Exploring Muslim University Students' Experiences and Identity Construction within HEI settings

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Abstract

This thesis provides an in-depth exploration of their multifaceted experiences through the lens of the novel Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework. Utilising a qualitative methodology which involves semi-structured interviews with 30 Muslim students aged 18-21 from two universities in the West Midlands region, this study captures the diversity and complexity of Muslim students' identities, challenges, and strategies within the university context.

The key findings revealed the centrality of faith in participants' lived experiences, manifesting across a spectrum of interpretations and practices that are intricately woven into their identity construction processes. As Muslim students navigate university life, they undergo transformations to negotiate their religious, cultural, and academic identities in secular institutional environments. The findings also highlight pervasive experiences of marginalisation and Islamophobia, ranging from microaggressions to systemic exclusion, which undermine their sense of belonging on campus. Nonetheless, Muslim students demonstrate resilience and agency, actively resisting marginalisation through community-building efforts, strategic self-representation, and embodied placemaking practices, carving out inclusive spaces that affirm their multifaceted identities.

These contrasting university environments shape Muslim students' experiences, support, engagement, and academic aspirations, underscoring the significance of the institutional factors. The MIIM framework developed in this thesis offers a nuanced understanding of the complex processes involved in Muslim students' identity formation and institutional engagement.

By amplifying Muslim students' voices and perspectives, this study challenges deficit narratives and highlights their creativity and resourcefulness in navigating university life. These findings provide invaluable insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners aiming to create truly inclusive and equitable environments that empower all students to thrive academically, socially, and spiritually, embracing religious pluralism as an integral part of the academic and social landscape.

Acknowledgments

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As I conclude this arduous and challenging research journey, I am deeply honoured to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my beloved brother Saif Abdo and my dearest friend Yusuf Ahmed. May their souls be cradled in eternal peace and happiness in the hereafter, forever wrapped in the warmth of divine grace. Their legacies shall endure as a beacon of hope and inspiration. As I dedicate this thesis to you, I find solace in knowing that your memories and legacies will eternally serve as my inspiration and motivation, as I navigate life's challenges (May Allah be pleased with you and may you be pleased with Him).

I pray that the knowledge and insights gained from this research will prove to be an immense blessing to humanity. May it contribute to the enrichment of knowledge and understanding in this field, and may it ignite a spark of passion and unyielding determination in others to chase their dreams.

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1   Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of Muslim students' identity construction and negotiation processes within British higher education institutions (HEIs). It outlines the guiding research aims, objectives, and questions and provides an overview of the research background, emphasising the study's significance and potential contributions to the field. Recognising the inherent subjectivity and co-constructed nature of knowledge production, it discusses the researcher's positionality and the qualitative interpretivist methodology employed. Finally, it provides an overview of the remaining chapters of this thesis.

1.1   Research Background and Context

The landscape of higher education in the UK has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, marked by an increasingly diverse student population and a growing recognition of the role of religious and spiritual identities in shaping student experiences (Guest et al., 2013; Stevenson, 2014; Jaspal, 2015; Guest, 2015; Falconer, 2017; Soysal, 2021). These changes have been influenced by factors such as internationalisation, the need for religious inclusion, and the reconfiguration of the institutional logic and purpose of universities (Stevenson, 2014; Jones, 2014; Walker, 2015). In this context, Muslim students form a significant and diverse community, encountering a complex interplay between religious, cultural, and academic identities (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Aune et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). This diversity reflects the rapid growth and diversification of the Muslim population in the UK, as evidenced by the 2021 Census, which revealed a 33% increase since 2011, reaching 3.87 million, or 6.5% of the total population in England and Wales (ONS, 2022). Consequently, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that Muslim students constitute a growing percentage of the UK student population, increasing from 9% in 2017/18 to 12% in 2021/22 (see table below) (HESA, 2022; McMaster, 2020).

Table 1- HESA – HE student enrolments by religious belief: Academic years 2017/18 to 2021/22[1]

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
No religion		50%	49%	48%	47%
Buddhist		1%	1%	1%	1%
Christian		33%	32%	32%	31%
Hindu		2%	3%	4%	5%
Jewish		0%	0%	0%	0%
Muslim		9%	10%	10%	12%
Sikh		1%	1%	1%	1%
Spiritual		1%	1%	2%	2%
Any other religion or belief		2%			

Despite the increase in Muslim student enrolment, these students continue to encounter challenges and barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. The 2021 census data revealed additional obstacles, particularly for those who were the first in their families to attend university (Coombs et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2018; Adamecz-Völgyi et al., 2021; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Reay,2021). While certain studies have highlighted positive experiences (Islam et, al.,2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), the majority of research points to a variety of challenges and disadvantages faced by Muslim students on campus. These challenges include underrepresentation, lower attainment rates, inadequate support, experiences of discrimination, and Islamophobia (Zempi & Tripli 2022; Abbas 2021; Danvers 2021; Gholami 2021; Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Shaffait 2019; Malik & Wykes 2018; Stevenson 2018; Boliver 2016).

The depiction of Muslims as 'high risk' or prone to radicalisation (Brown, 2020; Saeed, 2018) and Islam as conflicting with Western values (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018) significantly influence the construction of Muslim identities within educational settings (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Qurashi, 2018; Saeed, 2018; Brown, 2020). Such

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[1]"It has been compulsory for providers to return religious belief data to HESA since 2017/18 only. Data for 2017/18 is of poorer quality than 2018/19 onwards. For this reason, only data for 2018/19 onwards has been included" (HESA, 2022).

stigmatisation fosters an environment in which Muslim students may feel marginalised and excluded (Allen, 2023; Gholami, 2021; Akel, 2021; Guest et al., 2020; Shaffait, 2019; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Stevenson, 2018; NUS, 2018; Bagguley & Hussain, 2016). Additionally, research highlights that anti-radicalisation strategies such as the Prevent duty disproportionately target Muslims (Busher et al., 2017; O'Toole, 2022), influencing their experiences on campus.

Recognising the realities of marginalisation and Islamophobia, this study seeks to move beyond narratives of victimisation by underscoring the resilience and agency of Muslim students in affirming their identities and navigating challenges. Their counterstories illustrate community building, placemaking, and strategic self-representation, effectively countering exclusion (Pihlaja & Thompson 2017; Stevenson 2018; Islam et al. 2018; Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). These agentic responses challenge the assumption of Muslim passivity, revealing resilience anchored in cultural assets, faith traditions, and community-engaged approaches that are fundamental to students' persistence in universities. This thesis explores Muslim students' experiences and the ways in which they construct, negotiate, and articulate their identities in the context of British universities, embracing an intersectional approach that acknowledges the diversity and fluidity of their experiences.

1.2   Research Significance

The existing literature has provided valuable insights into various aspects of Muslim students' experiences in UK higher education institutions (HEIs), such as access and attainment (Khattab & Modood, 2018), discrimination (Brown & Saeed, 2015), and identity negotiation (Stevenson, 2018; Scott-Baumann, 2020). Despite growing recognition of the importance of religious diversity and inclusivity in HEIs, Muslim students continue to face significant challenges. These challenges include discrimination (Pihlaja & Thompson, 2017) and negative stereotyping (Malik & Wykes, 2018; Uddin et al. 2022), and the absence of inclusive policies (Scott-Baumann, 2020). These studies underscore the persistent barriers and difficulties Muslim students encounter in their university experience. Additionally, while recent studies have increasingly acknowledged the diversity within the Muslim student population and the intersection of various aspects of their identities, such as religion, gender, race, and social class (Mir 2019), there remains a need for a more

comprehensive and integrative approach that captures the complexity and nuances of their lived realities.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting an intersectional and inclusive methodology that foregrounds the voices and perspectives of Muslim students themselves. It introduces the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) as a novel conceptual framework that illustrates the complex interplay of identity, agency, social structures, and representations shaping the realities of Muslim students on university campuses. Although inspired by intersectionality theory, the MIIM develops a new analytical path tailored to scrutinise the unique identities and experiences of Muslim students. Therefore, the term used is 'intersectional' instead of 'intersectionality' [2] It integrates theoretical perspectives on agency and subjectivity (Mahmood, 2005), Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus, and field (1986), social representation theory (Moscovici, 1961, 1986), self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959), and spatial examinations of religion-secularity intersections (Knott, 2005; Kong, 2010). Through this multidimensional synthesis, the MIIM offers a conceptualisation of Muslim students' multidimensional identities and highlights the structural and cultural barriers they encounter within university contexts.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the growing body of literature on Muslim students' experiences in higher education by offering a more comprehensive and contextualised understanding of their identities and challenges. By focusing on the voices and agency of Muslim students and employing an innovative

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2 The decision to employ the term 'intersectional' rather than 'intersectionality' is motivated by the recognition that while the core tenets of intersectionality theory provide a valuable foundation, Muslim students' identities and lived experiences warrant a more nuanced conceptual framework (Mirza, 2013; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012). The term 'international' is intentionally utilized to underscore the intricate interplay of multiple identity dimensions that extend beyond the traditional categories of race, gender, and class (Meer, 2008). It encapsulates the interplay of cultural, religious, ethnic, and national identities that shape the self-conceptualisations and realities of Muslim students (Ramadan, 2021; Tariq, & Syed, 2018; Moosavi, 2015). By adopting this tailored terminology, the MIIM aims to capture the distinct complexities and contextualised negotiations that Muslim students navigate within educational settings and broader societal contexts (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Bhopal, 2018; Gao, 2018; Mirza 2018).This analytical shift acknowledges the utility of intersectionality while recognising the need for a more specialised lens to fully elucidate the multifaceted nature of Muslim student identities and experiences (Hopkins, 2011; Shah et al., 2021).(See chapter 4 for discussion on MIIM).

conceptual framework, this study seeks to generate new insights and recommendations that can inform policies, practices, and support services in higher education. Ultimately, this study aims to promote a more inclusive and equitable environment for Muslim students, one that recognises and values the diversity and complexity of their lived experiences.

1.3   Research Aims and Objectives

Considering the research context and significance, this study aims to explore the multifaceted experiences and identity construction of Muslim students in British HEIs. It seeks to investigate how Muslim students navigate and negotiate their religious identities, intersecting with other aspects of their lived realities amidst the opportunities and challenges posed by university settings. This study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. Explore the diverse ways in which Muslim students construct, negotiate, and express their faith in university settings.
2. To examine the influence of university life and student identity on Muslim students' identity construction and experience.
3.

To achieve these objectives, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Muslim students construct faith identities at universities?
2. How does university life and student identity affect Muslim students' identity construction?
3. How do they make sense of their university experiences as Muslim students?

By addressing these objectives and research questions, this study contributes to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of Muslim students' experiences and identity construction in British HEIs.

1.4   Researcher Positionality statement

As a researcher exploring the experiences and identity construction of Muslim students, it is crucial to acknowledge and reflect on my own positionality and how it shapes my approach to this study. As a British Muslim woman who has navigated the UK educational system as both a student and a staff member, my personal experiences and identity profoundly shape my approach to exploring Muslim students' experiences and identity construction within HEIs. My journey began from a place of personal curiosity and desire to understand how religious identity intersects with educational experiences after noticing a lack of Muslim student representation as an undergraduate in 2010. Although research exploring Muslim identities and experiences with HEIs has evolved significantly since then (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Song, 2012; Saeed, 2018; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2021; Aune et al., 2020; Ramadan, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Zempi & Tripli, 2022), which has ignited my motivation to contribute meaningful research in the area. Several years later, eager to explore this topic through postgraduate studies, I came across Ahmad's (2007) article, "Muslim Women's Experiences of Higher Education in Britain", which further shaped my research trajectory.

My journey intersects with the wider context of Muslim experiences in higher education, as highlighted by Scott-Baumann et al. (2020), providing valuable insights into the cultural and institutional dynamics that shape the lived realities of Muslim students. Being a practising Muslim, British, and a member of an ethnic minority has given me a unique perspective on the complexities of identity negotiation and cultural integration within the UK's higher education system. These lived experiences have provided me with a nuanced understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by Muslim students, enabling me to approach this research with empathy, sensitivity, and a deep commitment to amplifying their voices.

My interpretivist and constructivist stance further informed my research approach. The interpretivist lens allowed me to delve into the subjective realities of Muslim students (Cohen et al., 2017; Denscombe, 2017; Punch & Oancea, 2014), acknowledging the individuality and diversity of their narratives. Through a constructivist paradigm, I was able to explore the dynamic and contextual nature of identity construction, recognising the

influence of social, cultural, and institutional factors on Muslim students' sense of self (Burr, 2015; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012).

As an insider researcher, I am acutely aware of the potential benefits and challenges that arise from this positionality, such as facilitating trust and rapport with participants (Zine, 2006), while also navigating power dynamics and ethical responsibilities (Merriam et al., 2015). Therefore, throughout this research journey, I have sought to embrace a reflexive and dialogic approach that acknowledges the co-constructed nature of knowledge production and the importance of centering Muslim students' voices and agency (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Doucet & Mauthner, 2012; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). This involved practices such as bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012), memo-writing, and participant validation to ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in the data and were responsive to the diverse realities of Muslim students.

Furthermore, my commitment to social justice and transformative research paradigms (Mertens, 2008) has motivated me to approach this study as a form of "scholarly activism" (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2015) that seeks to challenge dominant deficit narratives and advocate for more inclusive and equitable practices in higher education. By amplifying Muslim students' voices and experiences, this study seeks to contribute to the scholarship that foregrounds Muslim students' agency, resilience, and resistance in the face of structural and cultural barriers.

Therefore, this thesis represents a convergence of my personal narrative, academic research, and commitment to social justice. It is an endeavour to bridge the gap between lived experiences and scholarly knowledge production, to centre Muslim students' voices and perspectives, and to contribute to a more inclusive and representative understanding of their realities within the UK higher education.

1.5   Research Approach and Methodology

Informed by the research aims, objectives, and my positionality as a researcher, this study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist epistemology. This methodological stance acknowledges the co-constructed nature of knowledge and recognises the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of the research

participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data collection method employed in this research was semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Muslim students from two universities in the West Midlands region of England. This approach allows for the exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives, while also providing flexibility to probe and engage in dialogue around emerging themes (Brinkmann, 2014; Rubin, 2012).

The data analysis process is guided by the principles of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the qualitative data. This approach enables a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of Muslim students' experiences and identities in the context of higher education.

1.6   Thesis outline

This thesis begins with an introduction, followed by a literature review in which previous literature is explored, followed by the methodology chapter, and three findings chapters that present and discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Chapter 1: This chapter provides an overview and background of the research topic. It outlines the research problem and gaps in the literature and introduces the aims and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2: The literature review begins by tracing the historical roots of the Muslim presence in Britain and highlighting the ongoing challenges of Islamophobia, discrimination, and the impact of counterterrorism policies on Muslim communities. It then examines existing research on Muslim identity negotiation, emphasising the complex interplay of religious, cultural, and social factors that shape the lived experiences of British Muslims in order to contextualise and demonstrate the relevance of studying Muslim students' experiences.

Chapter 3 outlines the broader philosophical underpinnings of this research and justifies its use of a qualitative interpretivist research method. It discusses the context of this study and the researcher's positionality.

Chapter 4: The Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) Conceptual Framework introduces and elaborates on the integrative conceptual framework developed for this research, drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex interplay of factors shaping Muslim students' experiences and identities.

Chapter 5: Navigating multiple identities: Muslim students' construction and representation of identity in a university setting. The first chapter highlights the complexity and nuances of Muslim students' experiences in constructing and expressing their identities in a university setting. It demonstrates the challenges Muslim students face in navigating various expectations and norms associated with their cultural and religious backgrounds, while also conforming to multiple identities that align with the university's norms and expectations. This

chapter emphasises the significance of Muslim identity in Muslim students' overall identity construction on campus and highlights the importance of acknowledging the agency and subjectivity of Muslim students in shaping their own identities.

Chapter 6: Navigating Cultural Capital, Social Capital, Habitus, and Field: Muslim students' experiences in British universities. This chapter discusses the experiences of Muslim students in HE, with a focus on the intersection of cultural capital, habitus, and social capital. This highlights the challenges that Muslim students face in accessing social and cultural capital due to their social class backgrounds and cultural norms. The analysis reveals the struggles that Muslim students from working-class backgrounds face in navigating the cultural norms and expectations of British HEIs. The chapter also highlights the role of institutional habitus in shaping the experiences of Muslim students on campus, which can either support or hinder these experiences and identities. Furthermore, the chapter emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing the unique types of capital (both social and cultural) that Muslim students bring to the institution, challenging the institutional habitus that reinforces inequality and marginalisation.

Chapter 7: The spatiality of Muslim students' experiences: The secular versus sacred space in the British university campus and its impact on Muslim identity. This last chapter explores the relationship between physical space, embodiment, and religious identity construction for Muslim students in British HEIs. Here the study highlights the challenges that Muslim students face in navigating their faith identity in relation to institutional policies and societal expectations. This emphasises the need for a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. The findings demonstrate that the dichotomy between public-private and secular-sacred is inadequate for capturing the multifaceted and fluid nature of religious identity and practice. Instead, the body plays a central role in enacting sacred spaces through embodied practices. This research reveals the significance of physical space, embodiment, and sense of belonging in the construction of religious identity and practise for Muslim students in British HEIs.

Chapter 8: The conclusion synthesises the key findings, discusses their implications, highlights the study's significant contributions, and provides recommendations for future research and

policy development. This chapter also includes personal reflections on the research journey and its transformative impact.

1.7 Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of Muslim students' experiences and identity construction within British higher education institutions. By adopting an intersectional and holistic approach, this study captures the complexity and diversity of Muslim students' lived realities and the ways in which they navigate and negotiate their religious identities within a university context.

The findings of this study have the potential to inform policies, practices, and support services in higher education, promoting a more inclusive and equitable environment that values and supports religious and cultural diversity. Furthermore, the introduction of the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) as a conceptual framework advances theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of religious and spiritual identities in higher education. By amplifying the voices and perspectives of Muslim students, this research contributes to a broader discourse on social justice, inclusion, and equity in higher education, challenging prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim students and promoting a more nuanced and accurate understanding of their experiences and aspirations.

2   Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the literature on Muslim students' experiences in British higher education institutions (HEIs), situating the research topic within the broader historical and sociopolitical context of Muslim communities in Britain.

It begins by tracing the historical roots of the Muslim presence in Britain, highlighting the ongoing challenges of Islamophobia, discrimination, and the impact of counterterrorism policies on Muslim communities. It then examines existing research on Muslim identity negotiation, emphasising the complex interplay of religious, cultural, and social factors that shape the lived experiences of British Muslims in order to contextualise and demonstrate the relevance of studying Muslim students' experiences.

Against this backdrop, the chapter discusses the experiences of Muslim students in British HEIs. It examines the challenges they face in navigating their religious identities on campus, including feelings of isolation, limited social space, self-censorship, and institutional neglect of their multifaceted needs. The review also discusses the impact of counterterrorism policies, such as the Prevent duty, on Muslim students, arguing that these policies have contributed to the securitisation and marginalisation of Muslim students. The chapter then discusses institutional responses to religious diversity within HEIs and explores the debate on policies and practices related to religious accommodation and literacy.

The chapter concludes by outlining the key insights drawn from the literature, addressing the main gaps and limitations motivating this study, and explaining how the thesis will build upon and expand the existing research. It argues for the importance of focusing on the diverse voices and experiences of Muslim students, exploring institutional dynamics within HEIs, and expanding existing concepts to develop a more nuanced understanding of their experiences in British higher education.

2.2   Research Approach and Eligibility Criteria

A literature search was conducted using various databases to identify relevant studies on this topic. The snowball approach was also used, and the references included in the literature review were employed to locate additional studies. The databases used included the British Education Index, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Taylor and Francis, SCOPUS, the Social Science Database, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Academic journals in relevant disciplines, such as religion, education, sociology, and anthropology, were also searched. The search terms included 'Muslim students', 'higher education/HE', 'identity', 'religion', 'Islamophobia', 'multiculturalism', 'religious literacy', and 'diversity', 'British Muslim', 'university students', 'sense of belonging', 'Muslim student identity', and 'Muslim students' experience'. To estimate the number of Muslim students in the UK, key governmental statistics portals were used, including the Office of National Statistics, HESA, Advance HE, Census 2011, and Census 2021. While the focus is mainly on student experience, relevant studies on the broader Muslim population in the UK have also been included where appropriate.

The research was subject to inclusion and exclusion criteria and was thematically arranged. The inclusion criteria for this literature review were peer-reviewed studies published in English that discussed Muslims or Muslims in higher education, their experiences, encounters, a sense of belonging, identity, representation, and identity construction.

2.3   Context of Muslims in Britain

The experiences of Muslim students in British HEIs cannot be understood in isolation from the broader history of the British Muslim communities. The history of the Muslim presence in Britain is complex and multifaceted, shaped by centuries of trade, colonialism, migration, and settlement (Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). Several scholars have documented that Muslims have been in the UK for several centuries, with interactions between Muslims and Britons occurring as early as the 8th century (Gilliat-Ray 2010; Matar 2009; Petersen 2008). However, it was not until the post-World War II period that large-scale Muslim migration to Britain began, primarily from former colonies in South Asia and the Caribbean (Ansari 2004; Matar 2008; Modood 2004; Gilliat-Ray 2010; Alrefai 2015). This migration was driven by a range of factors, including labour shortages in post-war Britain, which led to the formation of

a distinctive Anglo-Muslim community (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Ansari, 2018; Anwar 1979; Lewis, 2002). These factors wield significant influence over the experiences of Muslim students, offering valuable perspectives into the historical and sociopolitical backdrop that has moulded the wider Muslim community in Britain. Additionally, they shed light on the challenges and opportunities that Muslim students might face within higher education environments.

2.3.1 Victorian Era: Abdullah Quilliam and Early Conversions

The literature also shows that before the increased migration of Muslims, the late Victorian era marked a significant chapter in the history of Islam in Britain, with Abdullah Quilliam, a British convert, given the title Sheikh al-Islam of the British Isles by 1894 by the Ottoman sultan and caliph Abd al-Hamid II, because of the establishment of a Muslim identity and community within the country (Gilham 2017; Geaves, 2010; Knapp & Tilney, 2005). Quilliam's efforts, alongside other early converts such as Marmaduke Pickthall, illustrate the societal challenges of adopting a Muslim identity in predominantly Christian Britain. The establishment of the Liverpool Muslim Institute (LMI) by Quilliam in 1889, the first official Muslim organisation in the UK, signalled the beginning of a discernible Muslim minority in Britain, comprising both indigenous converts and immigrants (Gilham & Geaves, 2017; Singleton, 2017). However, as Quilliam's experience attests, Muslim converts faced discrimination and were pejoratively labelled as "becoming Turks", demonstrating the early "racialisation" of religious identity wherein conversion intersected with ethnic prejudices (Dajani, 2014).

Knott (2018) suggests that understanding this historical backdrop is crucial for discerning the evolving racialisation of Muslims in Britain. The post-9/11 era has added further complexity to the intersection of religious and racial identities, as highlighted by the author. While early 20th century individuals like Pickthall and Quilliam are less directly referenced today, their experiences establish "an association between 'Islam' and a "threatening outsider identity" (Birt, 2009:61) underlining the continuing societal perceptions of Islam as inherently foreign (Williams, 2023; Adida et al., 2014). This historical backdrop continues to influence contemporary discourses on Islam, identity, and belonging in Britain, shaping the narratives surrounding Muslim communities in the country. The experiences of Quilliam and his

contemporaries serve as a lens through which we can examine the complexities of religious conversion, racialisation, and societal integration in a multicultural context.

2.3.2 Post-World War II Migration

The literature on post-colonial and post-migration experiences also reveals the complex interplay between historical legacies, transnational ties, and the negotiation of multiple identities among British Muslims (Anwar 1979; Awan 2012). While remnants of colonial-era divisions among South Asian groups persist, ethnic backgrounds continue to influence aspects of identity within British Muslim communities (Bisin et al., 2008). Weller and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) discuss the complexity and diversity of the British Muslim population, emphasising how Britain's colonial history, years of migration, and development of indigenous white Muslim communities have contributed to the mosaic of global Muslim communities in the UK. This diversity challenges simple definitions of who British Muslims are and what it means to be a Muslim in Britain. It underscores the importance of acknowledging the various identities British Muslims may embrace, including their "Muslimness" and "Britishness". The challenge of navigating dual or multiple loyalties rooted in Britain's colonial history remains a significant issue for British Muslims, sparking debates on religious conservatism, cosmopolitan liberalism, and global Muslim solidarity (Jacobson, 1997; Meer, 2014; Saleh, 2021).

2.4 Paradigm Shift from Ethnic-Focused to Faith-Centred Approaches

The study of Muslim identities in the UK has undergone a significant transformation since the 1980s, marked by a shift from primarily ethnic-focused approaches to more faith-centred methodologies (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012; Vertovec, 2000; Elshayyal, 2021; Abbas, 2019). This transition reflects broader methodological and paradigmatic changes in social sciences, emphasising the complexity of identity and the importance of religion as a central aspect of individual and collective identity (Morgan, 2007). This change was also influenced by significant global events, particularly the Islamic revival movements and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which had an impact on Muslim communities worldwide, including in the UK (Hutnik, 1985; Bochner, 1982).

Hutnik (1985) and Bochner (1982) demonstrate how these events affected Muslim identity, emphasising the importance of religion in self-perception among South Asian Muslims in the UK. Hutnik's (1985) research indicates the significance of religion in the identity of South Asian Muslims in the UK, with 80% of South Asian Muslim participants listing Muslim identity as an important identity item. This finding is consistent with Bochner's (1982) study, which also reveals that Muslim identity is the strongest and most assertive among primary South Asian religious groups. Hutnik's findings are relevant because the study was conducted in 1985, prior to the 1989 Rushdie Affairs, which is often identified in the literature (Modood 1990) as a crucial moment in the development of British Muslim identity politics. This is supported by Fazakarley (2014), who argues that religion has been a significant factor in the claim making of Muslim communities in England since their settlement in the 1960s. These findings challenge the common perception that Muslim identity in Britain only gained prominence after the Rushdie affair event, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the historical context and the various factors shaping identity formation.

Nonetheless, the Rushdie Affair in 1989 and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 have been identified as key turning points that led to the intensification of anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination (Modood, 1990; Poynting & Mason, 2007; Choudhury, 2007), emphasising the significance of this event in catalysing a shift towards a more politicised Muslim identity. Asad (1990) provides an early analysis of the Rushdie Affair, emphasising its role in challenging British multiculturalism and identity. The author argues that the affair precipitated a political crisis in Britain, highlighting the tension between the freedom of expression and religious sensitivity. Despite significant Muslim protests, the government's refusal to ban the book was seen as a moment that alienated many Muslims and underscored the limits of British multicultural accommodation.

Echoing this sentiment, Modood (1992) emphasises that the Rushdie Affair highlights the delicate balance between upholding freedom of expression and respecting religious sensitivities in a multicultural context. This event significantly contributed to the sharpening of religious identities among Muslims in Britain, shifting the community's collective identity from ethnic to religious. The protests against "The Satanic Verses" not only marked a critical

point of contention, but also symbolised the Muslim community's growing presence and its active participation in public and political discourse. According to Peach (1990), this further catalysed the development of a politicised Muslim identity, particularly in the context of defending religious beliefs against perceived blasphemy. Saeed (2007) and Brown (2006) shed further light on the changing media and public perceptions of British Muslims in the aftermath of Rushdie Affairs, highlighting the emergence of stereotypical portrayals that contrast Muslim values with Western norms. These studies demonstrate the ways in which the politicisation of Muslim identity has contributed to the construction of a dichotomous narrative that positions Muslims as the 'other' in British society. McLoughlin (2002) situates these developments within the broader context of the resurgence of religion in public life and the increasing attention to 'Muslimness' both within the UK and globally.

Therefore, literature on the history of Muslim communities in Britain highlights that they face ongoing challenges and struggles in terms of social inclusion, cultural recognition, and political representation (Modood 2005; Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). For Muslim students in British higher education, this historical context is significant in shaping their experiences and identity. Many of them are descendants of earlier generations of migrants and their experiences are shaped by the complex history and dynamics of Muslim communities in Britain (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). At the same time, Muslim students navigate the specific institutional and cultural contexts of higher education, which have their own histories and challenges in terms of religious and cultural diversity (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). This shift towards studying faith as a central component of identity, rather than as a subset of ethnicity, is significant for this thesis as it provides a rationale for focusing on the religious identity construction and experiences of Muslim students in higher education.

This thesis fits within this broader context by contributing to the understanding of how Muslim students construct and negotiate their religious identities within the specific context of British higher education. It considers the historical, social, and political factors that shape Muslim identities in the UK. This research addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on the experiences of Muslim students, a specific subgroup within the British Muslim communities, and how they navigate the challenges and opportunities of higher education institutions. By

examining the religious identity construction and experiences of Muslim students, this study aims to provide insights into the ways in which faith, education, and identity intersect in the lives of Muslims in contemporary Britain.

2.5   Contemporary Muslim and British Identities

One of the earliest and most influential studies on Muslim identity formation in Britain is Jessica Jacobson's "Islam in Transition: Religion and Identity among British Pakistani Youth" (1998). Jacobson's ethnographic study of young British Pakistanis highlights the complex ways in which they negotiate their religious and cultural identities in the context of British society. She found that young Muslims draw on a range of cultural resources, including Islamic teachings, family and community traditions, and broader British cultural norms, in constructing their identities. Subsequent research has explored the diverse and dynamic nature of Muslim identities in Britain.   Key themes include the experiences of specific subgroups, such as South Asian Muslims and covert or crypto-Muslims, revealing the heterogeneity of Muslim experiences in Britain (Brah 1996; Hussain & Bagguley 2005; Puwar & Raghuram 2020; Moosavi 2014).

The literature also highlights the role of cultural heritage, national context, sectarian affiliations, personal life experiences, societal interactions, and broader sociopolitical contexts (Ramadan, 2004; Phillips, 2014; Manning and Roy, 2010). Ramadan, in "Western Muslims and the Future of Islam" (2004), focuses on the personal struggles of Muslims in the West as they reconcile multiple identities. Amin (2019) introduced the concept of British Muslims navigating between individualism and traditional authority, leading to 'do-it-yourself' identities in modernity. This suggests a self-fashioning process, in which individuals blend traditional and modern influences to create unique identity pathways. The negotiation of British Muslim belonging, encompassing the intersectional experience of societal oppressions, affects their sense of shared and individual identity (Karolia & Manley, 2020). The interweaving of the religious, ethnic, and civic dimensions underscores the ongoing negotiation of inclusion. Driezen, et al. (2021) examine the reconciliation of faith and social identity among British-Muslim youth, focusing on how they balance their religious identification with the broader cultural imperatives of individualism. Their findings highlight

the complex balancing act required to maintain a dignified self-presentation across different audiences, illustrating the challenges of upholding religious identification while adhering to expectations of individualism.

The intersection of Muslim identity and gender has received substantial scholarly attention, with examinations of the multifaceted lived experiences of Muslim women in Britain (Dwyer, 2000; Afshar, 2008; Ahmad, 2007; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Zempi, 2019; Brown, 2015; Phoenix, 2019). For example, Cheruvallil-Contractor (2012) provides a comprehensive analysis of the intersection of gender, religion, culture, and ethnicity in shaping the lives of Muslim women in Britain. Through in-depth research and interviews, the author explores the ways in which Muslim women navigate their identities within the context of a multicultural society while negotiating their religious beliefs and cultural practices. Cheruvallil-Contractor (2012) highlights the agency and resilience of Muslim women, challenging the monolithic narratives that often portray them as oppressed or marginalised. Cheruvallil-Contractor also emphasises the importance of recognising diversity within the Muslim community and the need to move beyond simplistic stereotypes. Furthermore, I analyse literature on these topics which looks into the influence of social, political, and economic factors on the lives of Muslim women in Britain. For example, Phoenix (2019) highlights the challenges faced by these women, including microaggressions and tensions between gender, ethnicity, and religious identities. Bhimji (2009) and Essers (2009) focus on the agency and empowerment of these women, particularly in religious spaces and entrepreneurial contexts. Sartawi (2012) and Fatah (2020) further explore the negotiation of Islamic identities in the face of cultural changes and the challenges faced by unveiled Muslim women in the workplace. Additionally, research into gendered experiences within Muslim communities reveals evolving attitudes towards education and gender roles. Hopkins (2006) and Alexander (1998) discuss the shifting perceptions of gender roles among Muslims in the UK, pointing to a generational shift towards more egalitarian views on education and gender. This shift has significant implications for educators urging them to prioritise gender equity and foster an environment supportive of the aspirations of Muslim students. Bartkowski (2003) and Ahmad (2007) provide comparative and individual perspectives on the negotiation of gender, power, and identity within religious communities, and the impact of higher education on identity construction.

Another important theme in the literature on Muslim identity formation in the West is generational difference, particularly in relation to Muslims in the UK. Many Muslim migrants who arrived primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, saw their stay as temporary and yearned to return to their countries of origin. Anwar (1979) argues that this belief or "myth of return" served as a coping mechanism, allowing migrants to maintain a strong connection to their cultural and religious roots while navigating the challenges of life in a new country. Castles and Kosack (1973) note that the myth of return was a common feature among many migrant communities in post-war Europe. However, despite their intentions, most first-generation migrants never returned home permanently (Anwar 1979; Miles, 1984). As they settled, started families, and became more established in Britain, the idea of return became increasingly distant. This process of settlement and the gradual abandonment of the myth of return have significant implications for the identity formation of subsequent generations. Duderija (2007) emphasises the salience of religious identity as a cornerstone of the first-generation migrant experience, while Maliepaard (2010) notes their efforts to preserve cultural practices as a means of maintaining connections to their homeland. These findings emphasise the centrality of cultural and religious identity in the lives of first-generation Muslim migrants.

The experiences of subsequent generations of Muslims in the UK, born and raised in the country, reveal a more complex process of identity negotiation (Younis 2018; Maliepaard 2010). Younger Muslims navigate a bicultural or multicultural identity, balancing familial expectations with the norms of British society. Their identities are hybridised, reflecting a broader set of influences from education, media, and peer interactions (Hussain and Bagguley, 2005; Dwyer, 2000). Jacobson (1997) argues that for many young British Muslims, Islam becomes a key source of identity, offering a sense of belonging and a way to navigate the complexities of being a minority in a Western society.

This shift towards hybridised identities is accompanied by a decline in traditional ethno-cultural and religious practices and an increased intertwining of religious and ethnic identities (Fadil, 2017; Dunne, 2020). These hybridised identities reflect the agency and creativity of

young Muslims in adapting their faith to the contexts in which they live, challenging the notion that Islam is incompatible with Western values and lifestyles.

Building on this concept, Jeldtoft (2011) introduces the concept of "everyday lived Islam" to describe how young Muslims in Europe navigate their religious identities in the context of their daily lives. Rather than adhering to a strict orthodox interpretation of Islam, these individuals adapt and reinterpret religious practices to fit their personal circumstances and the demands of Western society. This might involve modifying prayer routines to accommodate work or school schedules or finding alternative ways to express piety and devotion that are more compatible with modern lifestyles. Jeldtoft argues that this flexibility and adaptability are crucial for the successful integration of Muslims into European societies, as it allows them to maintain their religious identity while fully participating in the wider culture.

Similarly, Herding (2013) examines the emergence of "pop-Islam" in Germany, a phenomenon characterised by the fusion of Islamic values and Western popular culture. Young German Muslims are increasingly expressing their religious identity through music, fashion, and other forms of cultural production that blend elements of both traditions. This might involve the creation of Islamic-themed rap music that addresses issues of faith and identity or the development of modest fashion brands that allow young Muslim women to express their style while adhering to religious dress codes. Herding suggests that cultural hybridisation is a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes and promoting a more positive image of Islam in the West.

Further expanding on the theme of hybridised identities, the concept of "EuroIslam" represents a broader attempt to articulate a distinct European Muslim identity that is compatible with the values and norms of Western societies (Al Sayyad and Castells, 2002; Ramadan, 2004). This involves a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings and practices considering contemporary realities, as well as a recognition of the diversity and pluralism of Muslim communities in Europe (Yıldız, 2012; Karim, 2017; Bowen, 2014). Advocates of EuroIslam argue that it is possible to be both fully Muslim and fully European and that the two identities are not mutually exclusive (Karić, 2002, Nielsen, 2000). They emphasise the need for

a more contextualised and flexible approach to Islamic jurisprudence that considers the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Muslims in the West (Joppke, 2014; Salvatore, 2004).

The fusion of Islamic values with mainstream Western culture is evident in various domains such as fashion, music, and digital engagement. Lewis (2015) explores the emergent cross-faith transnational youth subculture of modest fashion, highlighting how young Muslim women in Western contexts engage with mainstream fashion trends while adhering to Islamic principles of modesty. By creating their own fashion brands and participating in online communities, these women challenge the notion that religious dress is oppressive or limiting and assert their right to express their style on their own terms. Similarly, O'Brien (2013) and Gazzah (2009) discuss how Muslim youth in America and Europe use hip-hop music to manage the cultural tension between religious piety and profane pop culture forms, forging a collective identity performance that blends religious commitment with youthful secularity, termed "cool piety." These musical expressions allow young Muslims to assert their faith in a way that is relevant and meaningful to their peers while also challenging negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

The rise of digital media has created new opportunities for Muslim identity formation and expression. Scholars (Zaid, 2022; Warren, 2018; Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2016; Wheeler, 2014; Sands, 2010;) highlight how social media platforms, blogs, and online forums have become important spaces for young Muslims to connect with one another, share their experiences, and explore their faith in new ways. These digital spaces allow for the creation of transnational Muslim communities that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries, fostering a sense of solidarity and a shared identity among young Muslims worldwide. They also provide a platform for challenging dominant narratives about Islam and Muslims, as well as challenging traditional religious authorities (Zaid, 2022), while also advocating for more nuanced and diverse representations of Muslim identities.

Moreover, the literature emphasises that the process of negotiating hybridised identities can be complex and fraught with challenges, as young Muslims navigate the often-competing demands of their religious and cultural heritage and the norms and values of the secular

societies in which they live. This can lead to tensions and conflicts within families and communities, as well as feelings of marginalisation and exclusion from both Muslim and non-Muslim circles.

Kibria (2008) examines the intergenerational dynamics of identity formation among Bangladeshi American Muslims, highlighting the tensions that can arise as younger generations challenge traditional gender roles and cultural norms. She notes that while many young Muslim women embrace the values of gender equality and individual autonomy, they often face resistance and criticism from older family members, who see these values as a threat to traditional Islamic principles. This can lead to conflicts over issues such as dating, marriage, and career choices as young women struggle to balance their personal aspirations with the expectations of their families and communities. Similarly, Ramji (2007) explores the challenges faced by young British Muslims in reconciling their religious identity with the demands of a secular society. She notes that many young Muslims feel pressure to conform to Western norms and values, particularly in the workplace and social settings, while also maintaining their commitment to Islamic principles and practices. This can lead to feelings of confusion and ambivalence, as individuals struggle to find ways to express their faith in a manner that is both authentic and socially acceptable. Ramji argues that this process of negotiation is further complicated by the negative stereotypes and discrimination that Muslims often face in British society, which can make it difficult for them to assert their identity in a positive and confident manner.

Bectovic (2011) introduced the concept of "double otherness" to describe the unique challenges faced by young Muslims in Denmark, who often experience marginalisation and exclusion from both their own communities and the broader society. She notes that many young Danish Muslims feel caught between the two worlds, struggling to find acceptance, and belonging in either sphere. Within their own communities, they may face criticism and ostracism for adopting "Western" values or lifestyles, while in the broader society, they are often viewed with suspicion and mistrust due to their religious and cultural background. This can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation as individuals struggle to find a sense of identity and purpose in a context that seems hostile or indifferent to their existence.

The challenges of negotiating hybridised identities extend beyond the individual level, impacting not only the broader Muslim community but also its relationship with society at large. As Modood (2010) notes, the process of identity formation among young Muslims is often shaped by the political and social contexts in which they live, including the prevalence of Islamophobia and discrimination. This can lead to a sense of collective grievance and alienation, as Muslims feel that their identity and values are threatened by dominant culture. Simultaneously, the emergence of hybridised identities can also be seen as a challenge to traditional forms of authority within Muslim communities, with young people asserting their right to interpret and practise their faith in new and innovative ways.

Despite these challenges, scholars have highlighted the potential benefits of hybridised identities for both individuals and communities. Gest (2015) argues that the process of negotiating multiple identities can lead to greater resilience, adaptability, and creativity as individuals learn to navigate complex social and cultural landscapes. Likewise, the emergence of new forms of Muslim identity can also serve as a catalyst for positive change and reform within Muslim communities, with young people challenging traditional hierarchies and advocating for greater inclusivity and diversity. Hopkins (2011) provides a nuanced exploration of the ways in which young British Muslims negotiate their identities at both national and religious levels. Through qualitative interviews, he discusses the concept of being "British in a Muslim way", highlighting the strategies employed by individuals to assert their commonality with British non-Muslims while also emphasising their religious distinctiveness. This study underscores the importance of recognising the diversity and dynamism of Muslim identities in the UK and the need for a more contextualised understanding of their experiences and perspectives. Hopkins argues that British Muslims' ability to construct hybrid identities that incorporate both their national and religious belonging is a testament to their resilience and adaptability. By asserting their commonality with British non-Muslims while also maintaining their religious distinctiveness, they can create a sense of belonging and purpose that is unique to their experience as a minority group in the UK. This process of identity negotiation can help challenge essentialist and monolithic understandings of Islam, highlighting the diversity and dynamism of Western Muslim communities.

This literature review underlines the diversity of British Muslim experiences and the imperative to recognise the nuanced contextual realities they navigate in forging their multidimensional identities and sense of belonging as a minority group in the UK. Therefore, by bringing together insights from researchers studying various aspects of Muslim identity, such as gender (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Phoenix, 2019), generational differences (Younis, 2018; Maliepaard, 2010), and cultural hybridisation (Lewis, 2015; O'Brien, 2013).

Thus, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of Muslim students' experiences in British higher education. It employs an intersectional approach that acknowledges the intricate interplay of religion, culture, and the university environment in shaping their identity negotiations. By focusing on the nuanced contextual realities navigated by Muslim students, this thesis seeks to provide a more holistic and in-depth analysis of their experiences, challenges, and strategies for belonging in the UK.

2.5.1   Muslim Identities and Multiculturalism in Britain

The negotiation of hybridised identities by British Muslims, as explored in the preceding section, is intertwined with evolving policies and debates surrounding multiculturalism in Britain. As Muslim communities are asserting their distinct religious and cultural identities in British society, questions are raised about how to effectively accommodate this diversity within a multicultural framework (Meer and Modood, 2016; Franceschelli, 2015; Sartawi, 2012; Hopkins, 2011; Abbas, 2007). The emergence of multicultural frameworks in Britain in the late 1960s marked a pivotal acknowledgement of efforts to accommodate cultural diversity within society. While aimed at promoting equality, cultural maintenance, and anti-discrimination, the conceptual clarity and effectiveness of these policies have remained the subject of ongoing scholarly debate (Modood, 2001, 2007). The increasing visibility and assertiveness of Muslim communities introduced novel dimensions to these discussions, particularly regarding the accommodation of religious identities alongside ethnocultural factors (Fleming, 2007). The complex relationship between these communities and the principles of British multiculturalism has been marked by tensions between cultural preservation and integration as well as concerns over social cohesion, national identity, and security. Additionally, the post-9/11 era, marred by heightened security concerns following

the 2005 London bombings, further complicated this landscape. Policy emphasis shifted from anti-discrimination efforts towards "community cohesion" and combating inequalities through individual responsibility (Wadia, 2018). Concurrently, the rise of Islamophobia and doubts surrounding the compatibility of Muslim identities with British values pose both theoretical and practical challenges to secular multiculturalism (Modood 2010; Abbas 2019).

Modood has been a pivotal figure in theorising multiculturalism as a civic concept that encompasses diversity and equality through the principles of inclusive citizenship, non-discrimination, and recognition of religious identities (Modood, 2007). He argues that British Muslims navigate the dual aspirations of asserting their distinct cultural and religious identities while striving for integration and civic participation. This viewpoint resonates with Meer's (2010) exploration of the intricacies surrounding citizenship and belonging within the British Muslim context. Meer highlights the tensions between the desire for recognition and the challenges of navigating multiple identities, underscoring the need for inclusive policies that acknowledge the diversity within Muslim communities. Meer (2010) also critiques the implementation of multicultural policies, arguing that they are often skewed towards ethnic/racial concepts of identity, thereby failing to adequately recognise and incorporate the religious identity and needs of Muslim communities. According to Meer, this marginalisation has fuelled the rise of Muslim political consciousness aimed at securing better representation and accommodation within the multicultural framework of Britain. Both Meer and Modood propose a revised theoretical framework that emphasises multiculturalism as a civic concept centred on religious recognition and pluralism. This approach seeks to reconcile diverse identities within Muslim communities with the broader aim of multiculturalism, advocating a model of integration that does not necessitate the dilution of religious or cultural distinctiveness. Meer calls for multicultural policies to move beyond narrow ethnicity/race-based approaches to better accommodate religious identities and anti-discrimination claims (Meer 2010). This echoes Modood's arguments for multiculturalism to evolve as a "civic idea" allowing Muslims and other faith groups equal cultural citizenship (Modood 2007, 2020).

However, multiculturalist critics argue that this has weakened social cohesion by fostering minority segregation and undermining national identity and values (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010; Joppke, 2004; Putnam, 2007; Goodhart, 2019). Some contend that multiculturalist

policies in the UK have led to the self-segregation and radicalisation of minority groups, particularly Muslims, challenging a common British identity (Brown 2015; Abbas 2015; Alam 2013; Bonino 2013; Rehman 2007). This has resulted in the stigmatisation of Muslim communities as 'suspect' groups, amplifying Islamophobic rhetoric in the media and academia (Alam, 2013; Bonino, 2013; Rehman, 2007). These policies have created a sense of crisis and securitisation, leading to a breakdown in trust between the state and British Muslims (Alam, 2013; Rehman, 2007). The concept of 'radicalisation' has been used to view Muslim minorities through a biassed lens, further contributing to their stigmatisation (Kundnani 2012). Counter-terrorism policies have also reinforced the government of society in discrete and divided ethno-religious groups rather than promoting assimilation or alienation (Ragazzi, 2016; Hussain & Bagguley, 2016).

Critics, such as David Cameron[3], blamed multiculturalism for the separation and segregation of communities, accusing it of encouraging different cultures to live separate lives and failing to provide a unified vision of society (Cameron, 2011). These criticisms have shifted the focus from ethnicity to a homogenised "Muslim" identity, leading to the targeting of Muslims through counter-terrorism policies (Modood & Ahmad, 2007; Hussain & Bagguley, 2016). This was followed by harsher criticism by the Labour government and then by the coalition government, which blamed multiculturalism for the separation and segregation of communities, causing ethnic minority communities to lead parallel lives (Lewis & Craig, 2014; Redclift, 2014).

Despite these criticisms, some scholars argue that the UK has adopted a pragmatic multiculturalist approach to accommodate minority religions within an established

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[3] Cameron (2011) speech, connecting multiculturalism with terrorism and asserting that:

"In the UK, some young men find it difficult to identify with the traditional Islam practised at home by their parents, whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to modern Western countries. However, these young men also find it hard to identify with Britain because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and from the mainstream. We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. we have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values" (Cameron; 2011; PM's speech at Munich Security Conference). https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference#:~:text=But%20these%20young%20men%20also,and%20apart%20from%20the%20mainstream.

Anglicanism context. Modood (2010) refers to this as "moderate secularism", a model aimed at respecting and recognising the positive differences and diversity of religious groups while fostering a sense of belonging and citizenship through dialogue, plural representation, and reform of national identities. While acknowledging tensions and contradictions between multiculturalism and counter-terrorism agendas, scholars like O'Toole et al. (2013) and Modood (2010) argue that multiculturalism is evolving and adapting to new realities and demands. Recent studies suggest that multiculturalism is shifting towards a more civic form that promotes religious pluralism and equal citizenship (Dobbernack et al., 2015; Dobbernack et al., 2022).

In summary, the literature on multiculturalism and Muslim identities in Britain reveals key tensions between recognition and integration. Modood (2007) and Meer (2010) argue for a civic multicultural framework that accommodates diverse communities, while critics claim multiculturalism fosters segregation and undermines social cohesion. These debates provide context for understanding Muslim students' experiences in higher education. Recent scholarship indicates a shift towards civic and pluralistic multiculturalism (Dobbernack et al., 2023; Modood et al., 2022), with ongoing debates informing discussions on Muslim students' experiences (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

This thesis seeks to contribute to these debates by exploring the experiences of Muslim students in higher education through an intersectional perspective. By examining how Muslim students navigate their religious identities within the specific context of the university, it aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of recognition, accommodation, and integration that shape their experiences. The thesis also considers the ways in which universities respond to the challenges of accommodating religious diversity within a secular multicultural framework and the impact of these responses on Muslim students' sense of belonging and inclusion on campus. By addressing these issues, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between multiculturalism, Muslim identities, and higher education in contemporary Britain.

2.6   The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Communities in the UK

Islamophobia has profound consequences for Muslim communities across the UK, influencing various facets of their daily lives and leading to widespread social exclusion and discrimination. This phenomenon is evident in sectors such as employment, housing, and education (Allen 2010; Abbas & Awan 2015). Notably, Jones and Unsworth (2020) underscore the normalisation of Islamophobic sentiments within the British public sphere, revealing that Muslims are often rated unfavourably. Their findings indicate the increasing normalisation of Islamophobic sentiments in the British public sphere. In their survey, they found that Muslims were rated as the second-least-liked group, with approximately a quarter explicitly negative views of Muslims (Jones & Unsworth, 2022:7), that Islamophobia, contrary to some perceptions, is notably prevalent among middle- and upper-class individuals. This reveals a significant correlation between socioeconomic status and negative attitudes towards Muslims. This demographic appears more likely to endorse conspiracy theories regarding Islam's influence on British culture and society, challenging the often-oversimplified portrayals of prejudice that predominantly emanate from lower socio-economic groups. Moreover, the study emphasises that Islamophobia cuts across various demographic lines, including age, gender, and political affiliations, with older individuals, men, working-class respondents, and those who identify with Conservative and Leave positions consistently exhibiting higher levels of prejudice not only against Muslims, but also against various minority groups.   Similar to Jones and Unsworth's (2022) findings, national surveys and organisational reports corroborate these findings, indicating that a significant portion of the British population harbours negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims, with some Conservative Party members viewing Islam as a threat to the British way of life (YouGov 2021; Ipsos MORI 2016). Alarmingly, data from Tell MAMA (2022) and the Home Office (2022) reveal a substantial increase in Islamophobic hate crimes, particularly following terrorist attacks and heated debates on immigration and multiculturalism, making Muslims the most vulnerable religious demographic.

Islamophobia intersects with multicultural debates on accommodating Muslim religious identities, contributing to the stigmatisation of Muslims as "suspect" groups (Keddie et al., 2019; Moosavi, 2014; Allen et al., 2013). This stigmatisation undermines the sense of belonging in Muslim communities, affects identity formation processes, and impacts overall

well-being in various contexts (Allen et al., 2013). Manifestations of Islamophobia, such as hate crimes, employment discrimination, and negative media portrayals, perpetuate stereotypes and exclude Muslims from public life (Ahmed et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2021; Allen, 2010; Mahr & Nadeem, 2019; Atnashev, 2016; Abbas, 2022; Runnymede Trust, 2017).

2.7 The Historical Roots and Contemporary Rise of Islamophobia

Alain Quellien's 1910 reference in "La politique musulmane dans l'Afrique occidentale" is frequently cited for introducing the term 'islamophobie'. Instances of its usage can be found as early as 1904 by Abdul Hadi el Maghrabi (Ivan Aguéli) in "Il Convito" and even in an 1877 edition of "The Atheneum", predating Quellien (Martijn, 2023). The etymology of "Islamophobia" fuses "Islam" with the Greek suffix "phobia," indicating an irrational fear or aversion, yet this simplification might not fully encapsulate the systemic and complex nature of anti-Muslim sentiments (Bleich, 2012). In modern discourse, Georges Chahati Anawati reintroduced "Islamophobia" in a 1976 article, heralding its resurgence amid growing interactions between Western and Islamic worlds. The 1990s witnessed the term's incorporation into the Arabic language as 'ruhāb al-islām' (رُهاب الإسلام), signifying its global recognition and contextual adoption within the Muslim world (Zahid, 2023). Its role in characterising discourse that reinforces the negative depictions of Islam and Muslims, along with linguistic Islamophobia, emphasis its psychological and societal implications (Bouma 2011; Mohideen 2008). Despite the modern spread of Islamophobia, this phenomenon can be traced back to the Middle Ages, particularly to the Crusades (11th-13th centuries) and expulsion of Muslims from Andalucía in the late 15th century (Jotischky, 2022; Green 2019; Kunst et al., 2012; Tolan, 2008). These events shaped European perceptions of Islam, casting Muslims as dangerous invaders and adversaries (Daniel 1993; Mastnak 2002; Tolan 2008; Bangstad 2022). The animosity towards Islam was exacerbated during the 19th century as European powers colonised much of the Muslim-majority world (Bangstad, 2022; Green 2019). Orientalist narratives, as described by Edward Said (1978), were employed to depict Islam as primitive, uncivilised, and incompatible with Western values, shaping Western views and policies towards Muslim-majority regions (Elmarsafy, 2021; Kerboua, 2016; Kundnani,

2014; Kunst et al., 2012). These historical events and narratives have contributed to the development and perpetuation of Islamophobia in contemporary times.

These historical narratives evolved into Samuel Huntington's (1993) "Clash of civilizations" framework, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War and the events of 9/11, 7/7, and recent ISIS-inspired attacks has resulted in a surge of Islamophobic incidents (Zempi, 2019; Green, 2019; Abass, 2005; Vertovec, 1997; Bazian, 2018). Despite widespread criticism for essentialising and homogenising diverse cultures and reflecting problematic Orientalist tendencies (Haynes, 2019; Orsi, 2020; Hobson, 2014; al-Ahsan, 2009), this framework has influenced political dynamics and foreign policy decisions, contributing to the marginalisation and securitisation of Muslim communities (Green, 2019).

Media plays a significant role in perpetuating Islamophobic narratives, reinforcing stereotypes, and normalising prejudice against Muslims (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Moore et al., 2008). The media's emphasis on the assimilation of Muslims into "British values" further contributes to the depiction of Muslims as antithetical to Britishness (Alkhammash, 2020; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Neckels et al., 2010). This amalgamation of misrepresentation, hostile political rhetoric, and stigmatisation fosters 'moral panic' towards Islam and Muslims in Britain, exacerbating public prejudice and Islamophobia (Gale, 2013; Kennedy-Turner et al., 2023; Allen, 2010). The phenomenon extends into the digital realm with a notable increase in online hatred, particularly on social media platforms (Awan, 2019; Awan, 2014). The online dissemination of Islamophobic content (Ekman, 2015) and its co-option by mainstream political parties and the media (Ansari, 2012) have contributed to its normalisation and spread. This was exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated Islamophobia in the UK, leading to increased discrimination and health inequities faced by Muslim communities (Shahid, 2022; Chandra, 2021).

Political rhetoric also shapes public perceptions of Muslims and Islam, with some politicians employing Islamophobic tropes to appeal to anti-Muslim sentiments (Moosavi, 2014; Schmuck et al., 2017). The rise of far-right movements and populist politics has further contributed to the spread of Islamophobia, framing Muslims as a threat to national identity and security (Hafez, 2014; Oztig, 2020). For example, the emergence of Islamophobia,

particularly in Europe, has been significantly influenced by far-right movements, nationalist ideologies, and populist politics (Benveniste 2016; Oztig 2020). These movements perpetuate negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, with some employing Islamophobic populism as their electoral strategy (Oztig 2020). For instance, former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, during his tenure as Mayor of London, made controversial remarks about Muslim women wearing the niqab, likening them to "letterboxes" and "bank robbers."[4] Such statements contribute to the dehumanisation and marginalisation of Muslims particularly Muslim women, who are often portrayed as oppressed or dangerous in Western media and political discourse (Perry 2014, Zempi 2019).

Scholars contend that the problematic framing of the "War on Terror" and counter-extremism policies such as Prevent have disproportionately targeted Muslim communities, labelling them as a "suspect group" (Abbas, 2015; Alam, 2013; Thomas, 2020; Awan, 2012; Thomas, 2014; Moran, 2021; Stanford, 2016; Parker, 2019; Wainaina, 2018). Researchers have also emphasised the negative impact of controversial surveillance measures, such as the Project Champion in Birmingham, which predominantly subjected Muslim neighbourhoods to extensive CCTV monitoring (Awan et al. 2018). Such targeted securitisation has been found to erode trust between Muslim communities and authorities, undermining social cohesion (Brown & Saeed, 2014). The mandatory monitoring of students and staff in educational institutions under Prevent has further reinforced the perception of being a "suspect community" (Coppock, 2014; Abbas, 2007). Moreover, the literature reveals how Islamophobic attitudes have infiltrated key institutions such as education. The "Trojan Horse" scandal in Birmingham schools, which alleged an Islamist plot to take over the education system, has had profound consequences for Muslim communities in the UK. The media's sensationalism surrounding the affair has intensified societal divisions and amplified Islamophobia (Awan, 2018; Abbas, 2017). This has resulted in heightened anxiety and deflated Muslim identities among students who feel unjustly labelled as extremists (Bi, 2020). Scholars argue that this was not an isolated incident but rather a manifestation of broader

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[4] Despite widespread criticism and accusations of Islamophobia, Johnson refused to apologize for his comments. He argued that his remarks were part of a broader debate on religious attire and freedom of expression. This incident prompted an internal Conservative Party investigation and a significant public and political backlash. For more details see full article here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45096519

uncertainties regarding the place of Muslim identities in the public sphere (Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018; Abbas, 2017). It is important to note that much of the research on prevention and counterterrorism policies focuses on discourse analysis, examining how these policies construct and perpetuate Islamophobic narratives and practices. This thesis represents an important area of research, which is more interested in exploring the lived experiences of Muslim students and how they navigate and resist these discourses and practices in their everyday lives. Therefore, it will engage with relevant literature to provide context and background but will focus primarily on the voices and experiences of Muslim students themselves. The specific impacts of counter-terrorism policies on Muslim students' experiences in higher education will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter (See section 2.6.2).

In response to the growing concerns about Islamophobia, academic research has increasingly focused on exploring its multifaceted impact on Muslim communities by examining the intersections of gender, ethnicity, race, and geography (Keddie et al., 2019; Moosavi, 2014; Allen et al., 2013). This thesis aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Islamophobia affects various aspects of Muslim students' lives, including their sense of belonging, identity formation, and overall well-being. By examining these intersections, the thesis aims to shed light on the complexities of Islamophobia and its consequences on Muslim communities in different contexts.

2.8   Defining and Conceptualising Islamophobia

Despite the widespread use of the term "Islamophobia", there is a lack of consensus on a clear definition (Bleich, 2011) which can complicate how it is identified and addressed. In present-day Britain, "Islamophobia" has undergone a notable evolution in its definitions. Early definitions focus on unfounded hostility towards Islam (Runnymede Trust, 1997), while later interpretations expand to encompass the systemic and structural dimensions of the phenomenon (Runnymede Trust, 2017). The Runnymede Trust's 1997 report marks a pivotal moment in bringing Islamophobia to the forefront of public discourse in the UK, defining it as "*an unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims*" (Runnymede Trust, 1997:4).

The early conceptualisation of Islamophobia, focusing on fear or phobia, has faced criticism for not fully capturing its evolving manifestations (D'Haenens and Mekki-Berrada, 2023; Bleich, 2012; Hargreaves, 2016). This has led to the proposal of various alternative labels, such as "Muslimophobia", "anti-Muslimism", "anti-Muslim racism", "anti-Muslim prejudice", and "anti-Muslim hate" (Halliday, 1999; Erdenir, 2010; Modood, 2020; Allen, 2010; Fekete, 2004; Kundnani, 2007; Ogan et al., 2014; Tyrer & Sayyid, 2012). However, over the years, Runnymede Trust has revisited the concept, evolving from its initial stance to adopt a broader, more inclusive definition aligned with the updated UN's perspectives on racism. By 2017, Islamophobia was characterised by the trust as follows:

> *"Any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life"* (Runnymede Trust, 2017:6).

This nuanced understanding highlights Islamophobia's systemic and structural dimensions, transcending mere personal prejudice to include institutionalised forms of discrimination.

In response to the evolving understanding of Islamophobia, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) of British Muslims proposed a more comprehensive definition in 2018. The APPG characterises Islamophobia as "rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" (APPG on British Muslims, 2018, p. 50). This definition represents a significant shift in the conceptualisation of Islamophobia, acknowledging its systemic and structural nature and targeting all aspects of Muslim identity, whether visible or perceived. While this definition has garnered support from various Muslim organisations, political parties, and civil society groups (Allen, 2019, 2020; Modood, 2017, 2018, 2020; O'Toole, 2016; Awan& Zempi, 2018), it has also faced criticism for its potential impact on free speech and academic freedom (Hassan & Azmi, 2021; Allen, 2020). The ongoing debate surrounding the definition of Islamophobia highlights the complexity of the phenomenon and the need for nuanced understanding. Some scholars advocate a broad interpretation that encompasses various forms of discrimination and prejudice against

Muslims (Allen, 2010; Sayyid, 2014), whereas others call for a more precise approach that differentiates between anti-Muslim sentiments, criticism of Islam as a religion, and racial or cultural discrimination). For example, Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad's (Tim Winter) proposal of "Lahabism" (2020) connects contemporary Islamophobia with historical animosities within the Islamic tradition, offering insights into how historical prejudices may resurface in modern times. By linking contemporary hostility towards Muslims with the figure of Abū Lahab, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, who was known for his enmity towards Islam and Muslims, "Lahabism" places Islamophobia within an Islamic historical and theological context. This perspective helps to understand the manifestation of Islamophobia in Muslim-majority countries, where Islam is deeply ingrained in the culture and daily life. Similarly, Ejiofor's (2023) concept of "anti-Muslim tribalism" critiques the predominant conceptualisation of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism, arguing for a broader understanding that includes tribalism and other forms of discrimination beyond the Western context. This expanded perspective captures the diverse manifestations of Islamophobia across different societies, highlighting the need for a more nuanced definition that accounts for various forms of discrimination and prejudice, including racism (Ejiofor, 2023).

2.8.1 Islamophobia as Racism or Religious Discrimination

The debate surrounding the conceptualisation of Islamophobia as racism or religious discrimination reveals the complexity and multidimensionality of this phenomenon. While some scholars emphasise the racialisation of Muslims and the intersection of religious, ethnic, and cultural discrimination, others argue for the importance of considering the religious and cultural aspects of Islamophobia separately from racial dimensions.

2.8.1.1 Islamophobia as Racism

Several scholars argue that Islamophobia is a form of racism, as it often targets individuals based on their perceived race or ethnicity, rather than their actual religious beliefs. Grosfoguel and Mielants (2006) contend that Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism in which Muslims are racialised and viewed as a monolithic group, regardless of their diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Meer and Modood (2009) argue that Islamophobia is a form of

"racialisation", where Muslims are subjected to discrimination and prejudice based on their perceived racial or ethnic identity. The racialisation of Islam is particularly evident in the experiences of Muslim converts in Britain (Moosavi 2015). Elahi and Khan (2017) have expanded on this perspective, suggesting that Islamophobia is a form of "gendered racism," where Muslim women, in particular, are targeted based on their visible religious attire, such as the hijab.

Proponents of this perspective argue that Muslims are often racialised in public discourse and policy because of their perceived ethnicity or nationality. They point to the fact that Islamophobia primarily affects Muslim populations that are visibly identifiable, such as those of Arab, Middle Eastern, South Asian, or African descent (Elver 2012; Allen 2010; Sayyid and Vakil 2011). While Islam is a religion and not a race, in practice, Islamophobia functions to discriminate against individuals based on their ascribed ethnic or national identity (Bleich 2011). Meer and Modood (2009) challenge the reluctance to acknowledge Islamophobia as a form of racism, arguing that this stems from a narrow view of racism that fails to account for how religious identities become racialised. Their contention that Muslims often face prejudice bearing the hallmarks of racism, yet their experiences are frequently dismissed, is a common argument in favour of the anti-racist framing of Islamophobia. Poynting (2007) documents the transition from anti-Asian and anti-Arab racism to contemporary anti-Muslim racism in Britain and Australia. This adaptive change reflects how racism mutates to target new, socially salient identity groups. Meer (2013) also situates Islamophobia within critical-race studies to address gaps in our understanding of its intersection with racism and antisemitism. By recognising the racial dimensions of religious prejudice, a deeper analysis can be achieved. However, while the racialisation of Islam is a significant aspect of Islamophobia, it is crucial not to overlook the role of religious identity and faith in shaping Muslim experiences, particularly in the context of this thesis.

2.8.1.2 Religious Discrimination and Bigotry

Some researchers have viewed Islamophobia as a form of religious discrimination. Bleich (2011) defines Islamophobia as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims," emphasising the religious component of prejudice. Halliday (1999) argued

that Islamophobia is rooted in the rejection of Islam and the belief that it is incompatible with Western values and norms. In a more recent study, Pratt (2020) suggests that Islamophobia is a form of "religious racism," where the boundaries between race and religion are blurred, and Muslims are discriminated against based on their perceived religious identity. Gholami (2021) contends that Islamophobia should be viewed as a manifestation of religious discrimination targeting Muslims based on their faith, along with the associated stereotypes and misconceptions. Focusing solely on race and racism in discussions of Muslim experiences of Islamophobia, according to Gholami, is "parochial" and conceptually narrow, risking the exclusion of other significant experiential and analytical perspectives (Gholami, 2021:333). This emphasises the significance of considering additional factors that contribute to Islamophobia, such as religious identity, socioeconomic status, and political context. Islamophobia is seen to have a distinct religious dimension, as Muslims are subjected to 'religification', the reduction of their multiple identities to only focusing on their faith affiliation. Gholami defines 'religification' as "the process whereby religion becomes a salient marker of identity and a source of meaning and belonging for individuals and groups in contexts where religion is perceived to be marginalised, stigmatised or threatened" (Gholami, 2021:4). Similarly, Jackson (2018), also proposes to use CRT to understand "the racialisation (brownification) of Muslims' and the use of the concept of 'religification' to 'conceptualise their religious positioning and disadvantage" (Gholami, 2021:333). He uses this notion to explain the educational disadvantages faced by Muslim students in the UK, who are currently the lowest-performing religious group at universities. He argues that institutional approaches to race and religion are crucial in creating and perpetuating this disadvantage, and advocates for more effective strategies to address and eliminate it.

The religious dimension of Islamophobia is further highlighted by the experiences of Muslim women who face discrimination and harassment based on visible religious markers. For example, the targeting of Muslim women due to their religious attire demonstrates the distinct religious component of Islamophobia, which cannot be fully captured by focusing on race and racism alone (Alimahomed, 2020; Zempi, 2019; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015; Moosavi 2014). This debate reflects the inherent complexity and multidimensionality of Islamophobia, which encompasses both racial and religious dimensions, as well as their intersections with

other forms of discrimination and marginalisation. While acknowledging that the racialisation of Muslims and historical patterns of racial discrimination are crucial, it is equally important to recognise the distinct religious and cultural aspects of Islamophobia. This debate suggests that a matrix model may be required to fully capture the complex and multidimensional nature of Islamophobia. Such a model would consider the various factors that contribute to Islamophobia, including race, religion, gender, class, and other social categories. It also considers the different levels at which the phenomenon operates, from individual attitudes and behaviours to institutional policies and practices.

2.8.1.3 The Intersection of Race and Religion

The debate surrounding the conceptualisation of Islamophobia as racism or religious discrimination highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. Although Meer and Modood (2009) challenge the reluctance to acknowledge Islamophobia as a form of racism. However, in his recent work, Modood (2023) questions the dominant understanding of Islamophobia as primarily a form of racism experienced by non-White Muslim immigrants in Euro-American societies. Modood (2023) points out that this conceptualization of Islamophobia may not be universally applicable, particularly in non-Western contexts where race is not a salient social identity and discrimination based on physical appearance is less plausible. This perspective highlights the need to re-examine the fundamental assumptions about Islamophobia and acknowledges that its manifestations and relevance may vary significantly across different sociopolitical contexts. By recognising the limitations of a primarily race-based understanding of Islamophobia, Modood (2023) opens up new avenues for exploring the various forms of discrimination and prejudice faced by Muslims in different social, cultural, and political settings.

Jones and Unsworth (2023) also argue that focusing only on Islamophobia's racial or religious dimensions risks "bypassing difficult but important questions" regarding religious beliefs. Through a separate survey examining attitudes towards Muslims and Islam, they found both consistencies and differences. Prejudice towards Muslims follows familiar patterns, correlating with the male gender, older age, and conservative voting. However, the negative perception of Islam's scripture as literal is disproportionately associated with a higher middle-

class status rather than a class traditionally linked to anti-immigration attitudes. This challenges the view that Islamophobia exists solely in a racialised working-class populist form. It also indicates that anti-Muslim prejudice can take on an overt religious form among more educated populations, allowing anti-Islamic views to gain mainstream acceptance under expert scriptural critiques. Therefore, according to Jones and Unsworth (2023), Islamophobia is distinct and more pronounced than discrimination against other groups, underlining the necessity of differentiating between prejudice towards Muslims and Islam as a religion. Lauwers (2019) further refines this discussion by differentiating between anti-Muslim racism and anti-Islamic bigotry, arguing that, while the two are interrelated, they are conceptually distinct. Anti-Islam bigotry, characterised by the rejection of an essentialised notion of Islam, suggests a perspective where religion or culture is seen as a choice, thus allowing for the possibility of conversion or assimilation. By contrast, anti-Muslim racism is marked by the perception of Muslim identity as innate and unchangeable, thus pointing to a more ingrained form of discrimination (Lauwers, 2019). This distinction highlights the importance of analysing Islamophobia as both racial prejudice and religious or cultural intolerance (Lauwers, 2019).

The complexity of Islamophobia is further underscored by the diverse experiences of Muslim communities in various contexts. For example, in the United States, the intersection of race, religion, and national origin shape the experiences of Muslim Americans, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 (Peek 2011; Selod 2018). The targeting of Muslim Americans based on their perceived racial and ethnic identities as well as their religious affiliation highlights the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia and the need for a nuanced approach to understanding and addressing it. Sheridan (2006) provides empirical evidence of the rise in both implicit and overt discrimination against British Muslims following September 11, 2001, suggesting that religious affiliation may be a more meaningful predictor of prejudice than race or ethnicity. This finding challenges the notion that Islamophobia can be neatly categorised as either racism or religious discrimination, highlighting the complex interplay between these forms of prejudice. Sheridan's (2006) work also challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the predictors of prejudice, shifting the focus from the traditional racial and ethnic dimensions of discrimination to considering the role of religious identity in experiences of prejudice and discrimination.

Abbas (2021) bridges the perspectives of Islamophobia as racism and religious discrimination by highlighting the interconnectedness of Islamophobia with broader socio-political processes such as globalisation and securitisation. This approach situates Islamophobia within the context of systemic racism, social exclusion, and political marginalisation of Muslim communities. By examining Islamophobia through this lens, Abbas underscores the need for policies and interventions that address the root causes of the phenomenon, including structural inequalities and the stigmatisation of Muslim identities. Abbas's analysis aligns with the work of Grosfoguel et al. (2015), who argue that Islamophobia must be understood within the broader context of global socio-political dynamics, modernity, and the capitalist/imperial/colonial world system. This perspective enriches our understanding of Islamophobia by situating it within the complexities of global migration and intersectional identities.

The conflation of race and religion in Islamophobia complicates efforts to strictly categorise it as racism or religious discrimination. It often involves the racialisation of religious identity in which Muslims are targeted based on a combination of perceived religious beliefs and racial or ethnic characteristics. This racialisation of Muslims underscores the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia, which operates at the intersection of racism and religious discrimination, leading to a unique form of prejudice that affects Muslims at multiple levels (Selod, 2015; Taras, 2013; Massoumi et al. 2017). Therefore, a comprehensive approach to Islamophobia should consider the multiple perspectives and dimensions that shape it, rather than reducing it to a single category or explanation. This includes acknowledging the diverse manifestations of Islamophobia across different societies, and the need for a more nuanced definition that accounts for various forms of discrimination and prejudice.

An intersectional approach to Islamophobia also requires examination of the ways in which gender, class, and other social identities intersect with religious and racial discrimination. For example, Muslim women who wear hijabs may face unique forms of discrimination and harassment shaped by the intersection of their gender, religious identity, and visibility (Zempi, 2019). Zempi's research highlights the gendered dimensions of Islamophobia, demonstrating that Muslim women's experiences of discrimination are often compounded by their visible religious identity and the intersection of sexism and racism. Similarly, working-class Muslim

communities may experience Islamophobia differently than their middle-class counterparts, as their experiences of discrimination are compounded by socioeconomic disadvantages and marginalisation (Abbas, 2021; Sayeed, 2014). In the context of Muslim students' experiences in higher education, the debate surrounding the conceptualisation of Islamophobia as racism or religious discrimination highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges they face. While this debate provides important insights into the ways in which Islamophobia intersects with various forms of discrimination, it is essential to critically engage with the limitations of existing frameworks and to centre on the lived experiences of Muslim students in developing an understanding of their experiences. This thesis aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Muslim students in British higher education by adopting an intersectional approach that considers the interplay between race, religion, gender, class, and other social identities. This approach recognises that Muslim students' experiences are shaped not only by their religious identity but also by their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as their gender and other social identities. Moreover, by examining the diverse manifestations of Islamophobia across different contexts and the ways in which it intersects with broader socio-political processes, this thesis seeks to situate Muslim students' experiences within the broader context of systemic inequalities and marginalisation of Muslim communities. This approach highlights the need for policies and interventions that address the root causes of Islamophobia, including structural racism, social exclusion, and political marginalisation.

2.8.2   Conceptualising Islamophobia for this research.

Reflecting on the diverse and often conflicting definitions and conceptualisations of Islamophobia it becomes clear that a unanimous consensus remains elusive (Allen, 2010). For the purposes of this study, I adopted Erik Bleich's (2011) definition of Islamophobia as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims". This conceptual framework captures a spectrum of attitudes and behaviours ranging from subtle biases to overt aggression, all rooted in prejudice (Pintak et al., 2021). Importantly, this definition situates Islamophobia within the broader context of societal issues, including racism and xenophobia, acknowledging its multifaceted nature and intersection with various forms of discrimination (Bleich, 2011; Garner and Selod, 2015). It emphasises the comprehensive scope

of Islamophobia, from individual prejudices to systemic inequalities, and underscores its role in shaping the complex realities faced by Muslims in diverse societies (Modood, 2023; Meer & Modood, 2008). By focusing on attitudes, emotions, and behaviours, this definition emphasises the impact of Islamophobia on the lived experiences of Muslims, particularly Muslim students, moving beyond theoretical or theological debates on Islam (Awan & Zempi, 2018; Saeed, 2018). This helps emphasise that Islamophobia works to establish and preserve distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims and to further ideological and political objectives; it is not just an attitude towards people of the Muslim faith, but is, rather, an institutional system that perpetuates prejudicial conceptions of superiority. This conceptualisation of Islamophobia informs the analyses and arguments presented in this research.

The current research recognises the importance of considering a broad spectrum of factors, including religious identity, socioeconomic status, and political context, in analysing and addressing the challenges faced by Muslim communities. This approach acknowledges the complex and multidimensional nature of Islamophobia; it is not monolithic or a uniform attitude or behaviour, but rather dynamic and context dependent. It is influenced by various factors, such as historical events, media representation, and manifestations in the individual, interpersonal, and structural domains. (Massoumi et al. 2017; Modood, 2023; Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Taras, 2013).

2.9   Muslim students' experiences within the HEI in the UK.

In the context of higher education, research has explored how Muslim students negotiate their religious identities in largely secular and liberal university environments. Studies have highlighted the challenges Muslim students face in terms of religious accommodation, social inclusion, and academic achievement (Khattab & Modood, 2018; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Stevenson, 2018; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Kyriacou et al., 2017).

Gao (2018) explores this dynamic through the lens of identity capital by analysing the experiences of South Asian Muslim female university students in Hong Kong. This study reveals that the capacity to invest in identity capital, which includes a hybrid self-image that

embraces both the target and heritage cultures, is contingent on an individual's unique possession of various forms of capital. This challenges generalised narratives about Muslim women's university experiences, suggesting that their multilingual and multicultural skills, as forms of 'intercultural capital', should be recognised and valued by societal institutions. Similarly, Bhatti (2011) explores the lived experiences of young Muslim men in secondary schools and an elite university in England, providing a rich narrative on how these individuals perceive and negotiate their identities. Central to Bhatti's findings is the concept of dual identity, in which young men navigate the boundaries between insiders and outsiders within their educational environments. This duality is not merely a reflection of their religious identity but is intricately linked with ethnicity, social class, and cultural affiliations. Bhatti's ethnographic approach reveals how these intersecting identities influence not only students' educational trajectories but also their perceptions of success and belonging. This study emphasises the significance of social class in shaping young men's educational experiences. Bhatti (2011) illustrates how structural inequalities and societal expectations comprise challenges faced by Muslim students. Therefore, the negotiation of success extends beyond academic achievement to encompass a broader struggle for identity affirmation within a context that often marginalises their religious and cultural identities.

While Bhatti's study provides important insights into the experiences of Muslim male students, it does not fully engage with an intersectional analysis that considers the multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation that shape Muslim students' experiences. This thesis aims to build upon Bhatti's work by adopting a more explicitly intersectional approach that examines how religious identity intersects with other social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class to shape Muslim students' experiences in higher education. In response to earlier research being 'gender blind', Ahmad (2007) shifts the focus to the experiences of British South Asian Muslim women in higher education, providing a nuanced understanding of how these women navigate their identities amid prevailing stereotypes and institutional barriers. Ahmad's study challenges the monolithic portrayal of Muslim women as passive subjects and highlights their agency in pursuing higher education as a means of personal and professional empowerment. Ahmad's research participants actively contest stereotypes that frame educated Muslim women as cultural and religious

rebels, demonstrating the compatibility of their educational aspirations with religious and cultural values. However, Ahmad (2007) also draws attention to the challenges these women face, including instances of anti-Muslim racism and subtle forms of "othering" within the university setting. Thus, despite the benefits associated with higher education, these students face challenges rooted in racialised and gendered stereotypes. Ahmad's findings advocate a revaluation of institutional structures and expectations to ensure that Muslim women can fully engage with and benefit from their educational experiences without compromising their identities. Echoing these findings, Thompson and Pihlaja (2017) offer an understanding of how young female Muslim students in England navigate their identities within the dual contexts of university life and wider societal perceptions. These students often confront direct and indirect forms of exclusion, which are magnified by stigmatising public discourse around Islamist extremism. Such experiences not only affect their social interactions but also impact their academic engagement and future aspirations in Britain.

The process of identity negotiation for Muslim students is further complicated by their intersecting experiences, as they navigate not only their religious identities but also their racial, ethnic, and gender identities within the university context (Mirza & Meetoo, 2018; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). For example, Muslim women who wear hijabs may face additional challenges in negotiating their identities as they are often subject to stereotypes and misconceptions about their religious beliefs and practices (Akel, 2021; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Similarly, Muslim students from minority ethnic backgrounds may face additional barriers to inclusion, especially in predominantly white institutions (Bhopal, 2018; Dhanda, 2010). Thus, the complexity of Muslim students' identity negotiation processes highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, considering the multiple and intersecting dimensions of their identity. As Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) argue, "the process of identity negotiation for Muslim students is not a simple matter of choosing between 'Muslim' and 'student' identities, but rather a complex and ongoing process of navigating multiple identities and finding ways to reconcile them within the university context" (Ibid:4).

By focusing on the voices and experiences of a diverse range of Muslim students, this thesis seeks to provide a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the challenges and

opportunities they face in navigating their identities within the university context. By addressing these issues, this thesis will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Muslim students' experiences in higher education.

2.9.1 Institutional Invisibility and Othering

A recurring theme in the literature is the feeling of marginalisation and the lack of representation experienced by Muslim students in British HEIs. Research has highlighted that Muslim students often feel overlooked and disregarded by HEIs, leading to a sense of alienation (Islam et al. 2018; Aune and Stevenson, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Stevenson, 2018; Malik and Wykes, 2018; Kyriacou et al., 2017). Early research by Gilliat-Ray (2000) highlights how despite their visibly growing presence, Muslim students felt that their faith existences were institutionally "invisible", uncatered to and rendered "othered" within university policies and infrastructures historically rooted in silencing non-Christian religious expression in public spheres.

More recent large-scale studies across the UK have documented that Muslim students face persistent discrimination, scrutiny, harassment, and overt Islamophobic abuse within academic settings, presenting barriers to their full social integration, belongingness, and equal institutional embeddedness (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; NUS, 2018). For instance, a nationwide report by the National Union of Students (2018) revealed that one in three Muslim students experienced direct Islamophobia, spanning insults, media vilification, and targeted hate crimes. 79% of the affected respondents unambiguously attributed the abuse and discrimination they faced on campuses to being rooted in prejudicial animus towards their Muslim identities (NUS, 2018). Such stigmatisation processes can affect students' sense of belonging (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Stevenson 2018).

Malik and Wykes (2018) outline the unique challenges these students encounter as they navigate their multifaceted identities, highlighting the pivotal role of the academic environment in either facilitating or complicating their experiences. Central to their findings is the impact of Islamophobia, which manifests in both subtle and overt ways and adversely affects Muslim students' sense of belonging, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Research has shown that persistent exposure to Islamophobic incidents, ranging from overt

discrimination to subtle biases, adversely affects Muslim students' mental health and well-being (Uddin, et al. 2022). The stress and anxiety resulting from these experiences can negatively impact academic performance, leading to lower grades, decreased retention rates, and diminished participation in educational and extracurricular activities (Stevenson, 2018). These experiences can affect Muslim students' self-perception, often compelling them to conceal their religious identity or isolate themselves from broader society to avoid being targeted (Dean & Probert, 2011; Weller et al., 2011). This withdrawal can hinder social integration and engagement within the university community, leading to a sense of alienation and diminished campus experience (Stevenson, 2018).

A recent study by Mahmud and Islam (2022) focuses on the experiences of Muslim academics and their encounters with Islamophobia and exclusion, arguing that despite the framing of HE as a progressive and inclusive space, it is still plagued by racism, including Islamophobia. This study sheds light on a group that is often overlooked in discussions of Islamophobia in academia, as most literature on Islamophobia on campuses tends to explore students' experiences. Hence, by focusing on the voices and experiences of academics, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges they face in UK HEIs. Their findings regarding the presence of Islamophobic microaggressions and exclusion within these institutions align with existing research on discrimination faced by Muslim individuals (Ahmed 2015; Qurashi 2017; Stevenson 2018; Saeed 2018; Scott-Guest et al. 2020). This highlights the need for further research to address Islamophobia in higher-education settings. However, it is important to consider the limitations of Mahmud and Islam (2022). First, the sample size and composition of the participants were not explicitly mentioned, which raises questions about the generalisability of the findings. Mahmud and Islam (2022) did not provide a detailed analysis of the institutional factors contributing to the perpetuation of Islamophobia, which could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Muslim staff members in UK HEIs and contributes to the growing body of academic research on Islamophobia. The experiences of Muslim academics highlighted in Mahmud and Islam's (2022) study have important implications for this thesis, as they suggest that the challenges faced by Muslims in higher education are part of a broader pattern of institutional Islamophobia that affects Muslim

individuals at all university levels. This emphasises the importance of considering the institutional factors that contribute to the perpetuation of Islamophobia in higher education - an area this thesis aims to explore in more depth. By examining the specific institutional and cultural dynamics that shape Muslim students' experiences, the current thesis seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Islamophobia operates within the university context and how it can be challenged and resisted.

2.9.2   The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Policies on Muslim Students' Experiences

The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim students' sense of belonging is further compounded by the broader implementation of counter-terrorism policies (Zempi & Tripli, 2021). In particular, the Prevent strategy has significantly influenced the experiences of Muslim students in British universities (Malik & Wykes, 2018; Jerome et al., 2019; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). Scholars have examined the experiences of Islamophobia within universities, asserting that prevention policies contribute to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of Muslim students, creating a climate of suspicion and surveillance that pressures them to self-censor or downplay their religious identities (Kyriacou et al. 2017; Saeed and Johnson, 2016; Saeed, 2018; Zempi, 2020). Bagguley and Hussain (2017) theorise the experiences of "late-modern" Muslim students, navigating the dual pressures of identity fluidity and securitisation of Islam. The study argues that the Prevent policies undermine the agency of Muslim students and contribute to their ontological insecurity, affecting their educational experiences and identity formation.

Scott-Baumann et al. (2020) examine how Islam and Muslims are perceived on campuses and how universities provide environments that encourage respect for differing identities. Guest et al. (2020) present findings in which a key finding was that Muslim students felt they had to self-censor and limit their discussions to avoid discrimination and suspicion due to the government's prevention initiative, which frames radicalisation as primarily related to Islam. As a result, counterterrorism policies have reinforced the negative stereotypes of Muslims and have encouraged a culture of surveillance on campuses. However, the study indicates that most students viewed Muslims positively overall, although some still held views aligning with stereotypes of Islam being intolerant or discriminatory towards women (Guest et al. 2020:5).

The research further emphasises the strong association Muslim students have with their religious identity, with many indicating an increase in religiosity since the beginning of the university. This trend contrasts with that of Christian students, highlighting the unique role of religion in Muslim students' identity formation. A critical aspect of this study is its examination of the UK government's preventive strategies. This strategy is primarily linked to Islamic extremism by university students and staff, contributing to the sense of "chilling effects", with students and staff expressing self-censorship and concern over surveillance. Familiarity with Prevent through official university channels is associated with viewing it more critically. The affirmation of radicalisation as a serious problem on campuses also correlates strongly with the negative views of Muslims (Scott-Baumann, 2020:200).

Kyriacou et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study examining the effect of Prevent on British Muslim university students' experiences and identity. Their findings reveal that the policy had negative consequences for Muslim students, leading to stigmatisation, marginalisation, and increased surveillance. This study highlights that Muslim students who felt portrayed as potential threats were subjected to heightened suspicion and experienced a sense of isolation and self-censorship. Kyriacou et al. (2017) also note that the impact of Prevention varied among Muslim students based on their visibility as Muslims, with those displaying visible signs of their faith (e.g., wearing hijabs or beards) being more vulnerable to its effects. Zempi and Tripli (2022) explore Muslim students' perceptions of the Prevent Duty in UK universities through qualitative interviews with 25 self-identified British Muslim university students. Their findings echo those of Kyriacou et al. (2017), revealing that Prevent Duty negatively affects Muslim students' sense of belonging and identity. Zempi and Tripli (2022) argue that the Prevent Duty is a form of institutionalised Islamophobia that marginalises and criminalises Muslim students, leading to feelings of not being valued as members of the academic community or British citizens. The study identifies an overarching theme of the "securitisation of education and the policing of Muslim students" (Zempi & Tripli, 2022:12), highlighting the flawed understanding of radicalisation that underpins the Prevent duty. These findings are consistent with a growing body of research that has documented the negative consequences of prevention for Muslim students, including stress, anxiety, anger, frustration, and alienation (Guest et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2021; Jarvis, 2014; Uddin, et al. , 2022; Tineo 2021; Vince,

2017), which underscores the need for a critical re-evaluation of the Prevent policy and its impact on Muslim students' experiences in British universities.

2.9.3 Academic and Cultural Barriers Exacerbating Alienation and Disconnectedness

In addition to the challenges posed by counterterrorism policies and Islamophobia, Muslim students face academic and cultural barriers that exacerbate their feelings of alienation and disconnectedness. Several studies have highlighted the significant disparities faced by Muslim students compared with their peers. Modood (2006), Malik and Wykes (2018), and Boliver (2016) document the under-representation of Muslim students in prestigious universities, higher dropout rates, and lower academic achievement. The Advance HE reports (HEA, 2020) further illustrates this issue, revealing that only 18% of Muslim students in the UK received top classifications, noticeably lower than their Christian and Jewish counterparts did. This disparity in academic outcomes can be partly attributed to the negative stereotypes associated with Muslim identities, which contribute to increased anxiety and stress among Muslim students, ultimately affecting their academic performance.

Furthermore, the discrepancy between university culture and the values of many Muslim students can significantly affect their sense of campus belonging. Research has indicated that a cultural mismatch between university norms and student values can lead to a negative sense of belonging among students (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). This is particularly relevant for international Muslim students who encounter challenges, such as adapting to a new culture, lack of understanding from the broader university community, inadequate cultural or religious-responsive education, absence of accommodation for religious practices, and social isolation (Chen et al., 2019). Moreover, Muslim students often experience feelings of being politically and culturally targeted and isolated on their campuses, perceiving a lack of engagement from their peers and teachers within the campus community (Ali, 2019). Anxiety stemming from stereotypes associated with Muslim identities can also affect academic performance (Possamai et al. 2016). The intersection of counterterrorism policies, broader societal Islamophobia, and cultural dissonance in university environments create a complex web of challenges for Muslim students. These factors combine to foster a sense of isolation, alienation, and lack of belonging, which can have detrimental effects on Muslim students'

mental health, academic performance, and overall university experience (Malik &Wykes,2018; Stevenson, 2018; Guest et al., 2020, Shaffait, 2019) Therefore, while the Prevent policy and Islamophobia have been a central focus of research on Muslim students' experiences, it is essential to situate these findings within the broader context of underrepresentation in British higher education. This thesis explores how the intersections of Islamophobia, counterterrorism policies, and academic and cultural barriers shape Muslim students' experiences in higher education.

2.9.4   Challenges and Resilience

The literature highlights the dynamic interplay between challenges and opportunities in the experiences of Muslim students in the UK. Although these students undoubtedly face obstacles related to their identity, discrimination, and integration, the multicultural context of British higher education offers unique avenues for learning, acculturation, and personal growth. Thus, despite facing numerous challenges ranging from discrimination to a lack of religious accommodation, Muslim students demonstrate resilience throughout their university years. Literature shows that Muslim students draw on their cultural and religious knowledge systems to construct "identities of resistance" in response to the perceived incompatibilities between their beliefs and prevailing campus norms (Peek, 2005; Sartawi, 2012). Sartawi (2012) provides critical insights into how cultural knowledge and everyday challenges influence the identity negotiation process for British Muslims. The reliance on religious advice to navigate daily life underscores the importance of cultural and religious knowledge systems in shaping individual and collective identity. This finding suggests that universities should consider the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students when developing support services and policies. Universities can create more inclusive environments to facilitate positive identity development by acknowledging and accommodating students' cultural and religious knowledge. This reflects Peek's (2005) ethnographic study of Muslim students at an American university which illustrates how youth construct "identities of resistance" and rejection of perceived incompatibilities between Muslim religious beliefs and prevailing secular campus norms around alcohol/drug use and other social ethics they associated with hegemonic Western secular liberalism. Some explicitly framed their religious

conservatism as a barrier to acculturation pressure, reinforcing the boundaries between their Muslim identities and secular student environments. Driezen (2021) examines how young Muslims in Antwerp negotiate tensions between their religious identification and the broader cultural framework of individualism. The study found that presenting a dignified self to both non-Muslim and Muslim audiences requires a delicate balancing act. Young Muslims draw on the cultural repertoire of 'religious individualism' to navigate their multiple identifications, selectively employing elements from this repertoire to rework potential tensions and present themselves as agentive within their religious framework. Malik and Wykes (2018) further shed light on the adaptive strategies Muslim students employ to harmonise their religious and cultural identities with the prevailing norms and expectations of university life. These strategies, which often involve complex balancing acts, underscore Muslim students' resilience and agency in navigating academic and social environments. This aspect of the study highlights the critical need for university policies and practices that support students' efforts to integrate and fully engage with their academic communities.

Hawes (2018) also offers an optimistic perspective by documenting Muslim students' reflections on their educational journey in the UK, which they often perceive as enriching experiences that contribute significantly to their personal and intellectual growth. This positive outlook is instrumental in understanding the resilience and adaptability of Muslim students as they navigate the complexities of identity formation and cultural integration within a diverse academic setting. Similarly, Busher et al. (2017) reveal how Muslim students actively engage with their identities, often advocating for their rights and fostering supportive networks in a university setting. This resilience is not just a response to external challenges but also a proactive approach to creating a more inclusive academic environment. Nonetheless, research underlines that resilience requires concomitant institutional efforts to create more inclusive environments that validate Muslim students' multifaceted identities and ensure their equitable participation across academic and social spheres (Rashid, 2021; Modood, 2006).

2.10 Accommodating Muslim Religious Identities in Higher Education

Religion is not a static phenomenon but rather a dynamic, personal process influenced by diverse experiences and contexts that are increasingly finding institutionalised expression within British universities (Aune & Stevenson 2017; Sharma & Guest 2013; Roberts & Yamane 2015; Edwards 2018). The traditional notion of universities as strictly secular enclaves is being challenged as more students, including growing Muslim populations, openly embrace religious and spiritual identities that transgress the historical boundaries between the public/private and secular/sacred spheres on campuses (Bryant, 2006; Hopkins, 2011). Once secularised, spaces are transformed into sites that accommodate religious practices and communal worship.

This shift problematises secularism's limits and underscores the need for universities to recognise and substantively accommodate the diverse religious needs of their multi-faith student bodies (Bryant, 2006; Hopkins, 2011). Rather than operating as homogeneous secular spaces, British institutions of higher education are increasingly sites where religious identity and observance are becoming embedded and negotiated within larger socio-political contexts of legal and policy developments, such as the 1976 Race Relations Act and the 2010 Equality Act's inclusion of protections for religious identity and practice (Stevenson, 2012; Aune & Stevenson, 2017). Such legislative frameworks highlight the importance of proactively accommodating religious pluralism within universities to support holistic student development and well-being.

For Muslim students, this increase in the institutionalisation of religious accommodation within secular British university contexts represents a pivotal renegotiation of Islam's place, citizenship boundaries, and modes of belonging within public arenas, historically shaped by Protestant Christian norms, or premised on the marginalisation of non-Christian faiths. This has led to discussions on the "Halal-isation" trend which encapsulates Muslim student mobilisations, community efforts and evolving university policies that formalise a range of accommodations, rendering Muslim religious expressions, rituals and lived experiences as newly integrated alongside the secular liberal frameworks traditionally governing campus operations and higher education spaces (Aune & Stevenson 2017; Asmar 2005).

The central focus of research has been the advocacy of Muslim students, faith-based societies, and community organisations, pushing universities to provide the requisite physical amenities, programming, and policy frameworks that enable Muslims to attain routine visibility and accommodation along with mainstream campus activities. Gilliat-Ray's (2011) seminal ethnography spotlights pioneering Muslim student campaigns demanding their universities institute basic provisions, such as dedicated prayer rooms, wudu ablution facilities, and halal dining options for foundational faith-based accommodations, which gradually gained broader institutional adoption nationwide in the 2000s (Gilliat-Ray 2010; FOSIS 2018, Scott-Baumann et al. 2020).

The institutional embedding of prayer spaces, Muslim student associations, and targeted faith accommodations within the university infrastructure symbolically validates Muslim civic stakeholders in arenas where Muslim religious needs were previously silenced, privatised, or rendered institutionally invisible (Stevenson 2012; Hopkins 2011). It represents Muslim communities legitimately reshaping secular norms and marginalising non-Protestant faiths.

On the one hand, scholars view universities' accommodation of Muslim religious practices as enabling substantive grounding of Muslim religious-cultural identities within Britain's social mainstream (Weller et al. 2011). Grounded in multi-site ethnographic analyses, this body of work reveals how Muslim religious sensibilities, normative traditions, and diverse community-based ethno-cultural practices once institutionally accommodated within secular British university contexts undergo dynamic interactions and multidirectional negotiation processes with prevailing secular liberal governance regimes, equality policies, bureaucratic-administrative rationalities, institutional cultures, and social norms. This encounter gives rise to emergent "hybridised Muslim practices" that amalgamate dimensions of Islamic orthodoxy and heritage traditions with secular British norms around issues such as gender politics, procedural customs, conceptions of pluralistic ethics, socio-civic participation frameworks, and monochronic scheduling protocols oriented around Western Christian ideals of linear secular time (Martin & Sumalat 2021; Sunier 2018; Modood & Calhoun 2015). Through this analytical lens, Muslim religiosity on British campuses diversifies away from Orientalised stereotypes into rich, syncretised Muslim "lived realities" that actively integrate Islamic traditions with secular-liberal frameworks in areas such as pedagogy, educational/career

engagement, and civic-institutional memberships (Gilliat-Ray 2010; Bano & Kalmbach 2012; Jaspal & Cinnirella 2010). From this standpoint, Muslim religious identities are intertwined with secular British life in nuanced ways that are no longer constrained by simplistic binaries of tradition/modernity or sacred/secular (Bano & Kalmbach 2012; Burt & Vivien 2018; Mustafa 2015).

While the accommodation of Muslim religious practices in secular institutions is often seen as a positive step, critics argue that these institutions, by defining what qualifies for religious inclusion and legitimising specific "Muslim identities", inherently embody an imperial Western colonial viewpoint and assert a kind of epistemological authority. This approach is significantly removed from the nuanced realities, collective beliefs, and decolonial aspirations of Muslims (Hashemi 2022). Consequently, there is a concern that these institutional frameworks might homogenise Muslims into a singular "religious student" category, thus ignoring the diversity within Islam, differences between denominations, and varying levels of religious observance (Vince, 2019). Such a reductive approach could perpetuate stereotypical views of Muslim identity, overlooking crucial intersectional differences including ethnicity, migration histories, and LGBTQ+ orientations (Ali, 2017; Hashim, 2010). Furthermore, concerns also extend to the possibility of increased surveillance and regulation of Muslim religious practices within universities, suggesting that the visibility granted to Muslim spiritual life might lead to its monitoring under security measures, echoing the problematic aspects of government initiatives such as the Prevent policy (Stevenson, 2018; Guest et al., 2020; Qurashi, 2018).

Along with the formal institutionalisation of Muslim religious accommodations, the literature also examines how persistent secular liberal norms and cultural blind spots within universities risk paradoxically reisolating Muslims (Valentine et al. 2010; Hammad 2020). Hopkins (2011) explores how Muslim students navigate university environments characterised by both tolerance and discrimination, advocating for an approach that transcends the mere provision of prayer rooms. While such facilities are crucial, genuine inclusivity requires a comprehensive understanding of Muslim students' experiences, encompassing the social and cultural dynamics of campus life such as interactions among students from diverse backgrounds and an overarching campus atmosphere. This is echoed by Stevenson's work (2014, 2018), in which she emphasises the challenge that higher education institutions face in balancing

secularism with religious diversity, pointing out that neglecting the latter can lead to feelings of marginalisation among religious students, including Muslims. This marginalisation is exacerbated in social spaces dominated by activities, such as alcohol consumption, which may not align with the values of Muslim students. Stevenson further argues that accommodations for religious practices are essential not only for faith, but also for improving the overall university experience of Muslim students, enhancing their well-being, and fostering academic engagement. Similarly, a study by Islam et al. (2018) at the University of Winchester reveals that despite feeling engaged and having a sense of belonging, the predominant "university bubble" centred around alcohol and the lack of alternative activities poses significant barriers for Muslim students. By offering additional support and resources, such as Ramadan examination exemptions and appointing Muslim chaplains, universities can enhance Muslim student satisfaction and engagement. Islam et al. (2018) suggest the development of more inclusive spaces and resources to enrich Muslim students' university experience.

The concept of "satisfied settling" introduced by Islam and Mercer-Mapstone (2021) reflects how Muslim students adapt to the limitations of university environments regarding religious accommodation. This adjustment process involves Muslim students coming to terms with and even normalising the absence of adequate facilities or acknowledgement of their religious requirements. In essence, "satisfied settling" reflects a coping mechanism in which Muslim students make peace with the limitations imposed by their university settings. However, this acceptance is not indicative of true satisfaction or optimal integration within the university community. Instead, it represents a resigned adaptation to existing conditions that may not fully support religious identities and practices. This sociocultural marginalisation dynamic reflects how religious identity affirmation and community needs beyond tokenistic institutional accommodations often remain unaddressed, diminishing Muslim students' capacities for unencumbered participation across academic and social spheres. Muslim students "settle" for marginal institutional adjustments without universities substantively reshaping secular default norms (Stevenson et al. 2017). Thus, structural religious-cultural marginalisation becomes self-perpetuating, reinforcing campus experiences circumscribed by universities' limitations in holistically affirming intersectional identities.

Scholars, therefore, advocate for a paradigmatic shift towards a holistic approach to inclusion in higher education (Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Tienda, 2013; Hodge, 2006; Whittaker & Akers, 2009; Outhred, 2012; Riedel et al., 2023; Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Stevenson, 2014). This shift transcends narrow religious accommodations and emphasizes the cultural, intellectual, and social dimensions of student diversity. It involves a transition from hospitality and appreciation to social inclusion (Dalton & Crosby, 2013) and necessitates deliberate strategies to foster meaningful social and academic interactions (Tienda, 2013). The need for a more inclusive educational environment is highlighted, with a focus on addressing religious discrimination.

This reconceptualisation of inclusivity suggests that it should be an integral part of university life, embedded in academic programs, social activities, and campus policies. Studies by Chikwa et al. (2022) and Hashim and Valdez (2019) underscore the importance of higher education institutions reflecting on their diversity and inclusion strategies. This entails recognising and embracing the cultural, intellectual, and social diversity of the student population, signalling a trend towards a more comprehensive approach to inclusivity.

Additionally, this view of inclusivity is critical for enhancing religious literacy in higher education institutions (HEIs), especially among Muslim students. The importance of religious literacy, as emphasised by Dinham (2010, 2015, 2017), is to foster understanding of and respect for religious diversity, contributing to social cohesion and informed public policy (Hannam et al., 2020; Seiple & Hoover, 2021). The integration of religious literacy into educational curricula aligns with the creation of interstitial spaces, as advocated by Scott-Baumann and Bunglawala (2020). Both physical and conceptual spaces are essential for facilitating understanding and dialogue, combating distorted views of Islam, and providing platforms for Muslim students to express their identity freely. However, the effectiveness of these interstitial spaces and religious literacy initiatives can be limited by societal bias and misrecognition. Thus, universities need to actively support these spaces to ensure they are robust and capable of fostering genuine understanding and dialogue (Jackson, 2014; Dinham & Shaw, 2017). This involves not only educating the university community about different religious traditions but also encouraging critical engagement with religious concepts and

practices, as suggested by Dinham and Shaw (2017). This approach to inclusivity and religious literacy is further supported by Collins et al. (2018), who highlighted the necessity of creating truly inclusive environments that consider the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of students.

In summary, the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship illustrates how British universities have become key arenas in which secular liberal governance frameworks rooted in Christian hegemonies actively encounter and engage Muslim communities' diverse religious, cultural, and civic claims for equal inclusion and belonging. This literature review has shown that architectural spaces, student services, academic programming, policies, and overarching institutional cultures constitute pivotal frontiers where Muslim needs, epistemologies, and intersectional lived realities interact with the secular rationalities, social norms, and historically hegemonic epistemological foundations within British higher education.

2.11 Conclusion

This literature review provided an overview of existing research on Muslim students' experiences in British higher education institutions (HEIs). Situating this research topic within the broader historical and sociopolitical context of Muslim communities in Britain, it highlighted the ongoing challenges of Islamophobia, discrimination, and the impact of counterterrorism policies on Muslim students' experiences. This review engaged with key debates and theoretical frameworks in the field, emphasising the complex interplay between religious, cultural, and social factors that shape the lived experiences of Muslim students. It also underscored the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to understand the heterogeneous experiences of Muslim students, considering the diversity within Muslim communities and the intersections of religious identity with other social categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

The literature review identified several consistent findings across multiple studies, including the challenges faced by Muslim students in navigating their religious identities within predominantly secular and liberal campus environments, the adverse consequences of Islamophobia and counterterrorism policies on Muslim students' sense of belonging and

academic engagement, and the importance of institutional interventions to support Muslim students and foster inclusive campus climates (Stevenson, 2018; Guest et al., 2020; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Thompson & Pihlaja, 2017; Hunt et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

However, the review also brought to light significant gaps in the literature, notably concerning the intersectional experiences of Muslim students. There was a clear necessity to amplify the voices of underrepresented subgroups within the Muslim student population and to delve deeper into examining the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in shaping these experiences. Despite an emerging interest among researchers in exploring the intersectional experiences of Muslim students, there remained a pressing need for research that employed more comprehensive and nuanced approaches to fully grasp the diverse experiences of Muslim students within British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This thesis aimed to address these gaps by employing an inductive approach to understand Muslim students' experiences on their own terms, without starting from a predefined definition of Islamophobia. By prioritising the voices and narratives of Muslim students, this research sought to provide a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of their lived realities, contributing to the growing body of literature that challenges essentialist and reductive representations of Muslim identities in higher education.

3 Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed relevant literature on Muslim students in higher education. This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to explore the experiences of Muslim students in higher education in the UK. It describes the philosophical underpinnings, research design, data collection and analysis methods, and ethical considerations. This section explains the rationale behind the key methodological choices.

3.2 Research questions

While universities strive to create inclusive and diverse environments, tensions or conflicts can still exist between religious beliefs and academic pursuits, particularly in contexts where secularism is a prevailing ideology (Bryant, 2006). The research questions explore how Muslim students negotiate their identities within this context, examining the stories they tell about their journey towards identity construction on campus. Therefore, it is important to recognise that Muslim students' experiences can vary across different cultural, ethnic, and national backgrounds. This study seeks to capture these diverse narratives. The following primary questions guided the research process:

1. How do Muslim students construct faith identities at universities?
2. How do university life and student identity affect Muslim students' identity construction?
3. How do they make sense of their university experiences as Muslim students?

3.3 Philosophical Foundations: Ontology and Epistemology

Epistemology explores questions about the sources of knowledge, the criteria for determining what qualifies as knowledge, and the processes through which knowledge is constructed (Marecek et al., 2015; Twinning et al., 2016; 2014). Conversely, ontology, which focuses on the nature and existence of social entities, is complemented by epistemology that explores the processes of knowledge acquisition and understanding. The importance of these concepts

in shaping research methodology is articulated by Ormston et al. (2014:7) and further emphasised by Mason (2002:59), who stated that our understanding of what the social world is (ontology) shapes how we think we can know about it (epistemology), and the ways we choose to look (epistemology and methods) influence our perception of the social world. This reciprocity underscores the impact of a researcher's ontological stance on their epistemological approach and vice versa. The epistemological and ontological foundations together provide the groundwork for conducting ethical and culturally responsive research on Muslim students (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Zempi, 2016; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

3.3.1   Epistemology: The Nature of Knowledge

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance that emphasises understanding participants' unique worldviews and lived experiences through meaningful engagement between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Interpretivism views knowledge as context-bound and subjective, shaped by individuals' perspectives, beliefs, and interpretations (Cohen et al., 2017; Denscombe, 2017). This approach aligns with the concept of "lived religion," which highlights the importance of understanding religious experiences and identities as they manifest in people's daily lives (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

Interpretivist research methodologies aim to understand individuals' beliefs and experiential realities. This investigation focuses on the beliefs and lived experiences of Muslim university students, posing questions aimed at unravelling the "why" behind individuals' experiences, such as probing into how Muslim students interpret their experiences within a university setting and what their lived experiences entail (Engler & Stausberg, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

This position aligns with the "narrative" approach to the study of religion, which emphasises the importance of personal stories in religious phenomena (Tweed, 2006; Ammerman, 2013; Riis & Woodhead, 2010). By adopting this approach, this study provides a rich and nuanced understanding of Muslim students' lived experiences and identity constructions within UK universities (Lawler, 2014; Riessman, 2008). The research centres on the voices and stories of

Muslim students themselves, allowing their diverse realities to challenge essentialist and monolithic representations of Muslim identities in academic settings (Stevenson, 2018; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Brown & Saeed, 2015). By foregrounding their personal narratives, this study emphasises the heterogeneity and agency of Muslim students' experiences, showcasing how they construct and negotiate their multidimensional identities within university contexts (Mir, 2014; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Hopkins, 2011; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Peek, 2005).

3.3.2   Ontology: Social Construction of Reality

From an ontological perspective, I view the research process as a collaborative and dynamic exchange between the researcher (Myself) and the participants in which meaning is co-constructed through dialogue and interpretation. This stance aligns with the social constructionist paradigm, which posits that reality is not a fixed or objective entity but is actively produced and reproduced through social interactions and shared understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). This stance is particularly relevant in my research on Muslim students' experiences, where I recognise that their identities and realities are not predetermined but are continuously negotiated within their specific social and cultural contexts. This view is supported by the work of Burr (2015), who emphasised the fluid and socially constructed nature of reality.

My understanding of existence and being is influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the social and cultural nature of knowledge construction, which emphasises that individuals' realities, including those of Muslim students, are dynamically shaped by their continuous interactions within their environments, particularly in educational contexts. The concept of "lived religion" (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014) is central to this study, acknowledging that religious beliefs and practices are not peripheral but central to Muslim students' identity construction and engagement with the world (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012, 2021).

Drawing from Asad (1993), religious practices among Muslim students are understood not only as expressions of personal beliefs but also as acts embedded in social and cultural contexts. These practices are forms of embodiment and habitus that interact with, and are influenced by, student environments, including educational settings (Bourdieu 1990). This

perspective aligns with Berger and Luckmann's (2016) argument in "The Social Construction of Reality," which asserts that societal frameworks play a pivotal role in shaping knowledge and self-perception. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also emphasised the importance of contextualising individuals within their specific social and cultural milieus, offering a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour and identity.

Thus, in this research the participants are perceived as active participants in constructing their identities and realities on campus, aligning with Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of identity as a continuous 'production,' particularly within diverse and multicultural contexts. This idea is further reinforced by Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, which highlights how group membership and social categorisation influence individual identity formation and self-concept. The study situates Muslim students within this framework, recognising them as active constructors of their identities and experiences, while acknowledging the complex interplay of societal discourses, norms, and their interactions within both academic environments and the wider social context. This approach emphasises the dynamic process through which Muslim students navigate and shape their identities, underscoring the reciprocal influence between individual agency and surrounding social structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

As a result of this interpretive and constructivist approach, this study introduces the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM), a conceptual tool that emerged organically from the research data (detailed in Chapter 4). The MIIM highlights the co-constructive nature of identity formation within various social contexts and integrates theoretical insights into the complex nature of Muslim students' identities, considering factors such as social representations and institutional norms (Bourdieu, 1986; Moscovici, 1961).

In summary, the epistemological and ontological foundations of this study provide the groundwork for conducting ethical, culturally responsive research with Muslim students in UK universities (Zubair et al., 2012; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

3.4   Research Methodological Approach

Building on the interpretivist epistemology and social constructionist ontology outlined above, a qualitative research methodology is employed. This approach recognises the multidimensional and socially constructed nature of Muslim students' identities (Hackett, 2014; Cho, 2018; Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2021).

3.4.1   Co-construction Methodology: Amplifying Voices, Fostering Inclusive Dialogue

At the heart of this research is the transformative co-construction methodology, which is a departure from traditional qualitative approaches that treat participants as passive data sources. This methodology positions Muslim students as vital partners and co-creators throughout the research process (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). Grounded in the constructivist framework, it acknowledges the crucial role that Muslim students play in actively shaping their religious realities through social interactions and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences within an academic context (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). This approach underscores that religious identity is a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon that continuously evolves through interactions and shared understanding among students (Berger & Luckmann, 2016).

Central to the co-construction methodology is the recognition that Muslim students actively construct and negotiate their religious identities based on their unique social interactions, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences in university settings (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). Rather than merely collecting data, this methodology embodies active engagement with participants by valuing their contributions as co-constituents of knowledge production (Heron & Reason, 1997). It acknowledges the fluid and dynamic nature of religious identities, rejecting the notion of a singular, monolithic Muslim identity (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012) or a universal Muslim student experience to be uncovered by the researcher.

In alignment with cooperative learning principles (Lenkauskaitė et al., 2020), this approach advocates creating an inclusive research environment in which all participants' diverse voices critically shape the research narrative and are valued equally in knowledge creation. This egalitarian stance challenges conventional power dynamics by fostering a more democratic

and empowering participant experience (Freire, 1970; Kapoor & Shizha, 2010; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). By acknowledging the subjective nature of religious experiences, varied perspectives and interpretations from Muslim students enrich this study with unique insights (Lenkauskaitė et al., 2020). Notably, the research process and interviews became a collaborative learning experience for both the researcher and participants, offering opportunities for critical self-reflection, aligning with transformative learning theory's emphasis on reframing beliefs and assumptions through such reflection (Mezirow, 1997; Baumgartner, 2012).

By positioning the participants as co-creators rather than just sources of data, the methodology facilitates the exploration of how their religious identities are formed, expressed, and navigated within academic landscapes. The dialogue and shared meaning-making between researchers and participants highlight the complex interplay between personal beliefs, social interactions, and institutional contexts shaping Muslim students' experiences (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Rodriguez-Labajos et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the participatory essence of this methodology reflects broader educational and societal goals, embodying the principles of Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970), which advocate for a collaborative and empowering approach to education and research. Freire emphasised the importance of dialogue, critical reflection, and co-creation of knowledge. By actively involving Muslim students as collaborators, this study embodies Freire's vision of empowering them to articulate and reflect on their experiences and perceptions. It recognises that students are not passive objects of research but are active agents with valuable insights and knowledge. This approach fostered a sense of ownership and agency among the participants (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021), enabling them to actively shape the research journey and data interpretation.

By embracing co-construction, the research becomes a collaborative endeavour in which Muslim students are active participants in generating and interpreting knowledge about their identities, with their lived experiences, perspectives, and voices as essential components for

developing a nuanced understanding of religious identity formation and expression in university settings.

3.4.2   Institution Context: A Comparative Case Study Approach

This study employed a comparative case study design, a methodological approach that allows for an in-depth, context-rich examination of complex social phenomena across multiple cases (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). Specifically, it adopts a "most different system " design (Bennett & Elman, 2006; Seawright & Gerring, 2008), which involves selecting cases that differ substantially in relevant dimensions while exhibiting similarities in others.

The two universities selected as research sites, referred to as University A and University B, were chosen for their contrasting institutional identities, values, and demographics, while sharing the commonality of having a substantial Muslim student population. This purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) aligns with this study's aim of providing a nuanced comparative understanding of how university environments shape Muslim students' experiences.

University A is a large, secular, civic university with a history dating back to the turn of the 20th century (The Complete University Guide, 2017). Known for its religious tolerance, it has a diverse student body representing multiple faiths. The university's Islamic Society is among the largest in the country, reflecting its substantial multi-faith composition. This diverse environment provides a unique context for exploring how Muslim students navigate their identities and experiences within secular institutions that actively promote religious inclusivity. In contrast, 'University B' is a smaller, more recently established university with a specific religious ethos. Originally founded to train educators in the central UK region, this university later expanded to offer a range of degrees and achieved university status in the early 2000s (University B, 2017).

Despite being geographically proximate, these two cases exhibit stark differences in institutional culture, values, policies, and historical trajectories, which are hypothesised to significantly influence Muslim students' sense of belonging, identity negotiations, and access

to support systems (Stevenson, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Gholami, 2021). The "most different systems" design allows for an examination of how divergent university environments impact the experiences of a similar group - Muslim students (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Utilising this comparative approach, this study aimed to uncover insights into how institutional ethos, policies, demographic factors, and campus cultures shape Muslim students' religious identities, the challenges they face, and the coping strategies they employ (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). These contrasting cases provide a rich opportunity to explore the complex interplay between individual lived experiences and institutional contexts.

3.4.3   A City in the Midlands UK

In a major Midland city with a large Muslim student population, the demographic landscape, as indicated by recent census data, also shows a significant Muslim presence. This city, which features one of the highest percentages of Muslims in any local authority in England and Wales, has over 341,000 Muslim residents, constituting 29.9% of the city's population. This figure marks an increase from 21.8% in 2011, representing the most substantial growth among all religious groups in the area (MCB (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015; ONS, 2023). However, it is crucial to approach these statistics with caution because of the voluntary nature of the religious affiliation question in the census, which could lead to potential discrepancies in response rates (ONS 2023). The city's youth demographic, particularly the increase in young people, is attributed "largely due to students coming to the city's universities" (City Council, 2019).

Given the diversity within the Muslim student population, this study sought to capture a diverse and representative sample of Muslim students that reflected a wide range of backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences. This approach was essential to ensure that the research findings were comprehensive and somewhat reflective of the varied experiences of Muslim students in higher education within this specific urban context.

3.5   Sampling and recruitment

Having established the research context, this section details the sampling and recruitment strategies used to identify participants within the selected universities.

3.5.1   Recruitment Strategy: Embracing Constructivism and Adapting Methodologies

The recruitment strategy employed in this study was designed to embody the core tenets of the constructivist paradigm while remaining adaptable and responsive to emergent realities during the research process. This intentional alignment with constructivist principles underscored the philosophical depth of the paradigm, extending beyond procedural considerations into the foundational ethos that guide all aspects of enquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mills et al., 2006). From its inception, the strategy involved a systematic, yet flexible approach aimed at effectively engaging participants from a breadth of perspectives and lived realities, reflecting constructivism's reverence for multiple co-existing truths and the centrality of individual meaning-making (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Ponterotto, 2005).

The initial approach to recruiting participants for the study yielded a low number of students, necessitating a change in strategy to expand the scope of the research. Consequently, a new strategy was implemented, involving targeted digital outreach through social media platforms, email campaigns, and more extensive leafleting to reach a broader audience and encourage participation. This intentional shift towards utilising social media and email communication proved effective in establishing connections with participants who were overlooked through initial purposive methods (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015), highlighting how digital methodologies can overcome the limitations of traditional approaches (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Shakkour, 2016).

To further expand the reach of the study, snowball sampling was employed, leveraging participants' social networks and community trust (Patton, 2015; Noy, 2008). However, over-reliance on the snowballing method carries the risk of creating insular, non-diverse samples that lack perspectival breadth (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Semaan, 2010). To mitigate the weaknesses associated with each individual approach, a combination of purposive, targeted,

and snowball techniques was used. For instance, researcher bias in purposive sampling was balanced by participant-driven snowballing and the expanded scope of the targeted outreach (Valerio et al., 2016). This multi-approach to participant recruitment ensured a more diverse and representative sample, while also addressing the limitations of each sampling method when used in isolation.

Digital outreach exemplified the constructivist principles of fostering participant agency and engagement (Jones et al., 2021; Yin, 2016). Providing accessible platforms empowers individuals to autonomously enquire about the study based on their interests and lived realities. This participant-driven approach aligns with constructivism's emphasis on subjective meaning-making and the co-construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006; Lincoln et al., 2011). This is supported by Alalwan et al. (2019), who emphasised the positive impact of social media on collaborative learning and communication. The empowerment of students to actively decide on their participation reflects the constructivist notion of empowering participants, as demonstrated by Whitaker et al. (2017) regarding the effectiveness of social media in health research recruitment. By grounding the recruitment strategy in a constructivist perspective and employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques, this study aimed to create a collaborative and inclusive research environment that valued participant agency, facilitated authentic engagement, and fostered trust and mutual respect between researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

In retrospect, this recruitment strategy's dynamic evolution was driven by critical reflexivity and intersectional dialogue (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Shakkour, 2016; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). By continuously refining methods, messaging, and engagement pathways based on emergent data, feedback from supervisors, and participants' lived experiences, the recruitment process remained aligned with the study's aims while reflecting the multidimensional realities of Muslim student communities. This iterative praxis upholds the constructivist positioning of participants as vital collaborators rather than passive subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Adaptability fosters an environment receptive to diverse perspectives and meaning-making processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5.2 Sampling Approach and size

Determining an appropriate sample size for this enquiry into Muslim university students' experiences proved to be a complex endeavour, underscoring the lack of clear consensus within academic circles (Baker & Edwards, 2012). This complexity emphasises the critical importance of carefully considering and balancing multiple influencing factors (Boddy 2016; Fugard and Potts 2015).

From the outset, strategic inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that the participants aligned with the study's intended scope. We excluded potential participants outside the 18-21 age range, postgraduate students, and those not considered "home students[5]." All interviewed participants self-identified as Muslim, provided detailed information about their participation, and gave their consent before proceeding.

Guiding considerations included available research time and resources (Griffith, 2013), study population size, confidence levels, expected outcomes, and the precision needed in the results (Omair, 2014). Additionally, defining the sample universe and identifying an appropriate sampling approach (Robinson, 2014) as well as considering the impact of cultural factors and establishing acceptable practices for justifying sample sites (Marshall et al., 2013) are essential. These factors collectively shaped my understanding and approach to selecting a sample size that was not only manageable, but also sufficiently rich to yield deep insights into the experiences of Muslim university students.

The initial phase involved interviewing 16 students to represent a balanced cross-section across the two research sites. This sample size offered an appropriately diverse yet manageable window into the varied perspectives of Muslim student communities. However,

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[5] The term "home student" in the UK refers to individuals who are settled in the country, meaning there are no immigration restrictions on the length of their stay. Additionally, they are considered ordinarily resident in the UK and have been so for the entire three-year period preceding the first day of the academic year. This definition determines eligibility for certain benefits and fee structures within the UK education system (UKCISA, 2023).

as the study progressed, and more participants expressed interest, an adaptive reconsideration of the sampling approach emerged.

From the literature, it became apparent that the most common method to determine whether the researcher had enough interviews is by using the 'theoretical saturation' theory (Bryman, 2016). It involved collecting and analysing data until new themes ceased to emerge, a process that promised comprehensive capture of experiences until no further significant insights were gained (Francis, et al. 2010; Mason 2010; Bryman 2016) Despite recognising the potential for theoretical saturation, I was initially hesitant to pursue it. My research, focusing on the distinctive experiences and identity construction of Muslim university students, seems to demand a more nuanced approach. I questioned whether strict adherence to theoretical saturation would allow the depth and richness of these unique narratives to be fully explored (Ando et al., however, the research methodology gradually evolved to incorporate theoretical saturation principles within a more flexible sampling strategy. This allowed for an ongoing iterative process of data collection, analysis, identifying emergent themes, recognising saturation points where no substantially new insights arose, and maintaining an adaptable approach to recruitment as the findings unfolded.

The data collection culminated at 30 interviews guided by the principle that this sample provided sufficiently rich, nuanced, and detailed data to achieve 'resonance' and 'fuzzy generalisability', as advocated by Tracy (2010) and Bassey (1999, 2001). Resonance refers to the ability of findings to authentically reverberate, representing lived experiences within the participant population (Tracy 2010). Fuzzy generalisability acknowledges qualitative research's capacity to offer transferable insights, where findings can illustrate understandings potentially applicable to similar contexts and situations, even if not statistically generalisable (Bassey, 1999, 2001).

This approach prioritises capturing the depth and richness of the data by assembling an unnecessarily expansive sample. It facilitated an iterative, reflexive analysis process in which new themes could continually emerge, enabling the research to authentically represent the multidimensional voices and lived experiences that resonate with Muslim student communities. Simultaneously, limiting the sample to 30 allowed for a manageable corpus,

facilitating contextualised analysis and the identification of findings transferable to similar higher education settings.

On reflection, theoretical saturation has proven to be a reliable and effective method in this context. Researchers, such as Rowlands, Waddell, and McKenna (2016), have demonstrated its efficacy in large datasets using quantitative techniques, whereas Nascimento et al. (2018) effectively applied it in qualitative research with schoolchildren. In studies focusing on Muslim students, methods closely related to theoretical saturation employed by Bhatti (2011) and Scott-Baumann et al. (2020) offer valuable insights into complex social phenomena.

By grounding sampling decisions in the established principles of theoretical saturation, resonance, and fuzzy generalisability, this study's methodology prioritised rich, contextualised understandings over the pursuit of strict quantitative generalisability (Tobin & Begley, 2004; Stake, 1995). This approach aligns with the overarching qualitative paradigm and enables an authentic exploration of the complex, multidimensional realities that characterise Muslim students' experiences in higher education (Tracy, 2010; Saunders et al., 2018).

3.5.3 Participant summary

This study interviewed 30 Muslim students from two universities in the West Midlands, England. A representative sample of Muslim students on campus was selected for the study. **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**summarises the participants' demographic information

Table 2-Participant summary[6]

Participant's pseudomonas	Gender	Year of study	Institutions	Would the participant consider themselves to be a first in family (FIF)/first-generation student? Yes/no [7]	Pre-University home	Reasons for applying to this University:	How would you describe your ethnic identity?	What word(s) would you use to describe your identity and your faith identity?
Soraya	F	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	The university name and profile	British Pakistani	British Muslim, practising Muslim
Mona	F	3rd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	It's local and small	British Bengali	I am a Muslim but not very practising, I would still identify as British Muslim.
Mo	M	2nd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	This university is well known for teaching	British Arab	British Muslim, I would say I am trying to be a good Muslim
Sarah	F	3rd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	I wanted to be a teacher and this university was the best for teaching, also the campus was small	Black	Just Muslim

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[6] The data shows that although these participants might share common identities and have similar experiences in the British, HE system, as discussed in Chapter 5, each has their own unique experience, and their unique take on the world that allows them to navigate their way around HE issues and create their own distinct ways of dealing with these issues. This emphasises the importance of stressing the heterogeneity of Muslim students' experiences and identities within British HE.

[7] First generation is defined as those individuals neither of whose parent has a university degree. Also referred to as 'first in family' (FIF) – ref to Henderson & Adamecz-Völgyi (2020) for more information. In the context of this research, the terms "first in family" and "first generation" can be used interchangeably to refer to individuals who are the first in their immediate family to pursue higher education. This includes participants who may have older siblings or cousins who have also attended university. Both terms convey the idea that these individuals are trailblazers within their families when it comes to pursuing higher education.

Abo	M	3rd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	A few of my friends came here, so I applied here	Pakistani British	British Muslim, Pakistani
Khadijah	F	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	No	London	The university is the best for my subject, it's well known in the area as well	Bengali	Muslim and British
Basmah	F	3rd year	University B (Post-92 university)	No	Manchester	This was my second choice, but I like the small class size, you get to know your lecturers and your peers here better.	British Arab	I was a bit confused, identify as a Muslim, but I am a human being first and foremost
Raj	M	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	This is the best university in the city	British Asian	I am not a practicing Muslim, but I care about Islam, I will fast Ramadhan though, but outside Ramadhan and when I am at university, I live a Western lifestyle but when I am at home with my family, I am a very good Muslim
Bushra	F	3rd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	My parents wanted me to go to a prestigious university	British Asian	Muslim and British, a mixture of everything.
Adam	M	2nd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	Not really sure, currently I like the small size of the university and the student support.	British Arab	British Muslim but not practising
Neelam	F	3rd year	University B (Post-92 university)	No	Birmingham	Wanted to become a teacher and heard this university is good for teaching	Asian British	I am just Muslim
Salama	F	3rd Year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	This university came to college, and I took part in the access programme and was given a scholarship.	British Asian	I would say I am British, Brummie, Muslim, Asian, Human
Ambia	F	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	No	Solihull	The rank of the university and my dad studied here for his degree	Asian British	British Muslim, someone who has ambitions and hopes

Esma	F	3rd Year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Reading	I worked really hard to get here; the university is one of the best in the Midlands	Black	Black Muslim
Isra	F	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	No	Birmingham	This university of one of the top ranked.	Middle eastern	Muslim, British Muslim
Minna	M	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	The university is well known, and I wanted to make my parents proud	Middle eastern	British Muslim
Sam	F	3rd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	The rank of the university	Mixed	British Muslim
Ihsan	M	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Lincoln	The profile of the university, I got the access scholarship	Pakistani British	British Muslim, a human being
Iaisha	F	2nd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	Local	Asian British	Muslim, British and Sufi-inclined
Mariam	F	1st year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	The only university that does my course locally	Asian British	Muslim, independent woman
Zai	M	1st year	University B (Post-92 university)	No	Birmingham	I am a good student but didn't get the right grades to go anywhere else. I came here after I applied via clearing.	Asian British	British Muslim, a person in the making.
Zamzam	F	2nd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	It's local and it fits with my life commitments.	Somali British	British Muslim
Ahmed	M	2nd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	I didn't do that well in my A levels, but this university is good, and my grades were ok here as well.	Asian British	Muslim, British Muslim

Isa	M	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	No	Birmingham	The university profile	Arab	British Muslim
Kat	F	3rd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	My sibling came to this university	Asian British	Muslim, Muslim British
Magida	f	3rd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Dudley	The university name and profile	Asian British	British Muslim
Sayimah	F	2nd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	The university name and profile	Anglo-Arab, British Arab	British Muslim
Shahin	F	3rd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	This university is good for teaching.	British Pakistani	British Muslim
Mosa	M	2nd year	University B (Post-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	It's a good university	Asian British	Shia Muslim, British Muslim.
May	F	3rd year	University A (Pre-92 university)	Yes	Birmingham	local and it's a good university	Bengali	Practicing Muslim, British Muslim

3.6   Research Methods

Once the participant sample was identified using the strategies described above, the following data collection method was employed:

3.6.1   Interviews

Interviews are a fundamental method of qualitative data collection in the social sciences, as outlined by Sarantakos (2013), with various forms utilised, depending on the research objectives. Structured interviews, characterised by a predefined set of questions, are more typical in quantitative research because of their rigid format and limited flexibility for both interviewers and interviewees (Sarantakos, 2013:278). By contrast, unstructured interviews employ an open-ended approach, offering greater flexibility in question wording and order, thereby facilitating more fluid and adaptable interactions (Sarantakos, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews, as described by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), occupy a middle ground by combining pre-planned questions with the opportunity to pursue emergent themes. The flexibility of this format is particularly advantageous for exploring complex topics, such as identity construction and meaning making, as it allows for in-depth discussions and the ability to follow up on unexpected insights (Sarantakos, 2013; Rubin, 2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018:278).

Given the focus of this study on understanding Muslim students' experiences in higher education, a semi-structured in-depth interview was chosen, which facilitated a nuanced exploration of how students navigated their identities within various structures, allowing for rich context-sensitive insights (Charmaz 2014). For this study, "the interview was not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018:506). Guest et al. (2013) described in-depth qualitative interviews as follows.

> "Interviews might be likened to an invitation to respondents to describe their journey through the same terrain but with little or no constraints imposed by the map. While similar languages and categories might be used, the respondent is not constrained by them and can decide upon their own route through the territory and redefine the

land's lay or adopt a completely different perspective if they wish. In simple terms, we learn a lot more about how [they] negotiate the university experience because we can get beyond preconceived categories and explore these students' lives in much greater depth, including allowing them to tell us about their stories in their own words" (Guest et al., 2013:7).

The semi-structured format was particularly advantageous for this study, as it allowed for exploration beyond predetermined categories and questions, enabling a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences, as noted by Kvale (2008:46). Thus, face-to-face interviews allow more information to be gained through body language and word choice (Blaxter, 2010).

The questions were devised to deal with broad topics and address various issues, such as the importance of faith identity in students' everyday lives, the impact of their faith identity on their university experience, and the university's provision for their religious needs. The open-ended questions invited participants to define religious identities in personalised terms rather than assuming uniform concepts (Bruce, 2011; Zine, 2006). Additionally, the interview guide (Appendix D) was adapted to be flexible and responsive to the participants' narratives and experiences, which is an important aspect of this research. For example, after the first two interviews, a common theme emerged among the participants: they were the first in their family (FiF) or the first generation to attend university. Although this was not originally included in the interview guide, I decided to ask each subsequent participant whether 'they would consider themselves to be the first in their family to attend university.' I sought an appropriate place for the interview, based on the points they were discussing or raising at the time. I would either ask this question midway through the interview or towards the end. The question was usually worded something like: 'I have spoken to other students who mentioned they are the first in their family to attend university. Would you consider yourself to be the first in your family to attend university?

Most of the participants (85%) answered 'yes. If the participant identified FiF, they were asked to share their experiences and thoughts regarding it. Specifically, I asked how they felt the university was supporting them and whether their status as a FiF impacted their university

life in any way. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how FiF students navigate their university experiences and the challenges that they face.

3.7   Interview Processes.

As previously mentioned, interviews constituted the primary data collection method for this interpretivist, qualitative enquiry, aligning with the study's aims to elicit rich, nuanced accounts of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Roulston, 2010). The interview process was carefully designed to uphold the key constructivist principles of empowering the participants' voices, fostering authentic engagement, and co-constructing contextualised understandings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mills et al., 2006; Charmaz, 2006). Central to this process was the creation of a safe space for participants to express their Muslim identities freely and authentically.

The interview duration averaged approximately two hours, a timeframe that allowed for in-depth immersion while remaining cognisant of participants' attentional capacities and commitments (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Seidman, 2006). Throughout this process, conscious consideration was given to nurturing a constructive interviewer-participant relationship built on trust, empathy, and ethical grounding (Josselson, 2007; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Recognising interviews as interactive, emergent spaces of meaning-making (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Langley & Meziani, 2020), the role here extends beyond extractive data collection to an ethic of engaged listening, collaboration, and bearing witness to participants' narratives with humility and care (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). For example, prior to each interview, steps were taken to build rapport through informal conversation, conveying the vital contextual message that this was an intentionally co-constructed dialogic space where participants were free not just to describe their identities but to be their true selves (Mills et al., 2006; Charmaz, 2006). This ethos was reinforced by offering participants autonomy in selecting the interview setting, a choice that enabled them to feel safe, comfortable, and empowered during the dialogic encounter (Dowling & Brown, 2010; Newby, 2014). Consequently, the majority of interviews took place on university campuses, familiar environments where many participants felt at ease discussing their emotions and lived realities (Berger, 2013; DeVault & Gross, 2012).

Interviews were conducted in two stages; initially, participants completed a Participant Information Form (PIF; initially used by Reid, 2014) (see Appendix E) prior to the interview session. The PIF served as a sensitising tool, providing contextual insights into participants' backgrounds and experiences to guide subsequent dialogic engagement (Padgett, 2016). Its purpose was not solely as an extractive data collection tool but to facilitate transitions from generalised faith discussions towards more personalised discussions shaped by participants' unique perspectives and meaning-making frameworks (Josselson, 2013).

While the PIF offered orienting background, the interviews commenced with a degree of initial structural framing. Over time, a conscious pivot was implemented, transforming the previously semi-structured format into a more open narrative facilitation approach guided by the participants' articulated perspectives (Riessman, 2008; DeVault & Gross, 2012). Questions evolved into prompts and topical catalysts, empowering participants to share their experiences at the granular level they deemed appropriate, with me as the interviewer carefully attending to emergent cues for probing deeper into salient meanings, subjectivities, and turning point moments (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Hydén, 2014). Therefore, rather than an extractive interrogation, the interactional praxis centred on cultivating a conversational atmosphere conducive to organic storytelling, meaning-making, and exploratory reflection (Chase, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Whenever possible, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences, faith identities, and the meaning-making frameworks they constructed to navigate their university journeys (McCormack, 2004; Josselson, 2004). Adequate temporal and dialogic spaces were intentionally preserved so that participants could engage in intimate, emotionally laden processes of sense-making with presence and depth (Petersen, 2011; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

This ethics of collaborative presence was paramount when participants became emotionally vulnerable. In several instances, profound grief, pain, and catharsis arose as participants reflected unflinchingly on their lived experiences of marginalisation, identity trauma, and the existential labour of negotiating selfhood within university ecosystems (Hubbard et al., 2001; DeVault & Gross, 2012). One particular example was a participant who began tearfully crying while reflecting on her university journey. At these moments, the research process was immediately paused to prioritise the participants' emotional needs, and time was given to collect their thoughts. The option was given to the participants to pause or discontinue the

dialogue (Hydén, 2014; DeVault & Gross, 2012), and the majority chose to continue after a short break.

This dialogic encounter relied on techniques such as empathic listening, compassionate silence, and patience (Josselson, 2004) as participants delicately navigated their vulnerability while sharing their lived experiences. These ethically grounded, trauma-informed praxes aimed to preserve participants' sense of safety, dignity, empowerment, and control over what they elected to voice or withhold (Newby, 2014).

Throughout the interviews, audio recordings served as the primary data recording mechanism. While the intention was to take handwritten field notes, this plan was frequently suspended, especially during moments of heightened participant vulnerability, where the methodological reflex shifted towards empathic presence and compassionate witnessing over bureaucratic proceduralism (Hubbard et al., 2001).

Post-interview, intentional time and care were dedicated to reflexively documenting these dialogic experiences through memoing (see Appendix K), self-monitoring, and note-taking to preserve participants' voices and the polyphonic layers of meaning interwoven throughout the research texts (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Horsdal, 2016).

Collectively, these multimodal praxes aimed to cultivate a co-constructed dialogic space grounded in foundational constructivist principles of empowering participants' voices, perspectives, and agency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Collins, 2000); fostering authentic engagement, trust, and ethical care (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015); and collaboratively elucidating the complex, nuanced, and polysemic meanings participants ascribed to their experiences navigating intersecting identities, faith practices, and institutional landscapes of higher education (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

3.7.1.1   Trustworthiness

Conducting interviews in qualitative research requires a distinct form of rigor that moves beyond traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality (O'Leary, 2004). Critics argue that interview data are inherently subjective, raising concerns about their validity and reliability (Miyazaki & Taylor, 2008; Qu & Dumay, 2011). One specific threat to validity is the phenomenon of "demand characteristics", in which interviewees may provide responses that

they believe align with the interviewer's expectations or desires to create a positive impression (Damaskinidis, 2017). Consequently, achieving traditional notions of validity and reliability in interview-based research can be difficult (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, from an interpretive, constructivist perspective, these subjectivities become an inherent component of the intersubjective meaning-making process between researchers and participants (Mills et al., 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Given the nature of this study, which focuses on individuals' dynamic and ever-changing experiences, generalisability is not the primary concern. Instead, the research aims to provide valuable insights by recognising the fluidity and complexity of individual experiences (Wang & Geale, 2015; Tracy, 2010).). The emphasis is on relatability, ensuring that the analysis stage captures rich details and accurate depictions of participants' experiences and the situations they discuss. By offering resonant, relatable accounts imbued with verisimilitude, readers can assess the potential transferability of the findings to their own distinct contexts (Stake, 1995; Freeman et al., 2007). Ultimately, the responsibility for determining transferability rests with those receiving the research and the resonance they perceive with their lived experiences rather than the researcher's generalisability claims (Lewis et al., 2014).

Within this interpretivist paradigm, the interview process becomes a collaborative space where knowledge is intersubjectively co-constructed between researchers and participants (Berger & Luckmann 2016; Charmaz 2014; Cheruvallil-Contractor 2021). As the researcher my role transcends that of an impartial observer, evolving into an engaged co-creator whose subjectivities, positionalities, and lived experiences inevitably shape dialogic meaning-making processes (Cunliffe, 2003; Bourke, 2014). Therefore, rather than pursuing an illusion of objectivity, this constructivist approach necessitates continuous reflexivity about how positionality influences what emerges from the interviews (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015)

From this interpretivist stance, interviews were transformed into intersubjective sites of collaborative storying between researchers and participants (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Riessman 2008). My role is that of an engaged listener, co-constructor, and ultimately an interpretivist researcher tasked with representing participants' narratives through my subjective lens while striving to preserve resonance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Josselson, 2011).

Rather than feigning neutrality, I engaged as a self-reflexive participant-conceptualiser, explaining my positionalities and subjectivities to foster resonant, ethical meaning-making with participants (McCormack, 2000; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). (See section 3.9 for more discussion on reflexivity and the researcher's positionality).

3.7.1.2   Pilot

The interview guide was written and piloted several months before the interviews were conducted. A pilot study was conducted to assess the method and wording of the questions; it was tested with several PhD colleagues at the College of Arts and Law. The findings from the pilot study showed that although the interview technique was appropriate for the study, some of the questions needed to be revised to ensure that they were not biased or leading. In addition, through the pilot study, it was clear that the interview might take its direction depending on the participants' experiences on campus. This was reflected in the actual interviews, where some participants stayed within the interview schedules, while others focused on what they thought was relevant and essential to their journey as Muslim students.

3.7.1.3   A follow-up meeting.

To further uphold the trustworthiness and ethos of co-construction, I conducted a follow-up meeting with participants to review and discuss their interview transcripts. These meetings were crucial for collaborative interpretation and understanding. They provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on and discuss various themes that emerged during the interviews. More importantly, these meetings served as a platform for participants to confirm the accuracy of their narratives and experiences as represented in the transcripts. This process allowed them to revisit their narratives, offering additional insights and a deeper understanding of their experiences, where necessary. I found that The majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with how their narratives were transcribed, which significantly contributed to the research's trustworthiness and credibility.

After all data were collected and transcribed, I maintained further contact with the participants, allowing them to review and comment on the written representation of their experiences. This step of the research process referred to as "interim research text" it is a

process supported by Clandinin and Huber (2009); they see it "as a way to shape safe spaces for research participants' experiences to be part of and to be heard" (Clandinin and Huber, 2009:89). The interim text review was conducted in the form of a presentation or informal discussion with participants to engage them in a process of mutual clarification. This approach was instrumental in ensuring that any potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations were addressed, facilitating a clearer and more accurate representation of participants' experiences and perspectives.

This iterative process of engagement and feedback with participants not only strengthened the quality of the research but also reinforced the principles of co-construction. By actively involving participants in the interpretation and presentation of their own narratives, this study upheld a collaborative and participatory ethos that reflects the core values of social constructivism and enhances the authenticity of the findings.

3.8   Ethical considerations

To conduct an "ethically literate study of Islam and Muslims", as proposed by Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015), continual self-reflection and critical ethical considerations were imperative. Thus, ethical considerations remain paramount throughout the research process. Measures were taken to ensure that participants felt safe, comfortable, and in control of what they chose to share. Their emotional well-being was prioritised, and care was given to create a supportive, non-judgmental space for open and honest dialogue (King & Horrocks, 2010; Orb et al., 2001; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

One key ethical consideration was the potential for participants to experience unintended psychological harm or distress when recounting difficult experiences related to discrimination, marginalisation, or impacts of policies UK government's Preventing violent extremism strategy (2015) As such, developing a protocol to prioritise participant wellbeing was imperative. Therefore, before commencing the interviews, I developed a plan in which the participants maintained full autonomy to pause or discontinue at any point if they felt overwhelmed or unduly distressed. I also committed to providing information about available support resources, such as campus counselling and well-being services, which they could access as needed (Berger, 2015). During the interviews, when participants displayed visible

emotional distress, I operationalised this protocol by pausing the interview, checking their willingness to proceed, offering support options, and continuing once the participant felt ready.

This ethical approach aligned with the institutional Research Ethics Guidelines under which I received approval across both university sites to conduct this study with appropriate safeguards (UoB reference: ERN_17-0491-See Appendix F). This formal ethics review process was critical for ensuring that rigorous protocols were integrated to minimise risks and prioritise the safety and autonomy of this potentially vulnerable participant group (Webster et al., 2014). Ultimately, these practices reflect the imperative for qualitative researchers to uphold strong ethical principles, especially when working with marginalised communities on sensitive topics that carry potential psychological risks (Banks et al., 2013; Shaw, 2008). While ethically rigorous research is inherently "complex and demanding", it is fundamental to the integrity of the work and its emancipatory potential to amplify voices through the ethics of care (Mean & Vásconez, 2012). Ultimately, these practices reflected the imperative for qualitative researchers to uphold strong ethical principles, especially when conducting an "ethically literate study of Muslims" (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).

3.8.1.1 Informed consent and right to withdraw.

The politicisation of Muslim identities and experiences in the UK, particularly in the context of higher education, has created a charged and often hostile environment for Muslim students (Stevenson, 2018, Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). For example, the Prevent Strategy, which places a statutory duty on universities to monitor and report students deemed at risk of radicalisation, has been widely criticised for its disproportionate impact on Muslim students and its chilling effect on academic freedom, political dissent, and religious expression (Abbas, 2019; Kyriacou et al., 2017; Qurashi, 2018; Saeed, 2018).

In this context, researching Muslim students' experiences requires a heightened level of care and sensitivity to ensure that the research process itself does not contribute to or exacerbate the very issues and challenges that it seeks to address. As a researcher, it was essential to approach this work with utmost care and sensitivity, recognising that the individuals and communities at the centre of the research are not merely abstract subjects but real people

with lives, emotions, and vulnerabilities that must be protected (Zempi, 2016; Gilligan, 2015; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Weller, et al. In 2013, Scott-Baumann, et al. 2020; Cheruvallil Contractor, 2021). This meant that I needed to be transparent and accountable about the research aims, processes, and outcomes, and involve participants as active collaborators and co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects of investigation (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

Prior to each interview, the participants received a detailed briefing on the study aims, procedures, risks, and benefits. They were provided with an information sheet for review that covered key aspects such as research purpose, what would be involved in participating, how confidentiality would be maintained, and their rights as participants (Harriss & Atkinson, 2015). Each participant was given the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions before deciding whether to participate, upholding the principle of informed consent (Musoba et al., 2008). I emphasised the importance of operating with full transparency regarding my identity as a researcher, my institutional affiliations, and the motivations behind the study. Building trust and rapport is crucial, especially when discussing sensitive topics (Siwale 2015). Being forthright allowed participants to make a fully informed choice.

Formal consent was obtained from each participant before commencing the interviews, which were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder (Dewing, 2007). However, I reiterate that providing consent is an ongoing process, rather than a one-time event (Majid et al., 2017). The participants maintained full autonomy to revise or revoke their consent (Musoba et al., 2008). They were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences (Layde et al., 2012). I provided them with contact information and assured them that they could reach out with any questions or concerns. We discuss these parameters around the withdrawal timeline (Wiles et al., 2008).

Throughout the interviews and afterwards, I intentionally created an environment in which participants felt empowered to exercise their autonomy (Shaw, 2008). I checked periodically to ensure that they felt comfortable with the proceedings. My goal was to avoid coercion and understand the power dynamics involved in researching marginalised groups (Banks et al., 2013). By prioritising informed consent and respecting autonomy, I aimed to uphold ethical standards and centre the well-being of the participants (Dewing, 2007). Transparency and full

consent control honoured the participants' self-determination as stakeholders and collaborators (Musoba et al. 2008; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

3.8.1.2 Privacy and confidentiality

All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, following ethical guidelines (Sanjari et al., 2014). The participants chose pseudonyms, and no detailed identifications were recorded. Interview audio was securely stored on an encrypted drive and deleted after transcription per the data protection practice. As a sole researcher, I am the only researcher with access.

I also endeavoured to ensure institutional anonymity throughout the research process by referring to the university sites as 'University A' and 'University B.' However, I utilised institutional documents in the data analysis and discussion sections, which may have indirectly revealed locations because of their distinctive nature. Fully anonymising university contexts obscured important nuances in the participants' narratives and research specificity. However, all the student data remained anonymous, allowing them to speak freely. These measures of anonymity, confidentiality, and engaged participation aimed to create a transparent, safe, and collaborative environment aligned with ethical principles for marginalised groups (Banks et al., 2013).

3.8.1.3 Debriefing and feedback

An important aspect of ensuring ethical and rigorous qualitative research is the practice of debriefing the participants and incorporating their feedback into the research process. Several strategies were implemented to facilitate debriefing and participant validation. After each interview, I engaged participants in an informal debriefing discussion. This allowed them to share any reflections, concerns, or clarifications regarding the interview experiences and the topics covered. It was an opportunity for me to respond to any questions they had and provide any needed emotional support, especially given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing issues such as discrimination and the impact of the Prevent Policy.

All the participants were offered the opportunity to review the de-identified transcripts of their interviews. Those who elected to do so were able to clarify any points of confusion,

expand their perspectives, and raise any other issues regarding how their narratives and experiences were represented in the data. I scheduled follow-up meetings with participants to discuss transcripts in a more in-depth manner.

During these follow-up sessions, I solicited direct feedback from the participants regarding my initial interpretation and thematic analysis of the interview data. This participant validation process helped to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of my findings (Birt et al., 2016; Koelsch, 2013). This allowed me to verify that I was accurately capturing the nuances of participants' experiences as insiders on issues surrounding Muslim student identity, marginalisation, and the impact of the prevention strategy.

3.9   Researcher Positionality: Navigating the Complexities of Identity and Experience

In social constructionist research, the concepts of positionality, reflexivity, and ethical considerations are fundamental, acknowledging the researcher's profound influence and reinforcing the transparency and trustworthiness of the research process (Guba & Guba, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Positionality, defined as one's stance in relation to the study's context and participants, encompasses myriad factors such as gender, race, class, cultural background, and professional experience (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Bourke, 2014). Understanding and navigating positionality through reflexive practices is crucial for conducting ethical and rigorous research.

Throughout my research journey as a Muslim researcher, delving into the experiences of Muslim students in higher education, ethical reflexivity has remained a central and ongoing concern. It involves critically examining the ethical dimensions and implications of one's research practices and actively engaging with the complex moral and political questions that arise in the process of knowledge production (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Kuper et al., 2008; Zempi, 2016; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). In the context of my research, ethical reflexivity has been particularly important given the sensitive and politically charged nature of the topic (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021), as well as my own positionality as a Muslim researcher studying my own community (Savvides et al. 2014; Zempi, 2016; Miled, 2017).

This shared identity and experience have been a source of both insight and emotional connection in my research, as it has allowed me to build trust and rapport with participants and understand their stories in a deeper and more nuanced way. As a Muslim woman studying the experiences of Muslim students in British higher education, I acknowledge that my identity is intricately linked to this study. Growing up in the UK, I experience life as a religious and ethnic 'other' against the backdrop of dominant societal narratives that do not always centre or affirm communities like my own (Mirza et al., 2013; Abbas, 2007; Meer, 2014; Sirin and Fine, 2008). This social positioning has equipped me with empathetic sensitivities towards the navigation of marginalised identities, imbuing me with an understanding of negotiating multiple layers of 'othering' (Chan & Case, 2022; Mirza, 2018), particularly those of Muslims. Also, as a visibly Muslim woman who has navigated higher education myself, I am acutely aware of the challenges, stereotypes, and forms of marginalisation that Muslim students often face in university settings. Muslim students in the UK higher education context already navigate a complex and often hostile environment in which their identities and practices are frequently scrutinised, questioned, and problematised (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Saeed, 2018; Abbas, 2019; Kyriacou et al., 2017; Zempi & Tripli, 2022).

My intersecting identities and experiences have placed me in a nuanced position when researching a topic within the dominant discourse and policy response to counterterrorism in the UK. As Nagy Hesse-Biber (2012) noted, a researcher's personal attributes and social locations influence their choice of research problem, who they interact with during their study, and how they make sense of the information collected. As a female Muslim researcher, my interests, perspectives, and rapport with participants who share aspects of this social position are undoubtedly conveyed through inhabiting this space. My identities and experiences have sensitised me to the challenges and opportunities that Muslim students face, instilling a sense of responsibility to conduct this research empathetically with a commitment to amplifying diverse voices (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Zemp, 2016; Bolognani, 2007; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Mir, 2014; Ryan et al., 2011).

While my religious and cultural identities connected me to the participants' lived realities, my experiences differed significantly. Acknowledging both points of connection and divergence is crucial for rigorously conducting this research with integrity and care. Ongoing reflexivity

supports the transparent representation of diverse Muslim students' voices (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). By recognising and reflecting on my own biases, beliefs, and experiences, I could gain a deeper understanding of how they shape my interactions with participants and my interpretations of their experiences. This process of reflexivity allowed me to be more transparent about my role in the co-construction of knowledge, and more attuned to the ways in which my positionality may influence research outcomes (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003).

3.9.1 Insider/Outsider Positionality: Opportunities and Strategies

My dual positionality as both an insider, sharing a Muslim religious identity with participants, and an outsider, occupying the roles of researcher and university staff member, had a profound influence on the research process. This duality presents unique opportunities for deep engagement and understanding while also introducing potential challenges that require careful navigation and continuous reflexive practice (Berger, 2015; Kerstetter, 2012).

As an insider, I benefited from shared experiential knowledge that allowed me to approach the research with empathy, sensitivity, and cultural fluency, facilitating deeper connections with the participants (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Shah, 2018; Miled, 2017). My personal lived experiences as a Muslim woman navigating the complex terrain of higher education provided an intimate understanding of the multifaceted challenges, negotiations, and triumphs that often characterise Muslim students' journeys through academia (Zempi, 2016; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). This insider perspective enabled me to engage with participants' narratives in an authentic and nuanced manner, probing deeper into the emotional and social impacts of their experiences. For example, when May shared her experience of feeling judged and stared at by her peers for wearing the hijab ((see Chapter 5), I personally related it to the sense of isolation and otherness that can come with being visibly Muslim in predominantly non-Muslim spaces. Likewise, when Zamzam (see Chapter 7) and other participants discussed the importance of finding a quiet space on campus to perform daily prayers, I empathised with the logistical and spiritual challenges of maintaining religious practices within the constraints of academic life.

Crucially, my shared religious identity cultivated an environment of trust and openness, which is invaluable for exploring sensitive subjects such as experiences of prejudice, discrimination, or the delicate negotiations of upholding religious practices within secular university contexts. Participants expressed feeling at ease discussing such vulnerabilities with someone who could empathise with their struggles from a personal and spiritual standpoint (Aston, 2015; Chavez, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This sense of common ground and understanding facilitated a more focused, in-depth exploration of their lived realities without the need for extensive explanations or contextual framing (Pike 1967; Harris 1976; Knott 2010; Tinker & Armstrong 2008; Gallagher 2011; Keane 2014; Engler & Stausberg 2022).

Furthermore, my insider positioning facilitated the establishment of deeper rapport and trust when participants chose to openly share some of their most personal struggles the experiences of grappling with peer pressure, desire for social conformity, or make choices that seemingly contradict religious values, such as drinking or partying on campus choices that seemingly contradict religious values, such as drinking or partying on campus (see Chapter 5). As someone who has navigated the challenges of being a Muslim student in higher education, I was able to comprehend and sympathise with their struggles. I let them know that I understood the complex social pressures and desire to belong that can arise in these contexts.

In addition, as a Muslim researcher grounded in spiritual principles emphasising human fallibility, imperfection, and the primacy of '*wahidiyyah'* (the Oneness of God as the sole judge of human actions), I was able to respond to such disclosures with an ethics of empathy, humility, and non-judgement. This allowed me to create a space where participants felt safe to openly share these intricate dimensions of their lived experiences without fear of condemnation (Tufford & Newman, 2012; Weller et al., 2013). By validating the complexities of their realities and acknowledging the immense emotional landscapes they navigated, I cultivated the trust and authentic connection vital for the deep exploration of their journeys towards self-discovery, belonging, and identity negotiation within the university environment. (Tufford & Newman, 2012; Engler & Stausberg 2022).

However, this insider Muslim identity existed in dynamic tension with my outer positioning as a researcher and staff member within the academic institution itself. These roles introduce

potential power imbalances, hierarchies, and competing allegiances, which require careful navigation to preserve the integrity of research relationships (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Despite my best efforts, participants may have perceived me through hierarchical lenses as an authority figure, possessor of institutional expertise, or representative of university interests. Such dynamics could have impacted their willingness to openly divulge certain nuances of their experiences or engage in constructive questioning of my interpretations and knowledge claims. My Muslim identity may have been overshadowed or influenced by these other subject positions in ways that constrain authenticity. Moreover, the very nature of my research agenda, although it was not directed or funded through institutional channels, still raised critical questions about whose interests truly guided the enquiry, whether it was those of Muslim student constituencies or the university's own aims regarding religious minority stakeholders.

To ethically navigate the tensions arising from my dual positionality, I followed the guidelines proposed by Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) that emphasise reflexivity, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative engagement throughout the research process. Central to this was a steadfast commitment to continuous self-reflection, critically interrogating how my own assumptions, experiences, and social locations shaped interactions with participants and the meaning-making processes surrounding their narratives (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003; Bhopal, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991). Throughout this research process, I was aware that my own understanding and experience of Islam, while providing valuable insights, does not necessarily reflect the diverse range of beliefs, practices, and interpretations that exist within the Muslim community, and that each participant's relationship with faith is unique and shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social, and cultural factors that may differ significantly from one's own (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012).

Recognising this diversity and complexity was essential to circumvent the pitfalls of essentialising or homogenising conceptions of Muslim identities and experiences. For example, when engaging with participants like Mo, who shared his experience of being introduced to Islam at a very young age and attending Arabic and Quran schools from the age of five (see Chapter 5), I had to be careful not to assume that his religious upbringing and identity were identical to my own, despite some apparent similarities. By actively listening

and probing for the unique details and meanings of Mo's story, I was able to capture the specific ways in which his family, community, and educational background shaped his understanding and practice of Islam, which were distinct from my own experiences in important ways. Similarly, when interviewing Raj, who identified as a 'not a practising Muslim', I was mindful not to impose my own religious views or interpretations of her experiences, even when they diverged from my own. I centred on the ethic of deep listening without projecting judgments, making space for him to articulate his spiritual journey's complexities without imposing a monolithic metric of religious legitimacy. I am a firm believer in the idea that each participant's lived reality deserves to be honoured and understood in totality.

Therefore, throughout this research journey, I consciously bracketed preconceptions about participants' faith identities, approaching their stories with an open, curious mindset and focusing on understanding their unique perspectives and meanings. By creating a space for participants to articulate their understanding without judgement, I gained valuable insights into the diversity of Muslim identities and the complex negotiations between religious traditions and modern social values within campus spaces (Kassan, 2020; Weller et al., 2013; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

To maintain this ethical grounding and ensure that participants' voices remained faithfully centred, I employed a range of methodological tools and practices. These included maintaining a reflexive journal to document thoughts, feelings, and potential biases throughout the journey; engaging in memoing practices to capture in-process reflections (see Appendix H); and leveraging peer debriefing and consultation with supervisors to gain alternative perspectives (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, a positionality checklist (see Appendix L) with prompts related to personal backgrounds, cultural identities, assumptions, and potential blind spots provided structured guidance for continuous reflexive interrogation (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Ahern, 1999).

Grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, I recognise that knowledge is not an objective, fixed entity waiting to be discovered, but rather a product of social interactions,

shared experiences, and the meanings that individuals ascribe to them (Charmaz, 2014; Mills et al., 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore, I sought to create a collaborative and participatory research environment that valued participants' agency and expertise and sought to co-construct knowledge and meaning through dialogue and mutual learning (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Torre & Fine, 2008; Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln et al., 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Sinha & Back, 2014). From our earliest encounters, I was transparent about my identities, motivations, and contexts, situating myself not as an omniscient knowledge-bearer, but as a positionality-conscious learner. Participants' perspectives, interpretations, and voices were vital, not supplementary lenses, but indispensable co-constitutions of the enquiry itself (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

The interviews became spaces of collaboration, with participants actively shaping the direction of our exchanges and providing invaluable feedback that enriched my interpretations and understanding. This reciprocal process, grounded in humility and a willingness to be challenged by participants' insights, fostered a sense of shared authority over knowledge production (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). For instance, when Sarah enquired about my own experiences in maintaining religious practices on campus, this opened up an opportunity for me to reflect on my positionality while also learning from her perspectives on the unique challenges that Muslim students face. By engaging in this kind of reciprocal sharing and reflection, Sarah and I were able to create a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim students in higher education, one grounded in our shared experiences and mutual learning from each other's stories (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Torre & Fine, 2008; Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln et al., 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Sinha & Back, 2014; Reiter, 2018).

Maintaining ethical integrity through this journey remained paramount, involving persistent efforts to cultivate transparency by explicitly discussing research aims, audiences, and processes for finding dissemination with participants. Emotional detriments stemming from the vulnerability of candid storytelling during the interviews raised concerns about well-being, which I mitigated by providing resources for well-being support services across both universities. I strove to embody an ethic of beneficence, committing to amplify participant

voices in ways that could tangibly contribute to fostering more inclusive higher education ecosystems for Muslim and minority faith students (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Gilligan, 2015; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

By actively engaging with the complexities of my multidimensional positionalities through ongoing reflexive practice (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002) and collaborative meaning-making with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I sought to honour their intricate truths and experiences. This approach nurtured an environment of mutual trust and shared struggle with a space where the voices of Muslim students, often marginalised (Ramadan, 2022; Phoenix, 2019; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012), could become agents in the co-construction of pluralistic knowledge ecologies (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Our partnership exemplifies the liberating potential that emerges when intersecting insider-outsider knowledge coalesces in the collective pursuit of understanding, healing, and transformation (Freire, 1970; Collins, 1986; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

3.9.2   The Value of Outsider Perspectives

Throughout the research process, I sought to incorporate multiple perspectives and voices into the analysis and representation of the research findings to challenge my own subjectivities and provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of Muslim students' experiences (Grace et al., 2015; Noy, 2015; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). This has involved actively seeking out and engaging with insider and outsider perspectives from diverse disciplinary, cultural, and experiential backgrounds and considering how these perspectives may complement, contradict, or complex my own interpretations. I have also included extensive verbatim quotes from participants in the research write-up to prioritise their voices and perspectives and allow readers to assess the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis.

Additionally, engaging with outsider researchers' perspectives offers a critical distance and objectivity in the study of religious experiences, which helps reduce taken-for-granted assumptions, reveal blind spots, and generate new questions and insights (Chryssides & Geaves, 2007; Knott, 2005). They provide a broader contextual understanding of the social, political, and institutional forces that shape religious communities' experiences, beyond the

immediate realm of religious identity and practice (Asmar, 2005; Jones, 2013). For example, engaging with the work of scholars who study the experiences of other marginalised groups in higher education, such as Black or LGBTQ+ students, has helped situate the experiences of Muslim students within the broader context of institutional inequity and systemic discrimination. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches from fields such as critical race theory, queer theory, and disability studies, scholars have shown that dominant norms and structures in higher education can perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation for students who fall outside the mainstream (Lin, 2023; Duran, et al. 2019; Patton, 2015; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Powell, 2013).

For instance, reading the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) on intersectionality has deepened my understanding of how Muslim students' experiences of marginalisation and resilience are shaped by the complex interplay of their religious identity with other social identities, such as race, gender, and class. Crenshaw's work has encouraged me to adopt a more intersectional lens in my analysis, attending to the multiple and overlapping forms of oppression and resistance that shape Muslim students' lives rather than treating their religious identity in isolation. Similarly, engaging with the work of scholars such as Shaun Harper (2012) on the experiences of black male students in higher education has helped me recognise the ways in which Muslim students' experiences of stereotyping, surveillance, and exclusion on campus are not unique, but rather part of a broader pattern of institutional racism and Islamophobia that affects students' colour more broadly. By situating Muslim students' experiences within these larger systemic contexts, I have been able to develop a more nuanced and politically engaged understanding of the challenges they face and explore potential alliances and solidarities with other marginalised groups on campus.

Moreover, reading the work of scholars who study the experiences of Muslim students in other national or institutional contexts, such as the United States and Australia, has helped me to identify common themes and challenges that transcend specific cultural and political contexts. By comparing the experiences of Muslim students across different settings, these scholars have generated valuable insights into the ways in which global forces such as Islamophobia, neoliberalism, and secularisation can shape the lives of Muslim students in higher education (Alisai, 2021; Possamai et al. 2016; Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006).

For example, reading the work of scholars like Shabana Mir (2014) on the experiences of Muslim American women in higher education has helped me recognise the transnational dimensions of Muslim students' experiences and the ways in which their identities and struggles are shaped by broader geopolitical forces and discourses. Mir's work also challenged me to think more critically about the ways in which my research might reproduce or reinforce Orientalist or essentialist assumptions about Muslim students, even as an insider researcher. By engaging with these outsider perspectives, I have been pushed to develop a more self-reflexive and globally informed understanding of Muslim students' experiences, one that attends to the complex ways in which the local and global contexts intersect and shape their lives.

Outsider perspectives have also challenged me to critically examine my own assumptions and interpretations, and to consider alternative explanations and frameworks for understanding Muslim students' experiences. For example, some scholars have argued that the concept of a unified "Muslim identity" is problematic as it can obscure the diversity and heterogeneity of Muslim communities and experiences (Afshar, 2014; Grewal, 2014). Others have criticised the tendency of insider researchers to present an overly positive or romanticised view of Muslim students' experiences, arguing that this can downplay the real challenges and struggles faced by these students (Mir, 2014; Shahjahan, 2014).

Engaging with these critical perspectives has pushed me to interrogate my own biases and blind spots and to strive for a more nuanced and complex understanding of Muslim students' experiences that acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of insider positionalities. For instance, reading the work of scholars such as Grewal (2014) on the politics of Muslim American identity has challenged me to think more critically about the ways in which my research might reproduce or reify simplistic or monolithic notions of Muslim identity, even though I seek to represent the diversity and complexity of Muslim students' experiences. Grewal's work has encouraged me to be more attentive to the ways in which Muslim students actively construct and negotiate their identities in response to broader social and political discourses rather than treating their identities as fixed or essential. Similarly, engaging with critiques of scholars like Riyad Shahjahan (2014) pushed me to be more reflexive about the ways in which my own positionality as an insider researcher might lead me to downplay or overlook the challenges and struggles faced by Muslim students to present a more positive

or empowering narrative. By grappling with these critical outsider perspectives, I have sought to develop a more self-aware and politically engaged approach to my research, one that attends to the complex power dynamics and ethical responsibilities involved in representing marginalised communities.

It is important to recognise that outsider perspectives are not inherently more objective or impartial than insider perspectives and that they are shaped by researchers' own positionalities, biases, and power relations (Knott, 2010). As such, the value of outsider perspectives lies not in their presumed neutrality but in their ability to provide a different lens through which to view and interpret religious experiences and engage in critical and reflexive dialogue with insider knowledge (Aune et al., 2017; McLoughlin, 2014). In this research, I have sought to engage with both insider and outsider perspectives in a way that recognises their complementary strengths and limitations and seeks to generate a more holistic and nuanced understanding of Muslim students' experiences in higher education. This has involved a willingness to be challenged and unsettled by alternative viewpoints and to engage in ongoing dialogue and reflection with researchers from diverse backgrounds and disciplinary traditions (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

By employing these strategies, I sought to navigate the complexities and tensions of my insider-outsider positionality in a way that is reflexive, collaborative, and ethically engaged. While my dual positionality has undoubtedly significantly shaped the research process, I believe that, by remaining vigilant, open, and adaptable, I have been able to harness the strengths and mitigate the limitations of this positionality to produce a rich, nuanced, and authentic understanding of Muslim students' experiences in higher education.

In many ways, my insider-outsider positionality has served as a microcosm of the larger tensions and possibilities that characterise the study of Muslim students' experiences in higher education. As Muslim students must navigate multiple intersecting identities and negotiate their place within complex institutional and societal structures (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020), researchers must grapple with the fluid and multifaceted nature of their own positionality in relation to their participants and wider research context. By embracing this complexity and engaging in ongoing reflexivity and dialogue, I was able to develop a more nuanced, collaborative, and socially engaged approach to research that honours the diversity

of Muslim students' experiences and their resilience, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable vision of higher education.

3.10 Analytical approach

Informed by constructivist principles, the data analysis in this study interprets data based on the premise that knowledge is constructed and undiscovered (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). It acknowledges that students' experiences and identities are shaped by their unique sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach views participants as active constructors of meaning in their everyday lives (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005). Therefore, the data analysis sought to uncover the sociocultural meanings embedded in students' experiences and identity construction.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method were used for this research as it allows for the identification of the ways in which participants construct their identities and navigate their social environments and to explore the factors that influence these processes, which is the main research aim of identifying and exploring Muslim students' experiences and perceptions of their experiences on campus. Braun and Clarke (2006:81) noted that "thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method that reports the experiences, meanings, and reality of participants, which is appropriate for the purpose of this study. It also provides "some level of patterned response or meaning" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82) within the dataset, and it offers an outline for investigative, data-driven analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Thematic analysis is also described as a "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:78); it is a good tool for interpreting data more rigorously and conscientiously, allowing for the identification of emerging themes as opposed to distilling them (Ezzy, 2002). This approach enabled me to uncover patterns in the information and organise the data into meaningful patterns and themes that reflected participants' narratives and experiences, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

An inductive or bottom-up approach was employed to uncover patterns within the data. The themes that emerged were tightly linked to the data, despite some influence from existing literature. Additionally, the data gathered from the interviews did not always reflect the questions asked, as the interviews developed naturally, and the participants were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences, even drifting away from the interview schedule.

Throughout the coding process, it was important that the data spoke for itself, and the codes were not derived from the previous literature. Thus, there is no coding framework. Although it is impossible to claim objectivity in this type of research, an attempt was made to ensure that analytical preconceptions were verified through reflexivity. However, the topics of the findings chapter evolved through the coding process, making this study more inductive than deductive.

Additionally, the data gathered from the interviews did not always reflect the questions asked, as the interviews developed naturally, and the participants were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences, even drifting away from the interview schedule. Throughout the coding process, it was important that the data spoke for itself, and the codes were not derived from the previous literature. Thus, there is no coding framework. Although it is impossible to claim objectivity in this type of research, an attempt was made to ensure that analytical preconceptions were verified through reflexivity. However, the topics of the findings chapter evolved through the coding process, making this study more inductive than deductive.

The inductive nature of the analysis, which is a key principle of co-construction, helped draw out themes that highlighted the different experiences of Muslim students across both universities. This allowed the common themes of student experience, identity construction, representation, and institutional identity/habitus to evolve. Thematic analysis offers a flexible approach that can be modified to meet the needs of the study, which aligns with the principle of co-construction. Owing to its flexibility, a wider range of conclusions can be drawn from the data. Although this is an advantage, it also makes the creation of precise guidelines more challenging. Nonetheless, it allows for a wider understanding of different issues and provides a rich and detailed account of complex data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To address researcher bias, which was a significant threat during the analysis stage, the assigned codes and identified themes were discussed with the supervisor and reviewed by the participants who were still in contact. This collaborative approach aligns with the principles of co-construction, which emphasises the importance of working with participants and stakeholders in the research process. However, it is important to note that while involving participants in the analysis process can help reduce researcher bias and ensure that the findings are grounded in participants' experiences, it does not eliminate bias entirely. The co-

construction approach recognises that the researcher's interpretations and theoretical lenses shape the analysis to some extent. Nonetheless, reviewing the codes and themes with participants provides an opportunity to incorporate their feedback, check the resonance of the interpretations, and enhance the credibility of the findings (Pannucci and Wilkins, 2010).

By applying the principles of co-construction, the analysis identified rich and detailed themes that provided a nuanced understanding of Muslim students' experiences at both universities. The collaborative approach helped ensure that the findings were grounded in the perspectives and experiences of the participants and reduced the potential for researcher bias. Braun and Clarke (2006) documented a six-phase framework (Table 3), which is an iterative and reflective process that evolves and involves constant reflection and back-and-forth between phases (Nowell et al., 2017) to establish trustworthiness, particularly when dealing with complex data.

Table 4 Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis.

| Step 1: Become familiar with the data |
| Step 2: Generate initial codes |
| Step 3: Search for themes |
| Step 4: Review themes |
| Step 5: Define themes |
| Step 6: Write-up |

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the interviews were recorded and transcribed; the transcribing of the interviews was labour intensive and took more time than expected. However, this was a fundamental step, as it started the familiarisation process of the data.

Following the transcription stage, the data were thoroughly reviewed, the audio was listened to multiple times, and the initial reflections and impressions were recorded. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and stories, and how they relate to one another. Additionally, this process helped familiarise the researcher with the data, which is a crucial step in the co-construction process.

The next phase involved importing the data into NVivo, data management software in which memos were used to comment on the data and reflect on the researcher's thoughts and emerging points. This aligns with Adams and Thompson (2016), who argued that tools such as NVivo play a significant role in shaping research practices and knowledge construction by introducing new dynamics into the research process (Adams and Thompson, 2016). A key feature of NVivo's contribution is its ability to visualise complex data. Employing tools such as in vivo coding strips and mind and concept (as shown in Appendix H-K), the software provided a clear, tangible representation of the research findings. This not only aided in the interpretation of the data, but also enhanced the clarity and comprehensibility of the research outcomes. Using visual tools created within NVivo brought an additional layer of depth to the analysis, enabling a more holistic understanding of the themes and patterns emerging from the data (Castleberry 2014).

Throughout the analysis, a continuous review of the participants' original statements and experiences was conducted to ensure that the findings were grounded in their perspectives and accurately reflected their experiences. This collaborative approach to data analysis and interpretation allowed for a more accurate understanding of the participants' experiences and themes that emerged from the data. By emphasising co-construction, this was to produce findings that were not only rigorous and reliable but also grounded in the perspectives of the participants, which is a crucial aspect of qualitative research (Richards and Hemphill, 2017).

In this study, a deliberate approach was adopted to avoid preconceived notions derived from existing literature on the topic, particularly in the initial stages of data analysis. This decision was guided by King et al. (2018) who cautioned against the early application of specific theoretical concepts. They argue that this can lead to a narrow analysis, focusing only on aspects of the data that align with pre-existing theoretical frameworks and potentially miss other significant insights (King et al. 2018:207).

This approach proved to be particularly insightful in my research, especially in examining the experiences of Muslim students across two universities. Contrary to the prevalent narrative in the existing literature that often portrays Muslim identity as problematic in university settings because of Islamophobia, the participants' accounts revealed a different challenge. They indicated that the primary issues they faced were not always rooted in Islamophobia but were rather linked to universities' failure to accommodate their social needs. This finding was

unexpected considering the dominant discourse that frequently associates Muslim student identities with issues of faith-based discrimination.

Interestingly, the participants did not attribute their sense of isolation to their faith identity; instead, they viewed it as a result of institutional shortcomings. In fact, their faith identity has been described as a critical support mechanism for their progress and identity formation in university environments. This departure from the commonly depicted narrative in literature highlights the value of approaching data analysis without preconceived theoretical frameworks. By allowing themes to emerge organically from the data, the research was able to uncover nuanced perspectives and experiences that might have otherwise been overlooked. This method underlines the importance of maintaining an open-minded approach in qualitative research, free from the constraints of existing literature and presuppositions.

Once codes were formulated, the literature was consulted; the literature helped in writing the findings chapters, but not in the formulation of codes. The primary objective of the initial data analysis was to identify overt themes, including symmetric or explicit themes (Braun & Clarke 2006), rather than latent themes. As coding and analysis progressed, the interview transcripts and themes evolved from mere descriptions to interpretations of deeper meanings and implications. The creation of codes allowed for the exploration of recurring themes within the data.

Open coding was initially used to code anything interesting, once the initial coding process of the transcript was completed, the relationships and consistency between codes were highlighted; this allowed for the code-defining process to begin, and also helped to see which codes were connected and could be put into groups, some of the initial codes were discarded as they overlapped with other codes, and some codes were also categorised as "miscellaneous" (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The new emergent codes were then grouped under an overarching theme and compared to the research question or focus developed from the overarching theme and coding groups. The review of these themes and checking whether they worked in relation to the coded data helped to create a meaningful connection with the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) offered vital questions that need to be asked during this stage, for example, questions as to whether there was enough meaningful data to

support this theme and whether it describes something useful about the research question, in this case, Muslim students' campus experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between two types of themes: "semantic and latent." Semantic themes are concerned with the "surface-level meaning of the data, and the analyst does not look beyond what the participants have Saïd or written" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:84). Although the themes in this research were initially categorised according to the 'semantic level, this helped generate the initial codes related to Muslim students' university experience and use of university spaces. However, the purpose of the analysis was to capture 'something important in relation to the overall research focus' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82). Hence the analysis moved beyond describing what is Saïd to focusing on to identifying "the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Ibid:84). The preliminary thematic analysis identified a collection of themes that helped map out the predominant themes that allowed for in-depth exploration and interpretation of Muslim students' experiences on campus, the meanings attached to these experiences, the interaction between the individual and their spaces, and how these were altered over time. Prevalence was considered in this study; that is, the number of participants who alluded to similar experiences. The themes were created by quoting only one or two participants. However, rather than similarities in experiences and the recurrence of themes, the stage of defining and reviewing the data involved discarding some codes and themes because of insufficient data or combining themes, amalgamating specific codes and subthemes, and merging them into one overarching. The coded data in the overarching theme were then reread; then, the chapter focus was defined and named (Braun and Clarke's (2006:91). The constant review of the data helped capture and understand what was significant in the data related to the research question and represented some patterns and recurring themes. The themes needed to work together to capture the overall narratives of the Muslim students' campus experiences. These themes capture the interplay between various factors that shape the campus experience of Muslim students.

The final themes included Muslim students' understanding of their identity, their faith, the importance of their faith in their everyday lives, their university experiences, the impact of the university environment on their faith and personal identity, their relationships with their university campus, and their reflections on their experiences and identities. It is fundamental

to acknowledge that not everyone who might identify as a Muslim is practising it. However, participants stated that Islam was a significant part of their identity as individuals.

The analysis took place over several months, during which time I revisited previous analysis sessions. It was essential to have an iterative approach. Throughout the research and analysis process, I maintained a continuous evaluation of my positionality (Shaw, 2010:234) to ensure awareness of the impact of my own biases (Rodham, 2015), which was achieved through self-reflection throughout the research process. Being an insider researcher made it even more vital for me to reflect on my position and the possible influence my identity would have on the generation of themes. Thus, regular supervision meetings, discussion of the findings, and reflection on the coding process helped in the initial exploration of the themes. In addition, reviewing the data several times over several weeks with reflection between the data collection and data analysis gave me space between myself and the data. I coded and moved between these stages and sometimes recorded and added additional codes to help identify overarching themes. Even though this was time-consuming, constantly returning to the data meant that I maintained a degree of flexibility and openness, which scholars argue is an essential quality of qualitative analysis (Lune and Berg 2017).

Based on these six phases of the thematic analysis framework, concept maps were drawn (see Figure 1), and the findings chapters were created to include topics such as the notion of representation and self-imagination, the chapter on identity construction and space, and the chapter on habitus and its impact on student identity construction. Throughout the findings' chapters, direct quotations from the participants were used to illustrate the narratives of Muslim students at the university. As much as this was a learning experience for me, it was also a valuable experience for the participants. Some participants became emotional during the interviews, particularly when asked to reflect on their university experiences and their impact on their identity and connection to faith. It appears that this reflective process allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the participants and further understand themselves. Thematic analysis was selected as the analytical method because it was found to be the most suitable approach for this study.

Figure 1: Concept map of the Muslim students' experiences in the UK higher education environment.
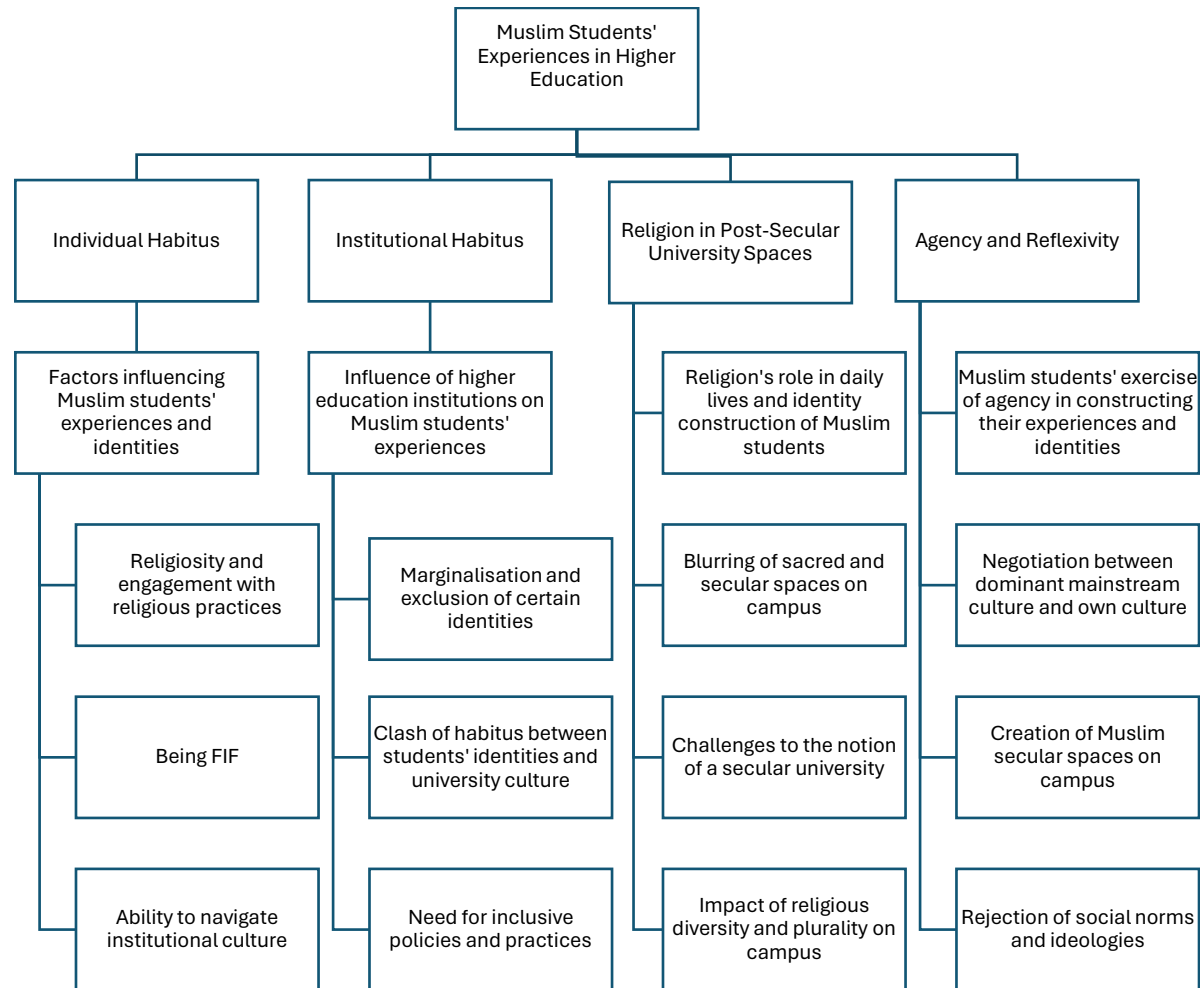
3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the research approach undertaken to explore the experiences of Muslim students in higher education in the UK. The chosen methods, rooted in a constructivist paradigm, aimed to provide a nuanced and contextualised understanding of the participants' lived realities. By prioritising ethical considerations, researcher reflexivity, and participant collaboration, this study sought to generate authentic and meaningful insights into the complex dynamics of Muslim student identities in university contexts. The next section presents the conceptual framework that emerged from the collected data.

4   CHAPTER 4: Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) Conceptual Framework

4.1   Introduction

This study developed the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework, which emerged through a collaborative and iterative process involving the researcher and participants. The study of Muslim students' experiences in higher education has gained significant attention in recent years as researchers and practitioners seek to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this diverse population. The MIIM framework aims to provide a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of Muslim students' experiences in university settings, grounded in the interpretivist epistemology and social constructionist ontology that underpins the study to address this gap. This study developed the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework, which emerged through a collaborative and iterative process that involved the researcher and participants, and the study of Muslim students' experiences in higher education has gained significant attention in recent years as researchers and practitioners seek to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this diverse population. However, existing research often fails to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of Muslim students' identities and experiences, leading to simplistic or homogenising representations that obscure the richness and diversity of their lived realities (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Stevenson, 2018). To address this gap, this study developed the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework, which emerged through a collaborative and iterative process involving the researcher and participants. The MIIM framework aims to provide a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of Muslim students' experiences in university settings, grounded in the interpretivist epistemology and social constructionist ontology that underpin the study.

The framework is organised into four interdependent and mutually interconnected concepts (see **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.**).The MIIM framework is grounded in the principles of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), recognising that individuals' identities and experiences are shaped by multiple, intersecting social categories and power structures, as well as by the meanings and representations that are socially constructed and negotiated in

specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Unlike a theoretical framework, which is typically predetermined before data collection, the MIIM framework is derived from the unique experiences and perspectives of the interviewed Muslim students, making it a flexible and dynamic tool that responds to the nuances of their identities and experiences (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The framework is organised around four interdependent and mutually interconnected concepts (see **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source no t found.**).

1. Identity shaped through the lens of intersectionality theory.
2. Agency and subjectivity viewed through Saba Mahmood's theorisation.
3. Social structures were analysed using Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus, and field.
4. Social representations examined through the lenses of Moscovici and Goffman

Represents the complex and multidimensional nature of Muslim students' identities, shaped by the intersection of various social categories such as religion, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

Represents Muslim students' capacity to actively navigate, negotiate, and resist the various structures and representations that shape their experiences in higher education.

Identity

Agency

Social Representation

Social Structure

Represents the dominant discourses, stereotypes, and narratives about Islam and Muslims that circulate in society and shape how Muslim students are perceived and treated in higher education.

Represents the institutional, cultural, and systemic factors that shape Muslim students' experiences and opportunities in higher education, such as university policies, campus climate, and societal norms and expectations.

Figure 2- presents a visual representation of the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework, illustrating the dynamic interplay between identity, agency, social structure, and social representation. As shown in the diagram, these four elements

4.2 Emergence of the MIIM Framework

Through an iterative and reflexive process of data analysis, the framework emerged as a collaborative effort between the researcher and the participants, ensuring that it remained grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of Muslim students. The development of the MIIM framework exemplifies the co-construction approach that underpins the methodology of this study. Through an iterative and reflexive process of data analysis, the framework emerged as a collaborative effort between the researcher and participants, ensuring that it remained grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of Muslim students.

As the analysis progressed, recurring conceptual dimensions began to surface, highlighting the intersection of identity, agency, social structure, and social representation as central to understanding the participants' educational journeys (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). The initial stages of data analysis involved a combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Open coding was employed to identify emerging themes related to factors shaping Muslim students' experiences, while deductive coding, based on relevant theoretical concepts, provided an initial analytical lens (Miles et al., 2014). As the analysis progressed, recurring conceptual dimensions began to surface, highlighting the intersection of identity, agency, social structure, and social representation as central to understanding participants' educational journeys (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021).

This process allowed for the emergence of four key concepts that form the foundation of the MIIM framework: identity, agency, social structure, and social representation. Through familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing a report, the researcher was able to identify patterns and connections across participants' narratives. The thematic analysis process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), plays a central role in the development of the MIIM framework. Through familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report, the researcher was able to identify patterns and connections across participants' narratives. This process allowed for the emergence of the four key concepts that form the

foundation of the MIIM framework: identity, agency, social structure, and social representation.

To illustrate this excerpt from an interview with Kat, a female Muslim student, as follows:

> *'I started wearing the hijab when I came to university, and it was a big decision for me. I knew that it would make me more visible as a Muslim, and I was worried about how people would react. But I also felt that it was an important part of my identity, and I wanted to express it. I remember the first day I wore it to lectures.   I was so nervous, but my friends were really supportive. That gave me the confidence to keep wearing it, even though I still face some stares and comments from people who don't understand. but wearing that hajib also made me visible to other Muslims, they look at me and say I see you; they acknowledge my presence…this is very important for my sense of self in a university, like University (A), where there are more than 30000 students across campus to feel like you are acknowledged and recognised as a person'* (Kat, University A).

Kat's narrative touches on several critical themes: her identity and agency in choosing to wear the hijab, the university's social structures, broader societal representations of Islam that can lead to misunderstandings and discrimination, and the value of supportive networks in fostering belonging and empowerment. As similar patterns emerged across narratives, it became evident that these concepts were not only individually significant but also deeply interconnected. Participants' agency in navigating university life was both enabled and constrained by social structures and campus culture. Their identities are shaped by personal experiences intersecting with societal representations of Islam and Muslims, leading to internalised oppression or resistance (Crenshaw, 1989; Mir, 2014; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012).

Engagement with participants played a crucial role in validating and refining the MIIM framework through a collaborative co-construction methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Heron & Reason, 1997). This iterative process sought participant feedback and insights, ensuring the credibility and reliability of the analytical outcomes while deeply embedding the research within a constructivist framework (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Charmaz, 2014).

Through these dialogues, the foundational concepts and interrelationships within the framework were subjected to further scrutiny, enabling more nuanced elaboration and clarification (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Saldaña, 2021).

Throughout the framework's development, ongoing reflexivity and bracketing minimized potential biases, ensuring it remained grounded in participants' perspectives. As a Muslim researcher studying my own community, acknowledging the influence of positionality, including insider-outsider status and personal experiences on the research process, was imperative. Regularly discussing interpretations with participants and supervisors upheld integrity and trustworthiness (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Zempi, 2016; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Berger, 2015; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

The framework highlights the interactions among identity, agency, social structure, and social representation throughout the chapters of the findings. Grounded in participants' lived realities, it accounts for the complex individual, social, and institutional factors that influence identities and outcomes (Crenshaw, 1989; Bourdieu, 1986; Goffman, 1959). This interplay manifests across the chapters. For instance, Chapter 5 explores how Muslim students' identity work is reciprocally influenced by the social representations and discourses surrounding Islam and Muslim identity within university contexts. Their negotiation of their identities is both shaped by prevalent campus narratives and stereotypes while also possessing the agency to challenge and transform these very representations through embodied practices and counter-narratives. Chapter 6 illustrates how their agency is constrained by the university's institutional habitus and how their agency can resist and reshape this habitus. Building upon these insights, Chapter 7 further examines the spatial dimensions of institutional habituses across contrasting university environments. It illustrates how varying approaches to diversity, inclusion, and the provision of sacred and third spaces can foster climates of belonging or alienation for Muslim students. Their sense of participation and entitlement to occupy campus spaces emerges as an embodied, spatial negotiation navigating intersections between personal identities, communal affiliations, symbolic representations, and the university's material-discursive landscapes.

Collectively, these chapters explain the MIIM framework's central assertion that Muslim students' identities, agencies, and experiences within higher education cannot be understood through reductive, monolithic lenses. Rather, they represent dynamic, multidimensional becomings continually co-constituted through the entanglements of personal subjectivities, sociocultural forces, and institutionalised power dynamic. The framework's holistic integration of these interrelated conceptual domains allows it to capture the complexities underlying Muslim university students' journeys.

4.3 Key Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives

These concepts are informed by a range of theoretical perspectives that illustrate the complex and dynamic processes of identity construction, negotiation, and contestation in the context of higher education (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).The Muslim I dentity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework is underpinned by four key concepts– identity, agency, social structure, and social representation–which are viewed as interdependent and mutually constitutive. These concepts are informed by a range of theoretical perspectives that illustrate the complex and dynamic processes of identity construction, negotiation, and contestation in the context of higher education (see **Error! R eference source not found.**).

4.3.1 Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital, Habitus, and Field

The concept of social structure within the MIIM framework draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, habitus, and field, which provides a valuable lens for understanding how social inequalities are reproduced and challenged within educational settings. Bourdieu posited that individuals' experiences and outcomes in education are shaped by the unequal distribution and valuation of various forms of capital, such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, which are accumulated and transmitted through family and social networks. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain that these concepts cannot be fully understood in isolation but are rather "two complementary ways of referring to the social reality of practices' (Ibid: 97). Their relations are captured in Bourdieu's famous equation:

(Habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984: 101)

For Bourdieu, practices - the observable actions, choices, and behaviours of social agents - result from the interaction between habitus (the embodied dispositions and schemas shaped by one's social conditioning) and the various species of capital (cultural, economic, social, and symbolic) that agents possess and strategically mobilise within a given field (the structured arena of power relations and struggles over legitimacy). In the context of this study examining Muslim students' experiences through the MIIM conceptual framework, Bourdieu's interconnected triadic concepts are employed as heuristic "thinking tools" to analyse the complex interplay between individual/group habituses, the distribution and activation of capitals, and the university field. This analytical lens aligns with the study's overarching constructionist ontology which views social reality as continually reproduced and negotiated through human meaning-making processes and practices.

4.3.1.1   Social and Cultural Capital

The concept of capital is another central element of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. Bourdieu (1986) describes capital as "accumulated labour (in its materialised form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour" (Ibid: 46). Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between three main forms of capital: economic capital (material wealth), social capital (social networks and connections), and cultural capital (cultural knowledge, skills, and qualifications). Thus, capital can be a resource that may be symbolically valued within a field and can therefore be used as a currency that social actors (students) take to the area (the university) (Bourdieu, 1986; Kilpatrick, 2003; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

The MIIM framework incorporates Bourdieu's concept of capital to examine how Muslim students' cultural capital shapes their experience and outcomes in higher education. It considers how Muslim students from different social and cultural backgrounds may have different levels and types of cultural capital, such as language proficiency, academic skills, or religious knowledge, which are valued and rewarded in the university field. It also considers how Muslim students may face various barriers and challenges in acquiring and

mobilising the cultural capital necessary for academic and social success, such as financial constraints, language difficulties, or cultural differences (refer to discussion in chapter 6).

4.3.1.2 Habitus

Intersecting with capital is Bourdieu's conception of habitus, which refers to the internalised dispositions and ways of thinking and acting that individuals acquire through their socialisation and experiences, which shape their behaviours and perceptions (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Huang, 2019). In his later work, Bourdieu (2000) referred to habitus as a "system of dispositions (Ibid:130). These dispositions are rooted in the social context and structure in which individuals are situated and reproduced. Habitus is widely used in higher education research to explore class space inequality and social reproduction (Reay, 2004; Reay et al., 2014; Davey, 2012), and is closely related to the issue of access to university (Schulz et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2005). Furthermore, Ivemark and Ambrose (2021) suggest that habitus can be shaped through consistent exposure to cultural capital-rich social settings throughout an individual's lifespan. Habitus is shaped by an individual's past experiences and their dispositions which leads to consistent practices over time (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005).

The concept of habitus particularly informs the social structure quadrant of the MIIM framework. It provides a lens to understand how Muslim students' dispositions, shaped by their early socialisation and religious education, influence their experiences and outcomes in higher education. The interviews revealed the significant role of being raised in Muslim families and attending Mosque school or Arabic and Quran schools during weekends and evenings in shaping the participants' habitus (refer to the discussion in Chapters 5 and 6).

Habitus incorporated in the MIIM framework to examine how the habitus of Muslim students shapes their experiences and outcomes in higher education. It considers how Muslim students from different social and cultural backgrounds may have different habitus that is aligned with the dominant habitus of the university, and how this alignment or misalignment may affect their sense of belonging, engagement, and achievement in higher education. It also considers how Muslim students' habitus is shaped by both their individual dispositions and experiences as well as by the broader social, cultural, and religious contexts in which they are embedded, such as their family, community, and faith traditions.

4.3.1.3 Institutional Habitus

Derived from the concept of habitus, institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2007; Thomas, 2002) recognises that educational institutions themselves possess distinct habitus that shapes their cultures, norms, and practices. Institutional habitus is not monolithic, but can vary across departments, faculties, and campuses, influenced by factors such as funding, public opinion, and cultural values. Crucially, institutional habitus tends to be resistant to change, reproducing itself through mechanisms such as the selection, socialisation, evaluation, and reward systems.

For Muslim students, the institutional habitus of their university plays a pivotal role in determining their campus experience. The degree to which their individual habitus, shaped by their cultural and religious backgrounds, aligns or conflicts with the dominant institutional habitus can create openings or barriers for their integration and success. Accommodations such as flexible scheduling, halal food options, prayer spaces, and academic support can foster a more inclusive environment, while limitations on religious expression, biased curricula, and scheduling conflicts can obstruct their full participation and sense of belonging (Stevenson, 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). Research suggests that institutions fostering a culture of collective solidarity, academic dispositions, and de-ethnicised interactions can enhance Muslim students' educational engagement and reduce inequalities (Çelik, 2020). Conversely, institutions that reproduce class-based or ethnic-based stereotypes and discrimination can alienate Muslim students, hindering their university experience (Stevenson, 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Bhopal, 2018).

This interplay between students' primary habitus and institutional habitus is central to MIIM's theorisation of social structural forces. Universities' institutionalised norms, policies, and practices around religion, diversity, and inclusion can create climates of belonging or alienation for Muslim students based on congruence or disjuncture with their classed, ethnic, and pious dispositions (Reay et al., 2010; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). An unwelcoming institutional habitus can engender cultural dissonances and forms of symbolic violence that devalue Muslim students' cultural, religious, and linguistic capital.

The MIIM framework's engagement with the concept of habitus aligns with the broader academic discourse on the relevance of this theoretical lens for exploring the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented groups in educational settings. It contributes to ongoing debates around the dynamic and intersectional nature of habitus, challenging essentialised notions and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of how individual and institutional habitus interact to shape educational trajectories and outcomes. Integrating habitus within the MIIM framework provides a comprehensive and theoretically grounded approach to understanding the complex interplay of identity, agency, social representations, and social structures that shape Muslim students' university experiences.

4.3.1.4 The Concept of Field

Moreover, the MIIM draws upon Bourdieu's conceptualisation of field as a self-contained domain of social interaction that operates according to its own distinct principles, rules, and incentives, which are influenced by the broader social structure and historical context (p. 349). A field is a "social space where agents and institutions compete for different forms of capital" and struggle to maintain or change the existing rules, values, and hierarchies that govern that particular field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 72). It is the site of social relations in which a struggle for various positions of power is played out, such as in the arts, politics, law, family, neighbourhood, or education (Hart, 2019), and emphasises the stratification and domination of social actors based on their capital and habitus (Swartz, 2020). Higher education itself constitutes a pivotal field in which Muslim students must strategically navigate institutional hierarchies, disciplinary subfields, and the selective conversion or repudiation of their intersecting cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Naidoo, 2004; Reay et al., 2005; Mangan et al., 2010).

Bourdieu (1993) asserts that "in order for a field to function, there have to be stakes, interests, and people prepared to play the game' (Ibid: 73). However, to "play the game" in the field, individuals must have pre-existing resources, such as reverent capital (such as prestige) (Bourdieu, 1984:446). Therefore, fields are not fixed or predetermined, but rather are shaped by the actions and interactions of agents who participate in them; thus, different fields exist within society, such as the field of education and the field of politics.

The MIIM framework incorporates Bourdieu's concept of the field to examine how the university field shapes Muslim students' experiences and outcomes in higher education. It considers how the specific rules, values, and power relations of the university field, such as emphasis on academic excellence, critical thinking, and social engagement, may enable or constrain Muslim students' opportunities and aspirations in higher education. It also considers how the university field is shaped by broader social, cultural, and political contexts, such as the increasing marketisation and internationalisation of higher education, or the rising Islamophobia and securitisation of Muslim communities in Western societies, and how these contexts may affect Muslim students' experiences and identities in higher education.

4.3.1.5 Critiques and Limitations of Bourdieu's Theory

Bourdieu's theory has faced criticism, particularly regarding the treatment of economic capital and poverty. Some critics contend that Bourdieu's theory places too much emphasis on cultural factors, such as habitus and cultural capital, while failing to adequately consider economic inequality and the structural constraints that limit the educational opportunities and choices of students from lower-income backgrounds (Lareau, 2011; Sullivan, 2002; Balachandran, 2021; Vučković Juroš, 2022). Additionally, it has been criticised for its middle-class bias, as it neglects the heterogeneity and agency of the working class in relation to education (Reay, 2017; Ingram, 2011). According to Bourdieu, education reproduces the existing social structure by transmitting cultural norms and values that favour the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1977). However, Reay et al. (2005) contended that this theory does not adequately explain how working-class students construct their identities and aspirations in educational settings and how they resist or challenge the dominant culture. Moreover, Reay (2017) questions Bourdieu's concept of habitus as being too static and deterministic, not allowing for change and adaptation, and thus, does not fully account for the active role that individuals play in shaping their educational experiences (Huang, 2019; Pöllmann, 2021).

Responding to these critiques, recent scholarship has advocated a more dynamic and reflexive understanding of habitus. Researchers have emphasised the potential for habitus to evolve through critical self-awareness and strategic navigation of diverse social fields,

aiming to reconcile structure and agency (Sweetman, 2003; Lehmann, 2007; Strand & Lizardo, 2015). For example, Hoque (2019) found that British-Bangladeshi Muslim female students in higher education actively negotiated and resisted the gendered and classed expectations of their families and communities and developed a reflexive and transformative habitus that enabled them to pursue their educational and career aspirations. Mohamedbhai (2021) showed how Muslim students in a South African university used their Islamic habitus, such as their ethical and spiritual values, to critique and challenge the neoliberal and secular norms of the institution and to imagine alternative visions of higher education that were more inclusive and socially just. This perspective aligns with Bourdieu's later work, which acknowledged the possibility of a "divided" or "clivé" habitus, whereby individuals develop the capacity to inhabit multiple, sometimes contradictory, habitus within various social spheres (Bourdieu, 1999; Reed-Danahay, 2005). Moreover, feminist, and intersectional scholars have drawn attention to the need to account for the multiple, intersecting dimensions of identity and experience that shape habitus and challenging notions of a unitary, class-based habitus (McNay, 1999; Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Friedman, 2016). Some scholars argue that Bourdieu reifies a unified, cohesive habitus rooted in French colonial imaginaries, omitting the internal heterogeneities which constitutes diasporic and post-colonial communities, such as Muslims (Puwar, 2009; Tripp, 2018; Nesdoly, 2021). This dialogue has enriched our understanding of Bourdie as a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a singular, essentialised notion of socialisation.

Despite these criticisms, Bourdieu's theory offers valuable insights and tools to understand educational inequality and its underlying mechanisms. Some researchers revisited Bourdieu's concepts and refined them to address the limitations and gaps identified in previous studies. For instance, Stahl and Mu (2022) suggest that cultural capital is still an important factor in shaping educational outcomes and argue that Bourdieu's concept of habitus is not a deterministic construct but rather a dynamic and contingent set of dispositions that are shaped by individuals' contexts (Reay et al., 2017). Individuals are not "passive recipients" of their social environment; they are active agents that can shape and transform their habitus (Yang, 2013). Therefore, habitus should be viewed as a relational and adaptable concept that develops through the interaction between a person and their

surroundings (Devine-Eller, 2012). Additionally, Akrivou and Di San Giorgio (2014) propose a "dialogical conception of habitus [that] can be compatible with the social basis of human freedom and learning" (Ibid: 1). They argue that habitus is not only a product of external social fields but also a source of creative and transformative action that can challenge and modify existing fields. Similarly, Stone et al. (2012) introduced the concept of relational habitus to describe the intersubjective processes of meaning-making that emerge in dynamic social systems such as classrooms or learning settings. They suggested that relational habitus is co-constructed and transformed through the participation and negotiation of different actors in a shared activity.

Therefore, the MIIM framework engages with these critiques and limitations by highlighting how Muslim students actively negotiate and transform university structures through their strategic accumulation and deployment of various forms of capital, such as forming Muslim student groups to build social and cultural capital or engaging in interfaith dialogue to challenge dominant representations of Islam and Muslims. It focuses on the ways in which Muslim students exercise their agency and reflexivity to navigate and negotiate the dominant habitus of the university, as well as to draw on their religious, ethnic, and community capital to navigate and negotiate the dominant norms and expectations of the university field, and to create alternative or hybrid forms of cultural capital that affirm their identities and aspirations (Basit, 2013; Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2014). It also considers how Muslim students' habitus is shaped by both their individual backgrounds and experiences as well as by the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are embedded, such as the increasing Islamophobia and securitisation of Muslim communities within British society (Johnson, 2019; Miah, 2019).

In Chapter 6, Bourdieu's concepts are extensively applied to examine how Muslim students' experiences are shaped by the interplay of their individual habitus, cultural and social capital, and the institutional habitus of the university field. The comparative analysis of Universities A and B illustrates how the alignment or misalignment between students' dispositions and the dominant norms and values of the institution influences their integration and success. The chapter also highlights the unique challenges faced by first-in-family Muslim students in accumulating and mobilising the forms of capital necessary for navigating the higher education landscape.

The framework adopts a nuanced approach acknowledging habitus' dynamic, intersectional nature while engaging structural constraints Muslim students navigate, aligning with literature emphasizing habitus' potential for critical reflexivity (Reay et al., 2017; Yang, 2013; Devine-Eller, 2012; Akrivou & Di San Giorgio, 2014).

4.3.2   Intersectional Identities

Identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that refers to an individual's sense of self, self-image, and self-definition (Erikson, 1968; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It encompasses the unique characteristics, values, beliefs, roles, and group affiliations that make up a person's self-perception and shape their interactions with others and the world around them (Ashmore et al., 2004; Smith, 2012). In the context of Muslim students in higher education, identity is a crucial concept for understanding how they navigate and make sense of their campus experiences (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Stevenson, 2018; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). Their religious identity as Muslims intersects with other aspects of their identity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and cultural background, shaping their sense of self and belonging within the university setting (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2021; Aune et al., 2020).

The conceptualisation of identity within the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework draws on the principles and insights of intersectionality theory, a critical approach that emerged from the groundbreaking work of Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Philomena Essed (1991). Intersectionality represents a paradigm shift in understanding the multiple intersecting systems of oppression and privilege that shape individuals' lived experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Windsong, 2018). It challenges the notion of treating social categories such as race, gender, class, religion, and sexuality as distinct and mutually exclusive, instead emphasising their interlocking effects on how individuals navigate the world (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2015).

The MIIM framework draws on the principles and insights of intersectionality theory but adopts the term 'intersectional' as an adjective to describe an analytical lens or approach rather than as a direct application of the theory itself. The use of 'intersectional' in this context highlights the importance of considering the complex interplay and mutual

constitution of multiple social categories and power structures in shaping Muslim students' identities and experiences, without necessarily engaging with the full theoretical and methodological implications of intersectionality as a distinct paradigm or framework (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005). This use of 'intersectional' as a descriptor is intended to signal the study's commitment to a nuanced, context-sensitive, and power-conscious analysis of Muslim students' lived realities while acknowledging the ongoing debates and challenges surrounding the operationalisation and application of intersectionality theory (Cho et al., 2013; Nash, 2008).

This intersectional approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the diversity and complexity of Muslim students' identity constructions, negotiations, and contestations on campus (Modood & Calhoun, 2015; Weller et al., 2011; Codiroli-Mcmaster, 2020; Scott-Baumann, 2020, Islam, et al. 2021). It considers how their religious identities intersect with other salient social locations and how these intersections produce unique experiences, challenges, and opportunities within the context of higher education (Rollock, 2022; Begum & Saini, 2019). For example, the MIIM framework examines how Muslim women who wear the hijab on campus navigate the intersecting forms of discrimination, objectification, and symbolic meanings attached to the veil (Mirza & Meetoo, 2018; Zine, 2008). It considers how their experiences are shaped by the interlocking systems of Islamophobia, sexism, and racism, as well as by their own agency in resisting dominant norms and asserting their identity (Afshar et al., 2005; Muñoz, 2006). The framework also attends to how Muslim students from working-class backgrounds or racialized minorities may face additional barriers and marginalization due to the intersection of their religious identity with their socioeconomic status or ethnic background (Modood, 2010; Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2014; Gao, 2018).

The MIIM framework recognises the importance of contextualising Muslim students' intersectional experiences within the specific institutional settings they inhabit. It considers how the configurations of power relations, diversity policies, and campus cultures at different universities may enable or constrain Muslim students' identity expressions and sense of belonging (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Stevenson, 2018). For instance, universities with a more inclusive and supportive institutional habitus may foster a greater sense of validation and empowerment for Muslim students, while those with a more hostile or

indifferent climate may exacerbate their experiences of alienation and marginalization (Reay et al., 2009; Islam, et al. 2018).

However, the MIIM framework also engages critically with the ongoing debates and challenges surrounding the intersectionality, it acknowledges the contested and ambiguous nature of intersectionality as a concept, with scholars having different interpretations and applications that sometimes contradict or conflict with each other (Davis, 2008; Hancock, 2007; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Cho et al., 2013; Nash, 2008). This raises questions regarding the meaning and purpose of intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical tool, including challenges such as defining and operationalising intersectionality in empirical research, avoiding the essentialism and reductionism of social categories and identities, addressing the complexity and diversity of intersectional experiences and perspectives, balancing the micro- and macro-levels of analysis, and engaging with multiple and sometimes conflicting epistemologies and paradigms (Bilge, 2013; Collins, 2015; Davis et al., 2008).

To address these challenges, the MIIM framework adopts a reflexive and self-aware stance that is attentive to the power dynamics and ethical implications of conducting intersectional research with marginalised communities (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015, Zempi, 2016).It strives to centre the voices and agency of Muslim students in the research process, while also being mindful of the researchers' own positionality and potential biases (Bourke, 2014). The framework employs qualitative in-depth interviews to elicit Muslim students' diverse and nuanced narratives of their intersectional experiences (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the MIIM framework integrates complementary theoretical perspectives, such as Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field (see Section 1.3.1), Mahmood's theory of agency and subjectivity (see Section 1.3.3), and spatial theories of religion (see Section 1.3.5), to provide a more holistic and contextualised understanding of Muslim students' identities and experiences. These theoretical lenses help to situate Muslim students' intersectional experiences within the broader social, cultural, and institutional structures that shape their lives, while also attending to their creative agency in navigating and resisting these structures (Crozier, 2018; Modood, 2019).

In summary, the MIIM framework offers a comprehensive and critical approach to understanding the complex and dynamic nature of Muslim students' identities and experiences in higher education. By adopting an intersectional lens that is attentive to the diversity and complexity of Muslim students' lives, while also engaging critically with the ongoing debates and challenges of intersectionality theory, the framework provides valuable insights for fostering more inclusive and equitable university environments that support Muslim students' academic and personal success (Ahmed, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

4.3.3 Agency and Subjectivity Theory

The conceptualisation of agency within the MIIM framework is grounded in a critical engagement with Saba Mahmood's (2005) influential theory of agency and subjectivity, which offers a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of Muslim women's practices, choices, and identity negotiations. In *'Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (2005)*, Mahmood challenged the dominant Western liberal paradigm that viewed agency primarily through the lens of resistance to social norms. Instead, her ethnographic study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt demonstrated how Muslim women achieve a profound sense of empowerment, fulfilment, and subjectivity through their active cultivation of religious and cultural virtues, such as piety, modesty, and embodied ethical practices, such as veiling and ritual observances. For these women, practices like the hijab were not merely blind obedience or oppressive constraints, but conscious and agentive acts through which they pursued ethical self-formation in accordance with their own conceptions of a well-lived life. As Mahmood states: "the analytic of power that I employ does not take resistance as the diagnostic of power relations; rather it seeks to understand the multiple ways in which moral agency is enabled and constrained by historically specific discursive traditions" (2005:15). Mahmood's reframing of agency challenged liberal assumptions, equating them singularly with a subversion of norms. Instead, she foregrounded how Muslim women actively inhabited and shaped their lives through traditions and ethical-religious matrices typically dismissed as uniformly oppressive by secular Western feminist paradigms.

The MIIM framework incorporates Mahmood's perspective to examine how Muslim students navigate and negotiate their religious and cultural identities in university settings. It considers how they exercise agency and subjectivity through practices such as wearing the hijab, participating in Islamic societies, or engaging with their faith on campus, and how these practices shape their sense of self and belonging. The framework focuses on how these practices shape Muslim students' multilayered sense of self, belonging, ethical-spiritual formation, and modes of being within the heterogeneous institutional and social landscapes of higher education. It recognises that for many Muslim students, religion is not merely a set of abstract beliefs, but a living tradition that profoundly informs their conceptions of self and community.

However, Mahmood's work has also sparked significant critical debates and scholarly engagement in feminist theory, post-colonial studies, and the study of religion and subjectivity. Critics have challenged her relativistic stance, arguing that it risks the uncritical celebration of Muslim women's practices while neglecting broader structural factors, the history of struggle, and uneven power relations circumscribing the terrain upon which women's decisions and aspirations take shape (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Hafez, 2011; Bilge, 2010). The prominent anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2010, 2013) contends that Mahmood's ethnographic focus fails to adequately consider the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's perspectives, subjectivities, and lived experiences. She critiques Mahmood's inattention to power dynamics and internal contestations within the piety movement itself and how it may delimit possibilities for women who do not share their particular ethical aspirations. Other scholars have disputed Mahmood's portrayal of Muslim women's practices as existing outside the terrain of liberal concepts of autonomy and freedom. They propose more relational and situated conceptions of agency acknowledging the interdependence of human beings with their social, cultural, and material contexts while still valuing religious practitioners' ethical commitments and subjective formations (Bangstad, 2011, 2014; Bauer, 2015; Jacobsen, 2010). For instance, Sindre Bangstad (2014) advances a conception of "relational agency" that strives to reconcile respect for Muslim women's self-understandings with a critical evaluation of the broader structures and power relations shaping their social contexts. He states: "relational agency comprises an acknowledgement of human beings as social beings whose actions

are always already entrenched in social relations that both enable and constrain them" (Ibid: 97).

Therefore, the MIIM framework situates itself within these critical dialogues, recognising both the importance of taking Muslim students' own articulations of subjectivity and ethical-religious praxis seriously, while also attending to the complex structural, intersectional, and institutional forces that shape the horizons of possibility for Muslim lives in the university. MIIM also recognises that Muslim students are not a monolithic group, but rather embody a heterogeneity of perspectives, backgrounds and positionalities shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, immigration status and more. Their practices and subjectivities cannot be understood in isolation from their navigations of interlocking systems of power such as Islamophobia, racism, patriarchy, and counterterrorism policies with the British HEIs. For instance, the MIIM examines how Muslim women who wear the hijab on campus exercise agency in complex ways that exceed simple resistance/submission binaries. Their hijab practices involve navigating the intersecting forms of discrimination, objectification, securitisation, and weighted symbolic meanings attached to the veil (Mirza & Meetoo, 2018; Zine, 2008). However, they can also serve as sites for self-expression, embodied identity claims, and modes of resisting the dominant secular-liberal norms, beauty ideals, and Islamophobic constructions of Muslim womanhood (Afshar et al. 2005; Muñoz 2006). These practices shape subjectivities through their entanglements with institutionalised discourses, power relations, racialised and gendered gazes within university spaces, and the wider sociopolitical landscape.

Moreover, Muslim students' participation in Islamic societies or other faith-related initiatives often involves complex navigations of marginalisation, tokenisation, institutional co-optation, and ideological regulation from university structures and discourses of liberal multiculturalism (Amin & Hamid, 2018; Chaudhry, 2016; Mukadam et al., 2021). However, these spaces can also catalyse community building, identity affirmation, social critique, and reimagining of Muslim self-understanding and ethical horizons. These engagements shape Muslim subjectivities through fraught intersections with institutional power relations, politics of recognition, and uneven terms of multicultural incorporation and representation.

The framework attends to the diversity of Muslim students' experiences and perspectives, recognising that not all Muslim students who participate in these initiatives share the same goals, strategies, or outcomes (Ali, 2016; Shahjahan, 2010). For example, some Muslim students may view their involvement in Islamic societies primarily as a means of preserving their religious identity and practices within a predominantly secular environment, while others may see it as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes, foster interfaith dialogue, and advocate for social justice issues affecting Muslim communities (Ali, 2016). Similarly, Muslim students' engagement with these spaces can lead to varying degrees of personal transformation, ranging from a deepening of their religious commitments to a critical questioning of traditional interpretations and a reimagining of what it means to be Muslim in contemporary society (Shahjahan, 2010).

In examining these nuanced experiences, the MIIM highlights how Muslim students' agencies and subjectivities are not merely individual properties but are co-constituted through their engagement within institutional cultures, securitisation practices and policies, discourses of secularism/liberalism, and systems of racialised, colonial, and capitalist power shaping the university's epistemic architecture.

4.3.4   Social Representation

The concept of social representation in the MIIM framework draws on the Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1988) and Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, which sheds light on the cultural and symbolic dimensions that shape Muslim students' experiences and identities in higher education.

4.3.4.1   Social Representation Theory (SRT)

Social Representation Theory (SRT), developed by Moscovici (1961, 1984), provides a framework for understanding how social knowledge, beliefs, and practices are constructed, shared, and transformed in society. Social representations are defined as "a system of values, ideas, and practices" that enable individuals to orient themselves in their social world and communicate with each other (Moscovici, 1973: xiii). Social

representations are not merely individual mental constructs but are socially elaborated and shared through communication and social interaction (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

In the context of this research, SRT can help understand how social representations of Islam and Muslims in British society shape the experiences and identities of Muslim students in higher education. Chapters 5 and 6 highlight the relevance of SRT in exploring how dominant social representations of Islam and Muslims, which are often negative, stereotypical, and Islamophobic, influence Muslim students' sense of belonging, self-esteem, and academic engagement (Hopkins 2011; Jones et al. 2015; Saeed 2017). Muslim students must navigate and challenge these social representations in their everyday interactions with peers, teachers, and university staff, as well as in their engagement with wider society (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Zine, 2001). Moreover, SRT can shed light on how Muslim students actively construct and negotiate their own social representations of Islam and Muslim identity in response to dominant representations in society. Chapter 5 illustrates how Muslim students engage in various strategies of identity management, such as selective self-disclosure, impression management, and social creativity, to challenge stereotypes and assert positive representations of Islam and Muslims (Goffman, 1959). Muslim students also draw upon alternative sources of social representation, such as their religious and cultural communities, to affirm their identities and resist marginalisation (Modood, 2006; Peek, 2005).

Furthermore, SRT can contribute to understanding how universities, as social institutions, reproduce or challenge the dominant social representations of Islam and Muslims through their policies, practices, and discourse. Universities that promote inclusive and diverse social representations of Islam and Muslims, such as faith dialogue, cultural events, and academic programs, can foster a more positive and welcoming environment for Muslim students (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). On the other hand, universities that reinforce negative and Islamophobic social representations, such as through discriminatory policies, biased curricula, or inadequate support services, can perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of Muslim students (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019; Sayyid, 2014).

The MIIM framework applies Social Representation Theory to explore how Muslim students navigate and negotiate social representations of Islam and Muslims in university contexts, such as those related to terrorism, extremism, oppression, or backwardness (Ahmed, 2017; Zaal et al., 2013). It considers how these representations are produced and reproduced through various media, political, and educational discourses and how they shape the attitudes, expectations, and interactions of Muslim and non-Muslim students, staff, and stakeholders on campus. For example, the framework examines how Muslim students may face various forms of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination based on the negative social representations of Islam and Muslims in Western societies, such as being perceived as a threat to national security, a challenge to liberal values, or a problem for social cohesion (Akel, 2022; MacGhaill, & Haywood, 2017). It considers how these representations may affect Muslim students' sense of belonging, safety, and well-being on campus as well as their academic and social engagement and performance (Hopkins, 2021; Munro, 2020). The framework also examines how Muslim students may resist and challenge the dominant social representations of Islam and Muslims in university contexts, such as engaging in various forms of identity work, community building, and social activism (Ebrahim & Taliep, 2022; Mukadam & Hussain, 2020). It considers how Muslim students may choose to make their religious identity visible or invisible depending on the context and audience, and how this may shape their interactions and relationships with others on campus (Hakim & Coventry, 2020; Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

However, the Social Representation Theory has several limitations, particularly in relation to the study of Muslim students in higher education. Scholars have argued that Social Representation Theory may reify or essentialise social representations, treating them as fixed or homogeneous entities that determine individuals' perceptions and actions, rather than as dynamic and contested processes that are shaped by individuals' agency and creativity (Howarth, 2006; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Others have criticised the tendency to focus on dominant or hegemonic social representations while neglecting the alternative or counter-representations that are produced and mobilised by marginalised or oppositional groups, such as Muslim students (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Wagner et al., 2000). Moreover, there are questions about the relationship between social representations and identity and how Muslim students' sense of self and belonging may be shaped by both the

dominant representations of Islam and Muslims in society, as well as by their own cultural and religious beliefs, values, and practices (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012; Siraj, 2012). There are also debates about the role of power and resistance in the construction and contestation of social representations and how Muslim students may challenge or transform the dominant representations of their identities and communities in higher education (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010; Schlosser, 2014).

Moreover, there are questions about the relationship between social representations and identity and how Muslim students' sense of self and belonging may be shaped by both the dominant representations of Islam and Muslims in society, as well as by their own cultural and religious beliefs, values, and practices (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012; Siraj, 2012). There are also debates about the role of power and resistance in the construction and contestation of social representations and how Muslim students may challenge or transform the dominant representations of their identities and communities in higher education (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010; Schlosser, 2014).

The MIIM framework seeks to engage with these critiques and limitations by adopting a more dynamic and agentic approach to social representation that recognises the diversity and complexity of Muslim students' experiences and perspectives. It attends to the ways in which Muslim students navigate and negotiate the dominant social representations of Islam and Muslims in university contexts while also acknowledging the alternative or counter-representations that they produce and mobilise to affirm their identities and belonging. It considers how Muslim students' sense of self and community is shaped by both the external representations and expectations they encounter as well as by their internal beliefs, values, and aspirations. For example, the framework examines how Muslim students may face various forms of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination based on the negative social representations of Islam and Muslims in Western societies, as well as how they may resist and challenge these representations through various forms of identity work, community building, and social activism (Ebrahim & Taliep, 2022; Mukadam & Hussain, 2020). It considers how Muslim students' experiences and identities are shaped by both the dominant discourses and practices that marginalise or exclude them, as well as by their own cultural and religious resources and strategies that affirm and empower

them. The framework also attends to the diversity of Muslim students' experiences and perspectives, recognising that not all Muslim students who face stereotyping or discrimination share the same responses, coping mechanisms, or outcomes.

The framework examines how Muslim students may create and promote alternative or counter-representations of Islam and Muslims in university contexts, such as those related to diversity, inclusion, social justice, or interfaith dialogue (Elshayyal, 2020; Panjwani & Fozdar, 2021). It considers how Muslim students' agency and creativity are expressed through various forms of cultural and religious expression, such as organising Islamic awareness events, participating in interfaith initiatives, or showcasing their artistic and literary talents. The framework also attends to the diversity of Muslim students' experiences and perspectives, recognising that not all Muslim students who engage in these forms of expression share the same goals, strategies, or outcomes (Khalifa, 2018; Yuskaev, 2020).

4.3.4.2 Goffman's Theory of Self-Presentation

Complementing SRT, the MIIM framework incorporated Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of self-presentation to examine the strategies Muslim students employed to counteract marginalising representations, assert self-definitions, and negotiate acceptance within campus spaces. Goffman argues that social interactions are performances in which individuals seek to create and maintain a desired impression of themselves on others. Impression management involves the use of various strategies, such as self-disclosure, concealment, and deception, to control the information others have about themselves (Goffman, 1959).

In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman likened social interaction to theatrical performance. Individuals vary their presentations depending on their audience, setting, and situation. This concept provides a useful lens for understanding how Muslim students shape their self-images and manage their impressions while interacting with others on campus. Goffman (1959) distinguished between the front stage, where individuals perform their roles according to social norms and expectations, and the backstage, where they can relax and express their true selves. He also identified various

impression management strategies people use to maintain a consistent and positive image of themselves in front of others.

Goffman argued that individuals engage in self-presentation to manage their impressions of others. They do this by actively selecting and manipulating the information they reveal about themselves to project a certain image or identity to others. In the case of Muslim identity, individuals engage in self-presentation to manage the way others perceive their Muslim identity and its intersection with other identities. He asserted:

> "The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he gives, and the expression that he gives off" (Goffman 1959:1).

Goffman distinguishes between the "front stage" and the "backstage" backstage of social interaction. The front stage refers to the public sphere where individuals present a carefully crafted and idealised version of themselves to others, while the backstage refers to the private sphere where individuals can relax and be themselves without the pressure of social expectations (Goffman, 1959). Goffman also introduces the concept of "stigma" to refer to any attribute, characteristic, or identity that is socially discredited or devalued, which can lead to discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion (Goffman, 1963).

The MIIM framework incorporates Goffman's theory to examine how Muslim students navigate the complexities of identity, impression, and social interaction on campus by adapting their appearance, manner, and language to match the expectations and norms of different situations and audiences. It considers how Muslim students engage in various forms of impression management, such as self-promotion, ingratiation, or self-disclosure, to achieve their goals and maintain their desired identities in university contexts (Akhtar, 2022; Esen, 2021). The findings in Chapter 5 highlight the relevance of Goffman's theory in understanding how Muslim students employ various self-presentation strategies, such as selective self-disclosure, impression management, and code-switching, to negotiate their religious identities in the university setting (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Shammas, 2009). For example, some participants chose to downplay or conceal their religious identities in certain contexts, such as in the classroom or in social interactions

with non-Muslim peers, to avoid stereotyping, discrimination against, or exclusion (Ali, 2013; Hopkins, 2011). This can involve strategies such as dressing in a more "Western" style, avoiding religious topics or practices, or using a "Western" name instead of their Muslim name (Mir, 2009; Zine, 2001). These strategies can be seen as a form of "passing" or "covering" (Goffman, 1963) that allows Muslim students to blend in and avoid being stigmatised based on their religious identity. On the other hand, some participants chose to emphasise or assert their religious identities in certain contexts, such as in Muslim student organisations, prayer rooms, or cultural events, to affirm their sense of belonging, pride, and solidarity with other Muslims (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Peek, 2005). This can involve strategies such as wearing religious symbols or clothing, participating in religious practices or discussions, or using religious languages or references (Mir, 2009; Zine, 2001). These strategies can be seen as a form of "claiming" or "proclaiming" (Goffman, 1959) that allows Muslim students to challenge stereotypes and assert positive representations of Islam and Muslims.

Moreover, some of the participants engage in "code-switching" (Goffman, 1959) between different social contexts and audiences, adapting their self-presentation and behaviour to fit the norms and expectations of each situation, by present a more "secular" or "liberal" self in the classroom or in social interactions with non-Muslim peers, while presenting a more "religious" or "conservative" self in the mosque or in social interactions with other Muslims (Mir, 2009; Zine, 2001). This code-switching can be seen as a form of "impression management" (Goffman, 1959) that allows Muslim students to navigate the complexities and contradictions of their multiple identities and social roles.

However, it is important to recognise the critiques and limitations of Goffman's theory, particularly regarding the study of Muslim students in higher education. Some scholars have argued that Goffman's focus on the micro-level interactions and performance of individuals may neglect the macro-level structures and power relations that shape their identities and experiences, such as racism, Islamophobia, and neoliberalism (Barmaki, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2019). Others have criticised the tendency to treat identity as a strategic or instrumental performance rather than as a deeply felt or embodied aspect of an individual's sense of self and belonging (Brekhus, 2003; Waring, 2012).

Therefore, the MIIM framework engages with these critiques and limitations by adopting a contextualised and critical approach to self-presentation that recognises the structural and cultural constraints that shape Muslim students' identities and experiences in higher education. It attends to the ways in which Muslim students' self-presentation strategies are shaped by both their individual goals and motivations as well as by the societal and institutional norms and expectations that they encounter in university contexts. It considers how Muslim students' sense of self and belonging is negotiated and contested through their interactions and performances with others, as well as through their reflections and resistance to dominant discourses and practices. For example, the framework examines how Muslim students may present themselves differently in academic, social, or religious settings on campus, such as by emphasising their intellectual abilities, cultural competencies, or moral values, and how they may face various challenges and dilemmas in managing their multiple and intersecting identities across these settings (Hassan & Azmi, 2019; Naseem, 2020). It considers how Muslim students' self-presentation strategies are shaped by both their personal aspirations and values, as well as by the institutional and societal pressures and expectations they face in higher education. The framework also attends to the diversity of Muslim students' experiences and perspectives, recognising that not all Muslim students who engage in self-presentation share the same goals, strategies, or outcomes (Kholid, 2017; Tahir, 2021).

The framework examines how Muslim students may engage in various forms of identity negotiation, resistance, or transformation on campus, such as creating alternative or hybrid identities that challenge the dominant norms and expectations of the university (Ibrahim & Abdellal, 2014; Sadeghi, 2020). It considers how Muslim students' agency and creativity are expressed through various forms of self-presentation, such as using humour, irony, or advocacy to subvert or redefine the social scripts and roles that are imposed on them by others (Khoshneviss, 2019; Munawar, 2021).

To summarise, the Social Representation Theory and Goffman's theory of self-presentation provide valuable lenses for understanding the social and cultural dimensions that shape Muslim students' experiences and identities in higher education. The MIIM framework incorporates these theories to examine how Muslim students navigate and negotiate the

dominant social representations of Islam and Muslims in university contexts as well as how they engage in various strategies of self-presentation and impression management to challenge stereotypes, assert positive identities, and achieve their goals. By focusing on the interplay between social representations, self-presentation, and power relations, the MIIM framework offers a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Muslim students' identities and experiences in higher education.

4.3.5 Spatiality of Religion: Secular/Sacred Dynamics on Campus

The intersection of religion and space plays a significant role in shaping Muslim students' experiences in higher education. As discussed in Chapter 7, the availability, accessibility, and quality of prayer spaces, socialising facilities, and halal food options on campus can have a significant impact on Muslim students' ability to practice their faith and feel included in the university community (Hopkins, 2011; Possamai et al., 2016; Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Moreover, the broader spatial organisation and design of university campuses can also reflect and reproduce certain norms, values, and power relations that may marginalise or exclude certain groups, including Muslim students (Hopkins, 2011; Sheller & Urry, 2003). For example, the location of prayer spaces in marginal or hard-to-reach areas of campuses, the lack of gender-segregated spaces for Muslim students, and the dominance of alcohol-related social events and spaces on campuses can all contribute to a sense of alienation and exclusion among Muslim students (Possamai et al., 2016; Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Drawing from theoretical work on the social production of sacred spaces (Knott, 2005; Holloway & Valins, 2002), the MIIM framework illustrates how Muslim students actively produce sacred geographies through embodied practices, such as praying, observing dietary norms, and holding religious gatherings within the ostensibly secular spaces of the university campus. This sacred placemaking reveals the "representational spaces' (Lefebvre, 1991) through which Muslim students inscribe religious meanings and assert their belonging despite the normalising secularity of the institutional setting.

Furthermore, the intersection of religion and space can shape the formation and expression of Muslim students' identities and sense of belonging on campus. As discussed in Chapter 7, Muslim students actively negotiate and redefine sacred and secular spaces

on campus through religious practices, social interactions, and spatial appropriations (Andersson et al., 2012; Hopkins, 2011). For example, Muslim students may transform a classroom, library, or common room into a temporary prayer space by laying down a prayer mat, reciting prayers, or engaging in religious discussions with other Muslim students (Andersson et al., 2012; Hopkins, 2011). These spatial practices can be seen as a form of "place-making" (Cresswell, 2004) that allows Muslim students to claim their right to religious expression and belonging on campus.

The findings in Chapter 7 also highlight the importance of "third spaces" (Oldenburg, 1999) on campus, such as cafes, lounges, and multi-faith spaces, which provide Muslim students with opportunities for social interaction, community building, and identity expression beyond the binary of sacred and secular spaces (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Possamai et al., 2016). These third spaces can foster a sense of belonging and inclusion among Muslim students by providing them with a safe and welcoming environment to practice their faith, socialise with other Muslims and non-Muslims, and engage in intercultural and interfaith dialogue (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Possamai et al., 2016).

By integrating spatial theories on place-making, power geometries, third spaces, and more-than-secular spatiality, the MIIM framework develops nuanced conceptualisations of how Muslim students navigate secular/sacred boundaries and power differentials through spatial practices and tactics. It highlights the participants' placemaking efforts to produce inclusive spaces of religious and cultural expression amidst marginalities within the spatial politics of university campuses.

4.4   Conclusion

The MIIM framework represents a significant contribution to the study of Muslim students' experiences and identities in higher education by offering a comprehensive and nuanced approach that integrates diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical insights. By adopting an intersectional lens, the framework recognises the multiple and overlapping dimensions of Muslim students' lives and attends to the complex interplay of individual, social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape their educational journeys. The framework's integration of theories on identity, agency, social structure, and social representation provides a holistic and contextualised understanding of how Muslim

students navigate and negotiate the various forms of marginality, privilege, and resistance they encounter in university contexts. This highlights the creative and resilient ways in which they draw upon their religious, cultural, and personal resources to create more inclusive and equitable spaces for themselves and others.

Simultaneously, the framework engages critically with the critiques and limitations of each theoretical perspective, acknowledging the debates and tensions within each theory and advocating for more intersectional, contextualised, and agentic approaches that focus on the diversity and complexity of Muslim students' experiences and perspectives. Through empirical illustrations and discussions of practical relevance, the MIIM framework demonstrates its potential to inform policies and practices that promote greater inclusivity, equity, and transformative change in higher education. By providing a more nuanced understanding of Muslim students' realities and potentials, the framework can guide efforts to create university environments that recognise and support the diverse identities, needs, and aspirations of this underrepresented and often marginalised population.

Ultimately, the MIIM framework represents a significant step towards more inclusive and equitable higher education for all students, regardless of their religious, cultural, or social background. Its unique contributions lie in its ability to challenge essentialist notions of identity, empower marginalised voices, and foster a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of power, resistance, and transformation that shape educational experiences and outcomes. It holds the promise of driving positive change and creating truly inclusive and transformative learning environments that celebrate diversity, promote social justice, and unlock every student's full potential.

5 Chapter 5: Navigating Multiple Identities: Construction and Representation of Muslim Students' Identities in University Settings

5.1 Introduction:

This chapter investigates the ways Muslim students negotiate their intersecting religious, ethnic, gender, and other social identities within the university context. Utilising in-depth interviews, this study employs the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework to analyse students' narratives and the processes of identity formation throughout their university journey. The analysis begins by examining the diverse ways in which students define and experience their Muslim identities, ranging from the central aspects of self-perception to expressions that are more influenced by culture or spirituality. The transition to university life is then shown to catalyse a heightened awareness and engagement with the students' faith identities.

Key themes emerging from the analysis of students' narratives include navigating visibility, fostering a sense of community, belonging, and the employment of strategic identity management in response to internal and external influences. This chapter also discusses the experiences of Islamophobia and discrimination encountered on campus. Subsequently, the chapter contrasts the experiences of students at the two research sites (university A and University B), illustrating how institutional culture and policies shape the expression of faith, identity, and sense of belonging.

Focusing on the diversity of student voices and experiences, this chapter aims to offer nuanced insights into the performance and negotiation of multifaceted identities within the university context.

5.2 Conceptualising Muslim Student Identities

The diverse experiences of Muslim students on campus highlight the complexity and intersectionality of their identities. Soraya from University A describes her Muslim identity as the core of who she is, influencing every aspect of her life:

> 'My Muslim identity is not just a part of me; it's the core of who I am, influencing every aspect of my life. However, being a Muslim woman on campus means constantly navigating the expectations and stereotypes associated with my faith,

my gender, and my race. It's not just about being Muslim; it's about how my Muslim identity intersects with other parts of who I am and how others perceive me.' (Soraya, University A)

Soraya's experience highlights the intersectionality of her identity, as discussed by Crenshaw (1989), demonstrating how her Muslim identity is interwoven with her gender and race. This perspective is crucial for understanding the diverse and intersecting identities that Muslim students navigate within the university context.

Ahmed from University B reflects on his experience:

'Being a Muslim student means constantly juggling my religious obligations with my academic responsibilities and just general life. It's not always easy, but my faith gives me the strength and guidance to navigate through the challenges. The university environment has also allowed me to connect with other Muslim students who share similar experiences, creating a sense of community and belonging.' (Ahmed, University B)

Ahmed's narrative underlines the dynamic process of identity negotiation, aligning with Mir (2014) and Seggie & Sanford (2010). His experience of reconciling religious and academic commitments reflects the active and ongoing nature of identity construction (Lawler, 2014; Giddens 1991).

Sarah (University B) emphasised the cultural diversity within the Muslim community:

'Coming from a different cultural background than most of the Muslim students at my university, I've learnt to appreciate the diverse expressions of our faith. This allows me to connect with others on a deeper level, despite our different cultural practices.' (Sarah, University B)

Sarah's account speaks to the inherent diversity within Islam and its impact on individual and collective identities, resonating with the work of Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) and Gilliat-Ray (2010). Her experience challenges oversimplified portrayals of Muslim identities and emphasises the richness of intra-faith diversity.

The complexity of Muslim student identities is amplified by the diversity within Islam itself, varying due to sectarian affiliations, cultural backgrounds, levels of religiosity, and personal

interpretations (Spiegler et al., 2021; Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Peter, 2006). Therefore, the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) serves as a conceptual tool for understanding the fluid and resilient nature of Muslim student identities, considering the myriad of internal and external factors that influence identity construction. This matrix highlights the evolving nature of Muslim student identities and the critical role universities play in supporting or hindering their development (Gioia et al., 2013; Côté & Levine, 2002).

Therefore, conceptualising Muslim student identities requires an integrated approach that appreciates the complexity and dynamism of their experiences. By exploring the intersections of faith, education, and identity within the context of HEIs, we can gain a deeper understanding of the factors shaping the experiences of Muslim students.

5.2.1   Terminology: Reconceptualising

Through the co-constructive approach adopted in this research, the interview spaces transformed into safe platforms where participants could actively embody and express their 'Muslimness' and various identities, rather than merely describing them (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014) (see section 7.5.1 for a detailed discussion on interview spaces). By fostering a collaborative and dialogic relationship, this research aimed to minimise power imbalances and create a more egalitarian research environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). The establishment of a trusting and empathetic relationship between the researcher (myself) and the participants was instrumental in creating a non-judgmental atmosphere where participants felt safe and empowered to share their experiences, challenge certain labels and terminologies, and move beyond surface-level descriptions to explore the depths of their faith identity and its intersections with other aspects of their identities (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mullings, 1999).

Consequently, throughout the interviews, the participants acknowledged the importance and centrality of their Muslim identity. However, they expressed reservations about the term "religious identity" and its application to their daily lives, considering it too rigid or judgmental. Instead, these participants favoured the term 'faith identity,' which they regarded as a more inclusive and personalised portrayal of their Muslim identity. This preference underscores the significance of individual interpretation and personal

experience in shaping religion, emphasising that religion is moulded through everyday experiences rather than institutional labels (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2016).

Raj (University A) encapsulated this sentiment by stating:

> *'My Muslim identity is vital, but the term "religious identity" feels constricting. "Faith identity" better represents my personal journey with Islam.'*

Raj conveyed that religion is negotiated amid life's complexities from his situated perspective, emphasising "journey" to depict faith as constructed contingently through daily living rather than unchallengeable dogma, a core premise of the methodology (McGuire, 2008). This perspective highlights the desire for an identity that resonates with personal experiences and interpretations within Islam, rather than preconceived notions (McGuire, 2016).

Isra (University A) similarly favoured "faith identity" for nurturing spirituality through reflection on mercy and justice in the Qur'an amid university life. She stated:

> *'Being Muslim means different things to different people. For me, it is about cultivating spirituality through reflection on concepts such as mercy and justice in the Qur'an; that's why I tend to say, "faith identity" instead of "religious identity.'*

Isra's focus on spirituality and reflection on Islamic teachings highlights the lived religious perspective of religion as a daily personal experience (McGuire, 2016; 2008; Hall 1997; Ammerman, 2014).

Similarly, Basmah rejected the term, describing it as "problematic and judgmental". She explained:

> *'I was born Muslim and take pride in that identity. However, I find the term problematic and judgmental because I am not religious but have faith in Allah. My faith evolves as I learn it. As long as I treat others with compassion, that's what Allah asks of me.'*

Basmah's statement reflects a journey of faith that is evolving and centred on personal beliefs and values (Orsi, 2005). Raj (University A) noted how his religious engagement

ebbed and flowed through university, stating 'I *wouldn't say I'm practising now, but that spiritual anchor is still there*.'

These reflections demonstrate the fluidity of religious identities that shift and take on new meanings across different life stages. Iaisha (University B), identified as Muslim, British, and Sufi inclined, adds another layer to this discussion by connecting faith's flexibility to customised interpretations and Sufi influences, demonstrating that traditions are blended contingently through individual proclivities rather than monolithically. (Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). She stated*:*

> '*I believe that "faith identity" allows for more personal interpretation and adaptation. It's about how I connect with my faith on a personal level, rather than just adhering to external expectations or norms.*'

Iaisha's blend of multiple identities and her emphasis on a personal connection with faith exemplifies the multifaceted nature of a lived religion (Weller, et al., 2013; Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).

The diverse ways in which participants articulate their connection to Islam, ranging from the emphasis on personal spiritual journeys to the integration of cultural practices and exploration of Sufism, highlight the inherent heterogeneity of Muslim identity. This diversity challenges monolithic perceptions of what it means to be Muslim, showcasing the vast array of beliefs, practices, and interpretations that exist within Islam (Cesari 2013; Ryan 2014; Dunne 2020; Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2021; Khan 2021)

Furthermore, in the post-9/11 landscape, where Islam has often been portrayed negatively within public and political discourse, and depicted as fundamentally incompatible with Western values, the impact on Muslim self-perception and identity negotiation has been profound (Cesari, 2007 Pauly, 2015; Thompson and Pihlaja, 2017; Modood, 2019). In this context, it can be argued that Muslim students strategically prioritise their "faith identity" over their "religious identity," engaging with their identities in a nuanced manner as a deliberate response to external pressures. This shift enables students to interact with their faith in a manner that is personal, less politicised, and more conducive to individual expression. It has enabled students to distance themselves from the political narratives

prevalent in media and the public discourse. This strategic differentiation represents a critical form of engagement in which Muslim students actively define and express their faith in ways that reflect their personal experiences, thereby countering prevailing stereotypes. It highlights a form of agency that emphasises faith as a personal journey that fosters resilient identity formation capable of withstanding external misrepresentations and cultivating a nuanced expression of Muslim identity that celebrates its inherent diversity.

Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argue that, in modern societies, individuals increasingly construct their belief systems in a "pick and mix" fashion, drawing on various traditions and sources of authority. This individualised approach to religion centred on personal experience and autonomy is evident in the narratives of the participants who describe their faith in terms of personal growth and exploration. It reveals not only the individuals' agency in shaping their religious identities but also underscores the diverse and dynamic nature of Muslim identities (Hussain and Bagguley, 2005; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Iner and Yucel, 2015; Driezen et al., 2021).

By articulating a version of Islam that reflects their unique experiences and journeys within faith, students can navigate the complexities of contemporary sociopolitical landscapes. They move away from uncritically following traditional religious authorities, embracing instead a more engaged, personalised 'faith identity' (Rashid, 2021; Amin, 2019; Kahani-Hopkins, 2002; Abbas, 2005; McDonald, 2011). This redefinition is in line with O'Brien's (2015) concept of "religious individualism", which underscores the significance of autonomy and agency within the religious domain. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) explains that agency in religious practice is not solely related to resistance or the remaking of traditions but also involves embracing and reinterpreting it within one's personal context, highlighting a nuanced approach to religious engagement and identity construction.

Therefore, by adopting 'faith identity" over "religious identity" this research aligns with the lived religious approach (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2016). It acknowledges the agency of Muslim students in defining their faith-based identities and appreciates the evolving nature of the individuals' perception and articulation of their faith affiliations. This perspective emphasises the importance of personal engagement and the reinterpretation

of religious traditions, reflecting the dynamic everyday experiences of Muslim students in contemporary society.

5.2.2   Centrality of Muslim Identity

Terminology preferences illustrate the dynamic interplay between the participants' religious and academic identities. Another theme that emerged from the interviews was Islam's significant role in shaping self-conceptions and daily experiences. Core religious values informed the participants of daily campus navigation as an ethical compass guiding interaction with their university spaces and peers and orienting their educational pursuits and career discernment aligned with principles of societal benefit. This integration of Islam with academia has demonstrated negotiated faith-learning intersections (Murphy et al., 2023; Peek, 2005; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

The principles of Islam provide a moral and ethical framework for many Muslim students, influencing their conduct and interactions within universities (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). This aspect of identity informs not only personal choices, but also communal interactions (Parboteeah et al., 2009; Strand, 2007; Murphy et al., 2023), Students like Abo and Sarah articulate how their Islamic values directly influence their choice of study and ethical conduct.

Abo (University B) reflects Islam's formative influence:

> *'My choice of study is heavily influenced by my Islamic values, which guide me towards contributing positively to society.'*

Sarah (University B) highlighted:

> *'Islam guides me not just in my personal life but how I relate to others, my integrity in my studies, and my participation in campus life'.*

The experience of navigating university life as a Muslim is a complex and multifaceted process, shaped by interactions within the campus community (Peek, 2005; Possamai, et al. 2016; Stubbs & Sallee, 2013; Gao, 2018; Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Totonchi, et al. 2022).

For participants such as Isa and Soraya, being Muslim is an all-encompassing identity that permeates every aspect of their existence, influencing their worldview and daily practices

beyond ritual observance. This integration of faith highlights how Muslim students' faith identities form a core component of their self-understanding and social navigation (Peek, 2005).

Isa (University A) articulated the following:

> 'Identifying as Muslim transcends mere ritual practice; it fundamentally shapes my worldview and interactions.'

Similarly, Soraya (University A) reflected on this perspective:

> 'My Muslim identity isn't a just a facet of my being; it forms the essence of who I am, permeating every aspect of my existence.'

This centrality of faith becomes a guiding force that shapes their behaviours and the way they navigate everyday university life, affecting their beliefs, behaviours, and sense of self (Murphy et al., 2023).

For many, sharing a common faith fosters a sense of community and belonging, particularly in environments where they might feel marginalised; therefore, Islamic societies and cultural events on campus become essential for social support and maintaining a connection with their faith community.

> 'Finding a community that shares my faith has been crucial in making me feel at home in the university', shared a student (Ahmed, University B).

The extent to which Muslim identity is acknowledged and respected in university settings significantly affects students' sense of belonging.

> 'Feeling recognised and valued for my Muslim identity by the university has greatly impacted my experience here positively', (Kat, University A).

Ahmed's and Kat's experiences reflect the importance of feeling recognised and valued for their Muslim identity, which significantly enhances their university life. Moreover, when facing stereotypes and misconceptions, students, such as Magida (University A), leverage their identity as a tool for advocacy and change:

> 'My identity as a Muslim allows me to confront and correct the misconceptions others might have' (Magida, University, A),

Illustrating how this identity can be a tool for advocacy, change, and agency (Mohmood, 2005). The narratives reveal the fluidity of Muslim identity, shaped by intersections with ethnicity, gender, and heritage, as Mariam (university A) noted,

> *'I'm not just a Muslim; I'm a British Muslim of Asian descent, and each part of my identity adds layers to my experience here at university'.*

This complexity adds layers to the students' university experience, indicating that Muslim identity is continually reshaped by societal change and personal growth (Weller et al. 2013; Crocetti et al. 2008; Luyckx et al., 2008). Such insights confirm the evolving nature of being a Muslim student, where faith and identity are not static but dynamic, influenced by, and influencing, the academic and social environment.

The participants' statements collectively emphasise that, for these students being Muslim is not merely a secondary label but rather a central facet of their identity. This aspect of their personas shapes their ethical compasses, social interactions, academic pursuits, and sense of community. The all-encompassing influence of Islam on their lives reveals the multifaceted nature of Muslim identities and their pervasive impact on university students' personal, academic, and social experiences.

It is important to acknowledge that while many participants highlighted the pivotal role of Islam in their lives, there were potentially others who perceived their faith identity as merely one component of their broader, complex experiences. This study's exclusive focus on self-identifying Muslims, emphasises the significance of this identity, possibly sidelining perspectives in which faith is seen as a less central element. Furthermore, the dynamics of discussing a prominent aspect of one's identity with a fellow Muslim researcher (like me) may have inadvertently led some participants to emphasise or even exaggerate the importance of Islam in their lives. This could be attributed to social desirability biases or the inclination towards presenting coherent narratives, despite efforts to ensure informed consent and foster open reflection (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To mitigate these methodological concerns, the study adopts a reflexive approach within a constructivist framework. This approach intended to maintain transparency about the study's goal, pursuing a commitment to participant anonymity from the start, thereby

encouraging genuine reflection. Debriefing sessions were introduced as a method of validation, facilitating open discussions between the participants and researcher (Myself) regarding interpretations and findings. These sessions were crucial for alleviating perceived pressure and enhancing participants' involvement in the knowledge co-construction process, thus lending greater credibility to the study's representations (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through such measures, this study sought to address these limitations while strengthening the authenticity and depth of its findings.

5.3   Diverse Expressions of Muslim Identities

While Muslim identity holds a central place in the lives of the participants, their responses to the question "What word(s) would you use to describe your identity and your faith identity?" reveal a wide spectrum, from those identifying as "practising" Muslims[8] to individuals who see themselves as culturally or "spiritually" Muslim, without strictly adhering to all religious practices. This diversity within Muslim identities underscores the critical importance of appreciating faith as a nuanced, deeply personal experience, moving beyond monolithic views to embrace the varied journeys of faith, identity, and experience among Muslim students (Weller, et al. 2013; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2021).

To capture this diversity and complexity, participants were categorised based on their self-descriptions of their faith identity. This categorisation serves as a tool for exploring the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their religious and cultural identities within an academic context. It unveils the distribution of Muslim identity concerning religion, specifically how individuals articulate their faith identity.

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[8] In the context of this research, the term "practicing Muslim" is used to denote participants who actively engage in Islamic rituals and adhere to the principles and commandments of Islam as a significant aspect of their daily lives. This engagement includes observance of the five pillars of Islam—Shahada (declaration of faith), Salah (five daily prayers), Zakat (almsgiving), Sawm (fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)—to varying degrees. Being a practicing Muslim encompasses a comprehensive lifestyle that informs decisions, ethical viewpoints, and interactions within and outside the faith community, signifying a personal commitment to faith that shapes identity and spiritual journey. This commitment also influences how individuals navigate the complexities of their social and academic environments, reflecting a spectrum of engagement influenced by individual, cultural, socio-political, and contextual factors (Muhsinin, 2019; Esposito, 2011; Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006; Peek, 2005).

Table 5:Participants' self-descriptions of their faith identity

Category	Description
practising vs. non-practising	Distinctions between level of religious practice, with some identifying as 'practising Muslims' and others as less observant or non-practising. E.g., Soraya is a 'practising Muslim,' while Raj is not but cares about Islam.
Cultural and national	intertwined with ethnic or cultural background, indicating a fusion of identity markers. E.g., identified as 'British Muslim,' 'Pakistani British,' or 'British Arab.'
Personal Interpretation and Beliefs	Highlighting personal journey and interpretation of faith. E.g., Mo describes himself as trying to be a good Muslim, Basmah identifies as a Muslim but emphasises humanity first.
Faith as Part of a Multifaceted Identity	Faith expressed as one aspect of a broader identity that includes nationality, ethnicity, and individual values. E.g., Salama identifies as 'British, Brummie, Muslim, Asian, Human.'
Influence of Environment on Faith	University life influences expression and practice of faith. E.g., Raj notes a difference in religious observance at home versus a Western lifestyle at university.
Ambiguity and Evolving Beliefs	Expressing ambiguity or an evolving sense of identity, indicating personal growth and exploration. E.g., Basmah and Zai show evolving perspectives on their faith and its role in their lives.

Figure 3-This word cloud generated from participants' descriptions of their identities offers a visual overview of the diversity and complexity inherent in the self-identification of Muslim university students.

The word cloud (Figure 3**Error! Reference source not found.**) focuses on how participants d escribe their religious identities, with "Muslim" being the most prominent term, alongside descriptors like "practising," "British Muslim," and variations indicating different levels of observance and engagement with their faith, from those identifying as "practising Muslim" to "not very practising" (Those who see themselves as culturally or spiritually Muslim may not rigorously adhere to all religious practices). This reflects broader trends of individualised faith, in which personal beliefs and practices are shaped by a combination of individual, contextual, and societal factors (Ryan, 2018; Francis & McKenna 2017; Cheruvallil-Contractor, et al. 2021). Such a variability challenges monolithic representations of religious communities and highlights the importance of understanding religion as a lived experience (as mentioned in section 5.2.1). Recognising the personal nature of faith can encourage more nuanced discussions on religion in public life, fostering an environment in which diverse expressions of faith are respected and valued. In addition, the narrative of striving to be a better Muslim in some students' descriptions further emphasises the dynamic and evolving nature of religiosity as fluid journeys influenced by individual experiences, cultural and political contexts, and generational differences (Weller, et al. 2013; Hopkins, 2011; Silvestri, 2012).

Expressions of ambiguity and evolving beliefs among participants such as Basmah and Zai (see Table 5) highlight the ongoing construction of a process characterised by questioning, exploration, and change. This aligns with the concept of "liminality" (Turner, 1969), in which individuals in transition experience a state of ambiguity and openness to new identities (Liminality will be discussed in more details in chapter 7). The narratives of students experiencing ambiguity or change in their religious beliefs reflect this liminal state, emphasising the nonlinear, fluid nature of identity formation (Brahm Levey & Modood, 2009). This fluidity challenges the traditional static understanding of beliefs (Campbell & Garner,2016). It is particularly evident in multicultural spaces such as universities, where diverse forms of religiosity emerge (Cesari 2013). The changing nature of religiosity is also reflected in the shift from symbolic-rich to sign-rich religiosity, emphasising experience, imagination, and knowledge models (Poewe, 1989). The variation in practice among the participants mirrors findings from Peek's (2005) study, which

highlight how Muslims negotiate their religious practices within the constraints and opportunities of their immediate environment. Thus, Muslim students' religiosity is further understood as a social identity that provides a unique worldview and group membership with both positive and negative impacts (Ysseldyk 2010; Jeldtoft & Nielsen, 2010).

The diversity and complexity revealed by students' self-descriptions of their faith identities highlights the nuanced ways in which individuals negotiate their religious and cultural affiliations (Alkouatli, 2023; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone 2021; Scott-Baumann, et al. 2020; Panjwani, 2019; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). Within the university context, these diverse expressions of faith identities add to the discussions on diversity and inclusion in higher education, suggesting that institutions can enhance support for Muslim students by promoting an inclusive culture that respects their varied identities, thereby creating a more equitable academic environment.

5.3.1 Awareness and Recognition of Muslim Identity

The journey through higher education significantly shapes the identity of Muslim students, intertwining their spiritual growth with their academic pursuits. This transformation is not merely coincidental but also fostered by the university's environment, which serves both as a reflection of their faith, and as a catalyst for integrating it into their academic and social lives (Gao, 2018; Peek, 2005; Abukar, 2014; Bagguley & Hussain 2017; Scott-Baumann, et al. 2020; Hunt, et al. 2020). In this research, 90% of participants experienced a heightened awareness of their Muslim identity upon entering university, indicating that this phase of life is not just about academic achievement, but also about personal and spiritual development.

Khadijah (University A) exemplified this transition:

> *'Before university, being Muslim was just a part of my family life. But here, it's become a conscious choice and a central aspect of who I am. The university has made me more aware of my faith, and I actively engage with and reflect upon this Alhamdulilah.'*

Khadijah's experience exemplifies how the university environment acts as a catalyst for deeper religious engagement, shifting Islam from a background element to a defining aspect of student life. These experiences often involve navigating diverse social settings,

confronting stereotypes, and engaging with peers from various backgrounds, all of which contribute to a more pronounced and active engagement with their Muslim identity. This active engagement encompasses not only a deeper religious understanding but also an exploration of how their faith intersects with other aspects of their identity, such as ethnicity, nationality, and personal values.

Similarly, Sarah (University B) shared that the university environment has been instrumental in her understanding of Islam not just as a faith but as a perspective that enriches academic discussions and personal interactions within the university's multicultural setting. She stated:

> *'At university, I've learnt to navigate my identity as a Muslim alongside my cultural background. It's a place where I've confronted stereotypes head-on and have had many discussions with people from different walks of life. This has not only helped me understand my religion better but also made me more aware of how all my identities are connected'* (Sarah, University B).

Sarah's experience highlights the transformative nature of the university environment, where the exposure to new ideas, cultures, and perspectives fosters a more nuanced understanding of one's own identity. This active process of identity negotiation and affirmation in a university setting leads Muslim students to consciously integrate their faith with other aspects of their identities, contributing to a holistic self-concept that embraces the complexity and richness of their multifaceted identities. This increase in awareness aligns with Peek's (2005) findings, which pinpoint a pivotal shift in development when Muslim students left their parental homes to attend university; there was a change in the participants' development. Peek (2005) identified three stages of construction which include "religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and religion as declared identity" (Ibid: 223). In a manner similar to Peek (2005), the participants' Muslim identity became a 'chosen' or 'declared' identity' when they started university, rather than an identity that was previously unchallenged or simply assumed.

The university setting acts as a microcosm of society, playing a critical role in the evolution of Muslim identity, where students engage with diverse perspectives, challenge their

beliefs, and explore the depths of their faith (Gidden, 1991). This enables them to engage in deep reflection and occasionally redefine themselves. As Bushra (University A) stated:

> *'University life has pushed me to explore my faith more deeply, to understand it not just as a tradition but as a living, breathing part of who I am.'*

The diversity and challenges encountered within the university setting not only deepen Muslim students' understanding of their faith, but also highlight the unique perspectives they bring to the academic and social spheres. Neelam (University B), for example, discusses the visibility and active engagement that comes with being a minority, highlighting the need for a confident and proud representation of their Muslim identity. She stated:

> *'Being in a minority makes you more aware of your identity. It's something I've had to explain, defend, and proudly represent more often than I ever did before coming to university.'*

Additionally, the growth of Islamic societies and peer networks on campus also plays a significant role in increasing awareness and connection with Muslim students' faith identity.

Ahmed (University B) stated:

> *'Since coming to university, I've spent a lot of time with people who have challenged my faith identity in a positive way. I now spend a significant amount of time developing my faith and have no trouble defining myself as Muslim. I socialise with many Muslim students, attend Islamic classes on weekends, and am a member of FOSIS[9], so my Muslim identity has been constantly being reinforced since starting university. Finding a community that shares my faith has been crucial in making me feel at home in the university,"*

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[9] FOSIS stands for the Federation of Student Islamic Societies. It's a national umbrella organization in the United Kingdom representing Islamic student societies at various colleges and universities. FOSIS aims to provide support, resources, and a platform for Muslim students to engage in educational, social, and community activities. It also advocates for the interests and rights of Muslim students and promotes interfaith dialogue and understanding on campuses (https://www.fosis.org.uk/)

The concept of "faith capital" as demonstrated by Ahmed's experiences highlights the significance of the university environment in providing valuable social, cultural, and spiritual resources that contribute to the strengthening of his Muslim identity (Hopkins, 2011; Abu-Ras, 2022). His interactions with fellow Muslim students, engagement in Islamic classes, and participation in FOSIS illustrate the accumulation and utilisation of these faith-based resources. Through these activities, Ahmed not only solidifies his Muslim identity but also discovers a supportive community that enhances his overall well-being in the university environment. This increased awareness of Muslim identity among students in university settings reflects a dynamic and multifaceted process that involves a deeper connection to their faith, reassessment of their place in a multicultural society, and proactive response to the opportunities and challenges presented by the university context. Ultimately, this heightened awareness showcases students' resilience, adaptability, and ongoing journey in shaping and affirming their identities.

The interplay between being a student and being Muslim creates a unique identity of "Muslim students", characterised by an active engagement with faith that influences, and is influenced, by the academic journey. This dynamic process involves a deep connection to students' faith, reassessment of their place in a multicultural society, and a proactive response to the opportunities and challenges presented in the university context, ultimately leading to a transformation in their identity formation.

5.3.2   Faith as Part of a Multifaceted Identity: Complex Self-Identification

As highlighted in the previous sections the participants' self-descriptions highlight the intersectional nature of their identities. This reinforces the need for a holistic approach to diversity and inclusion that considers the various dimensions of students' identities (Mirza, 2013; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012).

Mariam (University A) further illustrates the complexity of the multiplicity and fluidity of her identity. Her reflection captures the fluid intersections of her multidimensional self, renegotiated across varying contexts and relationships, stating:

> *My Muslim identity is the umbrella of all my other identities; however, it is not my only identity, depending on the situation I find myself. Sometimes my Asian identity*

is stronger, other times my Muslim identity takes centre stage, especially when I go to cultural societies at university or when we are talking about the partition[10]; when I am studying, I am a student, a Muslim student, and during the exam I am student, so yeah, it depends on the circumstances (Mariam (University A).

This fluidity of identity, in which different aspects come to the forefront in various contexts, reflects the dynamic nature of Muslim students' self-identification. It echoes the idea that identity is not static but is continuously constructed and reconstructed in interaction with different social environments (Hall and du Gay, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Highlighting the intersecting nature of Muslims identity construction, exemplified by Mariam's navigation of multiple identities, such as her Muslim and Asian identities, which can vary in salience depending on the context. Her ability to strategically adapt her identity, as in Goffman's impression management theory, highlights the role of situational cues in shaping one's self-concept (Goffman, 1959). Mariam's account reinforces the idea that identity is inherently multifaceted and challenges simplistic categorisation.

Abo (University B) further emphasised the idea that Muslim students have multifaceted identities that extend beyond religious affiliation. He acknowledged the significance of his Muslim identity, highlighting that it is just one component of his overall self-concept.

'I am proud to be Muslim, and it is my most significant identity, but I do not want to be just defined by this. I have so many identities, and they all have a role to play in my experiences' (Abo, University B).

Abo's pride in his Muslim identity exemplifies the concepts of individual agency and self-determination in the realm of identity formation, aligned with insights provided by Forrier et al. (2009). This perspective shifts the conversation from identities that individuals are passively endowed with to ones that are actively constructed and negotiated. Thus, Abo's proactive engagement with his Muslim identity, rather than a passive acceptance of externally imposed norms, is indicative of a deliberate exercise of agency. He manifests

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[10] The Partition of India, which occurred in 1947, was the division of the British Indian Empire into two separate and independent nations: India and Pakistan (Khan, 2017)

agency and subjectivity by actively embracing his identity as a source of pride and meaning, a process that Mahmood (2005) articulates as central to the development of identity within specific cultural and religious contexts.

Moreover, Abo's reluctance to be solely defined by his Muslim identity resonates with the contemporary understanding of identity as inherently multifaceted and dynamic (Klimstra, 2012). His perspective underlines the significance of cultural and ethnic dimensions in identity construction (Bounds 1997), highlighting how his cultural and religious backgrounds shape his self-conception. This acknowledgement of possessing multiple identities, including, but not limited, to his Muslim identity, illustrates the complex interplay between different aspects of an individual's identity, emphasising the multifaceted nature of the self-understanding that the participants go through.

The narratives of participants such as Abo allow for a deeper appreciation of the interplay of multiple intersecting identities, challenging the notion of identity as a uniform or static construct (Cheruvallil-Contractor,2012). This aligns with broader discussions on intersectional identities, emphasising the importance of considering how various social categorisations interact to shape Muslim students' identities and experiences (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Allievi and Nielsen, 2003; Bhatti, 2011). These accounts also highlight the context-dependent fluidity of Muslim identities, illustrating the adaptability and resilience of Muslim students as they navigate various social and cultural landscapes (Bhatti, 2011; Abukar, 2014; Mir, 2014; Islam, et al. 2018, Scott-Baumann et al. 2020).

Understanding the complexities and fluidity of Muslim student identities has implications for higher education policies and practices and calls for the creation of inclusive and supportive environments that recognise and affirm the diversity of student identities and foster a sense of belonging and engagement (Scott-Baumann, et al. 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). This understanding can inform approaches to student support, campus life, and curriculum development, ensuring that they are responsive to Muslim students' nuanced needs and experiences.

5.3.3 Navigating Dual Identities: The Journey of Muslim Students

The theme of navigating dual identities further emphasises the diversity within the Muslim student population, with identifiers like "British Bengali", "British Arab", and "Pakistani British" (see Figure 3) highlighting the complex nature of Muslim identities in the UK. It reveals how cultural heritage and religious faith intertwine to shape their academic and social experiences. Khattab and Johnston (2015) explored the significant influence of ethnic background on socioeconomic status and identity perceptions among Muslims in the UK, showing that cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' experiences and self-identification. The diversity within Muslim communities calls for the acknowledgement of the varied expressions and experiences of Muslim identities.

The participants' narratives revealed a nuanced understanding of the challenges that arise from navigating these overlapping spheres of identity, highlighting the delicate balance between embracing their personal complexities and responding to external categorisations.

Sayimah (University A), a British Arab Muslim student, navigates her multifaceted identity by engaging with both her Muslim and Arab heritage, reflecting on how her experiences within the university environment compel her to confront and negotiate her dual identities. She stated:

> *I am a Muslim of Arab heritage, I am differentiated by my dual identities, my British Muslim, and my Arab identity (I am Anglo-Arab), and some people also refer to me as British Asian, or British Muslim, the way I look is secondary to my nationality – sometimes I feel that others expect me to be one or the other'* (Sayimah, University A).

These interactions often lead to a deeper engagement with their faith, as students seek to reconcile their religious beliefs with the diverse cultures and viewpoints they encounter on campus. Sayimah's acknowledgement of the overlapping religious, national, and ethnic components that shape her identity echoes Hopkins's (2011) findings regarding hybrid self-constructions among this population. However, Sayimah's awareness of external

"differentiation" points to the internalisation of problematically reductive framings that position her background in binary terms (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2011; Gholami, 2021).

This dynamic speaks to the sociopolitical functions of identity constructs that privilege clear boundary demarcations that obscure lived intricacies and intersections (Breen and Meer, 2020). Sayimah's commentary on labels externally ascribed despite internal complexities, such as the categorisation "British Asian", underscores the power asymmetries, showing how outsiders define marginalised groups (Sarroub, 2013; Gholami, 2021). This resonates with findings showing that corporeal attributes determine externally inscribed positions, overriding embraced self-definitions a reality further complicated by debates around minority visibility and definitional authority regarding subjectivities (Maghbouleh, 2017; Ahmad & Evergeti, 2010; Husain, 2023; Chaudry, 2021).

For Isra, her faith not only serves as a spiritual guide, but also as a framework for navigating her social interactions, underlining the significant role Islamic values play in her decision-making processes and social engagements. Through her deliberate choices, Isra exemplifies how faith can influence daily life, particularly in diverse academic settings, and describes her experiences as follows:

> *Sometimes, it can feel as if you must choose to be one or the other; you cannot be yourself with all your multiple selves and be successful at what you do. So, it felt like I needed to choose what identity was most important to me. In my first year, I split my time with the different groups I used to hang out with, or rather identify with, so I would spend some Friday afternoons in the prayer room with Muslim friends who are mostly Asians. However, the Friday night I would go out with my non-Muslim friends who are mostly white and mixed, I did not feel that there was one place where I was one thing. I connected with many groups for different reasons, and these two groups are very different from one another'* (Isra, University A).

Isra's narrative highlights the complex dynamics of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation in multicultural academic environments. Her ability to navigate between these varied social groups showcases the sophisticated use of code-switching (Hopkyns, 2020) as a coping mechanism to manage the intricacies of cultural and religious identity within the

university. This strategy illustrates her pragmatic approach to balancing the expectations of divergent social circles while remaining true to her faith and values (Mahmood, 2005; Goffman, 1959). Her negotiations also highlight broader challenges to do with reconciling ethnic positioning with desires for inclusion against normative oversight, favouring clarity over complexity (Hopkins 2020; Butler 1990). Her ability to shift between these different social contexts highlights the role of code-switching as a valuable tool for managing interactions in diverse academic settings.

Sayimah and Isra's experiences highlight the rich ethnic diversity among Muslims and the continual reshaping of modern identities by social and cultural forces (Khattab & Johnston, 2020). Their stories also illustrate the process of 'religification', showing how their faith becomes more prominent in the context of secular educational institutions, as discussed by Ghaffar-Kucher (2011) and Gholami (2021). This phenomenon is further emphasised by Gholami's (2021) insights on how secular university cultures can inadvertently highlight Muslim identities in ways that may not always be positive due to prevailing stereotypes and misunderstandings about Islam. These narratives urge a re-evaluation of higher education's approach to identity, advocating for a dynamic understanding that recognises the evolving nature of student identities. This is in line with the critical race theory's challenge to existing power dynamics and its encouragement of diversity and complexity for true inclusivity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In the predominantly non-Muslim environments Sayimah and Isra navigate, their Muslim identity becomes a focal point, demanding a delicate balance between visibility and the expectation of conforming to a singular identity. This tension emphasises the additional difficulties students face, enriching the dialogue on the challenges faced by Muslim students and its impact on their academic journey.

Their adeptness in adjusting their practices according to the context not only showcases their resilience but also opens a window into the critical role of Islamophobia in shaping the strategies Muslims must employ in academic settings. This interplay between being Muslim and a student creates a unique identity for Muslim students, who must constantly navigate their faith within an educational landscape that may not always understand or accommodate their religious needs.

5.4   Encountering Islamophobia at university

Navigating university life as a Muslim student encompasses not only academic challenges, but also confronting Islamophobia, intersecting with issues of race and faith. This educational journey, while enriching, simultaneously deepens the understanding of one's religious identity and unveils the prevalence of Islamophobia, manifesting through both overt discrimination and subtler and more insidious forms. These experiences significantly affect Muslim students' well-being, academic engagement, and ability to overcome systemic barriers at the confluence of their professional goals and religious identity (Allen, 2023; Udden, 2022; Akel, 2021; Chaudry, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Stevenson, 2018; Brown & Saeed, 2015).

About 30% of the participants from universities A and B reported encountering Islamophobia, not through overt aggression but subtly woven into daily interactions and institutional cultures. These manifestations often include microaggressions[11], such as backhanded compliments or offhand remarks that carried prejudicial sentiments beneath the surface. Such incidents, although often dismissed, have disproportionate psychological effects that lead to feelings of otherness and exclusion.

Iaisha (University B) recounts how Islamophobic remarks, once casually dismissed, later became pivotal in her realisation of the deep-seated prejudices she faced as a Muslim student. She stated:

> *I knew that some people were Islamophobic, but I did not think this would have an impact on me, but I think about it now. I think it was difficult for me to understand and articulate why certain people in my sixth form and the school said a certain thing, like wow you should go explode with the rest of your kind, I just laugh it off, or this sort of career is not for people like you; you will become a housewife anyway. (*Iaisha University B).

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[11] Microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatised or culturally marginalised groups. These subtle forms of discrimination can be based on race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, disability, or other aspects of a person's identity. (Sue, et al. 2007; Nadal et al. 2014)

Iaisha's experiences with Islamophobia, ranging from harmful stereotypes to outright derogatory remarks, serve as a microcosm of the broader systemic prejudice that permeates educational institutions. Her encounters illustrate how such prejudices not only manifest through derogatory remarks linked to terrorism and gender roles but also deeply affect Muslim students' psychological well-being and identity. Iaisha's experiences align with Allen's (2010) definition of Islamophobia as an ideology leading to discrimination and hostility towards Muslims. Her intersecting identities, at the nexus of race, religion, and gender, compound the potential for intensified discrimination.

The specific instances Iaisha recounts, where she was stereotypically associated with terrorism and demeaned for her career ambitions due to her gender and religious identity, reflect a broader societal issue of Islamophobia. This manifestation of a pervasive stereotype has been critically analysed by scholars like Kundnani (2014), who argue that such stereotypes are embedded in Western discourses, further marginalizing Muslim communities. The derogatory remarks Iaisha encountered epitomize how Islamophobic prejudices become insidious realities for Muslim students, permeating educational spaces that should foster inclusivity and personal growth.

Similarly, the remark about Iaisha's presumed future as a housewife illustrates the intersectional discrimination experienced by Sarah and Esma, highlighting the compounded challenges Muslim women face, navigating both religious and gendered prejudices.

While Iaisha's encounters with Islamophobia were unmistakably overt, the experiences shared by other participants revealed a spectrum of Islamophobic behaviours, ranging from seemingly benign remarks about lifestyle choices to more explicit Islamophobic comments. This variety highlights the nuanced yet pervasive nature of the microaggressions Muslim students face. Such incidents, although often downplayed or dismissed, have disproportionate psychological effects (Nadal et al. 2012) which can challenge the students' sense of belonging and self-worth (Zempi & Tripli, 2022; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

Isa (University A) shared a particularly telling instance that exemplifies this dynamic:

'During a discussion at lunch with my friends about the war on terrorism, one of my friends jokingly asked about me whether I would ever consider becoming a terrorist. I know that it was supposed to be funny, but it made me feel uncomfortable and singled out. (Isa, University, A)

Isa's experience highlights the prevalence of the microaggression that Muslim students often encounter in educational environments. These microaggressions may manifest in various ways, such as peculiar staring, racial jokes, or maintaining distance. These acts, while seemingly small, can have significant psychological effects on individuals, leading to feelings of otherness and exclusion (Chaudry, 2021; Ramadan, 2021). Similarly, Mariam (University A) expressed the exhaustion of constantly being expected to act as a spokesperson for Islam when discussions arose regarding terrorism and negative news about Muslims. She expressed:

'I'm tired of being the spokesperson for Islam. Whenever there is a discussion about terrorism or negative news related to Muslims, everyone turns to me for explanation or justification. It's mentally exhausting' (Mariam University, A).

This highlights the burden placed on Muslim students to defend their faith and represent their entire religious community. The psychological impact of frequently encountered microaggressions that involve religious questioning or the assumption that they can speak on behalf of all Muslims (Nadal et al., 2012) can contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of hypervisibility. Microaggressions reinforce stereotypes and create an environment of scrutiny in which individuals feel constantly evaluated and judged. This can lead to a heightened sense of self-consciousness and a loss of confidence in educational settings (Husain & Howard, 2020). These effects can hinder students' ability to fully engage and thrive at university.

The aforementioned statements illustrate how broader societal attitudes towards Muslims are reflected in the microcosms of higher education. Normative views, which cast suspicion on Muslim identity, as framed by counterterrorism policies and media representations, appear to permeate learning environments. These experiences, often manifesting as derogatory remarks, prejudiced stereotypes, or exclusionary behaviours, serve as poignant

reminders of the challenges Muslim students face within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

5.4.1 Professional Discrimination and Religious Identity

The participants' narratives illustrate the multifaceted and pervasive nature of Islamophobia, impacting not only academic engagement, but also professional opportunities and personal identity. These accounts elucidate the intersection of religious identity with discrimination, both within and beyond the university environment, revealing the deep-seated biases and societal expectations that Muslim individuals often face.

Salama's reflection on her job interview experience, in which she suspects her hijab, influences the outcome, illustrating the intersection of religious identity with professional discrimination. She stated:

> *I applied for a job, I and my friend went for the interview; they had a job and said that I did not meet the standard; I felt it was due to my hijab, maybe I should have taken it off.* (Salama, University A).

This incident illustrates the systemic issue in which religious symbols such as the hijab are misconstrued as markers of otherness, potentially restricting access to equal professional opportunities. Such experiences reflect broader societal biases, where Muslim identity is often viewed through a lens of suspicion or nonconformity, which affects professional aspirations and opportunities. Salama felt pressure to remove her hijab to increase her job prospects, revealing the deeply entrenched biases and societal expectations that Muslim individuals often confront in their pursuit of professional advancement (Gardner et al. 2022; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Stevenson et al. (2017) discussed the broader impact of such discrimination on aspiration and career development, emphasising that the ability to find employment should align with skills and abilities irrespective of religious attire or identity. Salama's experience reflects a systemic issue in which the hijab, a symbol of faith, is misconstrued as a marker of otherness or nonconformity, potentially limiting access to equal professional opportunities.

Sarah experiences the intersection of faith identity and gender identity encountering professional discrimination that resonates with the findings of Tariq and Syed (2017),

underscoring the unique hurdles Muslim women encounter in the workplace. The visibility conferred by the hijab makes Muslim women easily identifiable, thereby increasing their vulnerability to discrimination and marginalisation due to their faith. This visibility subjects them not only to interpersonal discrimination but also to systemic barriers that influence their professional trajectory and sense of belonging within the workplace (Koura, 2018; Tariq & Syed, 2018; Abdul Fatah & Schnurr, 2020; Ramadan, 2021).

Another participant's narrative, namely Mosa's, provides insight into the realities of navigating Islamophobia within academic and professional arenas, underlining the critical need for systemic changes in how educational institutions and workplaces address discrimination against Muslims. Mosa (University B) stated:

> *'Since I started university, I am a lot more aware of the negative perception I get as a Muslim; this is because many people on campus and even places for the job appear to have taken a stance against Muslims and appear to label me with many unfair labels. I knew about this before the university, but I did not experience it. Now, I am wiser about how our society actually perceives Muslims, and I know a lot more about dealing with Islamophobic rhetoric.* (Mosa, University B).

Mosa's account of his increased awareness of the negative perceptions of Muslims upon entering university environments shows how campus environments can amplify students' consciousness of societal discrimination (Allen, 2023). His narrative reflects a transition from theoretical understanding to lived experience, emphasising the ways stereotypes and Islamophobic rhetoric permeate daily interactions and influence self-perception (Bhatti, 2011).

5.4.2   Social Exclusion and Systemic Pressures

The intersection of societal expectations and norms presents a challenge to Muslim students. Magida's narrative illustrates that the visibility of being Muslim can sometimes lead to feelings of otherness and microaggression on campus. These experiences created a hostile environment, making it challenging for her to feel fully included and accepted on campus. She stated:

> *'I have been at uni for almost three years, but I still feel a sense of otherness and exclusion at times, not just because I am the first in my family to uni. It is the little things, like the assumptions people make about me, it's hard to put a finger on it, but we know when it's happening; for example, people ask me why I do not drink and say that I am missing out on all the fun, they dare me to try even once, this might be harmless, but these questions and comments can have a big impact on my overall well-being and just feeling like I belong without having to explain myself'* (Magida, University A).

Magida's statement reveals that despite spending nearly three years at university, she continues to grapple with a profound sense of otherness and exclusion. This enduring feeling is not unique to Magida alone; it resonates with the findings of academic studies (Malik and Wykes, 2018; Stevenson, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam and Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), which emphasise that many Muslim students face ongoing challenges related to their sense of belonging. Similar to Mariam and Isa, Magida's experiences of microaggressions, such as unwarranted assumptions and comments about her choice not to consume alcohol, underscore the insidious nature of these seemingly harmless acts. These microaggressions had a substantial impact on the participants' overall well-being and sense of belonging. Nadal et al. (2012) and Chaudry (2021) elaborated on how such microaggressions can erode self-esteem, perpetuate feelings of isolation, and hinder the development of a strong sense of belonging among marginalised individuals on campus. Additionally, Magida's status as a first-in family university student adds complexity to her experience. It highlights the intersecting aspects of her cultural and faith identities, which may create additional challenges in navigating the university environment. The challenges related to first generation or first in family status will be discussed in chapter 6.

Moreover, the prevalence of alcohol-related activities embedded in British university culture often positions non-drinking students as peripheral, emphasising a divide that can feel insurmountable. The social expectations of alcohol consumption and the consequent judgments faced by those who abstain, as described by Magida, highlight a significant barrier to feeling fully integrated into the university community (Gambles, et al. 2021). Ahmed (University B) echoes this sentiment by stating:

> *'I often feel excluded from social events because I choose not to drink, and there's a prevailing assumption that I won't have fun without it. It's frustrating because it's not about having fun; it's simply a matter of personal choice.'*

These experiences illustrate how normative social culture within universities can alienate students whose personal or religious beliefs do not align with mainstream student behaviour. The expectation that fun and socialisation are intrinsically linked to drinking can marginalise those who, for reasons of faith, choose not to participate in such activities, further contributing to their sense of exclusion and discomfort (Fletcher & Spracklen, 2015; Brown, 2018; Jacobs et al. 2018; Possamai et al., 2016; Stevenson, 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

5.4.3   The "Islamophobic Gaze" and Visibility

May (University A) highlights the transformative effect of wearing a hijab upon entering the university. Her decision to wear a hijab upon entering university and the subsequent change in how she is perceived emphasises the powerful role that visible symbols of Muslim identity play in triggering what she describes as the "Islamophobic gaze." She stated:

> *'Before I came to university, I never wanted to wear a hijab, but I decided to wear it when I started university. I noticed how people looked at me, especially when I took a bus to come. I used to take the same bus when I was in the sixth form, but I have never experienced the Islamophobic gaze until I wore the hijab.' (May, University, A).*

This change in perception and treatment that May experienced is a clear example of the "Islamophobic gaze", a term that encapsulates the discriminatory scrutiny directed at individuals based on visible markers of their Muslim identity.

The experience of being a visibly practising Muslim in such a setting can be a double-edged sword, offering opportunities for affirmation and community building while also exposing students to potential misunderstandings and misrepresentations of their faith (Francis & Mckenna, 2018). The findings of Zempi & Tripli (2022) resonate with these accounts,

highlighting the dual nature of the hijab as a source of strength and magnet for Islamophobic behaviour in public spaces.

5.4.4   Gendered Islamophobia.

The experiences of Esma and Sarah at their respective universities offer a poignant glimpse of the lived realities of Muslim women in academic settings and highlight the pervasive impact of gendered Islamophobia.

Esma's decision to wear the hijab at University A led to a shift in her peers' perceptions. She faced questions about her marital status and educational commitment, reflecting the paradoxical curiosity and stereotypical assumptions that her visible Muslim identity attracted. She shared:

> '*Before I started wearing the hijab, no one asked me questions like when you will get married, or will your parents let you finish your education. But once I became a hijabi, these questions started coming from my friends in my lectures*.' (Esma, University A)

The questions about her marital status, educational pursuits, and parental control reflect societal tendencies to view Muslim women through patriarchal stereotypes. This aligns with Butler's theory of social gender construction, which posits that Muslim women are often viewed through a restrictive lens that prioritises passivity and subordination to men (Butler 1990).

Sarah's encounters further illustrate this phenomenon, as she faced questions about her family's permission for her education and the prospect of an arranged marriage, revealing deep-seated misconceptions about Muslim women's autonomy and agency.

> '*I keep being asked, how did my parents allow me to come to uni and whether I am going to have an arranged marriage*' (Sarah, University B)

This perspective assumes that Muslim women's choices and freedoms are inherently limited by their religious and cultural background (Finlay and Hopkins 2020; Alimahomed-Wilson 2020; Mohmood 2005). This perpetuates a narrative that portrays them as

oppressed and in need of liberation from their cultural practices (Abu-Lughod 2002; Zempi & Chakraborti 2015).

Furthermore, assumptions about their lives emphasise the intersectional discrimination that Muslim women face, where religion, gender, and race often converge to create unique challenges (Crenshaw, 1991; Selod, 2015). Zine (2006) conceptualised this as "gendered Islamophobia", a form of ethno-religious and racialised discrimination, deeply rooted in negative stereotypes against Muslim women. This framework is critical for understanding the specific challenges faced by women such as Esma and Sarah.

This finding aligns with the heightened visibility and scrutiny of Muslim women's experiences, particularly those who wear hijabs, as noted by Chaudry (2021) and Brown and Saeed (2015). Such visibility not only subjects them to dual scrutiny of their religious identity and gender, but also aligns them with cultural stereotypes (Allen, 2023). This gender-specific targeting is further compounded by the media's portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed and submissive, which not only reinforces stereotypes, but also justifies discriminatory practices under the guise of liberation (Zempi and Chakraborti 2015). Within the university context, these seemingly benign interactions contribute to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of Muslim women, threaten Muslim women's autonomy, and challenge their identity and agency within academic spaces (NUS, 2018; Malik and Wykes, 2018; Guest et al., 2020, Uddin et al. 2022).

These experiences can also contribute to the construction of self-identity and self-perception as 'other' among Muslim students (Thompson and Pihlaja, 2017;), which can impact the students' emotional and psychological wellbeing (Awan & Zempi, 2018; Chan et al. 2019), exacerbating feelings of isolation and undermining their sense of belonging. For example, Iaisha's use of humour as a coping strategy and Mosa's increased consciousness of societal perceptions underline the complex psychological dynamics at play, emphasising the urgent need for educational institutions to develop supportive strategies that aid Muslim students in navigating and countering Islamophobia. These strategies should not only address the immediate impacts of Islamophobia, but also counteract its underlying causes, promoting an environment in which Muslim students can

thrive academically and personally without the burden of systemic discrimination (Ahmadi & Cole, 2020; Gholami, 2021; Saeed, 2018; Zempi & Tripli, 2022).

The participants' accounts echo the findings of Guest et al. (2020), who found that although a majority of non-Muslim university students hold relatively positive views towards their Muslim peers, a significant minority still harbours Islamophobic stereotypes and attitudes. This dichotomy is partly attributed to the influence of counterterrorism and counter-extremism policies, which have inadvertently sown seeds of fear and mistrust towards Muslim students, thereby facilitating an environment in which Islamophobia can thrive in universities in the UK. This finding underlines the complex interplay between policy, societal attitudes, and the personal experiences of Muslim students, reinforcing the notion that Islamophobia remains a pervasive issue in educational contexts. Akel (2021) builds upon this analysis by documenting the increasing discomfort and feelings of unsafety among Muslim students in the UK, pointing to a concerning trend in which students encounter both overt and covert manifestations of Islamophobia. This escalation not only corroborates the lived experiences shared by the participants but also highlights the growing urgency for educational institutions to address these issues proactively.

5.5   Navigating Discrimination: Strategies and Resilience

Through a thematic analysis of the interview data, three primary strategies emerged as ways in which Muslim students navigate and respond to discrimination (Table 6). These strategies were identified based on the recurring patterns and themes in the participants' narratives, highlighting the proactive and resilient approaches Muslim students adopt in the face of adversity.

Table 6-Strategies employed by Muslim students in response to Islamophobia.

Strategy	Description	Example
Direct Challenge and Recontextualization	Confronting stereotypes or inaccuracies directly, challenging	"People assumed things about me that weren't true, so I corrected them." (Esma, University A). "I told

	the validity of Islamophobic incidents	them outright that their assumptions about my religion were wrong." (Abo, University A)
Narrative Integration with 'But/And'	Acknowledging experiences of marginalisation but integrating them into broader personal narratives, often using connectors like "but" or "and"	"I've faced this discrimination before, but it doesn't define my entire university experience." (Mo, University B)
Encouraging Further Dialogue	Viewing discriminatory remarks as opportunities for education, inviting others to learn more about Islam and dispel misconceptions	"When people ask me stereotypical questions, I see it as a chance to educate them about my faith." (Sarah, University B)

The first strategy, Direct Challenge and Recontextualization, aligns with "oppositional identity" (Guerrero, 2011), where individuals resist and challenge dominant narratives. By confronting stereotypes, Muslim students assert their agency and redefine their identities on their terms.

Moving on to the second strategy, Narrative Integration with 'But/And', this resonates with the notion of "narrative identity" (McAdams, 2001; McLean et al., 2007), which posits that individuals construct their sense of self through the stories they tell about their lives. By integrating experiences of discrimination into broader personal narratives, Muslim students demonstrate resilience and maintain a coherent sense of self in the face of adversity, acknowledging the reality of Islamophobia while asserting that it does not define their entire identity or academic experience.

The third strategy, Encouraging Further Dialogue, reflects the principles of "dialogic pedagogy" (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Mercer & Littleton, 2007), emphasising open communication and the co-construction of knowledge. Muslim students engage in

"transformative dialogue" (Nagda, 2006) by viewing discriminatory remarks as opportunities for education, challenging prejudice, and fostering mutual understanding.

Interestingly, the participants often refrained from explicitly labelling their experiences as "Islamophobia," aligning with the concepts of narrative identity (McAdams, 2001; McLean et al., 2007) and "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1998). This suggests that Muslim students may avoid using the term due to its political and social implications (Kundnani, 2014), focusing instead on the specifics of their experiences, and advancing their own interests while resisting dominant narratives. Furthermore, this reluctance to use the term "Islamophobia" could also be attributed to the lack of a clear and universally accepted definition of the concept (Allen, 2010; Bleich, 2011). The ambiguity surrounding the term and its varying interpretations may lead Muslim students to avoid using it, as they may feel that it does not accurately capture the nuances of their experiences or that it could be misinterpreted by others. Instead, they choose to focus on the specific incidents and their personal responses, which allows them to maintain control over their own narratives and resist being defined by a potentially contentious term.

The complexity of defining and understanding Islamophobia presents challenges for Muslim students in articulating their experiences of discrimination. The term "Islamophobic" has been subject to various interpretations and debates, with some scholars arguing that it lacks conceptual clarity and coherence (Allen, 2010; Bleich, 2011; Halliday, 1999; Klug, 2012; Shryock, 2010). This ambiguity may lead Muslim students to avoid using the term, as they may feel that it does not adequately capture the diverse manifestations of discrimination they face, such as stereotyping, microaggressions, or systemic barriers (Nadal et al., 2012; Sue et al., 2007). Furthermore, the political and ideological connotations associated with the term "Islamophobia" (Erdenir, 2010; Meer & Modood, 2009) may discourage Muslim students from using it, as they may wish to distance themselves from polarising debates and focus on their individual experiences.

Despite the challenges in defining and employing the term "Islamophobia," the experiences of Muslim students highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the various forms of discrimination they face. By focusing on specific incidents and their personal responses, Muslim students provide valuable insights into the complex realities of navigating religious and racial bias in academic settings. Their strategies of direct

challenge, narrative integration, and encouraging dialogue offer potential pathways for addressing discrimination and fostering more inclusive environments.

These findings contribute to the literature on the experiences and resilience of Muslim students facing Islamophobia (Abbas, 2019; Hopkins, 2020; Chaudry, 2021; Ramadan, 2021). By integrating experiences of discrimination into their life stories without allowing them to define their entire existence, Muslim students exemplify the notion of narrative identity formation as a dynamic process that transcends victimhood (Mahmood, 2005; Amer & Bagasra, 2013). This process enables individuals to maintain well-being and actively resist marginalising societal frameworks, with narrative reframing serving as a crucial coping mechanism (Chaudry, 2021; Ramadan, 2021; Zaal et al., 2010).

5.5.1   Navigating Stigma Through Identity Management

Building upon the strategies employed by Muslim students to navigate discrimination, the participants' narratives reveal a strategic approach to identity management and self-censorship, devised to address the multifaceted challenges arising from societal expectations. This includes adapting their appearance and confronting concerns over radicalisation (Ruitenberg, 2008; Scott-Baumann, 2018; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). These strategies are further complicated by the psychological impacts of increased visibility and negative media portrayals, emphasising the need to understand the adaptation mechanisms employed by Muslim students in academia that encompass both personal agency and external societal pressures.

Minna shared:

> *'When I came to university, I changed my wardrobe, I bought a lot of trendy clothes, I made sure that I spoke with Queen's English, I tried hard to only mingle with white middle-class students, I even drank alcohol, just to fit in, and never told them that I was a Muslim, I gave myself a neutral accents and even nickname' (Minna, University A).*

Similarly, Basmah (University B) stated:

> *'When I started university, I took my hijab off, and I bought a lot of English clothes, I cut and dyed my hair, I made sure that I befriended a lot of white people, and I did*

not hang around with any Muslim friends whilst I was at the university. However, in my social background at home, I had many Muslim friends, and I wore a hijab outside my university environment. I also created a new Facebook account, and I added many of my university friends, who were all white people; I did not add any Muslim friends; and I did not post anything about Islam just because I wanted to hide that identity because I did not want to be judged' (Basmah, University B).

These accounts exemplify the complex issue of self-censorship among Muslim students, shaped by various factors. Minna's adaptation to "Queen's English", changes in fashion, and engagement in alcohol consumption mirrors cultural assimilation and self-censorship influenced by external pressures in post-9/11 academia, such as Islamophobia proliferating stigma and fears of radicalisation, as well as internalised barriers to full belonging on campus (Scott-Baumann, Stevenson, 2018, Malik & Wykes, 2018; Ruitenberg, 2008). Basmah's decision to remove her hijab and alter her social media presence reflects a conscious effort to conform to a specific cultural image while simultaneously managing the hypervisibility associated with her Muslim identity (Chaudry, 2021).

The strategies some Muslim students adopt extend beyond the plane of physical appearance to that of social behaviour, deliberately choosing to associate with white middle-class students and distancing themselves from their Muslim peers. This strategic self-censorship in social interactions is a response they employ in order to avoid the stigma or discrimination often fuelled by media representations and societal prejudices (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; Brown & Saeed, 2015).

Moreover, Minna and Basmah illustrate the concept of "code-switching" or living with a dual identity, where they present themselves differently in the university environment compared to their social background at home. This duality can lead to a sense of fragmentation and can be psychologically taxing, as it involves constant negotiation between public personas and private selves, particularly evident in Basmah's maintenance of Muslim practices outside the university. This behaviour resonates with Erving Goffman's concept of frontstage (public) and backstage (private) behaviour (Goffman, 1959), demonstrating the dichotomy between their adapted public identities and their authentic private selves.

Basmah's conscious effort to uphold her Muslim practices outside the university setting, including wearing the hijab and maintaining connections with Muslim friends, while hiding these identity facets within the university, exemplifies a phenomenon known as "identity cloaking" (Lee, 2009). This phenomenon is well-documented, with studies showing that Muslim students often feel excluded and "othered" in public spaces (Hamid, 2016; Jeldtoft, 2013; Khan, 2013; Thompson & Pihlaja, 2017 Scott-Baumann et al. 2020).

Furthermore, this selective management of identity highlights the context-driven nature of their identity negotiations, shaped more by the perceived atmosphere of their campuses and societal expectations than by their individual beliefs or desires. For first in family university students such as Minna, the challenges of navigating academic settings are amplified. Such students are confronted with the dual pressures of pioneering higher education within their families and assimilating into campus culture, which often involves significant changes in appearance, language, and social affiliations to secure a sense of belonging (Jack, 2019). The specific experiences and challenges faced by first-in-family university students such as Minna are explored in depth in Chapter 6.

Minna and Basmah's stories become emblematic of the broader phenomena of cultural adaptation and identity management among Muslim students and the challenges they face in academic settings, (Ahmed, 2016; Scott-Baumann, 2020; Islam, & Mercer-Mapston 2021). According to Scott-Baumann et al. (2020), self-censorship is a common practice among Muslim students, who feel the need to suppress their beliefs in order to avoid negative stereotypes and discrimination. Self-censorship can take many forms, such as avoiding discussions about Islam or hiding oneself on social media. In this case, the participant's decision to hide her Muslim identity and present herself as someone who conforms to dominant cultural norms highlights the pressure that Muslim students face to assimilate and conform to the mainstream ideals of beauty and fashion. This also demonstrates the intersectional nature of Muslim students' identities, whereby the participant's decision to present herself as someone who conforms to dominant cultural norms affects not only her faith identity, but also her gender, race, and ethnicity.

However, it is important to note that despite the challenges they face, students have also demonstrated agency in how they want to approach their university life. Selective concealing or revealing one's identity can be seen as a way for Muslim students to assert

their agency and control over their self-presentation in different contexts while navigating the challenges and pressures that come with being Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim environment (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990; Mahmood, 2005).

Building upon these insights, Adam's narrative adds another layer to this discussion by demonstrating the dynamics of identity and perception, particularly within the context of navigating religious and ethnic identities in a society that often assigns values and assumptions based on physical appearance. His ability to blend into the dominant Caucasian group, coupled with a name that does not overtly signal his Muslim identity, acts as a shield against the immediate biases and stereotypes many Muslims face. He stated:

> *'Due to my Caucasian looks and my neutral name, I could have a beard and not be recognised as a Muslim; nobody questioned me. Furthermore, nobody asked me if my name had any Muslim connotation, although Adam is a Muslim name'* (Adam, University B).

Adam's experience underscores a key element of social identity theory: the way an individual's social identities can be shaped by their interactions within society (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It also demonstrates how visually aligning with the majority can diminish the stark markers of 'otherness', affording him greater control over the portrayal of his faith identity.

His ability to avoid identification based on stereotypical markers of Muslim identity highlights the privilege of adhering to the dominant group's norms. It grants him a form of social invisibility that enables him to sidestep the often-intrusive scrutiny that can accompany visible manifestations of 'Muslimness' in a post-9/11 era, where Muslims are frequently subjected to suspicion and stereotypical representations (Moscovici, 1986). While this privilege provides him with a certain level of freedom to express his religious beliefs, it also underscores the ongoing struggles faced by those who cannot easily assimilate; struggles stemming from the visual cues used to segregate individuals into 'us' versus 'them' categories (Goffman, 1963).

Collectively, the stories of Minna, Basmah, and Adam illustrate the multifaceted challenges and identity management strategies of Muslim students in academic settings. These

accounts not only reflect the pressures to conform to mainstream cultural norms but also reveal the agency they wield in navigating their university lives amidst these challenges. This interplay between self-presentation and societal expectations sheds light on the nuanced reality of being a Muslim student in a predominantly non-Muslim environment, where strategic identity management becomes a vital tool for navigating stigma and carving out space within the academic community.

Furthermore, these experiences emphasise the critical need for academic institutions to cultivate more inclusive environments that acknowledge and support the multifaceted identity of their student bodies. Such efforts are essential to alleviate the pressure on students to engage in exhaustive and potentially detrimental practices of self-censorship and identity alteration (Steele, 2010; Museus & Park, 2015).

5.5.2 The Role of Visibility in Promoting Community and Belonging

During the interviews, the participants actively demonstrated the importance of visibility in fostering a sense of community and belonging. For example, when discussing the significance of wearing the hijab on campus: Kat (University A) articulated:

> *They look at me and say I see you; they acknowledge my presence…this is very important for my sense of self in a university, like University (A), where there are more than 30000 students across campus to feel like you are acknowledged and recognised as a person'* (Kat, University A).

Kat not only described her experiences but also gestured to her own hijab, emphasising its role as a visible marker of her faith identity. This embodied expression underscored the power of visible symbols in facilitating recognition and connection among Muslim students which is crucial for navigating the complexities of university life. Such moments of recognition are vital for the well-being and integration of Muslim students; making the university experience more enjoyable can reduce feelings of isolation and increase perceived support among students from marginalised communities, such as Muslim students (Thompson et al., 2023).

Similarly, when Esma shared her story of being recognised by other Muslims in the city after starting to wear the hijab: She stated:

> *'When I wore the hijab, I also started attracting attention and being recognised by other Muslims around the city. My friends questioned whether I knew all of these people. I proceeded to explain to them that it is in Islamic teaching that every Muslim is part of a community, which was important to me, especially as I am away from home.* (Esma, University A).

Esma and Kat's visibility as Muslims, through the performative act of wearing the hijab, serves not only as a declaration of their faith but also as a mechanism for fostering a sense of belonging and recognition within the Muslim community. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups such as religious communities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The visibility of Muslim identities through practices such as wearing the hijab not only fosters a sense of community but also challenges and renegotiates the boundaries of multicultural identity within a predominantly non-Muslim societal context.

The participants' narratives highlight the pivotal role of educational institutions as a critical space for shaping and reaffirming Muslim identity, where the interplay between personal visibility, societal challenges, and community support is crucial in moulding students' experiences and perspectives on faith. Thus, the university environment transcends its academic role, becoming a vital social context for negotiation and affirmation of identity amid the backdrop of diverse influences and challenges. The spatiality of Muslim students' experiences, discussed further in Chapter 7, will explore how physical and symbolic spaces within universities impact the university experiences of Muslim students.

Modood (2009) emphasises the university setting as a key arena for affirming Muslim identity, suggesting that shared faith and experiences often culminate in robust support networks. These networks serve as a shield against Islamophobia, offering essential support for navigating the complexities of identity formation in multicultural, and often secular, university settings (Brown 2009). This sense of community is pivotal, as it provides

Muslim students with platforms for mutual support, understanding, and affirmation of their faith and cultural identities.

Furthermore, the visibility of Muslims in a predominantly non-Muslim society can challenge dominant stereotypes and assumptions regarding cultural incompatibility with British values (Uddin, et al. 2022; Amer & Howarth, 2018; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). This visibility involves a complex process of identity negotiation and management that requires strategies to cope with discrimination and prejudice. Muslim individuals often resist the erasure or misrecognition of their identity by drawing upon psychological and religious resources, such as social support, and spirituality (Arif, 2020; Ramadan, 2021). This resistance against victimisation and marginalisation is a testament to the resilience of participants, stressing the significance of visibility in affirming identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

5.5.3   Visibility as a Form of Resilience

Several participants described how they adopted the hijab to make their Muslim identities more visible. Khadijah stressed the significance of physical appearance in shaping others' perceptions and beliefs regarding their identity and faith by stating:

> *'People kept offering me stuff and inviting me to socials that involved alcohol and non-Islamic interactions, every time I declined. I got weird looks, then I explained to them that I am a Muslim, but it kept happening, so I decided to wear the hijab, as it allowed people to know that I am Muslim without me having to say it'* (Khadijah, University A).

Khadijah continued:

> *'In today's society it seems like appearing to be a Muslim (I mean wearing a hijab and jellaba) inevitably makes you a target for Islamophobia and prejudice. It is of course challenging, especially when you are constantly being judged based on your appearance, but for me, it is a choice I have made to express my identity and religious beliefs. My body, My choice! I always say that'* (Khadijah, University A).

Khadija's decision to embrace her Muslim identity visibly through practices such as wearing the hijab confronts and disrupts the prevailing stereotypes of Muslims (Mohmood, 2005), positioning her identity as a source of empowerment rather than something to be concealed.

Similarly, Mariam's resolve to wear the hijab despite making her "stand out" in her university environment:

> She stated, *'I know my hijab makes me stand out and maybe put me at risk of discrimination but who cares, this is who I am, and I want to stand out, why not'* (Mariam, university A)

This act of visibility is not merely an expression of her religious beliefs, but also a deliberate assertion of her identity within the university. Such actions exemplify agency in navigating a space in which one's religious practices may diverge from the dominant culture. It represents a strategic employment of visibility as resistance against prevailing misconceptions about Islam and a challenge to monolithic representations often portrayed in the media and popular discourse (Mirza 2013; Selod 2015; Weller & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Alimahomed-Wilson 2020). Disrupting narratives that depict Muslim women as passive highlight them as active agents in their lives, capable of making informed decisions about their education, career, and personal life.

Saba Mahmood's (2005) work on the politics of piety provides a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon, arguing that practices of piety, such as wearing a hijab, are not merely acts of resistance or subordination, but a complex interplay of personal agency, religious devotion, and cultural identity. Furthermore, Ramadan's (2021) research underscores the unique challenges faced by hijab-wearing Muslim women academics who often confront gendered Islamophobic microaggression. Nonetheless, they leverage their visible faith to advance their careers and dismantle negative stereotypes. This proactive approach is mirrored by Muslim students in universities, who utilise their visibility to counteract Islamophobia, turning it into a platform to foster understanding within the university community. Alizai's (2020) study further illuminates how Muslim students in Canada respond to Islamophobia, revealing that, in the face of prejudice, many embrace

their religious identities more fervently. This increased devotion and strong attachment acts as a form of resistance to Islamophobic attitudes. Their performative acts, such as wearing a hijab, or participating in Islamic events on campus, serve as powerful affirmations of their identity and resilience, and contribute to their sense of belonging.

5.6 Navigating Identity and Belonging: University A and university B

As shown in the previous sections, the experiences of Muslim students at Universities A and B provide insights into the diverse challenges and nuances they face in higher education contexts. Drawing directly from participants' statements, this analysis contrasts how students navigate their Muslim identities at the two institutions (See Table 7).

Table 7-University A and university B

Theme/Aspect	University A	University B
Centrality of Muslim Identity	Strong emphasis on Islam as a core part of students' lives.	Similar emphasis, with students actively incorporating faith into daily activities and academic pursuits.
Visibility and Representation	Use of hijab and participation in Islamic societies as forms of visible identity affirmation and resistance against stereotypes.	Visibility through hijab and engagement with Muslim communities, though with nuanced challenges related to discrimination.
Community Support and Belonging	Robust Islamic societies and peer networks fostering a strong sense of community and belonging.	Support systems are crucial, yet students navigate a more complex environment for community engagement.
Strategic Identity Management	Students employ strategies such as selective social interactions and altering appearance to navigate identity within the university culture.	Similar strategies noted, with a focus on balancing authenticity with conformity amid broader societal and institutional pressures.
Challenges: Islamophobia and Discrimination	Encounters with Islamophobia and discrimination, navigated	Challenges of Islamophobia present, with students employing strategic identity management to mitigate impacts.

	through community support and personal resilience.	
Institutional Influence on Muslim Student Experiences	Institutional policies and culture play a significant role in shaping students' experiences, with efforts towards inclusivity noted.	The university environment influences students' sense of belonging and engagement, highlighting the need for inclusive practices.
Resilience and Agency	Students demonstrate resilience in affirming their Muslim identity despite challenges, leveraging community support and visibility as empowerment.	Resilience through strategic identity management and community engagement, with students actively shaping their university experience.

A key difference between the two institutions is the level of communal support that is available. University A appears to have well-established Islamic societies and cultural events that foster a strong sense of community. This aligns with Modood's (2009) perspective of the importance of shared experiences in cultivating a strong Muslim identity in university settings. The communal support available at University A not only facilitates a sense of belonging, but also serves as a protective support system against the challenges of discrimination, a notion illustrated by the non-verbal recognition of solidarity among Muslim students, as seen in Kat's statement.

The students at University B reported weaker Muslim peer networks, indicating that they navigate affiliation independently, with fewer dedicated campus spaces for faith-based collectivism. As a result, this lack of communal resources may exacerbate feelings of isolation in the absence of identity-affirming solidarities, as suggested by statements highlighting the individual navigation of faith on campus. Studies have shown that the perception of a faith community can provide support for dealing with marginalisation and isolation (Thompson et al., 2023; Stevenson, 2013; Islam et al., 2018). However, some University B participants utilised off-campus resources such as family ties to maintain faith practices outside university settings. For instance, Basmah maintained a hijab at home, while Ahmed sought out Muslim student communities beyond his university. This highlights the diversity in Muslim students' experiences, even within the same institution.

Moreover, the presence or absence of spaces dedicated to Muslim students, such as prayer rooms and Muslim-friendly activities on campus, reflects institutional policies and priorities. The role of space is explored in chapter 7. At University B, a faith-based institution's lack of space for Muslim students might not just stem from oversight but could also reflect deeper issues related to institutional identity, inclusivity, and diversity policies. As Cantle (2012) argues, faith-based institutions often struggle to balance their foundational religious identities with the need to accommodate diverse student bodies. This tension can lead to a hierarchical recognition of religious needs, inadvertently marginalising minority faith groups. University A, with its active Muslim student body, demonstrates a contrasting approach, in which the provision of dedicated spaces can be seen as an institutional acknowledgement of diversity as a value. According to Patel (2013),

such institutional support plays a critical role in mitigating feelings of marginalisation and combating stereotypes that fuel Islamophobia.

Additionally, the roles of student agency and activism emerged as pivotal themes in comparative analysis. At University A, active engagement and advocacy of the Muslim student body have been instrumental in securing dedicated spaces and fostering an inclusive campus environment. Reflecting broader trends in higher education, these efforts underscore the transformative power of collective action in driving institutional change, as theorised by Tilly (2004) in his work on social movements and collective action. The active engagement of Muslim students in creating inclusive events and dialogue can further enhance campus climate, making it more welcoming and inclusive for all students. This resonates with Ahmed's (2015) findings regarding the role of student activism in enhancing university diversity initiatives. However, reliance on student activism to secure the necessary accommodation and support raises critical questions regarding the extent of institutional responsibility. As Marginson (2011) argues, universities have a fundamental duty to provide an equitable and supportive environment for all students, suggesting that the impetus for change should not rest solely on the shoulders of the student body. This perspective is echoed in the work of Zepke (2021), who emphasises the importance of institutional support in enhancing student engagement and success, indicating that proactive measures by universities are essential to ensure that student activism is complemented and reinforced by official policies and practices.

The concept of institutional habitus, explored in detail in Chapter 6, provides a critical lens through which to examine the interplay between students' identities and institutional values and practices. Although students at both universities encounter Islamophobia, the nature and impact of their experiences vary. Students at University B articulate a heightened awareness of vulnerability, echoing Akel's (2021) findings on the increasing discomfort among Muslim students in the UK. This heightened sense of vulnerability underlines the urgency for University B to enhance its inclusivity and support measures in order to combat the societal prejudices reflected in its campus culture. Conversely, the active presence of Muslims at University A may offer them a better resilience to discrimination. This distinction highlights the importance of proactive institutional efforts

for the creation of inclusive spaces that recognise and address the challenges faced by Muslim students.

The analysis further explains how Universities A and B offer contrasting environments for religious expression. University A's supportive climate, evidenced by practices such as wearing the hijab, aligns with Mahmood's (2005) discussion of religious expression that enhances identity and confidence. In contrast, at University B, students adopted strategies such as code-switching (Goffman, 1959) to navigate a less welcoming atmosphere, indicating a cautious approach to expressing their Muslim identity. This underscores the significance of campus culture, which encourages the open expression of faith as being essential for identity affirmation and well-being.

Although University A participants highlighted the opportunities and challenges, they faced, University A stood out for its supportive community and policies that foster belonging and religious expressions. In contrast, University B's environment prompted students to navigate their identities individually, underscoring the pressing need for more inclusive institutional practices. The diversity of experiences among Muslim students within each university, influenced by demographics, location, and institutional history, further complicates uniform assessment. Additionally, the potential influence of the researcher's visible Muslim identity on participant responses highlights the necessity for cautious interpretation and mindfulness of the inherent biases.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter explores the intricate processes through which Muslim university students navigate and articulate their intersecting identities within the academic sphere using the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) as a conceptual lens. Several overarching themes emerged. First, the dynamic interplay between individual agency, societal influences, self-representation, and social interactions stood out as pivotal influences, continually shaping fluid, yet resilient identities. The participants' statements evidenced the negotiating agency amid the constraints. Second, it was demonstrated how navigating non-Muslim university spaces intensifies challenges, requiring the sophisticated leveraging of resources. Finally, universities profoundly impacted the awareness, challenges, and belonging of Muslim students.

Central to the findings is the fluid yet fundamental role of Muslim identity among the participants. Islam is the cornerstone of self-perception and influences all facets of life. The diverse expressions of faith identities, ranging from practising Muslims to those identifying with Islam culturally or spiritually, underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of religious identity as a deeply personal and lived experience. This diversity challenges the reductive views of Muslim identities and stresses the importance of recognising religion as a dynamic, individual journey. The shift in preference from "Muslim" to "faith identity" in students' terminology reflects their desire to define their religiosity on their own terms, distancing themselves from politicised narratives and underscoring the inherent complexity and fluidity of Muslim identities.

A comparison of Universities A and B revealed contrasting climates for faith expression and belonging. At University A, participants stated that they were able to find commonality and solidarity with other Muslim students because of the latter's visible presence and the availability of resources on campus for them to develop their Muslim and student identities. Conversely, at University B, delicate negotiations were prompted amid the perceived discrimination risks and weaker communal structures. However, Islamophobia emerged pervasively in both settings, differentially impacting student experiences. The analysis also revealed assertive rebuttals of Islamophobic encounters, narrative reframing incorporating hardships in non-victimising terms, and productive redirecting of prejudices. Rather than adopting positions of vulnerability, the participants emphasised proactivity and reframed their experiences, identity construction, and active agency. While showing student perspectives, Islamophobia as a conceptual lens risks overshadowing the myriad of other factors that influence Muslim students' experiences within higher education spaces.

The participants from both universities, A and B, showed a pronounced awareness of their Muslim identity upon entering university, where diverse and minority contexts fostered deeper religious engagement and self-reflection. This phase transforms faith from a background characteristic to an active choice, profoundly shaping daily interactions, academic pursuits, and sense of belonging. Peer networks and Islamic societies have become instrumental in reinforcing Muslim identities and promoting campus well-being,

highlighting the transformative power of universities in encouraging identity exploration and affirmation.

Visibility and strategic identity management emerged as significant identity-navigation strategies for participants from both institutions. Some students, through prominent displays of religious dress or observance, boldly assert their Muslim identities and agency despite stigma, inviting dialogue to reshape their misconceptions. Conversely, others contextually adapt their behaviours to balance safety, comfort, and authentic religious expressions. These findings indicate that Muslim students engage in complex, multidimensional identity work to negotiate often-competing influences and navigate spaces of inclusion during exclusion.

Intersecting identities, such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality, compounded the experience of navigating Muslim identity within the university's diversity. These intersections offer opportunities for stereotype confrontation and advocacy on the one hand, and challenges, such as Islamophobia and discrimination, on the other hand, which affect campus belonging and well-being. In response, students adopted various identity management strategies, balancing authentic self-expression while navigating societal tensions. For some female students, the visible "performance" of their Muslimness through practices like wearing the hijab represents an act of defiance and reclamation of autonomy over their narratives.

In summary, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of Muslim students' identity navigation and articulation within universities, highlighting the interplay among personal agency, institutional environments, and broader societal factors. By examining the diverse experiences of Muslim students at two distinct institutions and addressing the complexities surrounding Islamophobia, this chapter enriches the discourse on faith identities in higher education. It calls for ongoing research and institutional efforts to foster environments that support the flourishing of Muslim students, emphasising the importance of inclusivity, understanding, and recognition of student agency in shaping their academic and social experiences.

6 Chapter 6: Navigating Cultural Capital, Social Capital, Habitus, and Field: Muslim Students' Experiences in British Universities

6.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the experiences of Muslim students in British higher education, a sphere of considerable academic and social significance. The primary aim of this study was to explore the multifaceted experiences of these students, examining their university life, social interactions, and identity development amidst the unique challenges and opportunities of university life.

By employing Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical constructs of habitus, capital, and fields, this study seeks to delineate the complex interplay between students' cultural and social capital, their ingrained dispositions (habitus), and the structural and cultural dynamics of education institutions (fields). Additionally, it utilises the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework, providing insights into the dynamic interactions between individual agency, social structures, and representations, thereby illustrating the continuous construction of Muslim students' experiences and identities within university spaces. It explores how students express their experiences and identities in response to an array of opportunities and challenges encountered in university settings. Special attention is given to the experiences of first-in-family (FiF) Muslim students who face distinct challenges because of their pioneering role in accessing higher education within their families.

Driven by the critical research question, "How do Muslim students interpret their university experiences?", this chapter elucidates the diverse challenges students face and strategies they devise to thrive academically. By integrating Bourdieu's theoretical framework with the MIIM approach, this study aims to illustrate the various challenges faced, and strategies employed by students, to achieve success in the academic field. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of diversity, inclusion, and equity in British higher education.

6.2   Bourdieu's theoretical framework

The significance of Bourdieu's concepts in the students' narratives became apparent during the coding of interviews and the organisation of emergent themes. The reflexive coding process, characterised by iterative analysis and continuous data re-evaluation, revealed how cultural and social capital, along with the dynamic interplay between habitus and field, are intricately connected to students' perceptions of belonging and identity (See Figure 4). Participants shared experiences that highlighted the influence of these forms of capital in navigating university life, ranging from accessing academic resources to engaging in social networking. The interaction between personal habitus and the institutional habitus of universities is crucial in shaping these experiences, highlighting the adaptive strategies employed by students to either conform to or challenge the academic environment's norms and values.
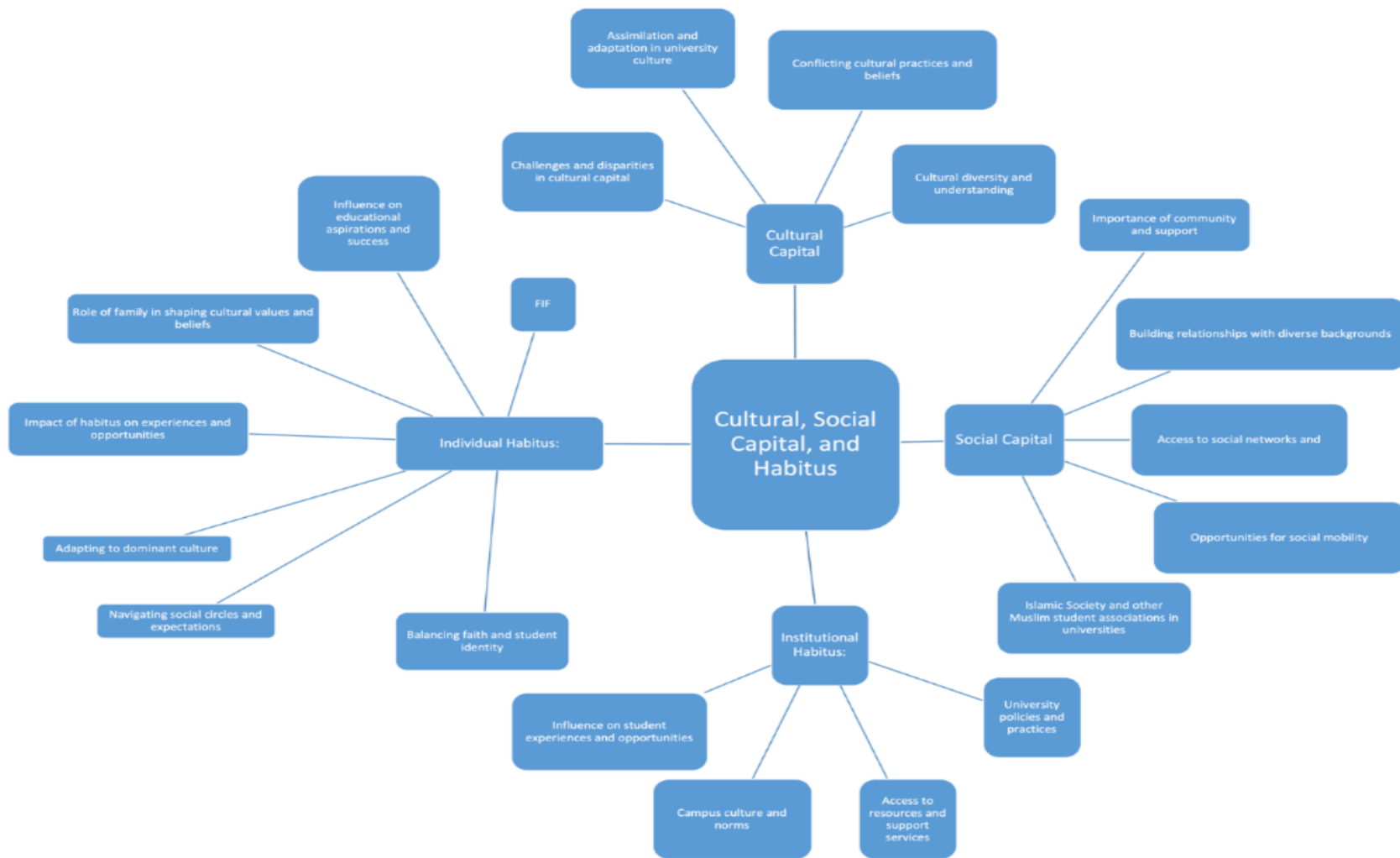
Figure 4-Cultural capital, social capital, institutional habitus, individual habitus.

6.2.1 Forming Religious Identities within Familial Contexts

These findings emphasize the fundamental role families play in cultivating the religious habitus of young individuals. Through religious socialisation within the home, families shape how faith becomes intertwined with identity, values, and dispositions. This section examines the narratives of Muslim participants to understand the influence of familial religious education on identity formation from early childhood to adolescence. It demonstrates how embedded religious schemas emerge through familial religious capital and the "dual socialisation" of both informal and formal religious learning pathways, both within and beyond the domestic sphere (Lareau, 1987).

Participants' reflections highlighted the integration of religion into family life from infancy. As Mo (University B) noted:

> *As a British Arab and British Muslim, both my cultural and religious identities are important to me, my parents ensured that I was introduced to my religion at a very young age, from when I was a baby and then going to Arabic and Quran school from the age of 5'.*

This highlights the proactive role of parents in initiating religious education from an early age and highlights the importance of structured religious education through Arabic and Quran schools in reinforcing the religious aspect of one's identity. Additionally, Mo's articulation of his intersecting identity as a British Arab and British Muslim exemplifies the theoretical concept of intersectional identities (refer to discussion in section 4.3.2 and 5.3.2), in which cultural and religious identities coalesce to form a multifaceted self-concept (Anthias 2002; Yuval-Davis 2006). His parents' proactive engagement in initiating Islamic education from an early age underlines the critical role that familial influence plays in the religious socialisation process, ensuring that faith identity is interwoven with cultural identity from the outset (Abbas, 2016; Jackson, 2014). This early introduction to Islamic education through Arabic and Quran schools not only instils religious knowledge, but also fosters a sense of belonging to a community with shared values and beliefs (Sahin, 2013; Lamhar, 2020; Qotadah 2022). Mo's experience also demonstrates the complex interplay of factors shaping the development of Muslim identity in multicultural Britain (Abbas 2019;

Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann 2015; Lahmar 2020). This reflects the broader implications of religious education highlighted in prior research - its role in Muslim youth identity negotiations in diverse contexts (Modood, 2005; Cesari, 2013).

Religious capital in the home also emerges through conversation, and modelling at home. Bushra (University A) recalled:

> *'My family keep me grounded, they ensured that I learned about Islam from a very young age, whether through mosque or my parents teaching us at home'.*

This reflects how informal discussions and religious experiences within the family setting were formative of Bushra's faith identity. Her statement affirms the profound role that families play in instilling religious learning at a young age - a finding aligned with social learning theory, which posits that individuals internalise values through observational learning from their parents (Bandura, 1977). Bushra's experiences therefore demonstrate not only her parents' commitment to imparting religious knowledge, but also highlight the importance of dual educational pathways, including formal instruction at mosques combined with informal family teachings at home—in cultivating a robust understanding of Islam among young Muslims (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2010). These early socialisation experiences helped transmit important religious capital to Bushra in her developmental years (Bourdieu, 1984), shaping her religiosity and sense of identity which can be drawn upon in later years.

Participants also described structured early religious education. For Mo, this occurred *'going to Arabic and Quran school from age 5'.* Institutional religious learning socialises religious schemas, such as second-language acquisition and communal belonging (Ramadan, 2009; Khan, 2012). Neelam (University B) recalled:

> *'My parents instilled in me the importance of prayer and the Quran from as early as I can remember, attending Quran school on weekends or after school was not just about learning to recite but understanding how these teachings fit into our daily lives.'*

For Neelam, religious education went beyond rote memorisation and recitation to cultivate a deeper understanding of how Islamic teachings apply to real-life contexts. She

distinguished her educational experience by emphasising comprehension, reflection, and putting religious knowledge into practice (Freire 1993). By focusing on the meaning and application of Quranic lessons, her education fostered religious literacy that encouraged critical thinking about faith (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann 2015; Lahmar, 2020). The holistic approach to Neelam's religious learning, combining formal instruction at the Quran school with informal family teachings, helped embed her multidimensional Muslim identity deeply within her habitus. Repeated religious socialisation experientially installed faith-based dispositions, shaping her view of the self and the world (Bourdieu, 1984). This reflects how families and religious institutions collaboratively form internalised religious schemas that traverse developmental periods.

Furthermore, participants reported that religion remained integrated with both the familial and educational aspects of their lives throughout developmental periods, including adolescence. Kat (University A) recalled:

'I was raised in a Muslim family, so I've always been aware of my faith identity'.

This suggests that her religious habitus was cultivated within the familial environment from a very young age and persisted as she grew older (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013). Sarah (University B) similarly affirmed that her 'family played a major role in shaping [her] identity.' These reflections demonstrate how family religiosity helps transmit faith orientations across generations, even into adolescence (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012).

The participants' experiences highlighted the religious habitus emerging at the intersection of the social, cultural, and educational contexts. Familial and institutional religious pedagogy intersected to form "multifaceted faith identities" (Hall, 1996; Anthias, 2002, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann 2015) internalised through developmental years (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, religious education, both within and beyond the home, fundamentally shaped the religious habitus underpinning the participants' sense of self.

Some participants also stated continuing structured religious learning during adolescence, and university. For example, Neelam highlighted still attending Quran classes *'on weekends or after school'* as a teen, while Mo stated:

'I recently joined an Islamic studies course in my local community centre, just to learn more about my religion'.

These ongoing institutional experiences reinforce religious schemas and complement the socialisation occurring within families. Through diverse interactions with religious authorities and peers, individuals are able to further negotiate and solidify their evolving religious identities during later developmental stages, particularly into and through the university (Jackson, 2018; Modood, 2005; Cesari, 2013).

For many students, this period of independent living and exposure to new perspectives presents opportunities as well as challenges for expressing and understanding faith identity. Engagement with campus religious groups such as the ISOC and faith-based communities provides supportive avenues for nuancing and strengthening identities beyond familial contexts during the transition to adulthood. Thus, religious identities organically developed from early religious capital are nurtured across the developmental ecology (Rissanen, 2014). In this way, participants' narratives demonstrate how religious education holistically contributes to the formation of internalised religious subjectivities.

6.2.2   Impact of Religious Institutions on Identity

The participants highlighted the importance of mosques and Arabic and Quran schools in shaping their identity and fostering a sense of community, as evidenced in their narratives. This aligns with the arguments regarding the crucial role of Islamic education in extending beyond knowledge transmission. These settings offer vital communal spaces for exploring and affirming religious and cultural identities in supportive environments (Sarmani, 2014; Ahmed, 2014).

Participants articulated a deep appreciation for their religious education, highlighting its role in fostering a sense of belonging and personal grounding. This grounding appears to influence their expectations and values regarding education, suggesting an intrinsic link between religious and academic pursuits. The esteem with which they hold their religious education suggests that they incorporate these values into their university experience, viewing them as integral to their academic and social navigation.

For instance, Mariam's reflection on the role of the madrassa in shaping her cultural and community identity indicates a broadened perspective on education, viewing it as a holistic process that encompasses both academic knowledge and moral development. Mariam (University A) stated:

> *'Madrassa wasn't just about religion, but also our culture and community. It was so important for feeling grounded in who I am'.*

Similarly, Iaisha (University B) recounting her mosque and Quran lessons as central to her Muslim identity implies that these experiences contribute to a foundation that supports resilience and adaptability in diverse environments, including universities. She stated:

> *'Attending mosque with my family, Quran lessons and celebrating Eid helped me feel connected to my Muslim identity growing up.'*

The emphasis on the role of madrassas and mosques in nurturing culture and community aligns with the conceptualisation of these institutions as crucial for shaping belonging and spatial identities in societal contexts (Isakjee, 2016; Thomas & Sanderson, 2011). Mariam's reflection that these experiences helped her feel "grounded" in her identity supports the literature highlighting the significance of faith in fostering resilient self-concepts and religious practices (Karolia & Manley, 2020).

Raj's (University A) reflection illustrates how religious institutions contribute to a broader sense of belonging and community cohesion among Muslims in Western societies (Meer, 2009; Modood, 2019). He stated:

> *'Even though I consider myself less practising now, I would say that going to a mosque with my family as a child was a formative experience for me. It gave me a sense of community and connection to my faith' (*Raj, University A)

Despite changes in his religious practices, Raj's early experiences at the mosque laid the foundation for his enduring sense of belonging to the Muslim community. This highlights the influential role of religious institutions in creating community ties and shaping religious identity, aligning with social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988). The mosque acts as a vital social institution that fosters connections within the Muslim community and

reinforces social and religious cohesion (Bagby, 2013; Hall & Sevim, 2020; McLoughlin, 2005).

Similarly, Adam (University B) shared the following points:

> *Growing up in my family's involvement in the local mosque provided me with a sense of community. It was more than learning Arabic; it was about connecting with our heritage and understanding our place in the wider world.'*

These reflections echo current research on the influential role of mosques in shaping religious identity and fostering community ties. Hoelzchen (2021) and Haider (2021) highlight the role of mosques in shaping Muslim selfhood, sociality, and education. Dana (2011) and Kamil & Darojat (2019) underscore the role of mosques in promoting social and political integration, particularly in American and Indonesian contexts. Efiyanti et al. (2021) and Fadzil et al. (2019) explore the potential of mosques in promoting social and economic empowerment, focusing on small merchants and human capital enhancement. Al-Krenawi (2016) highlights the mosque's role in providing various services, including conflict resolution and political mobilisation.

The communal aspect of faith identity, as illustrated by participants' experiences, serves not only as a means of imparting religious knowledge but also as a crucial space for building community ties and a collective sense of belonging (Becker, 2019). Lahmar (2020) underscores the importance of these educational environments in fostering a supportive community for Muslims in the West, facilitating their engagement with both their faith and broader society. This aligns with Ahmed's (2020) research on the transformative potential of British mosques in creating vital social and political spaces for Muslims. Meer (2012) emphasises the influence of these religious institutions in moulding Muslim consciousness and collective identities, particularly in countering media representations. However, the experiences and impacts of such institutions vary across Muslim communities in the United Kingdom, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, gender, and levels of religiosity (Gilliat-Ray & Bryant, 2011; Jeldtoft, 2011; Ryan, 2014; Al-Refai, 2020; DeHanas, 2016; Birt, 2006; McLoughlin, 2005).This diversity highlights the nuanced ways individuals engage with and are influenced by their religious environment.

From the participants' statements, it is evident that formative experiences through religious education at mosques, madrassas, and Quran schools laid a foundation for their sense of self and belonging. This upbringing instilled in them certain religious dispositions and expectations for continuing their spiritual development throughout their educational journeys.

6.2.3 Navigating University Through Religious Habitus

The interviews demonstrated how the transition to university life prompted participants to draw on their religious habitus, formed from early education, to navigate the new academic setting. The growing emphasis on finding Muslim communities at universities that resemble supportive environments demonstrates the importance of maintaining faith identity and learning in this new context. This action illustrates how religious habitus acts as a navigational tool, guiding students towards environments that support their identity and faith and highlights the continuity from the value placed on religious education to its application in navigating university life.

For example, Bushra's active search for and appreciation of Muslim communities within her university highlights the importance of maintaining connections with her religious roots.

> '*I was happy to find Islamic societies and prayer spaces that reminded me of home. It helped me stay connected in my faith here.*' (Bushra, University A)

Bushra's experience exemplifies how ingrained dispositions shaped through sustained early socialisation guided her strategic choices to optimise familiarity when transitioning to university. Joining Islamic societies and seeking prayer spaces are ways in which Muslim students attempt to recreate a semblance of their home or community environment, reinforcing their faith, identity, and sense of belonging. This search reflects a broader trend among participants who view their university experience through the lens of their religious upbringing, seeking spaces that affirm their identity and faith. As Holdsworth and Morgan (2005) discuss, habitus influences circumstances through a dynamic interplay between the past and present; in contrast, a common thread across the experiences of participants in University B is the evident absence of an active Islamic society or other foundational support tailored to the needs of Muslim students on campus, which not only affects their

ability to engage in religious practices within the university setting but also influences their sense of belonging and community connectedness.

Zai (University B) stated the following:

'I like this university, but it lacks support for Muslims, don't get me wrong, I am treated very well but there is no active Isoc, if we need a Muslim event we have to go outside'.

This lack of Islamic spaces and events necessitates seeking Muslim-centric events and gatherings beyond the university's bounds (Chapter 7 will explore the significance of university spaces for Muslim students, delving into how these environments impact their experiences on campus).

Iaisha's (University B) comments further amplify this narrative, indicating a pervasive lack of support for Muslim students at the university. She stated:

'Seriously, there very little support here for Muslims, I am so glad to have Muslim friends and to have learnt my religion at home'.

Her gratitude for having foundational religious education at home underscores the importance of early socialisation in Islam, but also highlights a reliance on personal networks and pre-university learning to navigate her faith in an environment where institutional support is lacking.

Mo (University B) articulates a similar struggle, despite his formative grounding, demonstrating how stabilised orientations interact variably with contextual support at different institutions. His proactive effort to find continuity in his religious practice outside the university context reflects the dynamic nature of habitus, as it adapts to and interacts with new environments. He stated:

'The lack of Islamic society on campus meant that I needed to find somewhere else to connect with other Muslims so that I can develop my Islamic knowledge'.

Like Mo, students may look beyond the university to find spaces and communities where they can practise their faith and connect with other Muslims, demonstrating an active effort to maintain their religious lives. Iaisha's reliance on her Muslim friends and her

religious education at home exemplify how students use existing networks and knowledge to navigate their faith in a less supportive university environment.

These participants' efforts reflect the broader theme of adaptability and agency of Muslim students in navigating their religious identities within an academic setting that significantly deviates from their foundational religious experience. This adaptability, as detailed by scholars such as Mahmood (2005) and Ingram et al. (2023), illustrates the fluid nature of habitus in adjusting to new contexts, highlighting students' efforts to maintain religious practices by establishing new spaces for engagement outside of traditional university parameters. This is evident among Muslim students at University B, demonstrating how they navigate and negotiate their faith identity within an environment that diverges from their early formative influences. This adaptability showcases students' capacity to maintain their religious practices and beliefs by finding or creating spaces for engagement outside the traditional university setting (the concept of space is discussed further in Chapter 7).

The narratives of Muslim students at Universities A and B provide insights into how religious dispositions are shaped by upbringing guide actions and expectations in new environments, such as universities. Bourdieu's concept of habitus elucidates this influence, where early socialisation durably structures perceptions and behaviours (Bourdieu, 1984). However, the research also highlighted that students' ability to express and maintain religious dispositions was significantly affected by their university's institutional habitus. This collective set of values and norms comprising the educational environment can better support religious identities or potentially lead to alienation if they are poorly aligned with students' habitus (Reay et al., 2005). The lack of resources at University B, as noted by Zai, Iaisha, and Mo, illustrates the challenges students face in aligning their university experience with their religious expectations, highlighting the nuanced ways in which religious habitus influences university life.

Formative experiences, such as family, religious education, and faith-based communities are instrumental in cultivating religious habitus and accumulating vital cultural capital to navigate new settings. This dynamic interplay between established and evolving dispositions in student journeys underscores the need for university support for religious and cultural diversity. This study reflects the diversity in experiences shaped by intersecting

factors in students' lives. It provides an understanding of the personalised strategies employed to balance cultural-religious backgrounds with university demands.

6.2.4 Cultural Capital and University Life

Neelam's (University B) statement illustrates how individual resources shaped by one's cultural background and faith can enhance university experience. Her proficiency in multiple languages, a direct reflection of her cultural capital, and her deep-rooted faith illustrate the impact these personal resources can have on social integration and academic resilience (Shaffait, 2019). Neelam articulated:

> *Being able to speak multiple languages, I found it easier to connect with different people at university, and that being Muslim has always helped when needed to stay motivated, especially when things get hard, I always put my faith in God and know that he will help me.*

Neelam's navigation through higher education, leveraging her linguistic abilities and faith, highlights the critical roles of cultural capital and habitus. Her narrative not only exemplifies Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital as a collection of linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge acquired from one's environment but also demonstrates how these assets can bridge cultural gaps and enhance the multicultural landscape of the university. Additionally, Neelam's narrative highlights the essence of habitus, namely as a set of deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through life experiences (Bourdieu 1984). Her faith, a central component of her habitus, provides a resilient foundation that enables her to persevere through academic challenges, illustrating how habitus influences perceptions, actions, and resilience in new environments (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2004).

This broader perspective on cultural wealth, as discussed by Yosso (2005), acknowledges the myriad forms of capital, such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital that students like Neelam utilise to successfully navigate academic life. Her engagement with diverse student groups highlights the cultivation of social capital networks of relationships that foster a sense of belonging and community within an academic setting (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988).

Through Neelam's narrative, it becomes evident that successful navigation and integration into university life are intricately linked to the effective utilisation and recognition of one's cultural capital and habitus. Her story serves as a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and potential of students who draw upon their diverse backgrounds and personal resources to enrich their educational journeys and broaden university communities (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011; Tierney, 1999). This aligns with the broader trends identified in the literature, where cultural competencies, including language skills and religious practices, are seen as sources of resilience and strength (Shain, 2011; Archer, 2003). Similarly, Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) emphasised the positive influence of cultural and faith identity in navigating academic settings, suggesting that these aspects of identity can enhance students' sense of belonging and academic engagement.

6.2.5 Social Capital: Networks and Support Systems

The significance of social capital, evident through varied networks of support, mentorship, and community engagement, has emerged as a pivotal theme.

Sayimah's reflections capture the challenges of forming meaningful connections in an environment in which shared cultural and religious backgrounds are not given. Her difficulty in trusting those who seem patronising or who may not share common experiences stresses the importance of bonding social capital connections formed within homogeneous groups based on shared identity or values. She stated:

> *'How would you understand me if you have nothing in common with me? Some people can be quite patronising, perhaps due to ignorance or arrogance, and I do not know, so I find it difficult to trust them.* (Sayimah, University A).

Similarly, Neelam's account highlights the transformative impact of finding someone with similar values and experience. Her initial feelings of loneliness at university were alleviated through friendships that offered not only companionship but also academic support and encouragement. Neelam stated:

> *'I was quite lonely when I first started uni, but I made an effort to find people that like and share the same values as me. I met this friend of mine when I was able to*

*see myself in her. We became friends, and she has been helping me ever since, people like that you do not find often, but my friendship with her helped me to continue and flourish in my course. (*Neelam, University B).

These examples demonstrate how participants relied on social support from peers who shared their experiences and identities (bonding social capital). However, while homogeneity in social capital, while fostering a sense of belonging, can also create closed networks and reinforce existing power structures (Anabella-Maria, 2015). As such, the importance of having a diverse social network is highlighted by the potential disadvantage of relying solely on bonding networks (Freeman, 2014). The participants in this study also shed light on the balance that Muslim students often need to strike in order to maintain their cultural and faith identity and engage in broader and more diverse social networks.

*'My non-Muslim friends seem to be hanging out in bars and socialising with various groups of people, and they seem to be more informed about opportunities within the university, so as much as I like hanging out with people that look like me and sound like me. I understand that I tend to miss opportunities because I do not hang out on the right (*Adam, University B).

Adam's reflection on the limitations of his social network highlights the critical role of bridging social capital in accessing information and opportunities at universities. His observation of the importance of broader networks resonates with Putnam's (2000) findings, who distinguished between these two forms of social engagement. Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) further elucidate how Muslim students often form close-knit communities to support one another but also highlight the need for bridging capital to facilitate wider social and academic opportunities.

This emphasises the role of networks and social connections in providing access to information and opportunities for broadening horizons. Specifically, Adam noted that his non-Muslim friends, who have more diverse social networks and are likely to engage in more bridging social capital, have access to information about opportunities that he does not have. As Modood (2007:66) notes, 'religion and ethnicity may promote the bonding of people within the same group, but they can also reinforce their separation from others and

prevent the development of bridging networks'. Thus, students at University A sought to broaden their social networks because of the potential advantages of bridging social capital, which involves forming connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

6.2.6   Habitus and Navigating University Spaces

Research data have shown that Muslim students employ a range of strategies to negotiate their religious identities amidst predominantly secular culture (Mirza, 2008; Shaw, 2014). Soraya and Raj (University A) offer contrasting examples of how cultural and social capital influences student interactions and behaviour on campus.

Soraya, who strongly identifies with her religious beliefs as a practising Muslim, consciously limits her social interactions to those within Islamic Society. She stated:

> *'I would consider myself a practising Muslim, so, I always avoid social interaction on campus, unless it's the Islamic Society',*

Soraya's restricted cultural capital, shaped by her religious habitus, stems from her familial socialisation as a practising Muslim. Bourdieu conceptualised habitus as durable mental and bodily dispositions acquired through socialisation within the family (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu (1984), this habitus disposes Soraya to prioritise involvement with the Islamic Society as a strategy. He argues that different fields value certain types of capital over others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). While Soraya's cultural capital is validated within Islamic Society, providing a sense of belonging (Thomas 2002) within this specific domain, it might concurrently limit her visibility and participation in broader university activities that do not conform to her cultural capital. This scenario illustrates Bourdieu's assertion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) that different fields have distinct valuations of capital, potentially marginalising individuals, such as Soraya, in spaces where her cultural capital is not as highly esteemed (Jones et al., 2013). This misalignment can contribute to Soraya's perceived isolation and lack of engagement with mainstream universities (Stevenson, 2018), positioning her on the margins of the university's social and cultural life.

However, Soraya's approach can be interpreted as a form of resistance (Guiffrida, 2006) against a university culture that does not fully embrace her religious habitus (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992). This resistance underscores the challenges that students face when their cultural capital, especially when influenced by faith, clashes with the dominant cultural norms in higher education. Mirza (2009) highlights the risks universities face in marginalising the experiences of students like Soraya by not adequately recognising and accommodating diverse forms of cultural capital.

Conversely, Raj's experience illustrates a more expansive engagement with campus life, driven by the desire to seize opportunities presented during his university years. He stated:

> *'I am only young once, so, I take advantage of all the events here'.*

His less restrictive approach to social interactions, not bound by religious considerations, enabled him to broaden his social network and enhance his access to social capital. However, this open approach has also led to feelings of detachment from the Muslim community on campus.

> *'I don't feel like I belong to the Islamic Society on campus, I don't really have many Muslim friends.'*

This finding suggests a trade-off between broader social engagement and religious community connectedness. Raj's narrative highlights a critical aspect of social capital, the networks and relationships that facilitate social mobility, and supports the complex ways in which cultural backgrounds influence one's sense of belonging and community connections within the university.

6.3 Insights into the intersectional Journeys of First-in-Family Muslim Students

Being a "First-in-Family" (FiF)[12] also known as first-generation, holds unique significance as they are the first in their immediate families to pursue higher education. Research

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[12] After conducting the first two interviews, I noticed that a significant proportion of the participants were the first in their families to attend university. Although this topic was not initially included in the interview guide, I decided to include it by asking a question at the end of the interview depending on the context of the discussion. The question was phrased in a conversational and non-threatening manner, such as 'I've heard that other students are the first in their family to attend university. Would you also consider yourself to be the first in your family to attend university?' As a result, 85% of the participants responded affirmatively and were subsequently asked to discuss their experiences as the first in their family to attend university. I also asked about the types of support they received from the university and how their status as First in Family (FIF) students impacted their university life. By including this question in the interview, I

indicates that FiF students constitute a majority of undergraduates in the UK. For instance, in the 2017-18 academic year, FiF students made up 68% of the student body in higher education, a substantial proportion of whom were ethnic minorities. This demographic often faces unique hurdles not encountered by peers with a familial legacy in higher education (Coombs, 2022; Henderson et al., 2020).

This was reflected in this research in which 85% of the participants stated they are FIF students. Being a first-in-family (FiF) university student presents additional layers of complexity for Muslim students navigating higher education in the UK.   (see Figure 5).

The participants mentioned encountering various challenges and opportunities being FIF. However, many drew upon their faith in withstanding difficulties at this intersection. For example, Zamzam (University B) attributes her perseverance in the face of daunting academic and financial pressures to the strength drawn from her family and faith, stating:

> *'As the first in my family to attend university, navigating academic expectations alongside financial pressures was daunting, yet my family and my faith instilled in me a sense of resilience and determination.'*

Zamzam's statements highlight faith not merely as a personal belief system but as a dynamic source of strength and perseverance. This reliance on faith and family support functions as a critical component of Zamzam's habitus, guiding her through the unfamiliar terrain of higher education and enabling her to deal with the obstacles she might face as an FIF student.

Sayimah's (University A) stated:

> *'Being a FiF student meant I had to build my own path, which was scary but empowering. It pushed me to seek out resources and communities within the university that I might not have otherwise, helping me to connect with my heritage and faith in new ways.*'

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gained insight into the experiences of FIF university students and the resources and support necessary to facilitate their success. This approach allowed for a greater variety of responses and added depth and complexity to Muslim students' experiences.
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This reflection brings to light the dissonance encountered by FiF Muslim students as they transition into a new cultural field that may starkly contrast their ingrained dispositions. The absence of a familial precedent in higher education amplifies this dissonance, presenting unique challenges in academic expectations and social integration. Sayimah articulates this journey as both "*scary but empowering*,' a testament to the transformative potential inherent in navigating these challenges. Her proactive engagement with university resources and communities illustrates a deliberate effort to adapt her habitus to her new environment, seeking spaces where her heritage and faith can be explored and integrated into her university experience.

The narratives of FiF Muslim students like Zamzam and Sayimah offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between faith, family support, and university resources in the process of habitus adaptation. Their statements reveal how these elements serve as foundational pillars, enabling students to navigate the challenges of higher education, adapt to new cultural fields, and foster personal growth and resilience. This underlines the importance of higher education institutions in recognising and addressing the unique needs of FiF Muslim students and ensuring that support structures are in place to facilitate their successful integration and achievement in the university environment.

Figure 5- Challenges and Opportunities Muslim students encounter as first-in-family students.

6.3.1 Navigating Cultural and Capital Barriers: The Intersectional Challenges of FIF Muslim Students in HEIs

Bushra (University A) mentioned feeling like an outsider in her department due to the class and language barriers she encountered. This emphasises that cultural capital, specifically academic language, can be a significant factor in determining the success of HE students. Thus, to overcome these challenges, Bushra invested significant time and effort in improving her cultural capital by performing activities that allowed her to generate this form of capital. She stated:

> *'Although I really enjoy my subject, when I first started, I felt that everybody in my class and in the department seemed to be very middle-class and seemed to understand each other; I couldn't understand a lot of the academic jargon and the language used in the literature, so I spent many hours reading in order to get myself to their standard. It is hard being the first in your family to come to university. I am the first of my family to pursue higher education, and my family has been my support system throughout this whole process.* (Bushra, University A).

Bushra's account of feeling alienated within her department due to class and language barriers underscores the critical role of cultural capital in higher education (HE). Her struggle with academic jargon and the sense of being an outsider within a predominantly middle-class academic environment highlights how cultural capital, particularly in the form of academic language proficiency, is a determinant of student success in HEIs (Bourdieu, 1986). Bushra's dedication to bridging this gap by investing time in reading and improving her understanding of academic language is a testament to her resilience and determination to succeed. This effort can be seen as an example of an adaptive habitus (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013), which allows her to navigate between different cultural fields without compromising her values or identity.

Bushra's mention of her family as a support system throughout her university journey emphasises the significance of social capital. While initial university social networks are often formed based on shared backgrounds, support from family members provides

additional resources and opportunities to overcome barriers and succeed academically (Coleman, 1988). This aspect of social capital is crucial for FIF university students such as Bushra, who are more likely to experience imposter syndrome[13] compared to their peers (Holden et al., 2021). The challenges and unfamiliarity associated with being the first in their family to attend university contribute to feelings of "self-doubt" and a sense of "not truly belonging" or deserving of their academic achievements (Parkman, 2016; Ramsey and Brown, 2018).

The challenges faced by Bushra due to class and language barriers, along with the broader issues of discrimination and marginalisation noted by Bhopal (2018), emphasise the intersectional challenges Muslim students encounter, reflecting broader literature concerns with the intersection of race, religion, and education (Gholami, 2021; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

Bushra's narrative introduces the common difficulties FiF students face in transitioning to university cultural expectations without access to requisite forms of capital transmitted through family networks with prior higher education exposure (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Luzeckyj et al., 2017).

The absence of prior familial university experience complicates even rudimentary administrative tasks for FIF students within university settings, making processes such as enrolment more daunting (Lehmann, 2009; Jury et al., 2017; Bell & Santamaría, 2018). This "lack of knowledge" can detrimentally affect overall university experience (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; O'Shea, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). In such instances, the importance of alternative sources of social capital has become evident. Teachers, mentors, and community organisations play an indispensable role in assisting students' navigation

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[13] Imposter syndrome, first described by Clance and Imes in 1978, is the belief that one's achievements are due to luck or external factors rather than one's own abilities. This phenomenon has been studied by researchers such as Ramsey and Brown (2018), Parkman (2016), and Cokley et al. (2013). Imposter syndrome can lead to decreased confidence and well-being, particularly among Muslim students who may experience minority status stress and impostor feelings. These experiences can have a negative impact on their mental health, as shown in research by Cokley et al. (2013).

through the complexities of higher education. Ihsan's account exemplifies these difficulties:

> *'I had to figure out everything by myself, from applying for scholarships to choosing courses. It was really hard to get the information needed at home, as my parents did not know, I still managed to find all the information I needed, I attended college workshops, I spoke to people in my community, and I even asked people I admired in the community to mentor me'* (Ihsan, University A).

This shows how the absence of cultural capital can hinder Ihsan's access to information. His lack of familial educational capital potentially limited his access to certain types of knowledge and resources that are typically available to university-educated households (Tramonte & Willms, 2010; Luzeckyj et al., 2017). However, Ihsan demonstrated "adaptive habitus" (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013) through community connections, workshops, and mentors to aid navigating an unfamiliar field. This also demonstrates resourcefulness in leveraging alternative connective resources within religious communities and mentorship for the acquisition of support structures vital for successful integration (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; O'Shea, 2016).

Additionally, managing the complex interplay between campus engagement and other responsibilities has emerged as a key theme for FIF students. For example, Iaisha expressed:

> *'Because I live at home, I go home and I don't discuss my university studies with my parents, so that also creates a sense of isolation because I don't belong to the particular group at university, nor do I belong to my family, because I am in that transition stage. Sometimes, the university atmosphere makes you feel like an outsider. But then, I am grateful for the university grant and for granting me bursaries, so I do not have to work like my siblings. I have my student loan and bursary, so I am focusing on my studies here. I have not moved from my working or unclassified class. These don't just fade by coming to university; I just know that when I finish, there will be challenges that I will have to face because I am a Muslim, and I am a working-class Brown woman. I do not want my background to define me,*

but social inequalities and class-based systems still exist in the UK' (Iaisha, University A).

Even though FIF students view university education as a chance to improve their social mobility, they also encounter various challenges and barriers due to the entrenched social inequality and class-based system in the UK (Groves et al., 2022; Reay, 2018). As a result, students like Iaisha and Ihsan must not only overcome the challenges of being FIF students but also the broader social context that shapes their university life. Iaisha's experience illustrates the challenges of being an FIF student as a Muslim woman from a working-class background, who is, nevertheless, excited, and curious about starting university. Her feeling of isolation is compounded by her intersecting identities and the pressure to balance her cultural and religious norms with the demands of university life (Stevenson, 2018). As a working-class Muslim woman, Iaisha's cultural capital and habitus differ from those of the dominant culture on campus, creating a sense of dissonance and disorientation (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay et al., 2009). However, being a recipient of the university grant and bursaries helped her provide social capital and resources to navigate some of the challenges.

Most of the time, FIF university students are unfamiliar with university settings and expectations, and if they do not receive adequate support and guidance from university staff, they may feel excluded from the university experience, which could, in turn, expose them to discrimination that hinders their success (Adamecz-Völgyi et al., 2021; O'Shea, 2016). O'Shea (2018) highlighted the importance of university transition programs that provide support and resources to help students develop the required cultural capital to navigate and succeed in the HE environment. These programmes aim to equip students with "legitimate forms of cultural capital" valued by the institution, which can help them better understand and meet the expectations of the university. Thus, FIF students can gain the skills and knowledge needed to succeed academically and socially in the university setting. Not having the cultural and social capital that is necessary to navigate the complex social and cultural dynamics of the university system (O'Shea, 2018), students may experience feelings of isolation and marginalisation, which most literature associates with Muslim students' experiences (Kyriacou et al., 2017; Stevenson, 2018). This can negatively impact their academic performance and mental health (Mahmud and

Gagnon, 2022). For Muslim students who are also FIF, the challenges can be even greater. In addition to cultural expectations, they also experience social and economic pressures that are not widely understood or acknowledged at university, such as caring responsibilities and financial struggles (Stevenson et al., 2019). This is illustrated in a quotation from Ahmed (University B), who stated:

> *'I am the only one in my family who goes to uni; no one understands my subject, so I feel so happy to be on Campus because other people understand me. …. My student identity comes to play as soon as I set off to come to uni; I take a journey every day. My student identity is unlike my other identities that I take home; it only comes out when I come to uni; there is no space for my student self at home… I am a carer as well as a part-time waiter, and finally a student. My first year was quite challenging; I had a complete lack of understanding of what the university was about; I did not know what to expect and where to start…. I feel now that I have opportunities to move up in life and make a new lifestyle for myself now'* (Ahmed, University B).

Ahmed's statement highlights the dynamic relationship between capital, habitus, and field in his university experience. As an FiF, Ahmed lacks the cultural capital often necessary to successfully navigate academic institutions. However, he appears to have developed a habitus that allows him to thrive despite the struggle within the university field. Ahmed identifies strongly with his student identity and '*feels a sense of belonging on campus*'; his various roles as a career, waiter, and student also indicate his possession of different forms of capital and how these interplay in multiple habitus. His role as a caregiver provided him with social capital, whereas his job as a waiter provided him with economic capital. His status as a student provided him with access to academic and cultural capital. Ahmed's struggles during his first year at university indicates that he lacked the particular forms of capital necessary to effectively navigate the academic field. However, it appears that he acquired these forms of capital over time, as indicated by his statement.

The participants' narratives also highlighted the diverse negotiated pathways FIF students take. Students like May and Ahmed were inspired by overcoming adversity with university success and hoped to change the future of their circle of influence. For example, May (University A) said:

> *'I am the first in my family to enter university, I believe that I have changed the course of history for my siblings and cousins'.*

Thus, creating precedence was a significant part of her university experience. Ahmed (University B) commented:

> *'I want to be a role model for other Muslim boys in my own family and my community; I want to show them that you can succeed and achieve too, instead of being always disengaged.'*

May's statement reflects the concept of habitus, as she described how attending university allowed her to change the course of history for her family. Her habitus, developed through her upbringing and socialisation, did not include a tradition of higher education. However, she was able to adapt and develop a new habitus, in which attending university and pursuing higher education is seen as a viable and desirable path (Reay et al., 2009). Her achievement was not only a personal accomplishment but also transformed her family's habitus. Ahmed's comments highlight the significance of cultural capital, particularly in the community. His aspiration to act as a role model for Muslim boys in his family and community shows that he recognises the value of cultural capital. By pursuing higher education, he is developing this capital, which he can leverage for his own advantages and for that of his community (Bourdieu, 1986).

Both May's and Ahmed's statements are related to the concept of the field. They operate within the HE fields and navigate the structure, rules, and expectations of the field. However, they also act as agents in this field, challenging and transforming the norms and expectations of their habitus and community (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

It is tempting to assume that FIF students are solely responsible for their success at university, relying only on their own hard work, persistence, and self-confidence. However, these students face many challenges and barriers when entering university that cannot be overcome by individuals alone. Therefore, the following question arises: what is the role of universities in supporting these students? Devlin (2013:993) argues that the "unspoken expectations embedded in university practices belong to a socio-cultural subset that is

typical of higher socioeconomic levels," which form a part of the institutional habitus and can act to exclude students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who might not be familiar with the norms and discourses of the institution. Consequently, the success or failure of non-traditional students, especially FIF students, cannot simply be attributed to their personal efforts. HEIs have a responsibility for making these hidden expectations explicit and creating a more inclusive institutional habitus that supports the successful transition and completion of degrees for all students (Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2010).

6.3.2 Leveraging Opportunities for Educational Attainment

May's narrative contrasts with that of Bushra, highlighting the opportunities that cultural capital and institutional support can provide. She stated:

> *I went to a sixth grammar form college; the staff were supportive, and they introduced me to the university widening participation scheme. I was keen to succeed, so I learned about this opportunity. I participated and worked hard to obtain all the scholarships when I started my university. I know that people like me do not get this opportunity often, so I was not going to let it go. I ensured that I was known to the university by participating in all activities to enhance my CV. Now, I have travelled everywhere with the university, and I have gained many experiences. Now, I am finishing soon. I have managed with the help of the university to secure a graduate scheme job with excellent pay. My parent is very proud of me, and I feel lucky to have had these opportunities… One thing I have realised very early is that life is a game and if you know the rules, you can play along and achieve all your goals'* (May, University A).

May's journey from attending a grammar sixth form college to securing a graduate scheme job exemplifies Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1986), which posits that cultural and symbolic capital acquired through education can facilitate success in the competitive higher-education landscape. For instance, by attending a sixth grammar form college, participating in the university's widening participation scheme and activities, and enhancing her CV, May acquired cultural and symbolic capital that enabled her to succeed in the highly competitive field of higher education institutions (HEIs). Despite the

challenges she faced due to her social background, her disposition and understanding of life as a "game" helped her overcome some of the obstacles. This exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of the educational system as a social field in which individuals compete for cultural and symbolic capital and the role of social background and cultural resources in shaping an individual's educational attainment and career success.

The intersection of being Muslim and FiF can create additional challenges for university students, as they face barriers related to their social, faith, cultural, and academic identities. The concept map (see Figure 5) encapsulates the challenges and opportunities Muslim students encounter as first-in-family students. These findings emphasise the pivotal role of FIF students as trailblazers within their families and serve as a source of inspiration for future generations to pursue higher education. Additionally, it sheds light on the hurdles encountered within university campuses, including the lack of guidance and the delicate balancing act of managing various responsibilities (Collins &Jehangir, 2021). However, it also shows the opportunities that arise from pursuing higher education, such as the acquisition of knowledge, exposure to new experiences, development of valuable networks, personal growth, and the potential to create a positive impact within the broader community (Reay et al. 2015; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). For many FiF students, university facilitated an evolution of how they understood and performed their Muslim identities.

Studies examining FiF students' experiences within HE has highlighted the difficulties they encounter when adapting to unfamiliar academic and social norms and expectations (Thering, 2012; Luzeckyj et al., 2017; O'Shea et al., 2018). Ivemark and Ambrose (2021) investigated how FIF university students in Sweden and the UK adjusted to their new environments and found that they faced significant challenges during the transition to HE. FiF students comprise the majority of the UK HE population (Coombs, 2022) but are not a homogeneous group. Their ethnic backgrounds vary widely, and students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be FIF graduates than white students (Coombs, 2022). This suggests that there are multiple intersecting factors that shape educational choices and outcomes, such as cultural capital, social networks, aspirations, and expectations. The role of institutional habitus in shaping FIF students' university experiences as well as their post-university aspirations and transitions is significant,

especially considering that these students often choose subjects that lead to higher earnings and well-defined career paths (Henderson et al. 2020; UK Government 2021). However, they also face higher dropout risks and more difficulties in the labour market than those with graduate parents.

6.4 Comparative Analysis of HE Institutions University A vs. University B

Universities often reflect on their habitus in student selection, favouring those who align with their standards and expectations, based on academic achievement, cultural capital, and social class (Reay et al. 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Reay et al. 2005). This practice results in a system of social reproduction, where elite institutions predominantly attract students from privileged backgrounds, while those from lower socioeconomic groups or underrepresented minorities may gravitate towards less prestigious institutions. The challenges students face in accessing HE vary significantly based on the interplay between their habitus and the institutional habitus they encounter (Boliver, 2011; Marginson, 2016). Students experience different challenges and difficulties in accessing HE depends on their habitus and the institutional habitus they face, as these dispositions are passed down through generations of academics, administrators, and staff, shaping their perspectives, behaviours, and decision-making processes (Çelik, 2021; Byrd, 2019). Thus, a university's institutional habitus is not only influenced by the wider social context of HE but is also intrinsically linked to power dynamics and cultural practices (Thomas, 2012). The HEI institutional habitus has the potential to shape students' involvement in academic and social events as well as their sense of belonging within campus. This section discusses the complexities faced by Muslim students at Universities A and B, revealing the nuanced interplay among institutional habitus, cultural and social capital, and individual habitus. This comparison not only highlights the diversity of experiences among Muslim students but also sheds light on the broader implications for higher education institutions seeking to foster more inclusive environments.

In both universities, students experience a lack of space for alcohol-free social events; however, at university A, because of the high number of engaged Muslim students, the participants tend to create their own spaces on campus. Also, in university B the students experience overt discrimination.

Table 8-University A vs University B- Habitus

Feature	University A	University B
Status and Affiliation	Part of the prestigious Russell Group, recognised for research excellence and attracting students from affluent or middle-class backgrounds.	Smaller institution with limited resources, facing challenges in engaging Muslim students fully in campus life, particularly in religious and social activities.
Student Body Diversity	Comprises 35,445 students with over 150 nationalities. Nearly a quarter from BAME backgrounds, including a significant Muslim student population.	Predominantly consists of under-represented groups, with 80% from ethnic minority backgrounds, including a growing Muslim population. Students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and may work part-time jobs.
Emphasis on Social vs. Academic Experience	Emphasises the importance of social experiences, with Muslim students having opportunities to explore and express their identity. Majority of students do not work during term time, allowing for greater campus engagement.	Places greater emphasis on academic satisfaction, viewing the university to gain qualifications and improve job prospects. Almost all students work at least one part-time job, affecting their ability to engage in campus life.

Impact of Socio-economic Status	Socio-economic status of students allows for a focus on university life without the need for part-time employment, enhancing access to resources and social networks.	Socio-economic challenges necessitate part-time employment for almost all students, limiting access to campus resources and opportunities for social engagement. Complexity of life as working students impacts university social experiences.
Challenges Specific to Muslim Students	Experiences subtle forms of exclusion and microaggressions despite diversity initiatives. However, a high number of engaged Muslim students tend to create their own alcohol-free spaces on campus.	Faces challenges in fully engaging due to limited resources for religious and social activities. Experiences of overt discrimination are more pronounced here, affecting the overall student experience.
Staff Representation and Inclusivity	Struggles with representation at senior levels, potentially affecting Muslim students' sense of belonging.	Not explicitly mentioned, suggesting a need for improved inclusivity and representation.
Outreach and Participation Programmes	Implements access programmes supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, aiming to enhance diversity.	Lacks extensive programmes for social support or out access programmes.
Support for Religious Practices	Offers a multicultural environment with student-led groups catering to cultural and faith needs. Alcohol-	Offers limited space for religious activities, highlighting a gap in support for Muslim students' religious practices. The overt discrimination

	free social spaces are created by students, reflecting adaptability and initiative.	experienced further exacerbates the need for supportive environments.
Facilities for Religious Activities	Presence of faith-based student societies suggests support, but details on facilities are limited. Despite this, students create their own spaces.	Demonstrates a clear lack of support for Muslim-specific religious needs, affecting students' ability to engage in religious practices. Lack of alcohol-free social spaces further limits engagement opportunities.
Academic vs. Social Prioritisation	Balances academic excellence with initiatives aimed at social inclusion and diversity.	Prioritises academic success with less emphasis on social development and community engagement. Experiences of overt discrimination may detract from academic focus.
Perceived Institutional Ethos	Seen as prestigious yet facing challenges in fully embracing inclusivity beyond surface-level diversity initiatives. Alcohol-free initiatives by students indicate a proactive student body.	Valued for its personalised approach to education, with a significant need to enhance support for broader social and religious needs of students. The overt discrimination experienced by students calls for a more proactive stance on inclusivity.
Impact on Muslim Students' Sense of Belonging	Fosters a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds, including Muslims. The student-	The absence of active Islamic societies or foundational support, coupled with overt

	led creation of alcohol-free spaces shows resilience and community building.	discrimination, negatively impacts Muslim students' sense of belonging and community connectedness.
Initiatives for Enhancing Student Experience	Access programmes and financial support schemes aid in reducing barriers to higher education for disadvantaged students. Alcohol-free social initiatives highlight student agency.	The campus has limited cultural capital, leading students to seek social interactions and cultural experiences off-campus.
Social Capital and Community Engagement	Initiatives help construct social spaces and support networks for Muslim students. So, the students leverage cultural and social capital as tools of navigation and resistance, utilising Islamic classes and community groups to assert their identity.	Emphasises academic support, with less provision for building social capital among Muslim students. However, like University A, students at University B use their cultural and social capital to counteract exclusion, emphasising the importance of community and identity reinforcement by looking beyond the university
Adaptation of Institutional Habitus	Slow transformation towards inclusivity as the student body becomes more diverse	Prioritises academic capital, with potential neglect of holistic student needs

This table (Table 8) highlights the distinct experiences and challenges faced by Muslim students at Universities A and B, underscoring the importance of institutional policies, practices, and the availability of resources in shaping their higher education journey. Although University A's prestigious status and diversity initiatives offer certain advantages, challenges remain in realising an inclusive environment for Muslim students. University B's small size and resource limitations pose various challenges, particularly in supporting the religious and social needs of its Muslim student population.

6.4.1 University A: Prestige, Diversity, and the Reality of Inclusion

University A's status within the Russell Group is highlighted by its diverse student bodies and its strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. With a total student population of 35,445, including 26,320 British and 9,125 non-UK students representing over 150 nationalities, it underscores its global outreach and multicultural environment. The university boasts that nearly a quarter of its students come from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, ranking fourth in the number of undergraduate BAME students among Russell Group universities. Specifically, Muslim students constitute 9.43% of the student population, reflecting the university's inclusive approach to accommodating diverse ethnic and faith-based student societies. This diversity is further supported by the presence of various student-led groups that cater to a wide range of cultural and faith needs, thereby fostering a sense of belonging among students from different backgrounds.

Despite University A's commitment to diversity, the lived experiences of Muslim students revealed a complex reality that sometimes contrasted with the institution's public image. This discrepancy amplifies the challenges minority students face in navigating their identities within prestigious universities, where diversity initiatives may not fully address the nuanced needs of all student groups (Ahmed, 2022). Participants at University A recalled encountering subtle forms of exclusion and microaggressions that impacted their sense of belonging and identity development. Magida (University A) noted that:

> *'Even though everyone talks about being tolerant, as a visibly Muslim woman I sometimes feel like I am facing subtle discrimination or that people make assumptions about me.'*

Magida's experiences of stares and refusals of eye contact made her feel "othered" on campus.

Isra encountered microaggressions such as surprise at her English abilities, calling into question her sense of belonging.

> *'Microaggressions, like surprise that I can speak English very well, make me question if I really belong here'* (Isra, University A)

This highlights the gap between performative inclusion and subtler norms, which still privilege dominant identities. The inculcation of the dominant habitus is difficult to overcome through surface declarations alone (Burke 2012). Reform requires examining embedded power structures and interrogating ingrained assumptions that perpetuate exclusionary dynamics (Puwar 2004; Ahmed 2012; Gause 2010).

The absence of challenges to the dominant hegemony within higher education, as highlighted by Watson et al. (2009), is evident in the university's senior staff composition, which is predominantly white and not reflective of the student body's diversity. This impacts the perceptions and experiences of its students, with 77% of the interviewees expressing feelings of unwelcomeness and disillusionment. This stark disparity between the university's professed values of tolerance and inclusivity and the actual makeup of its leadership underscores the deeper issue of representation and equity within the institution (Puwar, 2004; Ahmed, 2012; Stevenson, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). The concern is not merely about the immediate sense of belonging but extends to the broader implications for students' futures, influencing their aspirations and the perceived viability of career paths within academia or professional settings (Turner, 2002; Bhopal, 2015).

Esma's observation regarding the predominance of white individuals in positions of authority, encapsulates the apprehensions shared by many students from ethnic minority

backgrounds. This scenario prompts critical questions related to the existence of a 'glass ceiling' that might limit advancement opportunities for ethnic minorities and Muslims. She stated:

> *'Seeing mostly white faces in senior roles within the university makes me wonder if there will be opportunities for advancement for someone like me long-term' (*Esma University, A).

Esma's comment resonates with broader findings in the field. Turner (2002) discusses the importance of role models in leadership positions for minority students, arguing that their presence can significantly impact perceptions of potential career paths. The lack of diverse representation in senior roles can lead to feelings of exclusion and diminished aspirations among ethnic minority students, who may perceive limited opportunities for advancement (Bhopal, 2015; Arday & Mirza, 2018). This perspective is supported Ahmed (2012) who critiqued the performative nature of diversity policies that fail to bring real change within institutions. Ahmed argues that genuine inclusivity requires a substantive shift in organisational culture and practices, moving beyond tokenistic gestures towards meaningful representation and equity. The absence of diverse leadership not only affects students' sense of belonging but also perpetuates institutional structures that maintain inequality (Bhopal, 2018; Pilkington, 2018).

The impact of such underrepresentation can extend beyond campus culture, influencing students' long-term career aspirations and their belief in the possibility of achieving success in environments traditionally dominated by homogeneous groups (Çelik, 2021). This can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle, where the lack of diversity in leadership roles discourages ethnic minority students from pursuing similar paths, further entrenching the glass ceiling effect (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

To address these issues, higher education institutions must move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and engage in a critical examination of their organisational structures, practices, and culture (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019; McDuff & Tatam, 2020). This involves actively challenging the dominant hegemony, promoting inclusive leadership, and creating opportunities for underrepresented groups to advance and thrive within the institution

(Arday, 2018; Advance HE, 2020). Moreover, institutions should prioritise the recruitment, retention, and advancement of diverse talent, ensuring that leadership roles reflect the diversity of the student body and the wider society (ECU, 2019). By providing visible role models and challenging the glass ceiling effect, universities can foster a more inclusive environment that empowers ethnic minority students to pursue their aspirations and contribute to the transformation of higher education (Turner, 2017; Arday, 2018).

6.4.2   University B: Resource Constraints and Their Impact on Student Engagement

University B, though smaller and with more limited resources than University A, serves a substantial proportion of students from underrepresented groups, including a growing Muslim student population. However, despite the large number of Muslim students at this institution, few social events cater to their needs. The university's chapel provides support for all faiths and spaces for religious activities, but only a small room separated by a curtain is given to Muslim students for daily prayers; at the time of data collection, University B did not have Muslim chaplain. While many students are satisfied with the academic support they receive, they feel that the university should do more to support their social development in relation to their religious needs.

At University B, the lack of adequate prayer spaces and the absence of a Muslim chaplain are indicative of the broader challenges Muslim students face in finding support that caters to their religious and cultural needs.

Zamzam, (University B) shared her experience:

> 'Finding a quiet and respectful space for prayer on campus can be challenging. The small room provided is often overcrowded and lacks the tranquillity I seek for my daily prayers. It's disheartening to see our needs overlooked in the campus infrastructure.'

This sentiment echoes the broader issue of inadequate religious facilities, highlighting the need for universities to prioritise spaces that cater to the diverse religious practices of their student bodies, ensuring that all students have access to appropriate facilities that respect their religious commitments (Sapp & Zhang, 2013; Shalabi, 2014). While the university may strive to support its diverse student population, resource constraints highlight a critical

area in which the institution's habitus impacts the experiences of Muslim students, potentially limiting their sense of belonging and engagement with the university community (Stevenson, 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Scott-Baumann, et al. 2020; Mabvurir & Yasin, 2023).

Despite these challenges, some students, particularly those at University B, expressed positive sentiments about arriving at the university. For instance, Ahmed (University B) said:

> 'The university was so small that I felt like I was still at college. I looked around, and I saw many people look like me. I was overwhelmed, apprehensive and excited.

Additionally, University B's emphasis on small class size enables academic staff to provide personalised attention to each student. This approach is reflected in positive feedback from students, with many citing the small university size as a key factor in their satisfaction with the university experience.

> 'At University B, I'm treated as a person, not a number' and '[University B] is very welcoming, and everyone is really friendly here...' (Zai, University B).

Students like Zai find the environment welcoming and inclusive, reflecting a different aspect of institutional habitus that prioritises individual attention and a sense of community. It contrasts University A's struggle to translate diversity policies into lived experiences. This underlines the importance of recognising individual students as integral members of the university community. Despite resource limitations, this positive institutional ethos suggests that University B's habitus, which is dominated by academic capital, still offers a supportive environment for student growth and engagement.

6.4.3   Beyond University spaces: Social Integration and Community Building

Despite the positive experiences some Muslim students reported at University B, there are still significant challenges that many face, particularly when it comes to finding communal spaces and resources that cater to their specific needs. This further exacerbates their sense of isolation, as Zamzam described navigating faith alongside limited religious facilities and part-time work pressures, stating:

> *'If I don't have lectures I will not come to campus, I socialise outside University, when I have time, as I have multiple part-time jobs and a family to look after.'*

Ahmed, another student at University B, commented on the social aspects*:*

> *'Most of our social activities happen off-campus because there just aren't enough resources or events that cater to our interests and cultural backgrounds. It sometimes feels like we are missing out on the full university experience, but we have to create our own community here. We started a study group that turned into a support network for Muslim students.*

Ahmed's reflections pinpoint the gap in social programming at University B, suggesting that enhancing support for culturally inclusive events could significantly improve the sense of belonging and community among Muslim students and other minority groups on campus (Islam et al. 2018; NUS 2018). However, it also demonstrates the agency of Muslim students in utilising their cultural and social capital to navigate and challenge the constraints imposed by institutional habitus, fostering a sense of community in a less accommodating environment.

The experiences of students at University B emphasise the significance of social capital in fostering a sense of belonging, even in environments with fewer resources. The decision to socialise outside the university, driven by external responsibilities, highlights how students navigate and sometimes transcend institutional barriers to find their community and support networks.

6.4.4   Navigating Institutional Habitus and Capital

The analysis of Universities A and B revealed the complex interplay between institutional habitus, cultural and social capital, and the individual habitus of Muslim students. University A's prestigious status and diverse student bodies co-exist with challenges related to inclusivity and representation, reflecting the tension between its aspirational diversity goals and the realities of its institutional practices (Burke, 2015; Watson et al., 2009). Access programs and related initiatives represent positive steps towards bridging this gap,

enhancing the cultural and social capital available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Additionally, University A's advantageous location near the city centre, coupled with superior resources and ample social spaces, significantly enhances Muslim students' university experience. This proximity to the city centre offers students more opportunities to socialise and engage with the broader community, enriching their educational journey beyond the academic realm. For instance, Iaisha stated:

> *'I come to campus almost every day even when I don't have lectures, sometimes we have social events that I attend and I also work with the University recruitment team and there are a lot of spaces on campus for me to socialise and make friends, as I feel that socialising is an important part of my University life'* (Iaisha, University A).

This highlights the importance of social experiences in fostering a sense of community and belonging among students. Such engagement opportunities contribute to the development of social networks, facilitating the expression of the Muslim identity in a supportive environment. The emphasis on social experiences at University A underlines the institution's effective utilisation of its cultural capital and habitus to enrich students' lives, enhance their integration into university life, and reinforce their identities (Bourdieu, 1986; Thomas, 2012; Reay et al., 2010; Stevenson, 2018).

Conversely, University B, situated in the suburbs with limited resources and access to public transportation, presents a different set of challenges for the Muslim students. The lack of socialising spaces and specific resources for Muslim students necessitates concerted efforts to engage with the university community.

> Zamzam (University B) stated: *'If I don't have lectures I will not come to campus, I socialise outside University, when I have time, as I have multiple part-time jobs and a family to look after.'*

Zamzam's experience of balancing academic commitments with part-time work and family responsibilities exemplifies the challenges faced by many students at University B, limiting their ability to participate fully in campus life. This aligns with research that highlights the

barriers to engagement faced by non-traditional students, such as those with family responsibilities or financial constraints (Reay et al., 2010; O'Shea, 2018).

Despite these constraints, the emphasis on academic satisfaction and personalised attention at University B showcases the institution's focus on fostering academic success, albeit at the expense of a vibrant social atmosphere.

The contrast between students' experiences at Universities A and B emphasizes the varied strategies employed by students to find their sense of community and belonging, whether through on-campus engagement or in a broader community beyond the university. This underscores the importance of recognising the diverse needs and experiences of Muslim students and providing a range of support mechanisms to facilitate their success and well-being (Modood & Calhoun, 2015; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Stevenson, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021)

6.4.5   Socio-Economic Implications and Support Strategies

The majority of students at University A did not work during term time, while almost all students at University B had at least one part-time job outside the campus. This has implications for students' experiences at these two universities, as their socio-economic status influences their access to resources, opportunities, and social networks on campus.

At University A, the lower incidence of part-time employment among students during the term suggests a relatively higher socioeconomic status compared to their counterparts at University B. Research shows that employment responsibilities can negatively impact integration and performance for students (Broton et al., 2020). This economic advantage affords students more time and energy to participate in extracurricular activities, social events, and networking opportunities, enriching their university life, and potentially enhancing their cultural and social capital (Thomas, 2002). The ability to fully immerse in university experience without the pressure of juggling employment responsibilities can significantly benefit students' academic achievement and personal development (Burke, 2002). Shahin (University A) stated:

> *'not financially dependent on part-time jobs or asking parents for money and … able to spend more time at the university socialising'.*

Shahin's experience underscores the advantages of having the financial means to prioritize academic and personal growth during university years. The absence of part-time work allows students like Shahin to fully engage with the university environment, participating in extracurricular activities and social events that contribute to the development of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This aligns with research that highlights the importance of student engagement and involvement in fostering a sense of belonging and academic success (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021).

Moreover, the ability to focus solely on academic pursuits without the added responsibility of part-time employment can positively impact students' mental health and well-being (Carney et al., 2005). This is particularly relevant for Muslim students, who may face additional challenges related to their religious and cultural identities (Stevenson, 2018). The absence of financial stress allows these students to dedicate more time and energy to navigating the university environment and building support networks.

Additionally, the students spoke about how working with the university outreach team prior to the actual university helped them prepare for university life. The university's access program provides students from disadvantaged backgrounds with cultural capital by familiarising them with the university environment and academic expectations, thus giving them an advantage over other students. The programme also provides social capital by creating pre-existing friendship groups, which help these students feel more comfortable and less like outsiders when they start at the university (Gale & Parker, 2014; Bourdieu, 1986). May (University A) stated:

> *'Coming to University in year 13 and meeting other students from other colleges and sixth forms helped me later when I started university here because I had already made friends through this scheme. There were many students in a position similar to me, so I did not feel like outsider. Also, when I first started in September, I had already familiarised myself with University A's lecture theatres and some of my lecturers* (University A).

Kat (University A) also echoed this sentiment, stating:

'Through the academic writing piece that I had to submit in the summer I felt that I was more prepared than some of the students when I started in September and I needed to submit a piece of work I was already familiar with the University referencing system and some of the style of writing so I felt a bit more comfortable and this scheme made me feel more welcome and accepted' (Kat, University A).

These reflections emphasise the importance of social capital gained through community engagement, helping to reinforce Muslim identity within the university's institutional habitus. The outreach scheme implemented by University A played a role in enhancing the sense of belonging and integration of its participants because it enabled them to spend more time on campus and form pre-existing friendship groups. The students were able to construct a stronger sense of belonging, which helped them create their own social spaces on campus. This scheme indirectly contributes to the adaptation of the university's habitus by promoting inclusivity and accommodating students who may not conform to traditional norms or fit within the university habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005).

In contrast, students at University B, who are more likely to work part-time during the term, may face greater challenges in balancing academic commitments with employment responsibilities. This can lead to reduced engagement with the university community and potentially impact their academic performance (Callender, 2008). The need to work part-time may also limit students' ability to participate in extracurricular activities and social events, hindering the development of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986).

Abo (university B):

'I really have no time to do much beside just attending lectures some days because I am also working alongside studying'.

The demand to balance employment with academic responsibilities can limit students' availability for campus-based activities, potentially isolating them from the full spectrum of university life (Sundas 2015). Socioeconomic factors, such as the need to balance

employment responsibilities, can exacerbate feelings of marginalisation among the student population already negotiating complex identity issues (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

6.5 Clashes and Confluences of Habitus within University Fields

Research has shown that students sharing the same habitus as their institution tend to be more comfortable and confident in navigating academic culture and expectations and find it easier to form social networks and forge relationships with peers and staff (Thomas, 2012; Crozier et al., 2008). However, students with a different or incompatible habitus experience alienation or marginalisation, struggling to fit in or to adapt to institutional norms and values (Reay et al., 2009; Burke et al., 2016; Nairz-Wirth, et al., 2017).

Despite University A's commitment to diversity and inclusion, the reality of Muslim students is marred by subtle exclusions and microaggressions, highlighting a significant clash between students' habitus and the university's institutional habitus. This clash is indicative of a broader issue in the field of higher education, in which the dominant institutional culture does not fully accommodate or understand the complexities of Muslim students' identities. Similarly, University B faces its own set of challenges, primarily related to resource constraints that limit its ability to support religious and social needs. This situation exacerbates the clash of habitus among Muslim students, who find themselves at odds with an institutional culture that prioritises academic support over social and religious inclusivity. Integrating into the habitus of the university can be a significant challenge for Muslim students, especially FiF students who lack the cultural and social capital necessary to navigate the university environment. The habitus of the university often conflicts with that of individual students, generating a gap between their expectations, values, and practices and those entrenched in dominant academic culture. This difference leads to cultural shock and confusion among students, ultimately resulting in feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. As Reay et al. (2010) note, universities have distinct institutional cultures and practices that shape the experience of the student body.

6.5.1 Fitting Within the University Field

Moreover, the experiences of Muslim students in terms of belonging and exclusion at their universities are shaped by the interplay of their habitus and social capital with the

institutional influences and cultural norms of their academic field. For example, Neelam (University B) expressed the feeling that her Muslim identity was seen as 'wrong' within the university setting, echoing the broader themes of identity affirmation and resistance against stereotyping discussed in Chapter 5. By understanding the narratives of Muslim students and their habitus and social capital, we can better understand the complexities they face while attempting to navigate their university experiences.

For example, Minna felt pressure to conform to the cultural norms of his university, which included speaking with a certain accent that is considered 'posh' or prestigious. He stated:

> '*My accent was terrible, I really stood out, so I had to ensure that I spoke with a posh accent, especially around my classmates*' (Minna, University A).

Minna's experience with code-switching to fit the cultural norms of his university, including adopting a 'posh' accent, illustrates a strategic adjustment of his habitus in response to the perceived social class identities associated with his HEI. This act of code-switching, paralleling the themes of strategic identity management discussed in section 5.5.1 of Chapter 5, provides students with a means to navigate the tensions between their social class backgrounds and institutional culture (Burke,2013; Elkins and Hanke, 2018). However, Minna's experiences suggest a mismatch between the dominant habitus within the university field and his personal habitus, leading to internal conflict and questioning of his identity and sense of belonging. He stated that he 'had to adapt to different expectations and norms in different settings*:*

> '*I felt like an outsider' (Minna, University A).*

Similarly, Esma's feeling of not fully belonging to University A, due to clashes between her habitus and the university's institutional habitus, further connects to the question of how individual and institutional habitus interact to shape student experiences. She stated:

> '*For some reason, I feel like I don't belong here, I don't know, it's just everybody seems to be in their own little group, and I hang out with other Muslims, but I don't feel like I belong to this University A fully*' Esma (University A).

Therefore, Esma feels like an outsider who cannot fit into dominant groups or find their own place in the field. She also faces symbolic violence from the university system that does not recognise or value her cultural capital or identity.

Another participant, Mo, (University B), stated that he felt like a 'fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2010):

> *'For a long-time I have felt that I don't belong here, I don't mean academically, I know my stuff, my grades are very high as compared to my classmates, but I still feel like a fish out of water'.*

These narratives collectively highlight the critical interaction between individual and institutional habitus in shaping Muslim students' higher education experiences. They confront not only the internal conflict of aligning their habitus with that of their universities but also face systemic challenges, including symbolic violence that disregards their cultural capital and identities (Bourdieu and Passeron,1977). Symbolic violence occurs when the dominant culture of an institution devalues or marginalises the cultural capital and identities of certain groups, leading to feelings of exclusion and alienation.

Understanding these complexities is essential for fostering more inclusive university environments that recognise and value the diverse backgrounds and experiences students bring to their academic journeys. Universities must create institutional cultures that are welcoming and supportive of all students, regardless of their individual habitus or cultural background. This requires critically examining the dominant habitus within the university and committing to challenging and transforming practices that exclude or marginalise certain groups.

6.5.2 Building Social Capital within University Spaces

Despite these challenges, some Muslim students can build social capital through their involvement in clubs, societies, and other university activities that resonate with their

interests and values. Zai's positive experiences in drama societies and reading groups illustrate how engagement in university life can facilitate the building of social networks and foster a sense of belonging. Zai stated:

> *'I have made friends with many people from a range of places and cultures here. I attended different clubs, such as drama society and some reading groups, and it is quite fun. We get along well because we have common goals and passions'* (Zai, University B).

This indicates that Zai was able to build social capital through involvement in various activities and clubs at her university that matched her habitus. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of extracurricular activities in promoting student engagement, a sense of belonging, and social capital development (De Sisto et al., 2022; Buckley & Lee, 2021). By participating in activities that resonated with her interests and values, Zai was able to connect with like-minded individuals and form meaningful social networks. However, this is not a universal experience, as other students, such as Isa, encounter discrimination and social exclusion, which limit their opportunities to form meaningful connections.

Isa (University A) expressed the following:

> *'I feel like some people avoid me or treat me differently because I am Muslim. They assume things about me without knowing me'.*

This suggests that Isa's social capital was limited by the stereotypes and stigmas attached to his identity. He also felt isolated and marginalized in his university environment. This experience aligns with research highlighting the challenges faced by Muslim students in higher education, including discrimination, stereotyping, and social exclusion (Modood & Calhoun, 2015; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Stevenson, 2018; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

Isa's experience also points to the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim students' ability to build social capital and form meaningful connections within the university environment. As noted by Khattab and Modood (2018), Muslim students often face barriers to social

inclusion and belonging due to the prevalence of negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in Western societies.

Adjusting to the academic culture and expectations of the university is another challenge that Muslim students face when they enter higher education, as their expectations of the university and their perceptions of reality are influenced by these experiences (Reay et al., 2009; Laksov et al., 2008; Burke, 2015). This adjustment process can be particularly challenging for students whose habitus does not align with the dominant cultural norms and expectations of the university (Reay et al., 2010). As highlighted by Reay et al. (2009), working-class students often experience a sense of "not fitting in" or "standing out" when they enter elite universities, due to the mismatch between their habitus and the institutional habitus of the university. This can lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, and self-doubt, which can impact students' academic performance and overall well-being.

Similarly, Muslim students face additional challenges in adjusting to the academic culture and expectations of the university, particularly if their religious and cultural practices are not accommodated or supported by the institution (Stevenson, 2018). This can lead to a sense of "culture shock" and can exacerbate feelings of isolation and exclusion.

To support Muslim students in building social capital and adjusting to the academic culture of the university, institutions must work to create inclusive and welcoming environments that value diversity and promote cross-cultural understanding (Stevenson, 2018; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

6.6 Interplay of cultural, habitus, and social capital and their impact on the university experiences of Muslim students.

The interview data highlight that Muslim students face both challenges and opportunities in acquiring and displaying cultural capital valued by the academic field. These include language proficiency, understanding norms and expectations, and participating in cultural activities that may conflict with their religious beliefs or practices (Advance HE, 2020; Panjwani & Moulin-Stożek, 2017). However, these students also draw on their ethnic and faith capital—comprising identity, solidarity, belonging, and access to supportive communities and mentors—to navigate university spaces effectively (as highlighted in chapter 5). This research underscores how participants craft a flexible and adaptable

habitus, enabling them to balance various fields and cultures, including family, community, religion, and university life, without compromising their values or identity (Scandone, 2018).

As highlighted in section 6.4 University A, a prestigious Russell Group institution, offers certain advantages through its diversity initiatives and sizable student population representing over 150 nationalities (Puwar, 2004; Ahmed, 2012). However, issues of subtle exclusion and underrepresentation in leadership persist, highlighting the gap between aspirational policies and the realities of exclusion (Watson et al., 2009). In contrast, University B's constrained resources pose challenges by limiting engagement opportunities on campus, yet close-knit communities are fostered through personalized support (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Stevenson, 2018).

At both universities, cultural capital plays an important role in shaping experiences through complex interactions in each field. Faith-based societies, such as ISOC at University A, serve as anchors providing familiarity and connections amid adjustment to university life (Yosso, 2005; Bourdieu, 1986). However, the lack of resources targeting Muslim students at University B and the lack of role models at both universities reflect the participants' diverse backgrounds in their positions of authority (Bhopal, 2015; Çelik, 2021), leading some students to feel alienated.

The experience is particularly complex for first-in-family (FiF) students, who must navigate the unfamiliar terrain of university education while managing familial responsibilities (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Coombs, 2022). Their journeys illustrate both obstacles, such as a lack of guidance within family support systems unfamiliar with higher education processes, and triumphs in overcoming these disadvantages through perseverance (Henderson et al., 2021). Targeted assistance is vital to ensuring that FiF students from all backgrounds can access opportunities and integrate fully as valued community members.

At both universities, the participants' negotiation of their faith and other intersecting identities involved dynamic interactions with each institution's norms, as expressed through policies and symbols (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). However, the experiences of Muslim students in higher education are not uniform but vary and are dynamic, influenced

by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity, level of religiosity, and the nature of the institution attended, as well as their relationships within the campus and personal agency (Stevenson, 2018; Islam et al., 2018; Guest et al., 2020; Chaudry, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how cultural capital, habitus, and social capital interact and influence Muslim students' opportunities and experiences, as well as how these students actively use these resources to navigate and transform their educational paths (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

The interplay of capital, habitus, and field shapes Muslim students' experiences on campus, including their academic endeavours, religious practices, and social engagements. Through their practices, Muslim students contribute to the diversity of the university environment, and in turn, the institution's policies and practices can influence these practices by either enabling or constraining them (See

Figure 6)
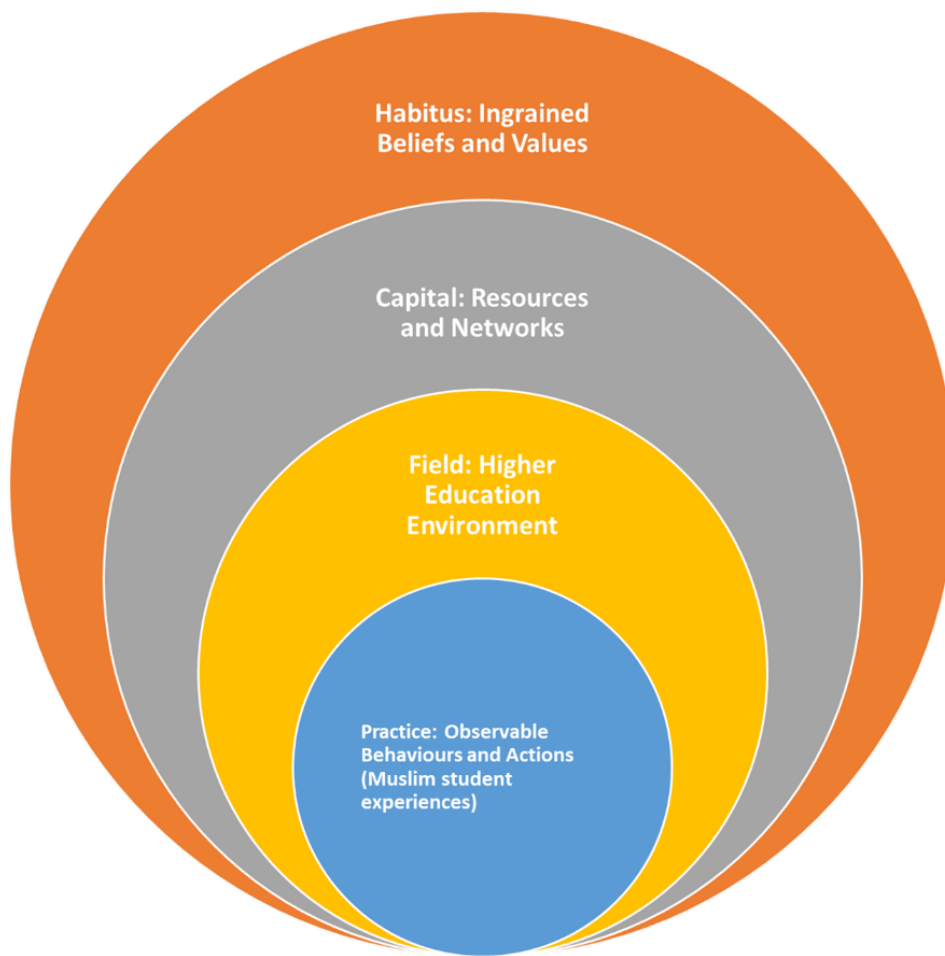
Figure 6-Muslim student experiences.

This analysis recognises the complex experiences of Muslim students as they navigate their identities, beliefs, and values within the higher education landscape. This underscores the imperative for institutions of higher education to cultivate truly inclusive communities. True belonging requires a commitment to meeting students' needs, which encompasses not only the provision of faith-based facilities and ensuring diverse representation, but also the establishment of a social infrastructure that promotes meaningful cross-cultural connections (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Shalabi, 2014; McGrath et al.2021; Taff & Clifton, 2022). By addressing these multifaceted needs, higher education can move beyond superficial inclusivity to foster environments in which all students, including those from Muslim backgrounds, can flourish.

6.7   Conclusion

This chapter examined the experiences of Muslim students in UK universities guided by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, cultural capital, social capital, and field. Applying these lenses, we explore the diverse journeys of Muslim students, highlighting the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate higher education. Examination of students' narratives revealed key themes related to identity development, belonging, integration, and resilience amidst the opportunities and barriers within the university landscape. The findings underline perceptions as personal and influenced by factors such as faith, family background, gender, and socioeconomic status. Although there were commonalities, each experience remained unique. Universities must holistically recognise students and address the nuanced diversity within Muslim communities and individual experiences.

Bourdieu's framework provides a significant insight: habitus, shaped by early religious socialisation, directly influences students' actions and expectations upon entering university. This habitus dynamically interacts with institutional habitus, affecting perceptions of belonging and alignment with campus norms. FIF students illustrated the complexity of navigating unfamiliar cultural terrains. It is, therefore, important that universities acknowledge diverse habitus and capital, exploring how to effectively recognise and integrate non-traditional forms of competence.

This research highlights both the challenges and agency among the participants. Students face subtle biases, representation gaps, and socioeconomic pressures as obstacles. Nevertheless, despite these constraints, they innovatively leverage personal resources, create communities, and find fulfilment. Their resilience exemplifies how capital conversion maximises opportunities within a university's distinctive fields. Valuing Muslim students as partners in creating inclusive environments enhances belonging for everyone.

The comparison between Universities A and B highlights that, while prestige offers advantages, the difficulty in translating policy into practice signals the ongoing work required. Despite prioritising personalised learning, University B encounters engagement barriers due to resource scarcity. Acknowledging socioeconomic realities as pivotal to participation reveals the multifaceted nature of inclusion. Progress, therefore, depends not on surface gestures but on substantive cultural shifts through equitable representation and comprehensive student needs.

In summary, this chapter illustrates how religiously diverse students navigate higher education in the UK, informed by Bourdieu's theoretical tools and an intersectional lens. It prioritises Muslim students' voices, amplifying their varied, complex journeys that merit respect. Universities must embrace these experiences as enriching assets, recognising that religious diversity enhances, rather than challenges, inclusion. By addressing the nuanced negotiations of faith and cultural backgrounds, higher education institutions can foster environments in which all members feel fully empowered and celebrated as partners in their educational journey.

The following chapter (Chapter 7) builds upon these insights by exploring how the spaces available on campus for religious and cultural practices, or lack thereof, impact Muslim students' ability to navigate and express their intersecting identities. Exploring the negotiation of secular and sacred spaces will provide further understanding of the complex and dynamic ways in which Muslim students interpret the meaning of their journeys within the universities they attend.

7 Chapter 7: The Spatiality of Muslim Students' Experience: Secular vs. Sacred Space on the British University Campus and its Impact on Muslim Identity

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how Muslim students experience and shape spaces at university, considering spatiality as a socially shaped, disputed, and lived environment that reflects power, identity, and culture (Harvey, 1996; Massey, 2005). Building on the concepts of habitus, social capital, and cultural capital from the previous chapter, it investigates how Muslim students negotiate secular and sacred spaces, balancing their religious, academic, and social needs and commitments.

Using interview data, this chapter examines how students view, use, and create spaces on campus that either support or hinder their faith and identity. It also explores how they cope with Islamophobia, discrimination, and exclusion in some spaces, and how they resist or challenge these issues through their spatial agency.

Key concepts such as liminality, identity, and belonging are discussed in relation to their spatial experiences, shedding light on how Muslim students redefine and occupy everyday spaces to express and maintain their religious identities, and the impact of these spaces on their identity development.

7.2 Liminality, Identity, and sense of belonging

The concept of "liminality" is rooted in the Latin word "limen," meaning "threshold." It refers to transitional phases in cultural and religious rites of passage, as outlined by Van Gennep (1960:190). He identified three primary stages of rites of passage: "pre-liminal" (where the individual's transition begins), "liminal" (the state experienced by the person in transition), and "post-liminal" (incorporation). Each phase is associated with specific rituals and is temporary.

During interviews, the participants conveyed the destabilising nature of transitioning through university, highlighting feelings of being "caught between two worlds." Minna's (University A) experience exemplifies the initial challenges and subsequent adaptation, illustrating a journey from confusion to confidence as he becomes accustomed to the

academic environment. He described feeling caught between his home and university worlds, reflecting the liminal state of being between two distinct identities and spaces.

> *'When I first arrived at university, I felt like I was caught between two different worlds, my home world, and the university world, I felt uncertain and confused. The first weeks were quite challenging, my academic discipline felt daunting at first, but I am thinking I grasped them, it feels like I am seeing the light, I gained my confidence a little'* (Minna, University A).

Minna's initial sense of disorientation and challenge encapsulates the pre-liminal stage of Van Gennep's rites of passage framework (Van Gennep, 1960), highlighting the destabilising impact of entering a new educational context. This transition resonates with Meyer & Land's (2003) theory of "threshold concepts", which posits that certain concept within a discipline act as gateways to deeper understanding and integration into a field of study. They may initially seem challenging to grasp, parallel to Minna's experience in finding his academic discipline daunting. Minna's progression from feeling "caught between two different worlds" to gaining confidence mirrors the journey through these 'conceptual gateways' (Davies & Mangan, 2007) or 'portals' (Entwistle, 2008), emphasising the transformative potential of mastering threshold concepts. This transformation is supported by research suggesting that successfully navigating threshold concepts can lead to significant cognitive and identity development within academic disciplines (Monk et al. 2012; Meyer & Land 2003).

Similarly, Ihsan (University A) navigated his liminal state by strategically crafting spaces on campus to facilitate a sense of belonging. He stated:

> *'I felt like I don't belong here when I first arrived at university, everything was so new and different, and I didn't know where I fit in. However, over time, I started to create my own small space on campus where I could feel comfortable and be myself. I found that the physical environment of the campus was important in helping me feel like I belonged. When I was in spaces, like prayer rooms or just anywhere to pray or spaces where I could socialise with people who shared my values and passion, it helped me feel like I was a part of the community* (Ihsan University A).

Ihsan's strategic creation of personal spaces on campus to foster a sense of belonging illustrates the importance of the physical and social environment in the liminal experience of university transition. This approach aligns with the concept of "third spaces" in education as informal spaces that facilitate the blending of personal and academic identities, offering students a sense of belonging and community (Bhabha, 1994). For Muslim students, such as Ihsan, these spaces are particularly crucial for performing religious identity and finding communities within a secular academic context (Modood & Calhoun, 2015; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Stevenson, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). Active creation and engagement with these spaces demonstrate students' agency in navigating the liminal phase, contributing to their integration and well-being within the university setting (Islam and Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

Minna's and Ihsan's statements highlight the active negotiation of identity and belonging that characterises the student experience in higher education. Therefore, the concept of liminality offers a lens through which to understand these transitions, emphasising the transformative potential of this in-between phase (Turner, 2017), particularly for those from marginalised backgrounds (Combs et al., 2021; Dortch & Patel, 2017).for example as mention in chapter 6, FIF students face intensified complexities as they navigate unfamiliar university cultures that intersect with their evolving selves (O'Shea, 2014; Coombs, 2021). During this period, students acquire new knowledge and skills, and engage in the process of self-discovery and identity formation (Magolda, 2001).

Higher Education Institutions play a crucial role in supporting students through their academic journey by recognising the significance of threshold concepts and providing inclusive spaces that respect students' intersecting identities, including faith (Tomalin, 2007). This support is particularly important during the challenging transitional period of emerging adulthood. Therefore, HEIs can enhance students' sense of belonging and academic engagement by fostering cultural competence (Sandell et al., 2021) and religious literacy (Dinham & Shaw, 2017).

7.3 The role of third spaces in fostering a sense of belonging for Muslim students in university settings

Interview data reveal that "third spaces" are crucial for understanding the dynamics of identity negotiation within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These spaces, characterised by their neither exclusively religious nor secular nature, serve as critical sites for social and cultural exchange, facilitating a unique blend of personal and academic identity development (Mohammed, 2023). They offer a nuanced and essential component of Muslim students' integration and identity formation within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Panjwani, 2019; Whitchurch, 2012). Experiences at Universities A and B highlight the significant impact of third spaces on the lives of Muslim students, helping them navigate the complexities of identity, faith, and belonging in multicultural settings.

The third space, developed through the lens of cultural hybridity by Bhabha (1994) and further theorised by Soja (1996), refers to environments that transcend the traditional binaries of home and work, public, and private. These spaces allow for the emergence of alternative social, cultural, and intellectual engagements (Soja 1996). Muslim students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) often play a crucial role in the negotiation and expression of their religious and cultural identities in predominantly secular or culturally different environments. For them, the negotiation of identity in third spaces encompasses a dynamic interplay between individual agency and societal structures, reflecting broader questions on belonging, acceptance, and representation. In this context, third spaces in HEIs can include Islamic societies, prayer rooms, multicultural centres, and informal gathering spots on campus. These spaces provide Muslim students with opportunities to engage with their faith, connect with peers facing similar experiences, and articulate a sense of self that is both authentic to their beliefs and responsive to the diverse social milieu of higher education (Ghumman and Ryan 2013; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). However, it is crucial to address critiques such as those by Thomassen (2014), who argue that the concept of third spaces might oversimplify complex social dynamics and overlook potential conflicts. This calls for a more nuanced and reflexive approach to third spaces, one that appreciates the diversity within and recognises their potential to connect and divide (Zhou and Pilcher 2019).

The establishment of a third space at University A demonstrates the institution's commitment to providing on-campus resources that will enable Muslim students to find and create communal spaces. The availability of prayer rooms near social hubs and informal gathering spots, where students can discuss and participate in activities that reflect their religious and cultural identities, exemplifies the positive impact of third spaces (Andersson et al., 2012; Stevenson, 2018). These environments not only support students' spiritual needs but also contribute to a broader sense of belonging and community in university settings. Esma from University A shared her thoughts as follows:

> *Sometimes, I want to embody my faith without necessarily being confined to the prayer room. You know what I mean. I feel that certain spaces do not belong to anyone in particular; they are communal spaces like the student lounge, the green space outside, and the cafes. There's nothing inherently un-Islamic or Islamic about these spaces, they have been quite influential for my time here at uni. In these places, I've had the opportunity to connect with different people, engage in meaningful conversations, and openly discuss my faith without feeling alienated or judged. I genuinely believe that these interactions have enriched my university experience and allowed me to explore various aspects of my identity and faith without rigid labels. These social environments have become a place where I feel connected not only to other Muslim students but also to the broader campus community.'* (Esma, University A)

Esma's desire to freely embody her faith outside of designated prayer rooms provides insight into the complex negotiation of personal faith and public identity among Muslim students. Her perspective resonates with Mirza's (2009) examination of the intricate identities formed by Muslim women in non-Muslim societies, dynamically balancing faith practices and expressions in public spaces. Additionally, Esma's narrative supports the notion that Muslim students actively incorporate their faith into daily life, challenging the static divide between private religiosity and public secularism (Kong, 2010; Knott, 2008; Alkouatli, 2023; Panjwani, 2017; Ahmed, 2016; Possamai, 2016; Shah, 2017).

Additionally, Esma's ability to connect with both Muslim and broader campus communities through third spaces indicates their potential to bridge cultural and religious differences. Amin (2002) discusses "micro-publics" that cultivate intercultural understanding via

inclusive shared interactions, leading to more united communities. Spaces such as student lounges, green areas, and cafés, which lack inherent religious classification, play meaningful roles in shaping Muslim students' experiences of belonging and evolving identities. By facilitating informal socialising, learning, and cultural exchange, third spaces promote mutual understanding and respect (Zhou and Pilcher, 2019; Pennington, 2018).

On the other hand, University B offers a contrasting yet complementary perspective on third spaces, with students such as Zai finding value in libraries and atriums. He stated:

> *'I find places like library and the atrium to be incredibly valuable for me and my friends. Our university is quite small, and these spaces provide a welcoming atmosphere where I can study and socialise with my friends, they allow for a sense of community and belonging, making me feel more comfortable and at ease.'* (Zai, University B)

Zai's reflections underscore the importance of third spaces in nurturing a sense of community and belonging among Muslim students, especially in smaller universities where dedicated faith resources may be limited. He emphasises the multifunctional value of informal spaces, such as libraries and atriums, which are not only conducive to studying but also socialising. According to Malik and Wykes (2018), these everyday third spaces are crucial for negotiating diverse identities and forming cohesive communities. Regular interaction with peers in these adaptable settings positively affects Zai's well-being, engagement, and possibly his academic performance by counteracting the isolation marginalised students often encounter.

Research has consistently demonstrated the positive impact of a sense of belonging on students' academic performance and psychological well-being (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019; Pedler et al., 2021). This sense of belonging is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social, and environmental factors (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). At the individual level, personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, resilience, and coping strategies influence students' ability to develop a sense of belonging (Sukor et al., 2019). Social factors, including supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, also play a crucial role in fostering a sense of connection and acceptance (Barnes et al., 2021; Slaten et al., 2014; Spiridon et al., 2020).

The presence of inclusive and supportive campus environments is a key determinant of students' sense of belonging (Spiridon et al., 2020). When students perceive their university as welcoming and accommodating of diverse identities and experiences, they are more likely to feel valued and accepted (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This inclusive atmosphere extends to the physical spaces on campus, such as classrooms, libraries, and social areas, which can either promote or hinder a sense of belonging (Barnes et al., 2021). Moreover, interactions with diverse peers contribute significantly to students' sense of belonging (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Engaging with individuals from similar backgrounds can provide a sense of comfort, while interactions with peers from different backgrounds can broaden perspectives and foster a more inclusive campus space (Spiridon et al., 2020).

It is important to note that not all third spaces were experienced by participants as equally inclusive (Hopkins 2011). Some described feeling unwelcome in alcohol-centred spaces because of the pressure to drink. These norms alienated observant Muslims who wished to socialise freely according to their beliefs. Ahmed (University B) stated:

> *'I don't really feel like I belong in those places because it conflicts with my religious beliefs. It is difficult for me because I want to socialise and make friends like my mates, but I do not feel comfortable in these environments. I wish there were more events that were inclusive of all students, including those with religious beliefs that conflict with drinking and partying'* (Ahmed, University B).

Ahmed's experience reflects broader societal and institutional structures that can either facilitate or hinder Muslim students' ability to negotiate their identities and engage fully in campus life as mentioned in the previous chapters. These findings align with previous research on Muslim students' experiences in UK campuses, which has highlighted the need for genuine inclusion and support to address these issues (Malik & Wykes, 2018). Third spaces on campus, owing to their nature, can create a social divide that excludes Muslim students and contributes to their disengagement from the university community (Andersson et al. 2012; Stevenson 2018; NUS 2018; Shaffait 2019).

7.3.1   Third Spaces Outside the University: Expanding Community and Identity

At University B, where campus resources for faith-based activities are more constrained, third spaces outside the university assume a critical role in fostering a sense of community and belonging among the Muslim students. Cafés, libraries, and grassroots off-campus groups are vital for facilitating connections and communal engagement, thus extending the scope of student interactions beyond campus borders.

Ahmed (University B) stated:

> 'My university is really small, so there aren't many or any events targeting Muslim students. However, there are a few groups across the Midlands organised by Muslim students. We go hiking, we also volunteer for projects like the 'date project', where we distribute dates before Ramadan. We meet in different places, like other universities and restaurants and café.'

This highlights the significance of institutional resources and student body diversity in shaping university experiences. The reliance on off-campus networks at University B illustrates the challenges faced by smaller or resource-constrained institutions in supporting the religious and social needs of their Muslim student populations.

The reliance on off-campus networks at University B highlights the unique challenges that those institutions encounter in meeting the religious and social needs of their Muslim student populations. Ahmed's narrative illuminates' students' proactive efforts to establish social spaces outside campus boundaries, thereby creating opportunities for identity negotiation and enhancing their overall student experience within a broader societal framework. This activity underlines the critical role of third spaces as sanctuaries where underrepresented minorities can foster a sense of community and belonging. These informal, off-campus sites allow individuals to fully engage with their identities, encounter role models and peers for collaboration, acquire the skills and perspectives necessary to navigate oppressive environments, and, more broadly, find spaces to 'breathe' (O'Meara, et al. 2019).

By providing a safe and welcoming environment, such unofficial intermediary spaces are instrumental in making individuals feel more connected and empowered, thus supporting their personal and academic development (O'Meara, et al. 2019; Daddow 2019). Engagement with third spaces outside the university not only enriches the Muslim student experience by offering avenues for identity exploration and community involvement but also highlights the adaptability and initiative of students in seeking inclusive environments. Through these efforts, students like Ahmed demonstrate the significant impact of external third spaces in enriching their university life, fostering a sense of well-being, and belonging that transcends the physical confines of the campus.

The relevance of third spaces in higher education institutions (HEIs) goes beyond religious observance, creating environments where students can engage critically with issues of identity, faith, and belonging (Patel, 2020; Anttila et al., 2019; Sataøen, 2018; Pennington, 2018). The emergence of such spaces reflects the changing dynamics within HEIs, acknowledging the need to appreciate and value the diversity of student populations. Additionally, the role of third spaces in facilitating identity negotiation reveals the complex ways in which institutional settings affect student experiences and identity formation (Ahmed 2012; Hopkins 2011).

Therefore, examining the influence of third spaces on Muslim students in HEIs reveals that these environments are more than just physical locations; they are endowed with significant social and cultural importance. They play a crucial role in shaping the experiences and identities of Muslim students in multicultural academic settings. Exploring third spaces thus deepens our understanding of the complexities of identity negotiation in HEIs, emphasising the importance of the inclusivity, diversity, and recognition of individual and collective identities within the educational landscape (Scott-Baumann, 2020; Mohammed, 2023; Alkouatli, 2023).

7.4   Redefining sacred spaces: Muslim students' use of university spaces

The redefinition of everyday spaces and the creation of sacred spaces are complex and multifaceted processes involving the embodied performance of religious practices, spatial management of difference and belonging, and negotiation and redefinition of everyday

spaces (Knott, 2005; Stump 2008; Kong, 2010). For Muslim students in university settings, this process can be especially challenging, as they must navigate and negotiate their religious identity in a secular environment where traditional sacred spaces are not always available or convenient (Albhlal and Alotaibi, 2020; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). The participants in this study reported actively redefining and repurposing university spaces to create sacred spaces where they could perform religious practices and express their faith.

These spaces are not necessarily defined by their purpose, and their identities are fluid and ambiguous, considering the characteristics of the occupants and activities that occur within them. Unlike faith- or study-designated spaces, everyday spaces have the potential to become significant through simple activities. Mariam (University A) remarked on using green spaces on campus for prayer, noting the following:

> 'It's *a serene and tranquil spot, giving me a sense of connection with nature and also me to preform my prayers' (*Mariam, University A).

This adaptive process requires a high level of creativity and resourcefulness, as they must overcome various barriers and constraints (Hopkins, 2011). Another participant mentioned using a secluded nook within the library to pray in between classes, asserting that: '*it's not a designated prayer room per se, but it's placid and secluded, and I feel at ease there'* (Sarah, University B).

Others described using a vacant classroom or shared space in a non-faith-based society to hold prayer sessions or discuss religious topics with peers.

May (University A) stated:

> '*Sometimes between lectures, I pray outside or in empty classrooms.'*

Sam (University A) mentioned: '*When overwhelmed, I pray alone outside under trees. Nature is very meditative*.'

This reflects the Muslim emphasis on appreciating God through natural beauty (Quran 3:191) and underlines how Muslims sanctify diverse spaces through embodied acts of worship.

Thus, the process of redefining everyday university spaces as sacred spaces by Muslim students involves the embodied practice of religious rituals, managing the dynamics of difference and belonging, and transforming common areas into places of faith. This process exemplifies the participants' resilience in maintaining spiritual practices in secular environments. By transforming common areas into places of worship and reflection, such as utilising green outdoor spaces for prayer or finding solitude in library nooks, students not only navigate but also actively shape their religious identity. These acts of reclaiming and redefining spaces underscore the dynamic interactions between personal faith and the public sphere. This highlights the importance of flexibility and creativity in religious observance, as students find innovative ways to integrate their spiritual needs within the constraints of their university life. Through these practices, mundane locations gain a new layer of meaning, becoming sacred through repeated acts of worship, thereby challenging the conventional boundaries between the sacred and the secular. This transformation speaks to the broader capacity of religious practices to adapt to and flourish within diverse settings, reinforcing the notion that sacredness is about community and personal devotion, as much as it is about specific physical locations. As Knott and Vasquez (2014:327) note, a religious presence physically manifested in a location can enhance sacredness. Sacralisation often occurs through ritualisation and occupation - as repetition of religious practices in a space, even if it is not traditionally consecrated, elevating its religious meaning over time and creating a sense of sacredness (Bains, 2021; Montemaggi, 2015). Such actions demonstrate the fluidity of sacredness in secular environments, challenging the strict separation between the sacred and secular realms. Through these practices, Muslim students not only claim spaces for religious expression, but also redefine the concept of sacred spaces within the university context (Knott, 2005; McClure, 2017; Stump, 2008).

Recent research has shown that while some spaces created by Muslim students on university campuses may have initially been intended for religious practices, they are not

limited to such activities. In fact, the embodiment of faith identity goes beyond physical representation and can manifest in a variety of ways, ranging from simple acts of kindness and compassion to more explicit religious practices such as prayer. Therefore, these spaces are not only used for explicit religious practices, but also serve as platforms for Muslim students to express and negotiate their faith identities in a more complex manner (Mubarak, 2007; Aune, 2017).

Table 9-The table below highlights some of the spaces mentioned.

Space	Importance	Description
The classroom	A place where identities can be challenged, strengthened, or questioned. As the students are forced to interact with other students and come out of the private bubbles Muslim students.	Being present, participating/ making a point.
Students Union/ Guild of Students	A place where the students can develop a sense of community and belonging.	'Every Friday; you'll see the Guild of Students area transform into a space in which your Muslimness is celebrated; that's because of the Friday prayer, everyone goes and prays together in the chapel, we eat together and pray together, and it's nice, it feels holy'
The prayer room	A place to share a common identity and unity and help with personal development and growth. The prayer room is vital to maintaining religious practice and belonging on campus.	Safe space, use, finding peace and comfort. Occupation/occupying, socialising. A place for socialisation and worship
The Library	A vital space for studying also, creates friendship groups and develop social capital among the students	Use, use, and benefit from, a meeting point.

7.4.1   The classroom

For many participants, the university environment was not just a place to interact with society and physical spaces but also to formulate a new form of student experience, for example, in the classroom and other social spaces on campus where students are forced to interact with other students and come out of their private bubbles. 80% of the participants talked about how their Muslim identities became more prominent in the classroom because of the topic of discussion. Isa (University A) stated:

> *'I am a Muslim always obviously, but I am a political Muslim in my lectures, particularly when issues around Palestine or the treatment of Muslims come up, I find myself having to speak up and represent, I feel quite passionate about these issues, I do all my reading and I come prepared to have the intellectual fight because I am a Muslim and I have a duty to speak for justice, it's my greater jihad, you know.'*

This statement is interesting; the embodiment of faith identity for this student manifests itself differently in different spaces. If we look at the language used, the classroom becomes a battleground that creates a form of academic engagement, but also shows various forms of faith identity representation.

Another participant talked at length about how working in groups allowed her to emulate the principle of kindness and practise her Muslim identity; this embodiment of their faith allows these students to bring their faith identity directly into the public space or the secular space, despite the challenges they faced. Most of them saw their visible and explicit embodiment of their 'Muslimness' as an opportunity for conversation to forge bridges between their faith and what is considered secular.

> *'In one of my modules, we were talking about molecular biology; I brought up my idea of creation as a Muslim in this space of science and scepticism, but me talking about my belief also opened the platform for other people who believe in the story of creation to talk about it too, for example, Christian students. This made me happy because, for the first time, I was not speaking as a Muslim only; I was talking to*

someone who believed in God. So, everybody who believed in God seems to have connected with me' (May, University A).

For May, this classroom experience resulted in a sense of appreciation and approval from the rest of the student community. For Sam (3rd University A), being Muslim in a classroom presented challenges; he cited an instance during a class discussion about plants and evolution when two Muslim students stated that they did not believe in the theory of evolution in its basic sense. He explained to the lecturer that as Muslims they believed that everything was created, to which the lecturer replied, '*This is a science discussion, not a religious discussion, we only believe in empirical facts, not myth'.* Then Sam continued, '*I felt really awkward'* (Sam, University A).

Both participants seem to distinguish between science and religion; thus, there is an underlying perception that these notions will inevitably clash, particularly when discussing the origins of the universe and of life, which reflects previous research, such as Konnemann et al. (2016). This does not mean that Muslims or others with faith identities are opposed to the theory of evolution. However, for these participants, the distinction between science and religion led to the manifestation of various feelings concerning their faith and identity. For Sam, being a student or Muslim was not problematic; however, he stated:

> '*it is challenging to be perceived as both in this classroom'.*

Although his peers may not necessarily be uncomfortable with his faith identification, the distinction between science and religion makes it inappropriate for him to express his beliefs in a science classroom. As a result, when he interacted in classroom discussions using his faith as the foundation for a scientific argument, it was not received favourably; that is, his religious views were not accepted in this setting. He stated:

> '*In a secular classroom there is no place for religion, but I can't really separate my faith from my academic studies and my conceptualisation of matters, so, I learnt not to engage too much in faith and science, because it can be uncomfortable for me and others' (*University A).

Here we can see that, in this case, the classroom setting implied the student's manifestation of their faith identity; for Mustafa, the lecturer's response resulted in him feeling 'othered', as if his identity was incompatible with the classroom. The deployment of the opposition of 'them' and 'us' – in this instance, science (seen as empirical fact) and religious beliefs (seen as mythical) – has resulted in a sense of isolation and alienation within the classroom. Thus, the student felt the need to accommodate to avoid being 'uncomfortable' and began to reflect on concealing some part of his identity so that they could fit in (Islam and Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). The participants described various factors that limited their expression of their Muslim identity, recognising that they held a minority student status. The participants discussed how they set aside their Muslim identity upon entering the classroom. However, this doesn't imply that they are perceived as neutral. Esma stated:

> *My parents told me to leave my faith at the door when in class; they did not want me to face any discrimination because of my religion, but I am a visible Muslim, so that does not always work. Believe me, I have tried; people always know that I am a Muslim, but this does not mean that I cannot be objective. (*University A).

Esma's experience at the university highlights the interplay between her Muslim identity, learner identity and the university social spaces. Her parents' advice on hiding her faith reflects the emotional burden of navigating potential discrimination based on religious identity (Jasperse et al. 2011). This has predisposed her to anticipate a discriminatory university and has the potential to shape her engagement with her peers and surroundings on campus. Here, the classroom is seen as a place where both learner identity and faith cannot co-exist, leading to a sense of conflict and potential marginalisation. Esma's statement that, *'identification is not just in convictions but physical appearance'* plays an important role in the negotiation of experience and identity. As a Muslim woman Esma visualises her faith identity in secular spaces through the public display of religious symbols and clothing (Hopkins et al., 2016; Falah and Nagel, 2005). Her experience in the classroom is also shaped by the intersection of her Muslim identity and other social identities such as gender, and class (Phoenix, 2019)

However, Esma's experience is clearly different from her parents' experiences and Muslim identity, and being a good student in the classroom appears to co-exist without issues. Esma went on to explain that the presence of other Muslim students in her lectures encouraged her to be herself, and shared spaces allowed for the development and manifestation of a shared identity:

> *'There are a couple of Muslims in my lectures, they didn't seem to be worried about their Muslimness, they participated in discussions just like any other student, this gave me confidence to be myself and embrace my Muslimness' (*University A).

The presence of other Muslim students in the classroom creates a shared identity and sense of belonging, as well as a shared habitus. This shared habitus, which in turn shapes engagement with the field of HE, results in finding a 'safe space' and a sense of belonging and community (Reay et al., 2010; Stevenson, 2018). This can positively impact students' motivation, engagement, academic achievement, confidence, and well-being (Hornstra et al., 2014).

Additionally, group identity made Esma feel safe enough to overcome her fear of being judged as a Muslim. This sense of shared identity is further reinforced through the visual representation of Muslim students, as it serves as a visual manifestation of their faith and can elevate their Muslim identity (Phoenix, 2019). For example, another participant stated:

> *'I feel my Muslim identity is important to me when I see other Muslims around, when I hear Asalamu Aliksum, or Insha Allah, these little things make me really aware of my Muslimness' (Neelam, University B).*

Being able to identify with others has the potential to create a stronger sense of belonging (Brewer, 1991). Feeling a sense of affinity and belonging is not limited to people from the same faith; rather, as shown above, this sense of affinity is present in the classroom. Moreover, the literature suggests that group identity can affect confidence and well-being (Kyprianides et al. 2019; Spiridon et al., 2020). Shared physical reality can be seen as a form of symbolic capital that elevates Muslim identity and challenges dominant narratives of Muslims (Greenaway et al. 2015).

7.4.2   The library

The library, a cornerstone of academic life, has a dual significance for Muslim students. Beyond its primary function as a repository of knowledge and study areas, parts of the library organically transform into prayer spaces. Given the constraints of academic schedules, despite their availability, a multi-faith prayer room is not always accessible. This reality leads over a third of students to seek space for prayer in unconventional spaces such as library nooks, empty classrooms, or even under staircases. This phenomenon of space repurposing reveals fluidity in the creation of sacred spaces, driven by convenience and necessity.

As Khadijah (University A) noted:

> *'The library is massive, and most of the time, especially when the weather is bad, I don't really want to walk to the prayer room when I first started my friend told me of the different areas we can pray in, such as under the staircase, on the 3rd floor as it is always empty, behind the big sofa in the library café, etc., these are some of the spaces we use, it's quite convenient especially when prayer time is late and I am in*

Neelam (University B) also stated:

> *'There is quite corner in the library, way at the back, it's my spiritual refuge some days, other times just a study spot.'*

Mariam (University A) echoed that anywhere quite sufficed as her "prayer mat becomes [her] masjid." She stated:

> *'I know there is a prayer room, but I am always in the Lab, so I just find anywhere quiet to pray'* mostly in the library because it's the closes building to my lab. Mariam explained that *'as Muslims, we believe that the whole world belongs to God, and wherever I put my prayer mat it becomes my masjid'.*

These experiences exemplify how spaces can take on changeable sacred or secular meanings based on embodied practice (Gilliat-Ray, 2005; Baker 2017). This adaptability is not merely a matter of physical convenience but resonates deeply with the Islamic belief

that any place can become a space for worship, provided it is clean and quiet (Desplat, 2012; Khoury, 2015). This practice underscores the broader theological perspective that the entire world belongs to God, thereby sanctifying makeshift prayer areas as temporary masjids (Ashadi et al., 2018; Kahera, 2002). As Kilde (2008) argues, the sacredness of a space is not inherent but is instead constructed through the actions and meanings attributed by those who use it.

The evolving role of libraries, particularly as they accommodate the spiritual practices of Muslim students, offers a lens through which to examine the interplay between educational spaces and users' diverse needs (Mross & Riehman-Murphy, 2018; Riehman-Murphy & Mross, 2019). This phenomenon, wherein parts of academic libraries are repurposed as prayer spaces, transcends a mere functional adaptation, symbolising a deeper integration of secular and sacred practice, which not only challenges traditional dichotomies between secular and sacred spaces but also enriches the academic landscape with a multiplicity of experiences and viewpoints (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013; Stump, 2008). As Crompton (2013) notes, the presence of prayer spaces in educational institutions can foster a sense of belonging and inclusion for Muslim students, contributing to their overall well-being and academic success.

The incorporation of prayer spaces within libraries aligns with the growing recognition of the importance of holistic student development, which encompasses not only intellectual growth but also spiritual and emotional well-being (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Schmalzbauer, 2013). By accommodating diverse spiritual practices, libraries demonstrate their commitment to creating inclusive and supportive learning environments that cater to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Elmborg, 2011; Awan, & Soroya, 2021). Moreover, the act of reimagining libraries as sacred spaces underscores the fluidity between public and private, secular, and sacred illustrating a broader and more inclusive interpretation of public spaces. This approach aligns with the sociology of religion's exploration of how religious practices adapt to and transform public spaces, suggesting a blurring of traditional boundaries between the sacred and the secular (Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Casanova, 2011). It reflects the negotiation and expression of religious identities in

secular settings, offering a unique perspective on the dynamics of public religion in contemporary society.

From an educational theory standpoint, the multifunctional use of libraries reflects the principles of inclusive education and the importance of designing learning environments that accommodate diverse needs, including spiritual practice. The literature emphasises the significance of adaptable and flexible spaces in educational institutions to support a diverse range of learning styles and cultural backgrounds (Adedokun et al, 2017; Kariippanon, et al. 2019). Adaptability is crucial for fostering an inclusive learning environment that respects and values students' multifaceted identities. Furthermore, the integration of spiritual practices within academic libraries has led to a broader debate about diversity and inclusivity in higher education. Research has highlighted the importance of a welcoming and accommodating campus climate for minority students, underscoring the need for educational environments that embrace racial and cultural diversity, as well as religious inclusivity (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021, Sheehan, et al, 2021).

Beyond prayer, the library has also emerged as a key site for creating friendship groups and developing social capital among students. This was particularly true for students from University B, as the library was the centre of the university, and the first floor was designated as a social study space. Thus, participants talked about the library being the first place they went to between lectures, and some talked about meeting their friends in this space. They were able to practise their students' identities without pressure from the lecture room. Basmah stated:

> '*I am now a 3rd year and I think I spend most of my time studying in the library; I go to lectures, and then I come to the library to study. I met all of my friends here and studied them together.*'

This reflects Oldenburg's (1989) view of third spaces as venues for sociality, beyond home/work. The findings also highlight that access to study spaces, such as the library, particularly for students at University B, depends on transportation to campus. For most of these participants, commuting to campus was the norm, making it challenging to travel to

campus for purposes other than attending lectures. However, some of them talked about having to hang around between lectures, as they did not want to travel back and forth, so they used the library as a respite space.

In addition, the use of libraries is not limited to universities. Students from University B explained that due to their institution being far from the city centre, they utilised the perk of being a student and access other HEI libraries using schemes such as the "SCONUL"[14]. Ambia stated:

> *'I live quite far from the university, but I don't have space at home to study, so I managed to get a SCONUL access to another university library closer to me, I go there a lot more than I go to my university. How I see it is that I am a student, and this is a space for students, so I do not need to be on my campus all the time, unless I have lectures, I have met many other students here and we have actually been out and socialised outside the university. (*Ambia, University B).

This gives students the opportunity to connect with other students in the city and create a wider social network that transcends institutional boundaries, which shows that student identity is not tied to a specific location, but to a phase of their lives. They belong to the city and student culture and not just one campus. Birmingham has many universities and HEIs; therefore, it is not surprising that a large number of students make their way to the city centre in search of a community and social life beyond campus borders. The Muslim student community is expanding, and finding new places to study and socialise, such as local libraries, coffee shops, or other universities, is becoming much easier. The data analysis shows that Muslim students' connection to the city is characterised by the permanence of typification with regard to a categorical understanding of what it means to be a student.

The multifaceted use of libraries by Muslim students highlights the evolving role of academic libraries in accommodating intellectual and spiritual needs. This adaptation not only challenges traditional notions of secular and sacred spaces but also contributes to a

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[14] SCONUL Access is a scheme run by the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) that allows many university library users to borrow or use books, journals, and study spaces at other libraries that belong to the scheme (SCONUL, 2022)

more inclusive and diverse academic environment. This emphasises the importance of reimagining educational spaces to support the holistic development of students, encompassing both their academic aspirations and spiritual practices.

7.4.3 Cafés and canteens

Many students commented on the importance of socialising and eating spaces on campus, and as most of the participants were non-drinkers, it was not surprising that the majority mentioned the importance of cafés across campus, as they offered an opportunity to meet other students and share experiences.

> *'Now we have three little cafes across campus, they are really helpful because they are just right outside the lecture rooms so when we finish our lectures we can hang out there and meet different students and talk about our lives, share experiences or even discuss the lecturer we just had; I find cafes to be more my type of thing rather than bars, I don't feel like, I'm being myself when I hang out there'* (Zamzam University B).

The literature has shown that shared spaces, such as cafés and other shared eating places, play a vital role in university students' sense of belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023; Dost et al., 2023; Ahn and Davis, 2019). These spaces provide an avenue for social interaction, informal learning, and community-building among students from various backgrounds, disciplines, and cultures. The serendipitous meetings and connections that occur in these spaces offer participants an opportunity to formulate a student experience that is unique to them without feeling conflicted.

The conflict stems from the students' religious identity. Zamzam highlighted feeling out of place in environments like bars but found the café, which didn't serve alcohol, to be conducive to personal growth, socialising, and bonding with peers. Thus, the presence of a faith identity is not limited to the prayer room but is embodied by the individual and is carried with them wherever they go. This has an implication for students' learning experiences and their learning spaces, since environmental context shapes those

experiences, which are dependent on the interweaving of sociocultural and physical phenomena.

7.4.4   The prayer rooms.

The data analysis revealed a significant influence of religion on the daily lives of these students, notably reflected in their choice of campus spaces and their proximity to the prayer room. For this group of students, the location allows not only religious identity to be performed but also for comradeship and group identity to be constructed and maintained, as well as a sense of solidarity in belonging to campus. The prayer room played an important role in some participants' sense of belonging and well-being on campus. For example, Mariam (University A) stated:

'When I'm struggling, and I can't cope, I find support in the prayer room'.

For University A students, the multi-faith space and students' unions are located within the same space, which significantly enhances Muslim students' sense of community. This proximity allows for the seamless integration of religious observances such as Friday prayers and iftar gatherings into broader campus life, enriching students' university experiences. Conversely, University B's smaller prayer room, disconnected from social centres, limits students' ability to effectively blend worship with socialisation, underscoring the impact of spatial planning on community cohesion. Zai (University, B) stated that he was glad that there was one in the first place; he said: *'I am happy that there is a prayer room here, I know it's small, but it serves its purpose, we didn't have one in my college.'*

In line with Islam and Mercer-Mapstone's (2021) findings, some of the participants in this study exhibited a sense of "satisfied settling" whereby Muslim students unconsciously "justify not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs" (Islam *et al.*, 2018:94). This is shown by the students from University B, who appear to have a "lack of entitlement" to the campus spaces and settle for little provision, whether for socialising or religious practices. Even though many of the interviewees from this institution are satisfied with the teaching and academic support offered to them, they acknowledge that the university needs to do more to support their

social development in relation to their religious needs. This is because this wider support enables the students to access and maximise the "academic" support. The sentiment that their voices are unheard, as shared by Iaisha (University B), further illustrates the disconnect between student needs and institutional actions:

'They don't listen to us, they ask us for signatures, but they do nothing with them'.

Iaisha's statement is a call to action for the university to engage in a more meaningful dialogue with Muslim students and take their needs seriously. It emphasises the necessity for universities to not only listen but also act on the feedback provided by students to create a more inclusive and supportive campus environment. The differences in spatial organisation between universities emphasise the importance of considering religious practices in campus planning. The positive feedback from University A's approach suggests that strategically located religious spaces can bolster the students' sense of belonging and community. This insight aligns with the research objective to explore how campus environments influence Muslim students' identity expression and underlines the necessity for institutions to provide adequately resourced and well-situated spaces for religious practices (Stevenson, 2018; Malik and Wykes, 2018; Guest, et al, 2020; Uddin, et al. 2022).

7.4.5   The Students' Union

The Students' Union at British universities is a key contact zone designed for social, political and leisure activities (Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine, 2012:505). The participants spoke at length about the Students' Union building. This space has various meanings ascribed to it; at University B, the Students' Union was referred to as a 'white-dominated' space in which the interviewee felt like an outsider; they reported discomfort being in and around this space:

> *'The Students' Union seems to be designed for white students, I don't think they would understand me, even if we want to become an active member of the union we can't really because the majority of the election campaigns take place in the bar in the evening, so, you can imagine not many Muslims can join, firstly because of the place the campaign is taking place in and secondly, most of us live at home, so we go home, we can't be hanging around here that late' (Shahin, university B)*

Similar to findings from previous research (Andersson et al., 2012; Stevenson, 2018; Shaffait, 2019), student bars and alcohol-dominated spaces influence the university experience of Muslim students, and the presence of alcohol often acts as an institutional barrier preventing Muslim students from integrating into university spaces. In addition, in the statement above, we can see that the space seems to be racialised as well; the student refers to the space as 'white-dominated'. This is interesting because whiteness is associated with non-Muslim identity. Although the connections between racial and spatial processes are beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note that the organisation of spaces and the way certain spaces feel can be seen to express and reinforce certain "power structures'' (Neely and Samura, 2011); the experience and implication of racialised identities are profoundly shaped by the places where people live, their prior education and their social practices. Some of the participants came from majority Asian and Muslim-populated areas, in which 'race' and colour were not noteworthy to them; however, the change in social and physical spaces meant that the participants felt more visible and noticed their racialised identities. For example, Bushra (University A), stated:

> *'Although, I started to feel like my Muslim and racial identity was becoming more important as I grew up, but it didn't really matter when I entered university. Uni was where I encountered a diverse mix of people with different backgrounds, and that was when I felt my identity really mattered. Before that, I attended Grammar School, not far from my house, I was mostly surrounded by people of my own ethnicity because my area is heavily Asian populated, so, I did really think that I was different, but university exposed me to different types of people which made me more aware of my own identity and how it differs from others.'* (Bushra, University A),

In addition, some participants did not see a distinction between their religious identity and their ethnicity or racial identity; thus, non-ethnic minorities and non-Muslims could be viewed as synonymous. In this case, the Students' Union is seen as less inclusive to Muslims and as a 'white-dominated' space, because there were no Muslims or individuals from ethnic minority elected representatives. The lack of representation and the practice of

holding elections in students' alcohol-dominated spaces has resulted in Muslim students feeling overlooked, invisible, and undervalued as Muslims.

University A students, on the other hand, have a different experience with the students ' union space; as the prayer room and most of the ethnic and Islamic Society events are located within the Students' Union building and are managed by the students' union team. Thus, the space performs a different role and is perceived more favourably, as it offers a space for Muslim students to practise their faith. 18 of the 30 participants stated that prayer was an important part of their identity. They talked about the use of multi-faith spaces on campus, from the prayer room to the chapel and contemplation rooms. The prayer room plays a significant role in the Muslim student experience on campus; it is not just a place for religious practices but also a place for socialisation.

Raj (University A) mentioned that some parts of the Students' Union are seen as a '*safe space to be yourself, we plan a lot of events within the Students' Union, other societies do that too, so it is not just Muslims.*'

Although the majority of the social spaces around the Students' Union at University A are bars, pubs, and clubs, with alcohol being dominant, the presence of other neutral and faith spaces in the vicinity seems to allow Muslim students to define their experiences within this space in a more positive sense. One of the participants expressed how the visualisation of their faith identity could impact the place and their feeling of belonging to that space:

> '*Every Friday; you'll see the Guild of Students area transform into a space in which your Muslimness is celebrated; that's because of the Friday prayer, everyone goes and prays together in the chapel, we eat together and pray together, and it's nice, it feels holy*' (Sayimah, University A).

Another space close to the Students' Union building is a study space that Muslims use; one student described this place as the 'Muslim Republic'. It is close to the prayer room, and many students use it, particularly on Fridays. Another student stated:

'When walking past the (building name), you can hear Quran, see people wearing hijabs, and thubs you smell attar, you won't believe that this is a building within the university, it's quite cool' (Isa, University A).

This phenomenon exemplifies how spaces within higher education institutions (HEIs) can evolve to reflect the identities and practices of their diverse student populations. The students' appropriation of these spaces, making them centres for cultural and religious expression, challenges and expands the traditional functions of university buildings beyond academic and administrative purposes. It illustrates the concept of "placemaking", where individuals or groups transform spaces to reflect their own cultural or social identities, thereby creating places that feel personally significant and welcomed (Carmona 2010).

It is apparent that for participants at University A, the Students' Union area is a safe space for them to express their Muslim identity and to be themselves. Although the building mentioned is not designated for Muslim students, collective use could give the impression that it is a Muslim building, as visibility plays a critical role in the identity and identification of the individual and the place used (Hopkins and Greenwood, 2013).

The occupation of spaces on campus, particularly such as the buildings mentioned above, can tell us a great deal about students' perceptions of themselves and their entitlement to HEI spaces. As shown by Islam and Mercer-Mapstone (2021), students' prior experiences can impact their sense of entitlement to using certain spaces on campus. Participants in this research reported feeling more confident in accessing and occupying spaces, depending on who else was using them. For example, the aforementioned building was located near the prayer room and was mostly occupied by Muslim students, which led to a sense of ownership and belonging among these students. This public space became a private or semi-private place where participants felt that they could engage in their faith, study, and interact with others who shared their religious backgrounds and understood their experiences.

Minna (University A) explained:

'I can be myself in here, it feels quite homey, even though I am only studying, but it's just nice to be around people who can understand you.'

This statement offers an interesting perspective on the public-private divide of religion. The concept of "homey" in a university space blurs the lines between the private and public aspects of religion, challenges the traditional view that religious expression is confined to private spaces and bridges the public-private divide of religion (Berg, 2019). Such spaces allow for the development of a stronger sense of belonging and connection among Muslim students' communities on campus.

The collective use of these spaces by Muslim students and the sense of ownership and belonging illustrates the significant role universities play in supporting not only the intellectual but also the cultural and spiritual development of their students. This highlights the need for HEIs to consider and actively support the creation of inclusive spaces that accommodate the diverse cultural and religious practices of their student populations, thereby enhancing the university experience for all students and fostering a more inclusive, diverse, and supportive campus community.

7.4.6   Home vs university

The majority of students lived at home; therefore, it is not surprising that they would talk about home and the spaces associated with their homes. In addition, most of the students were FIF university students; therefore, when talking about home, they were talking about a different environment from the one they found on campus. Several participants mentioned that they noticed a difference between their home and university, with their identities and presentations changing between the two spaces. This manifests in the distinction between the identities and feelings of how they are perceived in these two spaces.

Magida (University A) offered an insightful example of this experience when she explained how neither of her identities could co-exist in the same space and how she had to embody a different identity at home from the one on campus. She stated*:*

'At home I feel like nobody understands my student identity and the reasons behind a lot of the student-related stuff I do, for example, staying up all night to write an essay and the stress that comes with it; my mom gave birth to my little brother in April, which was obviously during my exams and it was really hard to cope with everything. However, this remains challenging. I had no time to study, and I needed to ensure that I was home at a certain time to feed and look after them. So, I leave this identity on the door; even better, I leave it as soon as I leave campus, and then I go back to my normal self as a daughter, sister, and carer, which are the different personalities I have to take with me. I feel like they cannot co-exist in the same space, because at University A, people do not understand my other roles and at home, my family does not understand my student life. (Magida, University A).

The conflict between student identity and self-representation in these two spaces was apparent. Most students interviewed in this study were FIF students. Research has shown that, due to families' lack of experience with the HE system, participants experience a lack of support and understanding concerning the workload and obstacles faced on campus. This struggle becomes apparent only when participants switch between the two spaces. This is more concerning for the class habitus and parents' understanding of HE experiences. The emphasis here is not on religious identity but rather on habitus change. When the participants talked about their faith identity at home, the majority of the time they said that they found a support system within their families; for example, Soraya stated:

'Islam was an integral part of my upbringing and family life. I learned about the importance of prayer and other religious practices from my parents and the community around me (masjid). Over time, my understanding of my faith identity deepened, and it became an important aspect of who I am today' (Soraya, University A).

However, some participants also talked about having to distinguish culture from religion. Here Mariam stated:

'In South Asian culture, there is a big confusion between religion and culture; a lot of the things I learnt before coming to university were culture based but they were

taught in the name of religion. Coming to university, I was exposed to people from various backgrounds, and one thing that united us was that we were all Muslims. I discovered that many practices at home are culture-based and not religious-based. Although my family is very supportive, I find it really awkward talking with them about religion because much of what they say is based on culture, so it can be a struggle. (Mariam, University A).

In this research, 80 of the students interviewed spoke about how the university allowed them to explore their faith further and even question some aspects of it; they were brought up to believe that certain things were part of their religion but discovered that they were more cultural and had no religious basis. The university environment did not just expose Muslim students to other faiths but also to different practices within Islam itself. Zamzam stated*:*

> *'Coming to the University, I was exposed to so many different types of Muslims and then I realised that despite our differences we are all one. I also discovered that many things I learned at home were culturally inspired rather than from the Quran. So, yeah, this made me want to learn a bit about my religion and make my own decisions'* (Zamzam University B).

The university space plays a key role in facilitating students' exploration of their various intersecting identities. The exposure to a variety of religions and to the diversity within the Muslim community could explain why the majority of the Muslim students, when discussing their campus social life, emphasise their sociocultural Muslim identity over their theological Islamic identity within the perceived secular space, especially at University A.

For example, Sayimah stated:

> *'I found that being part of a different group and meeting people from different parts of the world and different communities on campus helped me to expand my understanding and learn from others, both within and outside of my religion. University is a valuable experience that enriches my understanding of the world around me'* (Sayimah, University A).

In summary, Muslim students on campus negotiate their religious identities through a range of everyday spaces, both neutral and faith-based, and engage in placemaking practices to create safe and inclusive spaces. The physical representation and sensory magnification of these spaces allows for a more nuanced understanding of embodiment and the role of the corporality of identity.

7.5 The role of everyday space and embodiment of religion in constructing Muslim students' experiences on Campus

Examining the relationship between physical spaces, the corporal world, and faith identity is crucial for understanding how identities are constructed through the interplay of physicalness and subjectivity. The embodiment of religious identities in HEIs can be contentious because of the belief that these institutions ought to be secular (Sharma & Guest, 2013). People, buildings, and spaces play an essential role in constructing religions in these spaces (Knott, 2005; Tahar, et al. 2023).

Due to the nature of faith identities and the practice of religious rituals, particularly for Muslims, it can be argued that university spaces become sacred and religious depending on who occupies the spaces and the nature of the activities that occur in them, as there is a diverse spatial manifestation of religious activities on campus (Andersson et al., 2012). These activities range from the periodical prayers under the library staircase and outside in open spaces, to the seasonal sacralisation in which university spaces are filled with religious rituals that take place both in the prayer room 'unofficial' spaces and outside in public spaces on campus, such as the community iftar and Friday prayers.

The notion of embodiment is fundamental here because the religious identities of Muslim students are manifested physically; most of the participants talked about how they felt that space can gain significance for them through repeated use; as Metcalf (1996) observes, "it is ritual and sanctioned practice that creates the "Muslim space". Thus, these spaces do not have to be officially considered sacred and do not require any juridical claimed territory or formally consecrated or architecturally specific space' (Metcalf, 1996:3). However, the daily practice in various spaces on campus by Muslims and other faith groups all have kinesthetic and aesthetic dimensions. For example, the first event in the university's green

space was a community iftar: the smell of food, the sounds of the call to prayer, and the scene of people praying filled the university with spirituality, religiosity, and Muslims. This was one of the many events that occurred during students' lifetime at the university. The sight of Muslims in unity, kneeling, touching their foreheads to the ground, and sitting silently in a space that was considered secular created a striking contrast and transformed the perception of the space, imbuing it with a sense of spirituality and sacredness (Ammerman, 2007, Knott 2008).

The little prayers that might escape the individual mouths when appreciating the beauty of nature around them, to religiously inspired greetings.

All of these acts as carriers of belief that can infuse secular spaces with a hint of sacredness because religion is embodied in its followers. The religious propositions that only focus on theological abstract ideas cannot exist without the array of sensate experiences that embed them as memory traces within the human brain, particularly for those who believe that the purpose of their existence is to "contemplate God's power through observing creation". This was depicted in Khadijah (University, A) comments about how she experienced her faith on campus:

'The university is green; wherever I look, I see beauty, from people to nature, especially in the spring; I can't help but say Subhan Allah wherever I look, I remember God a lot more on campus than when I am in the city centre' (Khadijah, University A).

The student's observation of the university's green spaces and the beauty of nature as prompts for spiritual reflection and remembrance of God underlines the concept that sacredness is not confined to specific locations or practices but is a lived experience that can be triggered by the natural environment (Kong, 2010; Knot 2008). This idea resonates with the Islamic tradition of contemplating God's creation as a form of worship, suggesting that the sacred can be encountered in everyday surroundings, particularly in spaces that facilitate connection with the natural world.

Similarly, Shahin stated that:

'Walking around the library on Friday afternoon, I can smell attar, everyone, guys walk in with their thubs, and the air is filled with 'attar', it feels good, these little things make me feel happy' (Shahin, University B).

These sensory experiences, associated with walking around the library on a Friday, smelling attar and seeing others in traditional dress, highlight how physical sensations and the presence of cultural and religious symbols can create a communal atmosphere of faith and belonging. These experiences serve as carriers of beliefs and transform ordinary spaces into venues for the expression and reinforcement of religious identity (Ammerman, 2020; Mcguire, 2016; Knott, 2008; Kenna, 2005). They are central to religious subjectivities and the construction of religious experience (Meyer, 2012)

These nuances call for a reflection on the notions of the secular and sacred, two concepts that are intertwined in many ways (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Gökarıksel, 2009; Gonçalves, 2017). The language used to describe the spaces reveals the complex relationship between the secular and the sacred. For instance, one student remarked, *'We can smell secularism from the station' (*Ihsan, University A), while another student talked about the feeling of holiness because of the Friday prayers. This juxtaposition is further exemplified by the image of Muslims breaking their fast in the centre of the university, surrounded by buildings that have no religious connotations. These contrasting experiences highlight the fluid nature of the secular and sacred, demonstrating how religious practices and beliefs can imbue seemingly secular spaces with spiritual significance (Apffel-Marglin 1998, Reynolds 2009; Hedges 2019; van der Tol & Gorski, 2022).

Therefore, religion is not fixed in buildings, but it is an embodied experience that involves all the senses and is embedded in everyday acts and rituals, challenging the idea that belief is solely an abstract, cognitive affair (McGuire, 2008, 2016; Vasquez, 2011). As the participants indicated, the sensory aspects of religious practice, such as the sound of the Quran, the sight of greenery, the smell of attar, and the communal act of prayer, play a critical role in the formation and reinforcement of faith memory and identities of the participants (Maddrell et al., 2015) These experiences connect individuals to a broader community of beliefs and a continuous history of faith practices, making the sacred a tangible part of their daily lives on campus(Andersson et al., 2012).

This was reflected in the participants' comments on timetabling and prayer time. Because the lectures were in a space not close to the prayer room, some of the participants talked about the shift in the understanding of what makes a sacred space and the utilisation of their surroundings to perform their prayers. Kat stated:

> *'Although this university is secular, people around me are non-believers or agnostic, and I walk around campus thinking nobody believes in God, but I don't feel the need to walk to the prayer room, because wherever I stand, I face Makkah, and I pray, so that becomes my sacred space' (*University A).

Another student who was not practising stated the following:

> *'I don't practise; I'm a Muslim, but I don't actually believe in "organised religion"; however, when I walk around campus, I look at the nature around me. All my stress goes away. I know I am under God's protection, and where I am standing becomes sacred; the whole universe is sacred because God is in me and all his creation'* (Raj, University A).

In addition, religious identity can become noticeable for non-religious reasons; for example, a participant stated:

> *'You don't have to be religious to call yourself a Muslim; for me, Islam is political; I am the most Muslim I can be in the lecture room, when issues about Palestinians are mentioned and when injustice and inequality issues are discussed, I always ask myself what is my role in this situation as a Muslim; funny thing is, you'd think I would connect with my faith in the prayer room, don't get me wrong, I do, but I feel more politically Muslim in the classroom.'* (Isa, University A).

Not all Muslim students may feel the same, but the embodied nature of religion means that faith can be exhibited, and identities expressed in unofficially sacred spaces; therefore, to understand Muslim identities at university, it is important to include "unofficially sacred spaces" (Kong, 2010). Like other social identities, faith identity is embodied and presents itself in multiple places, thus infusing the spaces surrounding it (Hopkins, 2011; Ryan, 2014). By acknowledging and seeing sacredness in the spaces around the university, these

students are creating a personal sacred space; they can negotiate their faith identity internally without the intervention of sociological surroundings. It is apparent that university students' faith and other identities are constantly developing and evolving. One of the most common aspects mentioned was having a space that grew and reflected the faith identity of individuals. As much as sociological, it is also an emotional and psychological phenomenon.

Thus, the question of where to locate religion for Muslim students is vital, especially for those participants who state that God is everywhere and for them Islam is everywhere; religion and the sacred are not just defined within the walls of officially sacred places, such as mosques or churches, but can be unbounded and present in multiple spaces. Thus, defining religion on campus is not simply a case of opposition to the secular. Both literature and data suggest that religion and the sacred can be found in a variety of spaces, including unofficially sacred spaces (Kong 2010). Knott (2008) argues that "ritual, as sacred-making behaviour, brings about "sacred space" … religion is a consequence of spatial practice" (Knott 2005: 43).

Approaching Muslim students' experiences of religion and spirituality as part of their everyday experiences at university means that one ought to be prepared to deal with detangling the chaos of their daily student life and questioning how their religious identity is constantly made and remade, momentarily, and across various spaces on campus. This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship that recognises that religion and religious identity are made and remade.

For many participants, faith was the backbone of their identity and well-being at the university. Even for students who are not visibly religious, the embodiment of their faith identity is still represented by the way they conduct themselves. Mona said: *'I don't wear my faith externally; my faith is within me; it's in the manner and the way I interact with the rest of creation, including non-Muslims on campus'* (Mona, University B). Bushra stated:

> *'I walk around the university space in my own bubble, despite being physically present in a secular space; I am in my sacred bubble, the sacredness of it is in me, it's because I made it my own private space'* (Bushra, University A).

These statements demonstrate how individuals embody their faith identity through their everyday practices and connections with the world around them, including the physical spaces they inhabit. As argued by Jones (2019), the act of making meaning is a holistic experience that involves the entire person in relation to others and the world and can be viewed as an embodied practice of one's faith identity, shaped by how individuals conduct themselves and interact with others.

For the participants mentioned above, their faith identity is expressed not through visible signs such as religious clothing or prayer, but through their approach to and engagement with the world around them. This can create a liminal sacred space within an otherwise secular environment, where transitions between the secular and sacred, the public and private, and the personal and collective can occur. Shanneik's (2023) study of the symbolic re-enactment of the wedding of Fatima and Ali by Shi'i Muslims in Iran demonstrates how such spaces can be created and maintained, even within ostensibly secular contexts. These rituals are not only expressions of religious beliefs but also sites of negotiation and resistance against state-centred structures of domination. They create a liminal space in which religious meanings are embodied, enacted, challenging, and reshaping dominant power structures.

Some participants mentioned that the expansion of spaces across campus and the presence of quiet rooms for reflection and group work had a positive impact on their experience. Zai (University B) stated the following:

> *Sometimes I want to be alone, so I book one of these rooms, and sit there and just reflect on my day, sometimes I pray and sometimes just sit there quietly, for me, my faith is a personal matter and I do not have to show it to everybody, but having a quiet place to just contemplate is really helpful.* (Zai, University B).

The provision of quiet rooms or similar spaces on university campuses can serve as a physical representation of the extension of faith beyond traditional religious spaces, allowing students to engage in embodied practices of their faith identity outside formal religious settings. This echoes Olson et al. (2013), who illustrated how the spatial perspective of embodiment aids in understanding the concept of genuine faith, where the

body is perceived as the realm through which faith can transcend conventional religious boundaries (Ibid:1422-3). Thus, it is not the space that matters; rather, it is the practices and occupation of that space that transforms the space from a mundane everyday space to a place of refuge, reflection, or religious practice. This is not to downplay the importance of multi-faith spaces or prayer rooms, but rather to emphasise that it is the student's occupation of the space that gives a space its identity. Hence, the process of place identity and students' experience construction does not depend only on policy and directives issued by the institution; students' beliefs, attitudes, and values play a key role in this process (Peng et al., 2020; Holton, 2015; Chow and Healey, 2008).

7.5.1 Embodying Muslimness in the Interview Space

The interview process itself emerged as a significant "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) for identity performance and negotiation among the Muslim student participants. Through their narratives and embodied presence, the interviewees transformed the interviews into affirming environments where they could openly express their religious identities, challenge stereotypes and instances of discrimination they faced, and build a sense of community and belonging (Mir, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). Therefore, rather than merely describing their faith identities and experiences, they engaged in performative acts that served to assert and negotiate their identities within the context of the research setting, using religious terminology, sharing personal anecdotes, and expressing their faith-based perspectives without fear of judgement or misunderstanding (Orsi, 2012; Knott, 2010; Kong, 2010; McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014).

For instance, Khadijah (University A) recited Quranic verses to illustrate her points, while Sarah punctuated her narratives with phrases like "*Inshallah*," "*Alhamdulillah*," and "*MashaAllah*," linguistically anchoring her experiences within Islamic piety in a way that "perforated" the secular norms of the interview (Moosavi, 2015). These acts of embodiment served to assert the centrality of their Muslim identity and challenge the marginalisation of religious expressions in secular spaces (Gökarıksel, 2009; Jouili, 2015; Secor, 2002).

Soraya (University A) demonstrated the significance of seemingly small gestures in embodying her Muslimness. When discussing how she balanced her multiple identities, she paused, adjusted her hijab, and firmly stated:

> 'My Muslim identity is central - it is the core from which all my other identities branch out. Even just being able to sit here today, representing my faith through my dress, is an expression of who I am.'

Her deliberate motion towards the hijab asserted her Muslim identity in a bodily way, transforming the secular interview space into a site of religious affirmation (Knott, 2005; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2014; Dwyer, 1999). This embodied act can be understood as a form of resistance against the marginalisation of Muslim women's dress in public spaces and a way of claiming the right to religious self-expression (Bilge, 2010; Lewis, 2013).

At certain points, the interviews transcended beyond academic dialogues and stopped being just a data collection site to become sacred spaces themselves. For example, when the adhan (Muslim call to prayer) sounded, Ahmed (University B) excused himself to find an open corner to pray, challenging the secular spatial construction and imbuing it with visible sanctity (Knott, 2005; Metcalf, 1996). He reflected,

> 'Being able to talk about my experiences as a Muslim student and pray in this very room here feels like resistance and reclamation, asserting my identity and right to belong' (Ahmed, University B).

This blurring of boundaries between academic and religious spaces during the interviews challenges the notion of a strict separation between the secular and the sacred (Knott, 2005; Metcalf, 1996). The participants' ability to seamlessly integrate their religious practices and expressions into the research context highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of religious identities and the ways in which they are negotiated across different spaces (Hopkins, 2011; Falah & Nagel, 2005; Knott, 2010). This understanding of religious identities as inherently spatial and embodied contributes to a growing body of literature

that seeks to move beyond essentialist and static conceptualizations of religion (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Knott, 2005).

As a researcher, I consciously oriented an inductive approach to deconstruct assumptions and maintain an open space where participants' Muslimness could be expressed freely, engaging in a deeper exploration of their identities and experiences (Mir, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). When Soraya adjusted her hijab or Ahmed wanted to pray, I maintained a reverent silence instead of redirecting the conversation, signalling that the space allowed faith embodiments to occupy unhurried territory through movements, dress, speech, and rituals. This stance manifested an ethos of "transsubjective reciprocity" (Fabian, 2014), where our dialogues became a collaborative space characterised by mutual vulnerability, empathic unsettling, and the formation of self and other (Josselson, 2013; Finlay, 2002; Mir, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013).

The participants' active embodiment of their Muslimness through various practices and expressions highlights the multifaceted nature of faith identity and the ways in which it is negotiated and performed in different spaces (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Falah & Nagel, 2005). By recognising the transformative potential of research interactions and the importance of embodied and performative aspects of identities, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which Muslim students negotiate their presence and belonging within higher education contexts (Chaudry, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2018).

The emergence of the interview space as a "third space" for Muslim students to actively embody and negotiate their identities underscores the transformative potential of research interactions. By fostering an environment of openness, respect, and empathic understanding, I wanted to facilitate a process of co-construction in which participants could express their Muslimness in authentic and multifaceted ways (Mir, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). This approach not only deepened the understanding of Muslim students' experiences but also challenged dominant narratives and assumptions about religious identities in secular contexts (see section 5.2.1).

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter explores the nuanced ways in which Muslim students navigate and shape their experiences in the multifaceted spaces of British universities. Using the participants' interview data, this chapter contextualises their religious identities and faith journeys amid the intersecting influences of physical environments, social relations, and institutional structures, revealing several noteworthy themes and insights regarding the intricate interplay between space, embodiment, and identity construction.

One primary finding is the immense agency and resourcefulness that Muslim students display in creating avenues for religious expression and community despite potential constraints. Moreover, through creative transformation and occupation of everyday campus spaces, students were able to fulfil spiritual needs and find communities. This emphasises the complexity of students' lived experiences as well as showcasing their ability to navigate diverse settings, reflecting the agentic, context-specific performance of faith. By transforming and actively engaging with everyday campus spaces through placemaking practices, the participants were able to fulfil spiritual needs, sustain their faith identities, and foster inclusive environments that offer belonging and support networks. This emphasises the participants' proactive role in navigating university settings and exemplifies resilience in the face of obstacles.

However, the analysis also revealed discrepancies between students' needs and the support structures available from their institutions. Not all third spaces are experienced equally or feel to be uniformly inclusive. Some students face barriers to practising or expressing their identities in spaces perceived as exclusionary or lacking minority faith representation. This underscores the critical need for ongoing engagement between universities and faith communities to understand diverse needs and co-create responsive and welcoming campus climates. Institutions must systematically evaluate their offerings, consider various student perspectives, and act to remedy deficiencies.

A key insight is the identity negotiations that Muslim students undergo during their liminal university phase, with their traditional norms disrupted and new perspectives encountered, which emerged as a formative arena for redefining self-understanding amid various influences. The role of institutional space in facilitating or hindering navigation is

critical. Therefore, as spaces for identity exploration and community building, university environments are crucial determinants of integration and adaptation processes.

Additionally, third spaces, both on and off campus, are another significant theme that emerged in this chapter, playing a vital role in inclusive identity expression, and belonging. From prayer rooms to libraries and community-driven offsite networks, third spaces serve diverse functions that enhance student experiences shaped by the resources and diversity of different university settings. However, the effectiveness of these spaces in fostering belonging depends on proactive inclusivity efforts and management of potential tensions. Not all third spaces were experienced equally, and some felt they were exclusionary or lacked representation. This highlights the need for universities to proactively cultivate more diverse and welcoming environments through genuine engagement with minority faith communities. Rather than a passive approach, institutions must critically self-evaluate the current provisions for all beliefs and make meaningful efforts to incorporate varied student needs and perspectives into spatial planning decisions.

Another important finding relates to the meanings ascribed to university spaces through embodied practices, which imbue them with significance. Daily prayers, gatherings, and blending of social relationships within sensory surroundings allow students to enact their faith identities in embodied ways, transforming mundane locations into spiritually significant spaces. This reinforces the understanding of faith identity as lived and performed identities shaped by interactions and environments rather than static attributes.

Related to this is the comparison between the experiences at universities A and B which highlights how factors such as resource allocation and the physical organisation of facilities impact students' sense of belonging, community, and entitlement to campus places. While proximity benefits some, others feel a lack of targeted events or identification with their institutions due to insufficient support. Such disparities prompt reflection on how universities can work to equitably support all religious identities through holistic campus life events and the allocation of dedicated multi-faith facilities as shown in university B.

Collectively, these findings shed light on the fluid negotiations Muslim students engage in within the socio-spatial dynamics of British universities. Moving beyond rigid dichotomies,

the findings emphasise the adaptability of religious boundaries and diversity within diversity, particularly where marginalisations intersect. Highlighting students' resilience through adaptive place-making practices, this exploration lays the groundwork for policies that foster equitable, inclusive university climates.

8   Chapter 8: Conclusion. Muslim Students' Negotiation of Identity Within the University Setting

8.1   Introduction

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Muslim students in British higher education through the lens of the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework. By employing qualitative methods and thematic analysis, the research generated rich insights into the diverse ways Muslim students construct and negotiate their faith identities, navigate challenges and marginalisation, and engage in creative placemaking and community-building within university settings.

The MIIM framework, developed and validated in this study, offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the complex interplay of identity, agency, social structures, and representations that shape Muslim students' lived realities on campus. By capturing the intersectional nature of their identities and experiences, this study challenges monolithic representations and highlights the heterogeneity and fluidity of Muslim students' voices. The findings emphasise the significance of faith identity as a core existential anchor that influences various aspects of Muslim students' lives, values, and aspirations. Yet, this centrality of faith identity is often at odds with the secular norms and institutional cultures pervading many university environments, leading to experiences of marginalisation, isolation, and the pervasive impact of Islamophobia.

This study also offers valuable insights into the unique experiences of first-in-family (FiF) Muslim students. As pioneers pursuing higher education within their families, these students face amplified challenges in navigating unfamiliar academic environments and competing cultural expectations. The findings reveal how FiF status intersects with religious, racial, and cultural identities, underscoring the importance of tailored support to address this group's distinct needs. Despite the challenges encountered by the participants, the findings emphasise the agency and resistance demonstrated by Muslim students in asserting their identities, navigating systemic barriers, and actively creating spaces of belonging through embodied practices and community building efforts. Their stories contest deficit narratives and showcase the diverse strategies and coping mechanisms employed to thrive within

university spaces. Moreover, the comparative analysis across the two university contexts highlights the importance of acknowledging the role of higher education institutional factors in shaping students' sense of belonging, empowerment, and ability to express their multidimensional identities within campus.

In this final chapter, I return to the research questions and objectives, providing a summary of the key findings. I then contextualise these findings within the existing literature, discussing both the main contributions and limitations of the study. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research and explore the implications for policy and practice. I then conclude with a reflection on my personal journey and growth as a researcher throughout this study.

8.1.1   Research Questions and Aims

The primary research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How do Muslim students construct faith identities at universities?
2. How do university life and student identity affect Muslim students' identity construction?

3. How do they make sense of their university experiences as Muslim students?

8.1.2   The research aims were as follows:

1. Explore the diverse ways in which Muslim students construct, negotiate, and express their faith within the university setting.
2. Examine the influence of university life and student identity on Muslim students' identity construction and experience.
3. Investigate how Muslim students make sense of and navigate their university experiences in relation to their faith.

The findings address these research questions and objectives. This study adopted a qualitative enquiry anchored in constructivist and interpretivist epistemological and ontological frameworks. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived realities, co-constructed meaning-making, and socially embedded sensemaking through open-ended dialogue and collaborative research engagement. Employing semi-structured interviews through thematic analysis, the investigation generated a rich dataset capturing the distinctive

narratives and identities of 30 self-identified Muslim student voices directly articulating their experiences across two university contexts. The study highlighted the centrality and fluidity of Muslim identity, the impacts of institutional factors on students' experiences, the diverse strategies employed by Muslim students to navigate their multidimensional identities, and their aspirations for holistic inclusion and religious pluralism within university environments.

8.2   Summary of Key Findings

The findings across Chapters 5-7 emphasise the heterogeneity of Muslim students' lived realities within British universities. Several overarching themes encapsulate the fundamental dimensions of their experiences, which directly connect to the four key concepts of the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework: identity, agency, social structure, and social representation (see Chapter 4, sections 4.3.1-4.3.4).

8.2.1   Centrality of Muslim Identity: The Fluid yet Fundamental Role of Faith

As discussed in Chapter 5, participants like Soraya (University A) described their Muslim identity as "*the core of who I am, influencing every aspect of my life*" while Isa (University A) stated, '*Identifying as Muslim transcends mere ritual practice; it fundamentally shapes my worldview and interactions.*' These narratives underscore the profound significance of faith in shaping Muslim students' experiences and identities within the university context. However, this study also highlights the diverse expressions of Muslim identity, ranging from stringent observance to cultural spirituality, as exemplified by Basmah from University B, who first identified as a Muslim but emphasised humanity. This fluidity of Muslim identities is effectively captured by MIIM's identity dimension (see Chapter 4), which emphasises the complex interplay of religious, cultural, and individual factors in identity construction. This finding directly addresses Research Question 1, highlighting the diverse and dynamic ways Muslim students construct their faith identities within the university context.

8.2.2   Navigating Multidimensional Selves

Chapter 5 also illustrates how participants strategically navigate their multidimensional identities within campus, highlighting the delicate balance between embracing their personal complexities and responding to external categorisations. This reflects the MIIM's intersectional approach, recognising the overlapping dimensions of Muslim students'

identities and their impact on university experiences. The findings reveal participants' agency in negotiating these identities through code-switching and impression management (Dwyer, 2000; Goffman, 1959), as highlighted by the MIIM's agency and subjectivity dimension. For instance, Minna from University A adapted her accent and clothing to fit in with the dominant cultural norms, whereas Basmah from University B selectively presented her Muslim identity in different contexts. These strategic identity negotiations underscore Muslim students' resilience and adaptability in navigating the complex journey of higher education.

This finding addresses Research Question 2, illustrating how university life and student identity shape Muslim students' complex identity negotiations.

8.2.3   Experiences of Marginalisation and Resilience

Chapters 5 and 6 shed light on the systemic exclusion, discrimination, and Islamophobia encountered by Muslim students, which the MIIM's social structure dimension, based on Bourdieu's concepts (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3), helps to analyse. Esma from University A described facing the "Islamophobic gaze" and microaggressions, stating, "People assumed things about me that weren't true, so I corrected them." Similarly, Isa from University A shared his experience of jokes which involved asking if he would consider becoming a terrorist, highlighting the pervasive nature of Islamophobic stereotypes. However, in the face of these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and agency, as emphasised by the MIIM's agency and subjectivity dimension. Mariam and Khadija (University A) wear the hijab as a deliberate assertion of their faith identities within the university spaces, while Ahmed (University B) sought out Muslim student communities beyond his university to maintain his religious practices (see section 6.4.3)). These examples underscore Muslim students' proactive strategies in resisting marginalisation and asserting their identities. This finding addresses Research Question 3, showing how Muslim students make sense of and navigate their university experiences in the face of challenges.

8.2.4   Spatial Negotiations, Embodiment and Placemaking

This study also presents insights into how participants actively negotiate sacred and secular divides on campus through embodied practices and placemaking. At University A, the participants transformed campus spaces into sacred locales through prayers and communal

gatherings. Sayimah (University, A) described how the Students' Union area "*transforms into a space in which your Muslimness is celebrated*" during Friday prayers, highlighting the powerful impact of collective religious practices on spatial dynamics (see section 7.4.5). In contrast, participants like Zamzam and Ahmed at University B, had to seek out off-campus spaces for religious and social activities due to limited on-campus resources (see section 6.4.3). These findings connect to MIIM's attention to the interplay of social structures and representations in shaping identity construction (see Chapter 4) revealing how the contrasting spatial arrangements at Universities A and B influenced participants' sense of belonging and spiritual expression. Section 7.4 also highlights participants' agency in redefining secular spaces through embodied practices, as exemplified by Mariam's statement, '*wherever I put my prayer mat it becomes my masjid*'.

These findings shed light on the spatial dimensions of Muslim students' identity construction and negotiations by addressing Research Questions 1, 2, and 3.

8.2.5   Impacts of Institutional Habitus

This study provides compelling evidence of the significant impact of institutional habitus on Muslim students' experiences, which the MIIM's social structure dimension, based on Bourdieu's concepts (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3), helps to analyse. The comparative analysis revealed stark disparities between Universities A and B in terms of faith provisions, inclusivity, and support for Muslim students. At University A, the presence of dedicated prayer spaces, Muslim student societies, and inclusive events fostered a sense of belonging and community, (see Section 7.4). However, at University B, the lack of adequate prayer facilities, limited social programming, and instances of overt discrimination created a more challenging environment for Muslim students (See Table 8). These institutional factors shaped the participants' sense of belonging, community engagement, and identity negotiations in distinct ways, highlighting the crucial role of university policies and practices in supporting Muslim students' diverse needs and aspirations.

The contrasting environments of Universities A and B emphasise the impact of institutional habitus on Muslim students' experiences. The data highlight how the participants' sense of belonging, community support, and entitlement to spaces were shaped by universities' policies, resource allocation, spatial planning regarding faith provisions, and wider socio-

cultural positioning. Disparities in tailored programming and facilities reveal how institutions' norms and cultural reproduction could foster inclusion or alienation for Muslim students, prompting diverse resilience strategies calibrated to navigate the distinct structural landscapes of the HEI (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). This finding directly speaks to Research Question 2, illustrating the significant influence of institutional factors on Muslim students' identity construction and university experiences.

8.3   Discussion of Findings

These findings provide vital empirical insights that illustrate the underexplored dimensions of identity and inclusion in mainstream higher education research. They enrich understanding of how Muslim students construct selfhood and belonging while navigating university settings as cultural/religious "others." In doing so, this study's conclusions reinforce aspects of prior scholarship, while challenging predominant discourses and unveiling new complexities regarding Muslim students' lived realities on campus.

8.3.1   Muslim Students' Multidimensional Identities and the centrality of faith identity

One of the most significant findings of this study is the central role that faith identity plays in shaping Muslim students' self-perceptions, experiences, and navigation of university life. As discussed in Chapter 5, participants consistently described Islam as a core existential anchor that influences all aspects of their lives, from their values and motivations to their social interactions and academic pursuits. This deep personal connection to faith was evident in statements like Soraya's (University A) description of her Muslim identity as '*the core of who I am, influencing every aspect of my life,*' or Isa's (University A) assertion that '*identifying as Muslim transcends mere ritual practice; it fundamentally shapes my worldview and interactions.*' Therefore, while previous research has acknowledged the importance of religion for Muslim students (Peek, 2005; Stevenson, 2014; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Malik & Wykes, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), this study provides a more contextualised understanding of how, despite the participants' level of religiosity, Islam operates as a core anchor that influences various aspects of Muslim students' lives, from their values and motivations to their social interactions and academic pursuits, challenging the tendency to relegate religion to a compartmentalised or peripheral aspect of their identities (Meer, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Giddens, 1991). By capturing the deeply personal

and pervasive nature of religious identity for these students, this research contributes to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the role of faith in shaping Muslim students' university experiences.

The findings reveal the inherent diversity and fluidity of Muslim students' faith identities, which are constantly negotiated and recalibrated in relation to their unique circumstances, experiences, and interpretations of Islamic traditions. As discussed in Section 5.3, participants expressed a wide spectrum of religious orientations and practices, ranging from strict adherence to orthodox norms to more individualised and culturally inflected forms of spirituality. For example, while some participants like Mo (University B) described themselves as *"practising Muslims"* who strictly observed religious rituals and guidelines, others like Zai (University B) embraced a more personal and flexible approach to faith, emphasising inner spirituality over external conformity. While previous studies have highlighted the heterogeneity of Muslim identities (Meer, 2010; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Brown & Saeed, 2018; Franceschelli & O'Brien, Aune, & Stevenson, 2017; Panjwani, 2017; Phoenix, 2019; Guest et al., 2020), this finding offers a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of how Muslim students actively construct and reconstruct their religious selves in response to the varying demands and opportunities in university life. By showcasing the spectrum of religious orientations and expressions among the participants, from strict orthodoxy to cultural spirituality, this study challenges the monolithic representations of Muslim identities that often pervade public and academic discourse (Dunne et al., 2020; Hefner, 2014).

Using the MIIM framework, the study emphasises the complex intersectional and multidimensional aspects of Muslim students' identities, which are shaped by the interplay of their religious, racial, ethnic, gendered, and classed positions within the university context. As exemplified by Sarah's (University A) self-description as '*a Black woman, a Muslim, a Brummie, a student, British, and an aspiring teacher*' (see section 5.4), participants' narratives revealed the ways in which their "Muslimness" intersects with other salient dimensions of their identities to shape their experiences and perspectives. These findings align with and extend the intersectional approach to understand Muslim identities in Britain (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Mir, 2014; Brown & Saeed, 2018; Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2015; Phoenix, 2019), highlighting the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, and class shape the construction

and negotiation of religious identities in complex and often contradictory ways. By capturing the intersectional nature of Muslim students' lived experiences, this study highlights the limitations of single-axis frameworks that focus on one dimension of identity at the expense of others and advocates for a more contextualised and intersectional approach to understanding the complexities of Muslim students' identities and experiences.

This intersectional lens is further enhanced by a comparative analysis of Muslim students' experiences across the two different HEI contexts, which reveals how institutional cultures, policies, and practices shape the possibilities and constraints for their identity construction and expression. As discussed in Chapter 7, sections 7.3 and 7.5, the contrasting experiences of participants at University A and B, particularly in terms of access to prayer spaces and other faith-based accommodations, illustrate the significant impact of university environments on Muslim students' sense of belonging, community, and religious identity. These findings resonate with previous research on the role of institutional factors in shaping Muslim students' experiences (Weller et al., 2011; Possamai et al., 2016; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Hopkins, 2011; Peek, 2005; Malik & Wykes, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), and extend our understanding of how institutional practices can enable or constrain the expression of religious identities on campus.

By situating Muslim students' multidimensional identities within the specific institutional context of higher education, this study contributes to a more complex and situated understanding of how power relations, cultural norms, and structural inequalities shape their experiences and outcomes. This contextualised approach challenges the decontextualised and essentialist representations of Muslim students that often inform educational policies and practices, and instead highlights the need for more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive approaches to support their success and well-being.

8.3.2 Spirituality and Religious Identity Development

Participants identified universities as transformative arenas for spiritual exploration and self-interrogation, confirming the findings of Astin et al. (2011) and Hill (2011) regarding the pivotal role of higher education in the development of students' religious and worldview perspectives. Moving away from home catalysed personal journeys for these participants, enabling them to reinterpret Islamic traditions beyond their ethnic and cultural inheritances.

This reflects Bryant's (2006) observation that secular campus environments are crucial spaces for nurturing interfaith literacy, spiritual awareness, and the rekindling of individual and communal faith. However, the students' narratives revealed that these journeys were often fraught with dissonance. Participants encountered secular environments and perceived discrepancies between their spiritual and ethical values and the predominant campus culture. These contradictions caused discomfort, necessitating strategic adaptations to harmonize their "multiple selves" through practices like selective religious observance, impression management, and code-switching among performative identity repertoires (Stevenson, 2018; Ahmad, 2017; Goffman, 1959; Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). These findings highlight the complex inner dynamics underlying the development of Muslim faith identity at universities, marking it as a profound, negotiated personal process that extends beyond institutional frameworks that may oversimplify religious needs into tangible amenities such as multi-faith spaces.

Significantly, the research interview spaces themselves emerged as consecrated sites where Muslim students could engage in sacralising performances, openly articulating, affirming, and negotiating the meanings surrounding their multidimensional religious identities (Hopkins, 2011; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013) (Refer to section 7.5.1). This underscores the transformative potential of research interactions. By fostering an environment of openness, respect, and empathic understanding, the researcher facilitated a process of co-construction in which participants could express their Muslimness in authentic and multifaceted ways (Mir, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). This approach not only deepened the understanding of Muslim students' experiences but also challenged dominant narratives and assumptions about religious identities in secular contexts (see section 5.2.1).

Cheruvallil-Contractor (2021) emphasises that creating such spaces allows participants to assert agency and shape narratives about their communities. The empathetic rapport between the researcher and participants cultivated rare safe havens for unguarded self-expression, echoing Gemignani's (2017) emphasis on interviews as intimate spaces for marginalized voices. In these spaces, participants could express their struggles, acts of resistance, and spiritual embodiments that are often suppressed within secular campus settings (Hopkins, 2011; Jouili, 2015). By providing a platform for Muslim students to openly

articulate and negotiate their religious identities, the research interviews became transformative sites where participants could challenge dominant discourses and assert their agency in shaping the narratives surrounding their communities.

Thus, the emergence of the interview space as a "third space" for Muslim students to actively embody and negotiate their identities highlights the importance of creating inclusive and empowering environments within research contexts. By fostering an atmosphere of trust, respect, and empathy, researchers can facilitate a process of co-construction in which participants feel safe to express their religious identities authentically and multidimensionally. This approach not only enriches the understanding of Muslim students' experiences but also challenges the prevailing assumptions and narratives about religious identities within secular educational settings.

Additionally, the researcher's insider positionality facilitated a cultural and religious solidarity that enhanced trust and allowed the nuances of religious identity to emerge organically, mirroring insights on insider research (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008). By enacting "embodied faith praxis" uninhibited by secular constraints, participants could actively reshape interview dynamics, illustrating how sacred spaces are continually reproduced through everyday performances (Gökarıksel, 2009; Kong, 2001, Knott, 2005)- (Refer to section 3.9 for more detailed discussion of research positionality)

This aligns with Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor's (2015) emphasis on methodological eclecticism, drawing flexibly upon varied methods to capture the complexities of lived religious experience. For instance, some participants recited Quranic verses or adjusted their hijab, linguistically and corporeally anchoring their narratives within Islamic pietistic traditions, challenging secular epistemologies (Orsi, 2012; Knott, 2005; Metcalf, 1996). Such sacralising acts transformed the interviews into affirming "third spaces" where religious-ethnic identities materialized through embodied expressions often marginalized in public arenas (Bhabha, 1994; Bilge, 2010; Lewis, 2013; Dwyer, 1999). By cultivating an ethos of "transsubjective reciprocity" (Fabian, 2014) through reverent engagement with these faith embodiments, I was able to co-create a collaborative space enabling exploration of multidimensional religious-ethnic selfhoods resonant of "immanent transcendence" (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014). This ethos of mutual vulnerability and

exchange (Finlay, 2002; Josselson, 2013) allowed interviews to transcend academic discourse constraints, becoming sacred interzones where marginalized spiritual-ethical worldviews were openly negotiated through rituals, narratives, and corporeal praxis.

These findings emphasise Muslim students' dynamic faith identity development as a complex, profound reconstruction of meaning that transcends institutional accommodations. They reinforce the notion that Muslim religious subjectivities are continually co-constructed through interactions between governmentalities (secular institutional policies/norms) and ethical-spiritual formations (Islamic traditions). Students' reflections highlight how British secular university milieus govern the performance of Muslim identity, compelling authenticity negotiations across different campus spaces through practices such as veiling/unveiling, gendered social participation, and alcohol/substance engagement. This exemplifies Muslim identity as a multidimensional process, not a static category, constantly navigated by invoking and calibrating different performative, discursive, and somatic-ethical repertoires of selfhood across campus ecologies (Mahmood, 2005).

Collectively, these findings reveal how spiritual/religious identity formation is both catalysed and constrained by secular campus contexts. They challenge us to reimagine the secular university as a post-secular space, where multiple forms of belief and meaning making can co-exist and thrive, and where the spiritual and existential dimensions of students' lives are recognized as integral to their holistic development and well-being. This requires moving beyond a narrow focus on accommodations, such as prayer rooms or chaplaincy services, to a more comprehensive transformation of institutional culture and practice. This could involve initiatives such as integrating religious literacy and interfaith dialogue into curricula and campus programming, providing training and support for staff and faculty to engage with religious diversity, and creating spaces for students to explore and express their spiritual identities in meaningful ways, as exemplified by the community-building practices and events described by the participants at University A. This post-secular approach to higher education aligns with the calls of scholars who advocate for a more holistic and inclusive framework for supporting students' spiritual and religious development, recognizing the centrality of faith in shaping students' experiences. By embracing a post-secular framework for understanding and supporting religious diversity in higher education, universities can become spaces of transformation and empowerment for Muslim students and other religious minorities, where

their spiritual and existential needs are valued and nurtured alongside other aspects of their academic and personal development. This requires a shift in institutional cultures and practices, from a reactive and piecemeal approach to accommodating religious needs to a proactive and systemic effort to foster faith literacy, dialogue, and collaboration across all levels of the university community.

8.3.3   Experiences of Marginalisation of Islamophobia

One of the most significant findings of this study is the pervasive and multifaceted nature of marginalisation and Islamophobia experienced by Muslim students in higher education. As discussed in Chapter 5, the participants across both University A and B shared numerous examples of the systemic exclusions, discrimination, "othering", and microaggressions they encountered on campus, ranging from subtle forms of bias and stereotyping to overt acts of hostility and harassment. These experiences had an impact on Muslim students' mental health, well-being, and overall sense of belonging within their University A communities, as evidenced by the emotional and psychological toll described by participants such as Magida (University A) and Isa (University A).

The "Islamophobic gaze" described by May (University A)   emerged as a visceral and recurrent theme, with Muslim students describing an inescapable sense of scrutiny, judgement, and alienation based on their religious identity, echoing scholars' theorisations of Islamophobia as a form of racialised surveillance and policing (Scott-Baumann, & Perfect 2021; Sharma & Nijjar, 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019; Qurashi, 2018; Saeed, 2018; Garner & Selod 2015). As discussed in Chapter 5, this gaze manifested in various forms, from the invasive questions and assumptions faced by visibly Muslim students like May (University A), to the more subtle forms of exclusion and alienation experienced by those who did not fit the stereotypical image of a Muslim, such as Adam (University B). Regardless of its specific manifestation, the Islamophobic gaze perpetuates a sense of hypervisibility and vulnerability among Muslim students, making them feel perpetual outsiders within their university communities. These findings are consistent with the growing body of literature documenting the widespread prevalence of Islamophobia in higher education, both in the UK and internationally (Akel, 2021; Choudhury, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Malik & Wykes,

2018; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Hopkins, 2011; Zine, 2001; Awan & Zempi, 2017; NUS, 2018; Stevenson, 2018; Busher et al., 2017; O'Toole, 2018).

Also, as discussed in Chapter 2, scholars have offered various conceptualisations of Islamophobia, with some foregrounding its racial dimensions (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006; Meer & Modood, 2009; Elahi & Khan, 2017), while others have emphasised religious discrimination (Gholami, 2021; Jones & Unsworth, 2023; Lauwers, 2019). The findings of this study suggest that Islamophobia operates at the intersection of these various forms of oppression, creating a unique and multidimensional experience of marginalisation for Muslim students that cannot be fully captured by a singular theoretical framework. For instance, as explained in Chapter 5, participants such as Sarah (University B) and Esma (University A) faced gendered forms of Islamophobia, where their experiences of discrimination were shaped by the intersection of their religious identity and gender. These students describe how their lived realities are contoured by the intricate intersections of religious identity with gender, socioeconomic status, family background, and other salient aspects of their identities. This aligns with and extends scholarship examining Islamophobia's intersections with sexism, classism, xenophobia, and their compounding effects, underscoring the need for intersectional analytical lenses (Mahmood & Islam, 2023; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015; Elahi & Khan, 2017; Garner & Selod, 2015; Moosavi, 2015).

It is important to note that while the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim students' experiences is significant, the majority of the participants did not explicitly invoke the term "Islamophobia" when recounting these lived experiences. Instead, they focused on the tangible manifestations they grappled with, such as microaggressions, stereotyping, or systemic barriers, shaped by a complex interplay of factors beyond solely their religious identities. This preference for describing lived realities rather than employing abstract labels aligns with Cheruvallil-Contractor's (2021) emphasis on understanding marginalisation through the lens of participants' own articulations and sense-making processes, rather than imposing predetermined conceptual frames. By prioritising students' own articulations, this study reveals how Muslim students' experiences of marginalisation cannot be neatly categorized as either racism or religious discrimination alone.

As discussed in chapter 6, for a substantial portion (85%) of participants who were first-in-family (FiF) university students, their marginalisation arose from the convergence of their

pioneering status as higher education navigators, their socioeconomic positionalities, and the discriminatory attitudes and practices stemming from their religious identities (O'Shea et al., 2018; Adamecz-Völgyi et al., 2020; Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). For these students, their lived realities cannot be adequately captured through a singular analytical lens of either racism or religious discrimination. Instead, their experiences are forged at the intersections of their multifaceted identities and social locations.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis of participants' experiences across the two universities presented in Chapters 6 and 7 highlights the significant role of institutional factors in shaping Muslim students' sense of belonging and inclusion on campus. While both universities had instances of Islamophobic attitudes and practices, the presence of supportive structures, inclusive policies, and culturally responsive services at University A made a notable difference in how Muslim students perceived and navigated their university experience. This finding underscores the importance of considering the broader institutional context in which Muslim students are situated, beyond the narrow focus on Islamophobia as the primary determinant of their experiences.

The intersectional nature of the marginalisation experienced by Muslim students in this study has significant implications for how universities conceptualise and address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This suggests that a narrow focus on racism or religious discrimination alone cannot capture Muslim students' complex, intersectional experiences, echoing critiques of reductive "single-issue" framings (Mirza, 2009; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021). Such reductive approaches risk engendering inadequate, piecemeal strategies for fostering authentic cultures of belonging and inclusion (Ahmed, 2012). Instead, universities must adopt holistic, intersectional frameworks recognizing the multifarious, interlocking oppressions and privileges shaping Muslim students' realities, aligning with calls for transformative, structurally attuned inclusion efforts (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Scott-Baumann and Bunglawala, 2020).

By foregrounding this intersectional marginalisation, the study challenges reducing Muslim experiences solely to Islamophobia, heeding calls to move beyond reductive, essentialising framings (Gholami, 2021; Ali, 2014). It calls for a contextual approach recognizing how religious identity intersects with other vectors of oppression and privilege, producing distinct realities that defy essentialised categories (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach centres students'

pluralistic voices while engaging in theory-building around marginalisation, echoing advocacy for grounded, empowering representations (Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Choudhury, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Hopkins et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2016). By amplifying their narratives, it cultivates holistic, intersectional understandings of marginalisation in higher education (Bhopal, 2017).

8.3.4 Muslim Students' Agency, Resistance, and Community-Building

While the study highlights the significant impact of marginalisation and Islamophobia on Muslim students' experiences, it also emphasises the remarkable agency and resistance demonstrated by the participants in asserting their identities while navigating these challenges. The participants' counterstories reveal organic community-building and strategic self-representation tactics that actively counter the sense of marginalisation or exclusion they encounter (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Hopkins, 2011; Awan & Zempi, 2017; NUS, 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). These agentic responses challenge the assumptions of Muslim passivity and powerlessness, demonstrating the resilience rooted in cultural asset repositories, faith traditions, and community engagement approaches fundamental to Muslim students' university experiences. The participants' accounts serve as testimonies challenging hegemonic narratives that minimise Muslim student concerns or position them as "problems" requiring external interventions. Instead, Muslim participants emerged as proactive problem-solvers who capably mobilised resources to resist exclusion and carve meaningful paths towards empowerment. Their stories contest monolithic victim scripts and humanise higher education experiences through complex, hopeful, and agentic community-based responses (see section 5.5 and 7.4).

These findings align with the growing body of literature that underscores the agency and resistance of Muslim students in navigating and reshaping their educational experiences, and advocates for the acknowledgement and support of their various coping mechanisms (I Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021;   Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2020; Chaudry, 2021 Alizai, 2021; Possamai et al., 2016; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Peek, 2005). For instance, as discussed in Section 6.4, Ahmed from University B sought Muslim student communities beyond his university to maintain his religious practices and build support. The

participants' examples demonstrate how Muslim students mobilise their agency and resources to resist marginalisation and create spaces of belonging and empowerment within and beyond the university.

8.3.5 Rethinking Habitus: Muslim Students Navigating Institutional Fields

The findings from this study prompt a re-examination of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, institutional habitus, and field through the lens of Muslim students' experiences at British universities. Students' narratives reveal the complex interplay between individual religious habitus, shaped by early familial and community socialisation, and the distinct institutional habitus characterising each university environment. This intersection of religious and institutional habituses aligns with and extends upon several key strands of literature, including research specifically focused on Muslim students' experiences in higher education.

This study's emphasis on diversity and dynamism within individual and institutional habituses resonates with scholars who critique Bourdieu's original formulation as deterministic and reproductive (Reay et al., 2017). Muslim students' experiences across the two universities exemplify how institutional habituses vastly differ in sanctioning or alienating religious minority embodiment. At University A, the dissonance between espoused pluralism and ingrained secularist habitus manifests through institutional blind spots, masking how dominant norms perpetuate Muslim students' marginalisation. At the same time, however, an avowedly secular institutional habitus allowed Muslim students to navigate campus terrains pragmatically through strategic adaptations and organic community infrastructure. The comparative analysis of Universities A and B (see Section 7.5) reveals how different institutional habitus and campus cultures shape the challenges and opportunities for Muslim students to express their religious identities. Despite University A's avowedly secular institutional ethos, they offered dedicated faith spaces alongside neutral areas, enabling Muslim students to actively establish a sense of belonging and negotiate nuanced forms of exclusion. In contrast, at University B, the absence of provisions for religious practices and limited socialisation spaces, coupled with instances of overt discrimination, compelled Muslim students to mobilise their own resources and networks to sustain their faith on campus. This underscores their resilience and resistance in confronting institutional barriers. These findings reinforce arguments for a more pluralistic, malleable conception of habitus

that acknowledges individual agency and heterogeneity, echoing studies that highlight the challenges Muslim students face in negotiating their religious identities within predominantly secular university environments (Stevenson, 2014; Scandone, 2018; Stevenson, 2017).

Additionally, the examination of how Muslim students navigate university environments by leveraging intersecting forms of social, cultural, and religious capital contributes to the literature on the intersectional nature of habitus (Reay et al., 2004; Akrivou & Di San Giorgio, 2014; Webb et al., 2017). It resonates with research on the strategies Muslim students employ to maintain their religious practices and identities in higher education settings (Franceschelli & O'Brien, Kyriacou, 2017; Mirza, 2018; Scott-Baumann, 2020; Islam et al., 2018; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). Participants leverage the intersecting communal networks (for example, Islamic societies and Muslim student associations), faith-based social/cultural capital (e.g. religious knowledge and linguistic skills), and strategic self-representations (e.g. selective identity performance and impression management) as reflexive navigational tools that carve personalised persistence pathways across inhospitable campus fields. This underlines the importance of considering the multiple overlapping dimensions of identity (religious, ethnic, cultural, and gendered) and experience in shaping individuals' orientations and practices within institutional contexts.

The focus of this study on Muslim students' experiences also contributes to a growing body of research examining the dynamics of religious habitus within supposedly secular educational spaces (Mellor & Shilling, 2014; Ingram, 2018; Stevenson 2012) and the specific challenges faced by Muslim students in these contexts (Hopkins, 2011; Stevenson, 2017; Malik &Wykes, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Chaudry, 2021.) It reveals the complex negotiations and adaptations required for religious minority students to navigate institutional norms and expectations that may marginalise or exclude their religious identities and worldviews. The findings highlight instances of Muslim students' creative improvisation and strategic self-representation, such as adapting religious practices to fit academic schedules or selectively presenting their identities in different social contexts. For example, Sarah (University, B) Mariam and May (University, A) described how they would pray in the library or in a quiet nook on campus to accommodate their religious practices around their studies (see Section 7.4). This demonstrates the agentic navigation of the institutional environment to maintain faith commitment. Similarly, Minna from University A and Basmah from

University B strategically adapted their appearance and behaviour in different university contexts to manage impressions and negotiate their identities (see sections 5.5.1 and 6.5.1). Minna consciously altered her accent and clothing to fit in with the dominant cultural norms, while Basmah selectively presented her Muslim identity, depending on the social setting. These examples of creative improvisation and strategic self-representation align with the literature emphasising the agentic, transformative potential within habitus (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) and studies documenting Muslim students' resilience and resistance in the face of institutional barriers (Ali, 2013; Ramadan,2021; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

The study's critique of the secular/sacred binary and its call for integrating Islamic ontological and metaphysical commitments beyond orientalist "cultural diversity" metrics (see Chapter 7) resonates with post-colonial and decolonial engagements with Bourdieu (Go, 2013; Sablan, 2019) and scholarship advocating for the integration of religious literacy into educational curricula in higher education to better accommodate Muslim students' religious identities and epistemologies (Scott-Baumann & Bunglawala, 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Gholami, 2021). This involves challenging the Eurocentric assumptions and power structures that underpin secular educational paradigms and proactively integrating diverse religious worldviews and knowledge systems into the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture of universities (Scott-Baumann & Bunglawala, 2020; Meer et al., 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013; Mignolo, 2011), as exemplified by participants' accounts of negotiating faith and academic identities in classroom settings (see Isa and Sam's experiences in section 7.4.1).

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the unique challenges faced by first-in-family (FiF) Muslim students as they navigate the complex interplay between their religious habitus and the institutional habitus of their universities. As pioneers within their families to pursue higher education, as mentioned in Section 8.3.2, the absence of familial precedence in higher education amplifies the dissonance experienced by these students as they confront unfamiliar academic expectations and social norms that may diverge from their dispositions (Thering, 2012; Luzeckyj et al., 2017), as illustrated by Bushra's struggles with class and language barriers (see Section 6.2). However, the narratives of FiF Muslim students also highlight their resilience and adaptability in the face of these challenges. By drawing upon their faith as a source of strength, such as Zamzam's reliance on family and religious values for perseverance, and actively seeking resources and communities within the university, as shown in Sayimah's

engagement with support services and faith-based networks (see Section 6.3), these students demonstrate a dynamic process of habitus adaptation (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). This emphasises the importance of universities recognising and addressing the unique needs of FiF Muslim students, ensuring that adequate support structures are in place to facilitate their successful integration and achievement in the higher education environment (Devlin, 2013; O'Shea, 2016).

Collectively, these findings reorient our understanding of habitus towards more processual, intersectional paradigms acknowledging dynamism, plurality, and consciousness in reshaping fields via iterative co-constitutions of individual/collective practices with structural fields. By situating its insights within intersecting strands of literature, including research specifically focused on Muslim students' experiences and the challenges faced by FiF students, this study makes valuable contributions to ongoing efforts to retheorise and extend Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit (Reay et al., 2009; Stahl, 2015; Ingram, 2018; Costa et al., 2019). It offers empirically grounded interventions that challenge and complicate prevailing assumptions about the nature of habitus, institutional habitus, and field, opening new possibilities for understanding the dynamic interplay between agency, structure, and identity in educational contexts, particularly for religious minorities and FIF students. This involves recognising the complex ways in which Muslim students actively navigate, resist, and transform the institutional fields they inhabit, drawing upon diverse forms of capital and adaptive strategies to carve out spaces of belonging and empowerment within the university (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Franceschelli & O'Brien, 2015; Bhatti, 2011), as demonstrated throughout this study.

8.3.6 Fostering Inclusive and Pluralistic University Spaces

This research reveals that Muslim students' placemaking within university settings takes a subversive form, as they actively resist marginalisation from dominant secular norms on campus. Through intentional, everyday spatial practices, Muslim students contest the rigid bifurcations between the sacred and secular embedded in institutional policies that frequently constrain their spiritual expressions to regulated accommodations or tokenistic multi-faith provisions. As exemplified by the engagement in grounded rituals across university spaces, Muslim students engage in remapping contested boundaries and enact sacred

citizenship that challenges rationalities consigning religion only to abstract beliefs disconnected from lived spatial contexts (see Section 7.4). Their placemaking practices continually claim and materialise sacred embodied infrastructures through which spatial belonging is negotiated.

This resonates with perspectives in the geography of religion literature exploring how faith traditions are reproduced and lived through spatial embodiments, with sacred sites and sensibilities emerging through localised rituals and contestations that weave spiritual and mundane realms together across physical and metaphysical landscapes (Knott 2010, 2015; Kong 2001, 2010; Gökarıksel 2009, 2015). The spatial practices of Muslim students, such as transforming the Students' Union area into a space where "*Muslimness is celebrated"* during Friday prayers, as described by Sayimah (University A) (see section 7.4), exemplify the concept of "immanent transcendence", animating university spaces with sanctified meanings through devotional acts (Knot, 2010; Kong, 2010). These findings substantiate the calls from critical religious scholars to examine the dynamic constitution of religious landscapes within secular public spheres through on-the-ground placemaking (Hopkins et al. 2013; Berg, 2019; Gilbert, 2018). Rather than focusing only on formal accommodations or metrics of inclusion, attention shifts to faiths' sensory and spatial immanence through enactments of rituals, resistance, and sacred claims to space. For example, participants such as Shahin from University B described how the sight of fellow Muslims in traditional attire and the smell of attar (perfume) in the library created a sense of spiritual connection and belonging (see Section 7.5). These experiences serve as carriers of beliefs and transform ordinary spaces into venues for the expression and reinforcement of religious identity, calling for HEI to recognise the centrality of faith in students' lives and to proactively create environments that celebrate and empower their religious and spiritual identities as integral to their academic and personal growth (Astin et al., 2011; Rockenbach& Mayhew, 2014; Small, 2020). This involves a fundamental reimagining of the university as a space that validates and nurtures the diverse worldviews, practices, and aspirations of all its members, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment for marginalised communities, including Muslim students (Stevenson, 2017; Malik and Wykes, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021)

This echoes with the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education's guidance that institutions must transcend representational diversity through proactive pluralistic integration, thus validating students' divergent worldviews and identities (Worthington et al. 2019). This necessitates expanding diversity/inclusion remits beyond retrofitting secular paradigms to reshape institutional cultures and interweave all religious, spiritual, and non-religious identities within academic/social infrastructure. As demonstrated by the contrasting experiences of participants at Universities A and B, the presence or absence of dedicated faith spaces, inclusive programming, and supportive policies significantly impact Muslim students' sense of belonging and ability to express their religious identities on campus (see sections 7.3 and 7.5).

In capturing Muslim students' experiences and their productivity in creating communal belonging and holistic faith affirmation within their institutions, this study's findings substantiate the need to transcend additive accommodation and religious privatisation (Modood & Calhoun 2015). Instead, campuses must reorient towards multicultural pluralism that reimagines secular neutrality beyond religious absence/suppression, enacting cultural recentring by proactively embedding religious consciousness and living faith experiences within the higher education infrastructure (Dinham &Shaw, 2017; Scott-Baumann & Bunglawala, 2020; Awang-Hashim & Valdez, 2019; Chikwa et al. 2022). This involves not only providing adequate prayer spaces and accommodations, but also integrating religious and spiritual dimensions into academic curricula, social programming, and institutional policies in a way that validates the multidimensional identities and lived experiences of all students, including those from diverse faith backgrounds (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Aune et al., 2019; Stevenson & Aune, 2017).

8.4 Overarching analysis

Central to this study's findings is the recognition of the significance of faith identity in anchoring Muslim students' self-perceptions, values, aspirations, and meaning-making process. Participants' narratives reveal the all-encompassing nature of their religious beliefs, which serve not only as a source of spiritual guidance, but also as a fundamental framework for navigating the challenges and opportunities of university life. This insight challenges the assumptions of secularity in higher education and calls for a paradigm shift in how universities

understand, accommodate, and celebrate religious diversity on campus because HEIs are not wholly secular institutions despite often wearing their secularism as a badge of distinction (Gilliat-Ray, 2000; Berger, 1999; Bryant, 2006; Guest et al., 2013; Modood & Calhoun, 2015). By acknowledging the centrality of faith in Muslim students' lives, this study contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for a more holistic and inclusive approach to support students' spiritual, academic, and social development (Malik and Wykes, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021).

Moreover, despite facing marginalisation, discrimination, and the pervasive impact of Islamophobia (Allen, 2023; Gholami, 2021; Akel, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Hopkins, 2011), this study's intersectional approach, grounded in the MIIM framework, reveals the agency and productivity of Muslim students in navigating challenges and asserting their identities, as demonstrated by their active resistance to marginalisation and creative placemaking practices. This emphasis on Muslim students' strengths, resistance, and proactive strategies represents a significant counter-narrative to dominant deficit discourses that often pathologies or victimise marginalised communities (Bhopal, 2017; Mir, 2014; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Mahmood, 2005). By highlighting the agentic ways in which Muslim students negotiate their intersecting identities, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the strategies and resources that enable marginalised students to thrive and resist within the university context.

Another crucial finding that emerged from this study was the impact of institutional habitus on Muslim students' experiences of inclusion, belonging, and identity negotiation. The comparative analysis of Universities A and B, situated within the MIIM framework, reveals stark disparities in terms of faith provisions, cultural norms, and support structures, underscoring the critical role of university policies and practices in shaping the campus climate for religious diversity (Bourdieu 1986; Crozier et al. 2008; Reay et al. 2017). This finding encourages universities to critically examine their institutional assumptions, power structures, and commitment to authentic religious pluralism and to take proactive steps towards creating inclusive and equitable environments that validate the multidimensional identities of all students. By situating Muslim students' experiences within the broader context of institutional habitus, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of

higher education in fostering social justice, diversity, and inclusion (Chikwa et al., 2022; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this study's focus on the experiences of first-in-family Muslim students offers valuable insights into the intersectional challenges and complexities navigated by this underrepresented subgroup. By examining how first-in-family status intersects with religious, racial, and cultural identities, this study extends our understanding of the unique barriers and opportunities faced by Muslim students who are pioneering in higher education within their families and communities (Ives et al., 2021; O'Shea, 2016). This intersectional analysis, grounded in the MIIM framework, highlights the importance of developing targeted support systems and inclusive practices that recognise and address the diverse needs and aspirations of marginalised students.

The findings of this study, grounded in the MIIM framework, offer a lens for understanding and transforming the lived realities of Muslim students in British higher education, highlighting the complex interplay of individual, social, and institutional factors that shapes their university experiences. The overarching significance of this study lies in its transformative vision for higher education, a vision that embraces the complexity, diversity, and resilience of Muslim students' lived experiences as catalysts for institutional change. By centring on the voices and agency of Muslim students, challenging essentialist notions of identity, and advocating for a paradigm shift towards intersectional equity and authentic religious pluralism, this study lays the groundwork for a more inclusive, responsive, and empowering university culture. It calls upon higher education institutions to reimagine their approach to religious diversity, moving beyond tokenistic accommodations or assumptions of secularity towards a holistic and proactive commitment to support the spiritual, academic, and social flourishing of Muslim students and all members of the campus community.

8.5   Significant contributions

This study makes several significant contributions to the theoretical and empirical understanding of Muslim students' experience in British higher education.

8.5.1   Methodological and Theoretical Contribution

This research makes vital contributions to understanding the multifaceted experiences of Muslim students navigating British higher education. By centering an inductive, qualitative approach grounded in participants' lived realities, the study provides nuanced insights into how Muslim students construct sacred spaces and affirm religious identities within university contexts (Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2020).

A key strength lies in cultivating safe spaces where Muslim students authentically expressed their narratives through empathetic researcher-participant engagement (Lahman et al., 2011; Gemignani, 2017). The interview process itself became a sanctified arena for participants to openly perform, articulate and make sense of their religious selfhoods (Amir-Moazami, 2018). This fostered trust enabling vulnerabilities and resistance strategies to emerge organically, contrasting dominant essentialising discourses (Pihlaja and Thompson, 2017; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Choudhury, 2021). Prioritising Muslim student voices challenges monolithic portrayals, highlighting instead their diversity, resilience, and agency in inhabiting university landscapes (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). Moreover, the study's emphasis on the spatial and performative dimensions of Muslim identity contributes to a more dynamic and contextualised understanding of faith identity formation and negotiation in higher education contexts.

Additionally, this research also makes an original theoretical contribution to the field through the development of the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework, which offers a comprehensive and nuanced approach to understanding the complex and dynamic processes of identity formation, social interaction, and institutional engagement that shape Muslim students' experiences in higher education. The Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) framework inspired by 'intersectionality 'theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990) [2] and draws upon Saba Mahmood's theorisation of agency and subjectivity (2005), Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field (Bourdieu, 1986), social representation theory by Moscovici (1961; 1986), and Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, as well as spatial theories examining the intersection of religion and secular spaces to provide a comprehensive conceptualisation of Muslim students' multidimensional identities and experiences in higher education. It seeks to capture the diversity and complexity of Muslim

students' identities and experiences and to highlight the structural and cultural barriers that they face in university settings. The MIIM framework provides a nuanced intersectional lens attuned to the diversity and fluidity of Muslim students' experiences. By grounding the MIIM in intersectional principles, this study also contributes to ongoing debates around applying and advancing intersectional understanding as a critical analytical tool for examining the multidimensional lived realities of marginalised student populations in higher education contexts (Bhopal, 2017).

The MIIM framework extends and challenges existing theories and frameworks in the field of higher education in several ways. Firstly, by centering the lived experiences and voices of Muslim students, the MIIM framework disrupts the dominant secular paradigms and Eurocentric assumptions that often underpin mainstream higher education research and policy (Grosfoguel, 2013; Gholami, 2021). It brings to the fore the complex interplay of religious, racial, ethnic, gendered, and classed identities that shape Muslim students' experiences, highlighting the limitations of single-axis frameworks that focus on one dimension of identity at the expense of others (Meer & Modood, 2009; Elahi & Khan, 2017). Secondly, the MIIM framework challenges the tendency to relegate religion to a compartmentalised or peripheral aspect of students' identities (Meer, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Giddens, 1991), by emphasising the centrality and pervasiveness of faith in shaping Muslim students' self-perceptions, values, aspirations, and meaning-making processes. This contributes to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the role of faith in shaping students' university experiences and calls for a paradigm shift in how universities understand, accommodate, and celebrate religious diversity on campus (Dinham and Shaw, 2017; Hannam et al., 2020; Seiple and Hoover, 2021; Scott-Baumann and Bunglawala, 2020; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). Thirdly, the MIIM framework extends Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, institutional habitus, and field by examining the complex interplay between individual religious habitus and institutional habitus in shaping Muslim students' experiences and outcomes. It offers empirically grounded interventions that challenge and complicate prevailing assumptions about the nature of habitus, institutional habitus, and field, opening new possibilities for understanding the dynamic interplay between agency, structure, and identity in educational contexts, particularly for religious minorities and FIF students (Reay et al., 2009; Stahl, 2015; Ingram, 2018; Costa et al., 2019). Finally, the MIIM framework

contributes to the growing body of literature that examines the dynamics of religious habitus within supposedly secular educational spaces (Mellor & Shilling, 2014; Ingram, 2018; Stevenson, 2012), and the specific challenges faced by Muslim students in these contexts (Hopkins, 2011; Stevenson, 2017; Malik &Wykes, 2018, Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Chaudry, 2021). It reveals the complex negotiations and adaptations required for religious minority students to navigate institutional norms and expectations that may marginalise or exclude their religious identities and worldviews, highlighting the agentic ways in which Muslim students resist, transform, and create spaces of belonging within the university.

8.5.2 Empirical Contributions: Comparative Institutional Analysis and Amplification of Muslim Students' Voices

The comparative analysis of Muslim students' experiences at two UK universities highlights the significant role of institutional factors in shaping their experiences and outcomes. The findings show that the institutional culture, policies, and practices of universities can either support or hinder Muslim students' sense of belonging, engagement, and achievement on campus, depending on their level of inclusivity, diversity, and responsiveness to their needs and perspectives. This finding resonates with the growing body of literature that emphasises the importance of institutional factors in shaping the experiences and outcomes of marginalised and underrepresented groups in higher education and the need for universities to develop more inclusive and equitable policies and practices that support the needs and perspectives of all students. It also contributes to the broader debate on the role of universities in promoting social justice and diversity in society and the need for higher education to be more responsive and accountable to the needs and aspirations of diverse communities and stakeholders (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Aune & Stevenson, 2017; Hopkins, 2011; Possamai et al., 2016).

The findings of this study make important contributions to the existing literature on Muslim students' experiences in higher education, providing rich and contextualised evidence of the diverse challenges, strategies, and resources that shape their university journeys. The study amplifies the voices and agency of Muslim students, challenges deficit-based narratives, and highlights their resilience and creativity in navigating and transforming their university experiences.

8.6   Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Muslim students in British higher education, it is important to acknowledge its limitations.

Firstly, the sample size of 30 participants, while allowing for in-depth exploration of individual narratives, is not representative of the entire population of Muslim students in the UK. The study focused on two universities in the West Midlands region, and the findings thus cannot be generalised to other institutional or geographical contexts. Thus, this study provides a snapshot of Muslim students' experiences at a particular point in time and does not capture the longitudinal trajectories or long-term impacts of their university journeys. Consequently, these findings may not entirely portray the dynamic and evolving nature of Muslim students' identities and experiences throughout their university careers and beyond.

Secondly, this study relied on self-reported data gathered through semi-structured interviews, which may have been subject to social desirability bias or selective memory. Participants may have consciously or unconsciously presented their experiences in a way that aligns with their self-image or perceived expectations of the researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This phenomenon, also referred to as "demand characteristics," was acknowledged in the study. Steps were taken to mitigate its impact (Damaskinidis, 2017), including thorough review of consent and information prior to interviews, and ensuring participant anonymity (Knapik, 2006). However, participants were informed before the interviews that confidentiality might be breached in cases of safeguarding concerns. This may have influenced what they chose to share and discuss during interviews.

Despite these limitations, this study makes valuable contributions to the understanding of Muslim students' experiences in British higher education and offers important implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

8.7   Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study offer a call to action for a change in how higher education institutions approach religious diversity, inclusion, and holistic student support. Several key implications of this study have emerged.

First, universities must recognise and value religious diversity as an essential aspect of students' identities and experiences in higher education. This implication is grounded in the findings from Chapters 5 and 6, which highlight how participants' Muslim identities were central to their self-perception and lived experiences (see Section 5.2), intersecting with other identities (see Section 5.3). However, there was often a clash between students' religious habitus and institutional habitus (see Section 6.5). This suggests the need for universities to move beyond narrow conceptions of diversity and develop policies and practices that are sensitive to how religious identity shapes students' experiences.

Secondly, universities must provide adequate and accessible spaces and facilities for Muslim students on campus, not just for praying but also for socialising. This implication emerges from Chapter 7, where it was demonstrated how participants actively created sacred spaces like libraries for prayer due to lack of facilities (see section 7.4), with some institutions like University B severely lacking such provisions (see section 7.4.4). Participant voices emphasised the importance of prayer rooms and nearby social spaces for fostering belonging and community (see sections, 7.4.4 and 7.4.5). These environments serve not merely as functional venues for religious practice but also as vital cultural hubs that enable the preservation and authentic expression of faith-based traditions, values, and ways of being.

Thirdly, universities need to offer culturally sensitive counselling and support services for Muslim students on campus. This implication arises from the numerous accounts in Chapter 5 of participants facing Islamophobia, discrimination, and its impacts on mental health and sense of belonging on campus (see Section 5.4). University culture and the lack of representation intensified these experiences, highlighting the need for tailored support services.

Underpinning these recommendations is the recognition that creating an inclusive and supportive environment for Muslim students is not a matter of tokenistic gestures or surface-level initiatives. This requires a deep and sustained commitment to understanding and valuing the multidimensional identities, experiences, and perspectives that Muslim students bring to the academic arena. By actively listening to and amplifying the voices of Muslim students, universities can gain invaluable insights into the nuanced challenges and opportunities that they face daily. This knowledge should inform the development of holistic policies and

practices that address the practical and psychological needs of Muslim students, empowering them to thrive academically, socially, and spiritually within a university setting.

8.8   Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers several recommendations for future research on the experiences of Muslim students in higher education.

Firstly, future research should continue to develop and refine the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework by applying it to different contexts and populations of higher education Muslim students. This could include conducting comparative studies of Muslim students' experiences in different countries, regions, or institutional types or exploring the intersections of Muslim identity with other social identities, such as disability, sexuality, or age. Future research should also consider the ways in which the MIIM framework can be adapted and extended to other marginalised or underrepresented groups in higher education, such as other religious or ethnic minorities or students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Secondly, toolkits and assessments should be developed based on the MIIM framework to help universities evaluate and enhance their campus religious and cultural climate. Such toolkits grounded in MIIM's intersecting dimensions of identity, agency, social representations, and structures could provide guidelines for institutions to:

1. Assess accommodation of multidimensional religious/cultural minority student identities
2. Identify barriers constraining students' agency and self-expression.
3. Evaluate dominant narratives/discourses shaping social representations of minority faiths.
4. Examine institutional norms/practices for potential biases or misalignments, combining methods such as questionnaires, focus groups, spatial audits, and policy analyses.

These MIIM-based toolkits could generate a holistic understanding of the religious/cultural climate from minoritised student perspectives, pinpointing areas for improvement in accommodations and anti-discrimination policies.

Thirdly, future research should adopt a longitudinal and collaborative approach to study Muslim students' higher education experiences. The findings of this research highlight the dynamic and context-dependent nature of Muslim students' identities and experiences and the need for research that captures the complex and evolving processes of identity formation, social interaction, and institutional engagement over time. Future research should consider conducting longitudinal studies that follow Muslim students' trajectories and experiences from pre-university to post-university and that involve Muslim students as active collaborators and co-researchers in the research process. This could involve the use of participatory action research or other collaborative research methods that empower them to shape the research agenda, design, and dissemination and promote a more reciprocal and transformative relationship between researchers and participants.

Fourthly, future research should explore the role of technology and social media in shaping Muslim students' experiences and identities in higher education. The findings of this research highlight the importance of social interaction, community building, and identity expression for Muslim students' sense of belonging and engagement in higher education and the need for research that captures the ways in which they navigate and negotiate their identities and experiences in online and offline spaces. Future research should consider the ways in which technology and social media can both facilitate and constrain Muslim students' agency, resilience, and resistance in higher education and the implications for policy and practice in the digital age.

Finally, future research should adopt a more critical and transformative approach to the study of Muslim students' experiences in higher education. The findings of this research highlight the significant impact of Islamophobia, discrimination, and marginalisation on Muslim students' mental health, well-being, and academic outcomes, and the need for research that not only documents these challenges and barriers but also seeks to challenge and transform them. Future research should consider ways in which research can be used as a tool for social justice and empowerment, by working with Muslim students and communities to identify and address the structural and cultural inequalities that shape their experiences in higher education, and by advocating for more inclusive and equitable policies, practices, and spaces that support Muslim students' success and well-being.

8.9   Personal Reflections

As I reflect on my research journey, I am filled with gratitude and humility for the transformative impact this project has had on my personal and professional growth. Engaging with the complex narratives of Muslim students has not only deepened my understanding of the interplay between faith, identity, and higher education but has also challenged me to confront my own positionality, biases, and ethical responsibilities as a researcher (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Zempi, 2016; Ademolu, 2024; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

One of the most significant challenges I encountered was navigating the ethics approval process, particularly regarding the development of the participant information sheet. The Ethics Committee's recommendation to include language explicitly mentioning the possibility of breaking confidentiality under Prevent or counterterrorism circumstances raised concerns about the potential stigmatisation of Muslim students, who already face challenges due to the Prevent Strategy (Zempi & Tripli, 2022; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Saeed, 2018; Abbas, 2019; Kyriacou et al., 2017). As a Muslim researcher committed to creating a safe and inclusive space for participants, I grappled with the tension between transparency and my duty to protect my participants' well-being and dignity (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2009; Lahman et al. 2010). The inclusion of such a language felt like a betrayal of trust and perpetuation of the stigma and surveillance that Muslim students were subjected to under the guise of counterterrorism efforts (Qurashi, 2018; Kundnani, 2014).

Zinn's (1979) warning about the unequal and potentially exploitative nature of researcher-participant relationships and Lather's (2001) caution about research becoming an "invasive stretch of surveillance" resonated strongly with my concerns. These concerns were further amplified by the historical and ongoing legacy of unethical research practices that have harmed and exploited marginalised communities, particularly those subjected to state surveillance and criminalisation. Consequently, I decided to refuse to include stigmatising language. This decision was grounded in the ethics of care and protection of the participants, especially as Muslim students' experiences and identities are highly politicised (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Gilligan, 1993). This led to prolonged negotiations with the ethics committee, delaying the research timeline and prompting my transition to part-time PhD studies while continuing to work. The emotional labour and practical

challenges involved in advocating for the rights and dignity of my participants were significant, but ultimately necessary to uphold the principles of ethical and socially just research (Denzin, 2017; Darra, 2008; Haggerty, 2004; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015).

My Muslim positionality granted me insider status, facilitating rapport, trust, and empathy with participants through shared experiences of Islamophobia and marginalisation (Zempi, 2016; Ryan et al., 2011; Tinker & Armstrong, 2008; Zine, 2006; Bhopal, 2010). This insider positionality allowed for richer insights into participants' lived experiences, a deeper understanding of the potential harms of stigmatising language, and more authentic engagement with participants (Ademolu, 2024, Aston et al. 2015; Chavez, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, Greene, 2014).

The complexity of navigating insider/outsider dynamics was further compounded by the intersecting aspects of my identity as a researcher. While my shared faith afforded me a degree of insider status, other aspects of my identity, such as my gender, ethnicity, class background, and academic status positioned me as an outsider in certain contexts. For example, as a female researcher interviewing male participants, I had to navigate the gendered power dynamics and cultural norms surrounding gender segregation and modesty (Bhimji, 2020; Broom et al. 2009). Additionally, as a staff member interviewing students at both institutions, I had to be mindful of how power dynamics could shape my interactions with the participants (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021). Navigating these intersectional identities required constant "reflexive embodied empathy" (Finlay, 2005) and "critical reflexivity" (Dowling, 2006). This involved not only examining my own positionality and subjectivities, but also interrogating the broader social, political, and historical contexts that shape the experiences of Muslim students in higher education (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Gilborn, 2015; Zempi, 2016; Shain, 2020; Shah, et al. 2021; Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Ademolu, 2024).

This critical reflexivity process was extended to analyse and interpret the data. As an insider researcher, I had to be vigilant about the risk of imposing my own assumptions or biases on participants' narratives, which required engaging with bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012), in which I set aside my personal preconceptions and allowed the data to speak for itself. Therefore, throughout the research process, I sought to cultivate humility and openness in

my research practice, acknowledging that my emotional responses and interpretations are just one of the many perspectives. By embracing bracketing as an iterative process of critical self-examination (Tufford & Newman, 2012), I strived to balance insider proximity and critical distance by engaging in ongoing reflection and dialogue to ensure that my work remained grounded in the lived realities of Muslim students.

Furthermore, to mitigate the risks of over-identification, projection, and misrepresentation while generating co-constructed, contextualised knowledge that is responsive to the needs and perspectives of Muslim students (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015), I regularly sought feedback from colleagues and supervisors and shared initial analyses and interpretations with the participants, inviting them to help enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings and treat the participants as co-creators of knowledge. This collaborative approach to knowledge production sought to disrupt traditional hierarchies between researchers and participants, recognising the expertise and agency of Muslim students in shaping the research agenda and outcomes (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021; Fine, 2018; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Mirra et al., 2016).

The knowledge gained from the participants was not only impactful for the purpose of the research. Throughout this research journey, I have been transformed by the emotional connections and empathetic engagement that emerged through my interactions with the participants. I found myself deeply invested in the struggles, triumphs, and aspirations that they shared. These emotional connections have been a powerful source of motivation and insight, allowing me to develop a nuanced understanding of the lived realities of Muslim students, consistent with the principles of "empathic neutrality" (Patton, 1990) and "epistemological empathy" (Watts, 2008). A particular example was when a participant shared her experience of isolation and fear when wearing a hijab at a university. Her story of finding belonging and community among other Muslim students served as a reminder of the transformative power of small acts of kindness and solidarity, reflecting the importance of "safe spaces" and "counterspace" for marginalised students in higher education (Solorzano et al., 2000). This experience has significantly shifted my awareness and practice, inspiring me to consciously foster a more inclusive environment through my daily interactions on campus and embodying the principles of "culturally responsive" and "equity-minded" pedagogy (Howard 2021).

Navigating these emotional connections presents challenges in managing the potential for vicarious trauma, burnout, and compromised objectivity (Zempi, 2016; Ryan et al., 2011). There were moments during the interviews when I found myself fighting back tears, deeply moved by the participants' stories of resilience, resistance, and hope in the face of systemic oppression and marginalisation. At these moments, I had to remind myself to prioritise the participants' emotional needs, create a safe and compassionate space for them to share, and seek support in processing my own emotions while maintaining appropriate boundaries (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Rager, 2005). Developing self-care strategies, such as debriefing with colleagues, engaging in reflective writing, and seeking professional support, was essential for maintaining my own well-being and ethical practices (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018).

Nonetheless, these emotional connections deepened my sense of responsibility and commitment towards using research as a tool for social justice and empowerment. Bearing witness to the participants' stories not only highlighted the urgent need for systemic change in higher education, but also affirmed the transformative potential of counter-narratives and collective resistance in challenging dominant discourses and power structures (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Choudhury, 2021; Freire, 1970; Borda, et al. 2006). By amplifying the voices and experiences of Muslim students, I sought to challenge dominant deficit narratives and advocate for more inclusive and equitable policies and practices in higher education, a form of "scholarly activism" (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2015), which situates research as a means of promoting social justice and dismantling systemic inequities (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2021).

Furthermore, this research has deepened my understanding of the role of higher education in reproducing and challenging social inequalities, as well as the potential of universities to serve as sites of resistance, transformation, and decolonisation (Bhambra et al., 2018; Arday & Mirza, 2018). By investigating the ways in which Islamophobia, racism, and other forms of oppression are embedded within the structures, practices, and cultures of higher education, this study seeks to contribute to a more critical and transformative discourse on diversity, inclusion, and social justice in academia (Pilkington 2013; Yancy & Sharpe 2018). This has involved not only critiquing existing practices but also imagining and enacting alternative models of higher education that centre on the knowledge, experiences, and aspirations of marginalised communities (de Sousa Santos, 2017; Stein& Andreotti, 2016).

This journey has also challenged me to confront my own privileges and complicity in systems of oppression and develop a more nuanced and reflexive understanding of the complex dynamics of power, identity, and differences that shape the experiences of Muslim students in higher education (Bourdieu, 1977; Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, as I move forward, I am committed to engaging in embodied critical praxis (Darder, 2017) that combine the pursuit of knowledge with the struggle for social justice, recognising that the personal and political are intimately intertwined in the quest for transformative change. This commitment involves not only producing critical and engaged scholarship but also working in solidarity with marginalised communities to challenge systemic inequities (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). This involves embracing a vision of higher education as a site of transformative praxis, where knowledge is not only produced but also mobilised in the service of social justice, and where the university becomes a catalyst for individual and collective liberation (Harney & Moten, 2013; Shukaitis, 2009).

Last but not least, I am forever grateful to the brave and resilient Muslim students who trusted me with their stories. Despite facing numerous challenges and barriers, they actively navigate and negotiate their identities and experiences by drawing on personal, social, and institutional resources to thrive and succeed in higher education. I am also deeply aware of the responsibility that comes with this research to use the knowledge and insights gained to make a positive difference in the lives of Muslim students and the wider higher-education community. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to ongoing efforts to create more inclusive, equitable, and transformative university environments where all students, regardless of their background or identity, can flourish and achieve their full potential.

8.10 Concluding remarks

This thesis explored the multidimensional experiences of Muslim students in British higher education using the Muslim Identity Intersectional Matrix (MIIM) conceptual framework to capture the diversity and complexity of their identities, challenges, and strategies. The findings highlight the centrality of faith identity, the significance of institutional factors, and the creative ways in which Muslim students navigate and transform their university experiences. They emphasise the importance of recognising and valuing the agency, resistance, and community-building capacities of Muslim students in the face of marginalisation and Islamophobia. By highlighting the complex and agentic ways in which

Muslim students navigate and resist exclusionary practices, this study challenges deficit-based narratives and calls for a shift towards strengths-based approaches that amplify the cultural wealth and diverse coping mechanisms of marginalised students. As universities strive to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, it is crucial that they engage with the lived experiences and perspectives of Muslim students and work collaboratively to change oppressive structures and practices, while supporting the development of their students' identities and aspirations.

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10 Appendices