classes with Diba, the idea of this still sounded too perfect. As someone who’s getting medically treated from a psychologist and therapist through Kaiser Permanente, I know the frustration with booking an appointment, getting the nearest appointment scheduled and dealing with the expenses. As someone who takes antidepressants, I know that the pills are ineffective unless I’m talking my problems out and dealing with them through someone who is professionally trained. The idea sounded too good to be true. But luckily, it was true. On a campus that breathes the stress of others, on a campus that mentally exhausts you, on a campus with an environment so strenuous, Muslim students are taking their time and effort to provide an outlet for other Muslim students. At UC Berkeley, Muslim students are talking about depression, anxiety, mood disorders, eating disorders, etc. At UC Berkeley, Muslim students are taking taboo topics and making them into discussions. At UC Berkeley, Muslim students are making other Muslim students feel as if they’re not alone, they’re validating our emotions, and they’re telling us to take a break. At UC Berkeley, Muslim students are taking care of each other.

If we didn’t have MMHI, I don’t know if I would have stayed at this school. I don’t know where I would be or where my health would be. But what I do know, with the help of MMHI, is that I survived.

*Rabiah Shere is a senior media studies major at UC Berkeley.*

Appendix J: Identity Formation Flow Chart