Racism without Race: The Racialization of Middle Eastern and North African Students at U.S. Colleges

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RACISM WITHOUT RACE: THE RACIALIZATION OF MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN STUDENTS AT U.S. COLLEGES

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Although a growing body of literature covers the experiences of international students at U.S. colleges, the stories of those who do not fit into the U.S. racial schema remain untold. This study examined how Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students understood their racial identities given the United States’ tense history with Islam and the MENA world. Using foundational texts on critical race theory, current scholarship on Arab Americans and foreign-born students, and facets of the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS), this study examined the experiences of MENA students who study amid a national backdrop of xenophobia and racialized Islamophobia. This study included 58 survey respondents and 10 interview participants. Findings suggested participants were 53% more likely to identify as Black within the U.S. Census schema. When self-identifying, 42% of participants chose new terminology such as Arab, North African, and Middle Eastern. Interview participants felt most comfortable with other MENA international students and Black and Muslim peers, and reported often self-isolating from white spaces due to fear of tokenization and prejudice. Participants who identified as MENA experienced more pride in their heritage and a deeper understanding of the role of race in their lives than participants who identified as white. These findings illuminated the need for increased representation of MENAs' racial and sociocultural lived experiences, which are currently not reflected in the U.S. protocol of labeling MENA peoples as white.
DEDICATION

In loving memory of my Papa, Mohamed Mesouani, who taught me how to live with integrity and stand up for what is right. I miss you every day.
I thank God for this and all things. I am eternally thankful for my father, may he rest in peace and forgiveness. I do this work for him and my MENA family so that we can be proud of who we are without having to fend off the gallons of bleach and gasoline that get thrown our way. My beautiful Mesouanis; Jazāk Allāhu Khayran. To my brilliant wife, Rachel, thank you for your love and endless patience as I whined about the Census, sighed dramatically, and watched Criminal Minds on loop as I type-type-typed away. To Libby, thank you for being the best mate anyone could ask for and for teaching me the wonderful world of Excel: SPSS, who? To Liz, Trish, AP, Stephanie, Sarah, Alister, Yury, Jessica, Chandra, Greta, Kwame, Anne, Liz G., thank you for being my home away from home and always keeping me going. Supergroup! My dear Tommy, Dianne, Karla, Zulema, Jennifer, Mario, Gabriel, Graciela, Norma, Raketa, Michelle, Tiffany, Adan, Abel—we are the lil cohort that did! I am better for knowing each of you.

Dr. Quezada, thank you for your mentorship, encouragement, and wit; you made this process feel both possible and enjoyable. Dr. Kalyanpur, there aren’t enough words to thank you, so please know that you are stuck with me for life. Dr. Molina, Dr. Stolz, Dr. Fabionar, and Dr. Spencer, bless you for the love and light you bring. Dr. Lam, Tré, Sergio, and Usama—you’re the heroes we all need. Thank you to caffeine, heated blankets, and therapy. Lastly, but certainly not least in any measure, to my participants, I quite literally could not have done this without you. Thank you for your trust in me. I appreciate each of you and really just wish we could have all hung out in college! Barak Allahu Fikum!
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The world of humans is divided by lines, but the mind knows no limits, the heart no barriers.

—Moroccan Proverb

I came alone as an international student to the United States from Morocco in 2006 with two suitcases; it was my first big trip away from home. Although I was ready for the rigor of the classroom, I was not ready for the conversations and uncomfortable situations classmates would impose on me. During my first year of college, a classmate listed me as a personal reference on her application for an internship with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). I obliged and attended what my classmate initially claimed would be “an informal chat” with an agent about her character and interests. When I arrived for this “chat,” I quickly learned my classmate had been asked to provide the contact information of all the Muslims she knew. Sitting across from a stern-looking man who brandished an official name tag, I was instructed to turn over my passport and immigration paperwork while explaining why I came to the United States. The CIA agent closed our interview by genially saying, “You know, we have to make sure you don’t have horns.” Many years later, in 2020, while working at a small college in the Midwest, a Department of Homeland Security officer called my cellphone ostensibly to serve as a reference for a former student employee and instead asked about my personal life and travel history.

Both instances served as violating reminders that, as an Arab immigrant, I do not have the right to feel comfortable and at times safe on U.S. soil. Through reaching out to
fellow Middle East and North Africa (MENA) friends, following MENA scholars, and learning about Arab Americans’ ongoing demands for a MENA category in the U.S. Census, I know my story is not unique, but one square of a quilt of MENA experiences that have yet to be examined.

Need for the Research Study

International students arrive on what are clearly labeled temporary stay visas. Despite the short-term nature of students’ legal standing, the rhetoric around college life is very much one of a second home in which students are told they will make lifelong friends and memories. Although there is substantive research such as that of international student adjustment, there is a gap in extant research considering foreign-born Arab students who land in a country with a complicated political history with the MENA world (Freeman & Li, 2019; Fries-Britt et al., 2014).

The MENA world encompasses Arab nations in the Maghreb and the Mashriq, the westernmost and easternmost points of the Middle East. Additionally, despite growing bodies of literature on mental health concerns of students and alumni of color and Muslim Americans, there remains little discussion on the well-being of Muslim international students and alumni who have grown up with formative, cultural exposure to Islam (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012). This study examined how international Arab students are impacted by their time in the United States amid the potential for social exclusion and acculturation. Awareness has grown regarding the emotional vulnerability this population

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1 For the purposes of this dissertation, the terms Arab and MENA were used interchangeably to describe the same geographical and cultural region of the world.
might face, as the MENA identity has been both vilified and ignored in popular culture (Brondolo et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2012). This chapter explores the landscape where international MENA students and alumni live and learn and how their school, professional, or personal settings affect them by providing a brief overview of U.S. attitudes toward Arab and Muslim communities, which are often perceived as synonymous.

**Background on Middle Eastern and North African Identity**

Traveling internationally for education has become a global norm presently in the Arab world (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022; Israel & Batalova, 2021; Jou, n.d.). An estimated 5.5% of U.S. college enrollment nationwide includes temporary stay international students (Bustamante, 2021). Despite the COVID-19 global pandemic, the United States hosted over 1 million international students from across the globe each year between 2016–2021 (IIE, 2022; Israel & Batalova, 2021). The *Chronicle of Higher Education* found 62% of international student enrollments occur at the undergraduate level, and roughly 10% of all international student enrollments in the United States come from MENA (Sawahel, 2016).

**MENA Region**

The MENA region is comprised of the geographical and cultural region often referred to as the Arab world. Although the term Arab refers to the linguistic identity of those communities that predominantly speak Arabic and its various dialects, Arab also relates to societies’ ethnic and cultural qualities throughout the MENA region. These two terms are not universally synonymous due to Urdu, Kurdish, Tashelhit, and Hebrew-speaking populations. Other groups have suggested the region be referred to as South-
West Asia/North Africa (SWANA), though the use of this term appears to be limited to the U.S. West Coast (SWANA Alliance, n.d.). This study focused on Arab MENA students raised in Arab cultures and used the labels of Arab and MENA due to their prevalence in both U.S. and global contexts.

Scholars have noted there is no universally agreed-upon definition of which countries are consistently considered in the MENA region (Kiprop, 2019). The World Atlas (Kiprop, 2019) considers this the comprehensive list of MENA countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Although the World Atlas (Kiprop, 2019) definition consists of these 19 countries, their official statement also noted the following 16 countries are sometimes considered: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chad, Comoros, Cyprus, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, Sudan, and Turkey. As a born-and-raised Moroccan, I recognize neither of the above lists includes Western Sahara, which I have included in this study.

Colonization of the MENA World

During a British initiative to divide the world into categories such as the “Far East” and “Near East,” the term “Middle East” was coined in 1901 by a white\(^2\) U.S. military strategist, Admiral Mahan, who neither spoke Arabic nor lived in these regions (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016). Cleveland and Bunton (2016) noted the decision makers in these naming processes had little direct contact with the African and Asian nations they

\(^2\) I made the decision not to follow the APA requirement of capitalizing white to emphasize my position that capital-W Whiteness is an ineffective and reductive moniker that erases MENA identity. I took this stance as a half-white woman living through the colonization of my Arab and Amazigh people.
chose to divide and categorize. The term Maghreb, which refers to Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, has a disputed origin. Although the Arabic translation of Maghreb is “the place of the setting sun,” white European academic Emile-Félix Gautier claimed to have coined the term to refer to the countries of Morocco, Western Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya (Vikor, 2013).

The MENA region has a rich history of Amazigh and Arab cultures; however, it has historically been and is presently colonized by Eurocentric globalization. This colonial history blurs the boundaries between nations and overlooks countless landmark historical events and sociopolitical and academic achievements from this region. The countries and cultures that comprise the MENA region are debated and often defined by non-Arab and non-MENA governments and historians. The blurred lines of MENA geography and the amorphousness of its definition have allowed gross generalizations and sweeping stereotypes to run awry without solid affirmations of who MENA communities are and why they matter.

For the purpose of this dissertation and because of the prevalence of more prominent phenotypical, cultural, and religious similarities among these nations, the MENA region included the following countries, all of which are members of the League of Arab States (2021): Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen. Although I cannot profess to be an expert on the geopolitical nuances of all 27 countries, I am a Moroccan citizen who has studied both Arab and Amazigh cultures in North Africa. I can, therefore, claim firsthand familiarity
with the region. Furthermore, I relied upon an inclusive combination of the demarcations offered by the League of Arab States and the Arab League so that I can uplift Arab and MENA voices instead of external, colonizing European forces. Figure 1 depicts the map of the MENA region that was included in this study.

![Figure 1. A Map of the Middle East and North Africa: The MENA Region](image)


**Eurocentricity in the MENA Region**

The MENA region has continually yet inconsistently been defined by white Eurocentric colonial forces (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016; Vikor, 2013). Throughout its centuries-long history, the U.S. Census Bureau has not provided a specific classification for persons from the MENA region. As a result, federally created data on Arab or MENA
populations in a U.S. context are not publicly available. Given the lack of a consistent definition of the MENA region, official U.S. population figures of the community range from just over 1 million to 3.5 million people of MENA heritage (Arab American Institute Foundation, n.d.; Wang, 2013). Since the U.S. Census Bureau’s genesis in 1790, there has been no specific categorization for North Africans or Middle Easterners other than “Some Other Race” or “White,” which is currently defined as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022, para. 7). Approximately 80% of the U.S. MENA population are first- and second-generation immigrants, the first of whom were Syrian Christians escaping the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s and after World War 1 (Haiek, 2022; Naff, 1985). The remaining 20% received green cards, or student or work visas after 2010 (Cumoletti, 2021).

Available data indicate the MENA population in the United States is younger than their Black, Latinx, and white/European peers, both in terms of mean age and regarding their length of residence on U.S. soil (Cumoletti, 2021; Haiek, 2022; Naff, 1985). As a result, international students from the MENA region enter a country where they do not see themselves represented in U.S. culture as much as other ethnic and cultural groups. As a younger population with fewer generations of residency in the United States, the Arab American community is mainly underrepresented in both popular culture and political influence. What little representation they receive is overwhelmingly negative (Beydoun, 2018; Shaheen, 2003). Though Arabs are not the only recent arrivals to the U.S. cultural landscape, Arabs and Muslims are disproportionately portrayed as terrorists and violent rapists in as much as 95% of U.S. mass media (Shaheen, 2003). Much of this
negative representation stems from the politicized racialization of Islam (Beydoun, 2018).

The exclusion of appropriate racial identifiers in the U.S. Census has not hindered the ubiquitous prejudice against Muslims. This practice has fueled discriminatory policies against MENA communities, most recently since the Trump administration issued Executive Order 13769, also known as the Muslim Ban. The ban was a policy doppelgänger for the post-9/11 National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), which registered, profiled, and monitored young immigrant men from every MENA country (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Singer, 2021). Between 2016 and 2020, 60–62% of Muslims reported experiencing faith-based discrimination and violence (Ikramullah, 2020). In the 2017–2018 academic year, one year after Trump implemented his Muslim Ban, undergraduate enrollments from the MENA region declined by 9% (Bollag, 2017; Fox, 2018). The Muslim Ban served as a clear signal to Muslims and people from Muslim countries the United States would not welcome them. The U.S. reputation as a global melting pot of diversity did not and does not extend to those from the Muslim-majority Arab world (Bollag, 2017). As a result, international students from the MENA region study in a country that legally polices their presence based on stereotyped characteristics coded as profoundly contradictory to the ideas of U.S. democracy. This U.S. conflation of a demonized religion and the nebulousness of the MENA region has resulted in double-bind confused stereotypes and xenophobia that international students encounter upon entering U.S. campus life.

**Discrimination Without Representation**

Without sufficient data, care, or support, international students from the MENA region are subject to experiencing discrimination without representation in demographic
data. Any discrimination these students face is statistically silenced without accurately representing MENA life’s racial and sociocultural truths. The whitewashing of international MENA students does not allow them to share their heritage, celebrate their successes, and address the challenges they endure amid the systemic racism and rising nationalism of the United States. Arab international students and their unique lived experiences remain largely ignored without sufficient investigation. As such, there is a crucial need to examine MENA students’ identity development amid the landscape of U.S. higher education. Current scholarship practices on race and its intersections with education systems do not presently explore the experiences of international students of color who are not represented in U.S. racial schemas. Though U.S. government demographers do not categorize MENA individuals as people of color, the pervasiveness of the U.S. systemic and sociocultural racism and xenophobia is not so colorblind, as manifested through Islamophobia (Beutel, 2014; Beydoun, 2015; McQueeney, 2014; Shaheen et al., 2006).

Too often, non-Muslims of South Asian descent are also victims of Islamophobic hate crimes. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American in Arizona, was the first documented murder victim of post-9/11 hate (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). The U.S. culture’s mental model of a Muslim is typically a turbaned brown person of MENA or South Asian heritage, coded as untrustworthy and prone to aggression and sexual deviousness (Patai, 1976). There is no doubt that such vitriolic xenophobia harms many; this study focused on the meaning-making of how international MENA students are impacted as they adapt to the dominant culture. This study used a mixed methods approach, applying the Ethnic Identity Scale (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004) to determine participants' racial identity and
conducted individual interviews, to explore the challenges faced by international MENA students in the US. Rooted in social justice, this inquiry sought to uplift marginalized voices that have yet to be heard due to the white-washing of MENA communities.

**Governmental Systems**

There are currently no public-facing governmental systems that collect data on MENA communities. The Arab American Institute Foundation (AAIF), a national civil rights organization, sought to bolster the civic engagement of the 3.7 million U.S.-based Arab American community members. The AAIF launched the “Check It Right, You Ain’t White” campaign to urge Arab Americans to write the label “Arab” on the 2010 Census as a step toward advocacy and self-affirmation (Blake, 2010; Kahn, 2019). Although the Trump Administration largely ignored this campaign, the movement indicated a growing awareness of MENA identity as separate and distinct from U.S. connotations of whiteness. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is a research and advocacy organization focused on Muslim inclusion in the United States. Their work spans Muslim communities of all races, though they do not disaggregate Arab identity from whiteness in a U.S. context. ISPU’s research on anti-Muslim bigotry depicts how such marginalization is inextricably linked to all forms of exclusion that racial and ethnic minority communities experience (Beutel & Khan, 2014). ISPU noted that U.S. legislative actions coded as anti-Muslim or “anti-sharia” disproportionately target Black and Latino communities. Their research amplified how

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3 The term “sharia” is the Arabic word for law, particularly the religious and cultural canons of the Qu’ran and the Muslim hadiths. Though the word refers to everything from daily prayers and the importance of charity and supporting orphans, U.S. mainstream media has co-opted the term from its true meaning of Islamic democracy to refer to extremist ideologies that threaten the United States and its people.
Muslim identity is conflated with those of racially minoritized groups in ways that have social and legislative implications, suggesting that MENA identity can no longer be a silenced target for politicized xenophobia at the expense of students’ well-being.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study explored international MENA students’ experiences studying in U.S. colleges and how their time in the United States impacted their racial self-identification and sense of self. There is currently a gap in the literature examining the social–emotional well-being and acculturative stress foreign-born Arab students may experience in the United States (Berry et al., 2006; Suleiman et al., 2021). Based on the current research gap in the literature, this research focus was on how international MENA students and alumni racially self-identified and how that impacted their sense of self. The purpose has been to consider a range of lived experiences and all the variables and experiences that comprise Arab students.

This study employed a two-phased concurrent parallel mixed-method investigation (Creswell, 2009). Given the challenges of connecting with international students in a pandemic-stricken, hybrid world, a mixed-methods approach included a questionnaire to ensure access and eligibility for the study before conducting interviews. The survey instrument used sections of Umaña-Taylor et al.’s (2004) Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) that allowed participants to racially self-identify and examine their understandings of their own race. This methodology relied on individual interviews of international MENA students and alumni who had completed at least two semesters of their undergraduate education in the United States. Recruitment tactics such as snowball sampling and personal correspondence to community organizations were employed to
focus on MENA and Muslim identities, although only responses from MENA participants were considered. Intentional outreach to and partnership with academic and social organizations that focus on MENA identity and scholarship successfully increased the collaborative and people-driven nature of the research while prioritizing personal reflexivity and consideration of the diverse needs of MENA students. The survey received 165 complete and partially complete responses, of which 58 were eligible and analyzed. Of these 58, 53 were completed to be considered specifically for the EIS instrument which allowed for racial self-identification by participants. Ten individual interviews were conducted and coded to analyze and identify themes and patterns (Creswell, 2009).

**Positionality**

Kuntz (2016) wrote, “Methodologies are inherently partisan” (p. 29). I am deeply and personally invested in this topic as I came to the United States from Morocco as an international student. As an insecure teen, I repeatedly, often contradictorily, had U.S. peers and professors tell me who I was and how I should identify. In my first year at a small liberal arts college, my roommate’s boyfriend threw my Qu’ran at me while a hallmate casually asked if I would be beheaded by my family for being queer. Although the university-designated school officer charged with my orientation explained that I was “white” in a U.S. context, professors, classmates, and school administrators visibly looked uncomfortable when I shared where I was from. I cannot recall a single classmate who knew that Morocco was in Africa; when I shared that I am African, an acquaintance inadvertently quoted *Mean Girls* and bluntly asked me, “if you are from Africa, why are

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4 Though it should need not be stated, my family has been unconditionally accepting of my queerness, my late father welcomed my wife into our family with open arms.
you white?” (Waters, 2004). Although legal paperwork required me to identify as “white,” my whiteness was conditional, as I was reminded I did not belong here. My experiences in the United States made me believe any whiteness ascribed to me is a privilege that can be taken away even more quickly than it had been granted. Love (2020) wrote, “white folx cannot lose their whiteness; it is not possible” (p. 43). This statement affirmed my occasional “whiteness” is not mine; my “whiteness” is subject to the judgment of others and can be revoked at any time. This reality would not be the case if I were a white American like the forefathers’ European descendants. The ephemeral nature of my welcome in any given situation is dependent on either my silence or my consistent and vocal dispelling of myths around my Arab-ness and Muslim-ness; it is simply too much work to be white in the American sense of the word.

Martinez (2000) wrote, “Not all persons who are marginalized—singly, doubly, or multiply—within the dominant culture come to critique it” (p. 18); however, as a queer, biracial, Muslim immigrant, I have been marginalized in too many ways not to critique the ways I am treated and framed in U.S. contexts. To not critique the incessant white supremacy, homophobia, and xenophobia in dominant U.S. rhetoric would be akin to accepting that my life is somehow devoid of morality and worth. This work uplifts what Kuntz (2016) called “a critical insubordination to traditional ways of knowing and coming to know” (p. 25). As an activist working in diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) education, I am deeply aware of the painful paradox that I live in a

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5 “Mean Girls” was a cult classic of the early 2000s. The character of Karen, played by Amanda Seifried, was a member of “that Plastics” a group of pretty, popular girls in a Midwestern high school. Karen became a meme of rich, ditzy, and ill-informed white Americans who care more about their appearances than learning about others.
country that lumps me in the same category of whiteness as white supremacists who viciously slander my faith and culture. Without the language to claim our heritage, my MENA peers and I are denied access to accurately labeling the hate crimes we face or accessing the few resources available that other minoritized communities of color may access.

My critical perspective explored “the fusion of local knowledge with facts and broader social theories that [will help me see my] own particular circumstances in the larger contexts” (Oakes & Rogers, 2006, p. 146). Toldson (2019) described good data as information that is humanizing, “comprehensive, holistic, and provides a complete picture of important issues” (p. 7) and lends itself to storytelling. I firmly believe in what Foucault (1988) and Kuntz (2016) call parrhesia, and I am deeply invested in this research. Foucault (2001) described parrhesia as evolving from meaning “free speech” to a fearless speech where the “speaker emphasizes the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum” (p. 13). The words I typed in this dissertation did not just come from me; they are me. Still, I do not presume nor project a universal MENA experience. Claiming any semblance of neutrality on this topic would be dishonest on my part, and on the part of any researcher on any subject. Therefore, I followed a commitment to regular journaling and reflection to maintain an analytical distance by staying close to the data and engaging in member checks to ensure I was accurately representing my participants’ voice (Bhattacharya, 2017; Groenewald, 2008).

The research process was iterative and necessitated an understanding of my positionality and an awareness of how my identity may have impacted participants’ vulnerability throughout the interview process. Though I was born and raised in Tangier,
Morocco, for the first 18 years of my life, most of my adult life has been spent in the United States. My positionality spans that of both insider and outsider to my participants. All aspects of this study have been conducted from the “double bind” space of familiarity and strangeness by actively seeking out people with shared identities and experiences that may or may not be like mine. This work invited the voices of those who may have completely different responses to shared circumstances and allowed for nuanced reflections on what it means to be MENA in U.S. higher education. Bethune and Gilbert (2019) stated, “Critical approaches to ethnography take the legacy of the colonial gaze seriously” (p. 7); given the space of the double bind, researchers must be cautious not to “cast an objectifying gaze” (p. 7) or to blur differences through comfort in shared identities. These words guided the interview and analysis process, as researchers must not project their own insecurities, traumas, or epistemologies on their participants, who may have radically different consciousnesses and feelings than they do. Kuntz’s (2016) words on the “illusion of full or complete knowledge” (p. 44) guided all research efforts not to reduce all MENA truths to match my own.

Significance of the Study

Due to the absence of an operational definition of the MENA region, current research on international students does not represent the over 80,000 MENA students currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (IIE, 2019). The lack of discourse on MENA identity has created a void of research and resources for these young adults trapped in the crosshairs of weaponized xenophobic global politics against Muslims and the Middle East. Increased understanding of how MENA students do and do not integrate
on U.S. campuses will increase investment in developing strategies to protect their well-being.

Muslim students, regardless of their country of origin, are harassed in multiple ways at twice the national rate of students of other faith groups (Singer, 2021). The nonprofit One Voice Canada (2021) issued a plea to the Canadian government after publishing a concerning report about a rise in suicide rates among international students. The study cited elevated stress due to struggling with the compounding effects of financial and academic concerns in addition to social isolation caused by both culture shock and the pandemic. However, no such call to action has been issued in the United States despite having a darker history of political tension around immigration and the MENA community than Canada does. Generations of anti-MENA xenophobia and Islamophobia have festered due to U.S. reactions to everything from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo in the 1970s and the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 to the so-called War on Terror after 9/11 and fear of the Arab Spring radicalizing Muslims abroad. The Southern Poverty Law Center (n.d.) reported an increase in anti-Muslim hate groups in 2020 and an increased membership in ACT for America, the country’s largest anti-Muslim group that initially went under the moniker of “American Congress for Truth” (Smith & Tau, 2004). ACT for America has consistently lobbied to dismantle the U.S. Refugee Admissions Programs (USRAP) through its heavy use of right-wing Islamophobic rhetoric (Hodson, 2020).

This research is a humble addition to the existing body of research on international student well-being, with particular attention to the unique needs and challenges of MENA students. Examining how foreign-born Arab students move through
the U.S. educational system increases understanding of how to support them best. Given the number of colleges that have permanently closed their doors in 2021 alone, higher education professionals must urgently investigate how best to reach, recruit, and retain international students (Lederman, 2021). An increased understanding of Muslim and MENA identities as nonsynonymous yet equally valid will allow for more ethical and informed information-sharing with incoming international students, their families, and the administrators supporting them.

**Nature of the Study**

To “invite multiple possibilities” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 42), a wide range of data was considered to best understand the social–emotional identity development and sense of wellness and belonging of international MENA students. This study’s focus was on the identity navigation of MENA students to center narrative research and in-depth interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell, 2009; Kuntz, 2016). Given the extreme fear Islamophobic policymakers have instilled in MENA individuals, engaging students and nurturing an atmosphere of trust proved challenging in this study. Over 100,000 visas were revoked due to the Trump administration’s Muslim ban (O’Hara, 2021). Indeed, my own citizenship application was denied by the Trump administration. Although I was transparent and invitational in my outreach to MENA peers and leveraged social networks of trust, my outreach was still occasionally perceived as spam or intrusive. A dear friend’s husband, a Moroccan man whose wedding I had attended only a couple of years prior to my study, warned her that my call for participants looked like previous scams he had seen soliciting private information from Muslims in the United States. Even though my name was on the posted flyer and my friend explained my study to him, he
was still too wary to share it with his connections because of the U.S. history of monitoring internationally born Muslim men. Conversely, there were also moments of joy, such as when several participants expressed excitement about the goal of the study. Two young women reached out to share the heartbeat of this research was something with which they had personally struggled as MENA students in the United States.

The approach to this research study was rooted in the development of a grounded theory, which allowed for the open-ended examination of in-depth interviews to identify and formalize the qualitative analysis of student experiences. Zuberi (2001) wrote “race is a measure of a relationship—not an inalterable trait” (p. 110); participant conversations highlighted evolving, often situational, and surprising changes in perceptions when in different friend groups and cultural settings. The goal was to examine how participants understood and have lived their racial identities. Our identities are both something that we are and something that we do through our socialization and repeated behaviors, even those of which we may not consciously be aware. Ladson-Billings et al. (1995), a proponent of nontraditional methods such as narrative storytelling, emphasized analysis must be dynamic and not based on supposition or stagnant, mythic narratives. To establish transparency of my positionality, my “social positions, values, epistemologies, ontologies, and praxis” (Garcia et al., 2018, pp. 154–155) were internally and iteratively journaled and then explained to participants where appropriate. Self-reflectivity was required throughout the process so that my “critical insubordination” (Kuntz, 2016, p. 25) neither centered on my narrative nor delved into the logic of extraction. Although my positionality directly opposes current and historical governmental praxis around MENA identity, neither I nor any researcher can claim ownership of capital-T Truth; full
knowledge is an illusion (Anyon, 2009; Freire, 1970; Kuntz, 2016). There are many messy truths to examine and amplify, and it was both my honor and privilege to strive to do justice to my peers. Aziz (2014) wrote, as Arabs, we must “write or be written” (p. xiii). This research was conducted as an act of resistance to reclaim the MENA narrative and center Arab voices and experiences.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following definitions are offered to establish an operational understanding of this research study:

*Acculturation*, according to Berry et al. (2006), is the cultural and psychological change that results from intercultural contact. These behavioral, attitudinal, and relational changes result from immersion in a new host culture.

*Acculturative stress* describes the experiences of foreign-born individuals entering new host cultures (Berry, 2005). Exposure to a unique cultural setting causes psychological changes in individuals who go through culture shedding, culture learning, and culture conflict. Through culture shedding, unlearning, and undoing home cultural norms and behaviors, culture learning, or exploring and adopting host cultural norms, the acculturating individual intentionally and purposefully makes choices to fit. Acculturative stress occurs through moments of cultural conflict where the individual’s home and host cultural norms clash, or the individual feels pressure to assimilate.

*Arab* refers to peoples, traditions, and countries with Semitic heritage originating from the Arabian Peninsula. Arabic is the most widely spoken language across the Arab world, which encompasses the following countries (listed alphabetically): Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania,
Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (League of Arab States; 2021; TeachMideast, 2017).

Belonging is the feeling of active inclusion and membership where one is welcome and can fully participate in all aspects of a space/culture (National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS], n.d.).

Black is an adjective referring to people of all phenotypes whose heritage is African or Caribbean, including African Americans and all descendants of the African diaspora regardless of birthplace, skin tone, or nationality (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Campus involvement/engagement describes a student’s active participation and investment in their campus. Campus engagement requires interaction with academic and social activities (University of San Diego, n.d.).

Community is a sense of fellowship and shared common traditions, goals, or mutual trust (NAIS, n.d.).

Critical race theory is a legal framework developed by Bell (1970) that addresses historical and current systemic racism. Critical race theory (CRT) uplifts underrepresented counternarratives, addresses the permanence of racism, challenges whiteness as the norm, and critiques liberalism and the need for interest convergence to effect positive, equitable change.

Cultural responsiveness involves being respectful and invested in the dignity of other cultures (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012; Villenas, 1996).

Ethnicity is often conflated with or measured alongside race; ethnicity refers to the shared cultural history, heritage, culture, and national traditions of a group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).
Eurocentrism is the prioritization of white European histories, values, and epistemologies at the expense and exclusion of other global nations, cultures, and values (Fanon et al., 2021).

Hybridity was developed by Bhabha (1994) and refers to the genesis of new transcultural identities as developed through contact with areas of physical and ideological colonization.

Identity development is the complex, lifelong process by which a person develops, examines, and evolves their sense of self amid the cultural, interpersonal, and ideological norms with which they engage. Marcia (1980, 1994) built upon Erikson’s (1959, 1968) theory of identity formation to develop a typology of identity statuses: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved. Diffuse refers to an individual who has given little thought to their identity, whereas foreclosed individuals are often closed off to identities unlike their own and profess superiority over others. Moratorium refers to those who experience anxiety and social and interpersonal tensions around their identity. Lastly, achieved identity refers to those who have undergone or avoided an identity crisis and can maintain self-esteem while appreciating identities other than their own.

International students, in this study, referred to all scholars at U.S. colleges and universities who were neither born nor raised in the United States.

Islamophobia was coined by Dinet and Ibrahim (1925) and advanced by Said (1985); this phenomenon refers to sociopolitical prejudice against Muslims that can occur on individual, national, and global levels.

MENA is an acronym referring to the Middle East and North Africa or the people and nations from that geographical area (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.).
**Middle East** is the umbrella term in U.S. and U.N. geopolitical contexts that refers to the following countries (listed alphabetically): Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen.

**North Africa** refers to the following countries (listed alphabetically) in U.S. and U.N. geopolitical contexts: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and Western Sahara (League of Arab States; 2021; TeachMideast, 2017).

**Parrhesia** is Foucault’s (1972) notion that the truth should be told candidly, without hesitation, even at personal risk.

**Race** is often conflated with or measured alongside ethnicity; the U.S. Census (2022) defined race as a “person’s self-identification with one or more social groups” (para. 8) determined by physical traits and national, tribal, and geographical heritage.

**Racial consciousness**, per Banton (1997), refers to the ways that humans understand social relations as impacted by ethnic and racial identities, including one’s own identity to others.

**Racial schema** is the representational framework by which racial and ethnic identities are categorized and understood (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These systems of categorization order and classify the surrounding society and are not globally universal, but are context-based and culturally specific to social groups.

**White and whiteness**, according to the U.S. Census (2020), is having “origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (para. 2). Within a social justice context rooted in CRT, whiteness as property is given the legal and social
privileges exclusively afforded to white people throughout history and in current sociopolitical systems and hierarchies (Bell, 1970).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations and delimitations can have an effect on the outcomes of any study. In this study, the participant pool was limited to students and alumni born and raised in the Middle East and North Africa and who had completed at least two semesters of their undergraduate degree at a U.S. college or university. Participants were not limited to a specific age range, though they each had come to the United States after September 11, 2001. This event was seminal to the increase in anti-MENA and Islamophobic sentiments which shaped the cultural landscape in new and impactful ways (Beydoun, 2018). Although specific nationalities, religious affiliations, and gender identities did not preclude anyone from participating in this study, participants had each been exposed to post-9/11 political rhetoric.

The research process involved the standard limitations of a typical dissertation process, including a lack of funding and compounding time constraints of my academic schedule and commitments as a DEIA educator and caregiver to my wife. A further limitation was the lack of demographic data on MENA individuals. U.S. society does not view MENA as a unique identity; therefore, information was hard to find. Another constraint was that of access, given the deep suspicion that many MENA international students harbor, by necessity, against government intrusiveness. I am eternally thankful for my participants who were willing to participate in my study and entrusted me with these difficult stories, and I uplift their resilience in each of these words. Kuntz (2016) described participation in truth-telling as “necessarily risking the very identities of those
who inquire” (p. 15). Participation in self-inquiry may be painful and politically charged for participants and researchers alike. To explore MENA-ness is to dive into ourselves and be ready for whatever we may find. This study provided qualitative and statistical evidence suggestive of the need to change current policies and practices to consider MENA identity as valid as any other racial categorization or ethnic classification, such as Indigenous, Latinx, Black, or Asian. Being allowed access to resources, affirmative action, and counternarrative spaces would have been life-changing for most interview participants.

**Chapter Summary and Organization**

The United States is praised for its higher education system which is held as the global standard, yet it is a nation whose history has targeted Muslims, MENA, and other minoritized communities as a backward threat to democracy. Arab American scholars and activist groups have advocated for increased consideration of the Muslim cause amid Islamophobic rhetoric on news platforms from Fox News (Folkenflik, 2019), to the 1991 *New York Times* Islamophobic cartoon (see Appendix A), or those caricatures of the *New York Post* (see Appendix B) and *The New Yorker* (see Appendix C). Such rhetoric is inescapable and inexcusable in U.S. culture and influences how students and educators do or do not welcome MENA students into shared academic spaces.

As such, this dissertation is organized in the following manner to provide a seamless transition from chapter to chapter. Chapter 1 provided the context and purpose of this research with special attention to the need for increased care and attention of international MENA students. Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive review of relevant literature that explores the scope of this study. This review of literature highlights the use
of critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and a review of
current frameworks of identity development. An overview of U.S. treatments of Arab
American and Muslim experiences is also provided.

Chapter 3 introduces the research design and methodology, a convergent parallel
mixed-methods survey, including details on the participant pool, methods for data
collection, and the applied frameworks. Chapter 4 offers a review of the results, looking
most closely at the quantitative data that emerged from the questionnaire and the EIS.
Chapter 5 expands on Chapter 4 through an overview of thematic findings from
individual qualitative interviews and an in-depth discussion of the findings. The study
closes with Chapter 6, which offers a conclusion that includes a review of the limitations,
implications, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Love truth even if it harms you, and hate lies even if they serve you.

—Moroccan Proverb

Despite a growing body of literature on the experiences of international students at U.S. colleges, the stories of those who do not fit into the U.S. racial schema remain untold. Additionally, though much scholarship has centered on the racial identity development of international students of color, there remains a lack of research on scholars from the Middle East and North Africa, also known as the MENA region. The attacks on 9/11 served as a seminal moment in the racialization of Islam and Islamophobia in Western ideology. Shaheen’s (2003) analysis of over 900 U.S. films found U.S. cinema equated Arab identity with Muslim identity and that Arabs and Muslims were portrayed as un-American violent savages and terrorists following this event. These stereotypes have remained ubiquitous both in popular media and government policies such as the Muslim Ban enforced in 2018, which I explore later in this chapter. International students from the MENA region, therefore, enter a social atmosphere where their U.S. classmates have been exposed to prejudiced and hateful sentiments about their culture and perceived religion. This study explored how exposure to potentially and actual hostile attitudes on U.S. campuses impacted international Arab students’ self-perceptions.

Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods investigation (Creswell, 2009), this study examined how MENA students navigate their perceived and lived racial identities once immersed in a U.S. racial framework. I included a quantitative examination of
MENA students’ self-identification through a survey tool and the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The survey provided opportunities for individual text responses that were qualitatively coded. The study also used qualitative methodologies through one-on-one interviews with participants. Descriptive statistical analysis of survey responses was used to identify international MENA students’ relationship to their ethnic identities; qualitative inquiry dove into if and how time in the United States had shifted participants’ self-identification.

This study used critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework and analyzed current scholarship on Arab Americans and foreign-born students to identify the gap in research on the experiences of MENA students who study amid a national backdrop of xenophobia and racialized Islamophobia. Traditional U.S. treatment of MENA identity has occurred on two separate axes: (a) one of religiously coded xenophobia and (b) another of complete racial erasure (Abboud et al., 2019; Abdulrahim, 2008; Beydoun, 2015; Diouf, 2021; Pickens; 2014). To understand how international MENA students navigate campus landscapes influenced by contradictory sentiments and policies, attention was paid to the ways that race and racialized stories are understood. A critical lens was applied to explore how MENA identity is framed and if it has been impacted by U.S. perceptions of the Arab world. This lens remained attentive to the postcolonial truth that much of the Arab world has survived physical and ideological colonization from the Global North. The following literature review explores themes of individual and socially constructed identity development, international student adaptation, nationalist constructions of race, and the racialization and politicization of Islam.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks of CRT (Bell, 1970; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005) and culturally inclusive pedagogical practices, such as (a) culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP; Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012; Villenas, 1996), (b) culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP; Paris, 2012; Sleeter, 2011), and (c) multicultural education (MCE; Banks, 1995, 1996) honored the need for MENA students’ self-determination and increased systems of support. CRT, at its core, challenges the dominant perspective and uplifts experiential knowledge, or counternarratives (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The use of this framework allowed for the disruption of popular (mis)understandings of MENA identity. Using a critical framework provided an opportunity to dissect the significance of identity-gaslighting that is all too common for this vulnerable student population. Exploring firsthand, multifaceted experiences of Arab students defied the white-normed narrative.

Furthermore, this study honored the tradition of social justice as embodied in that facet of CRT that views oppositional scholarship as desirable because it works beyond conventional traditions to promote radical scholarship (Taylor, 1998). Though race is often defined as a social construct, the framework that shaped this study honored that a person’s relationship to their race is self-determined and not defined or valued by the white master narrative. Throughout this literature review, the guiding principles of CRT and layered culturally inclusive pedagogies guided the exploration of the themes of manipulated data, the weaponization of whiteness, and the need for increased understanding of the international student experience.
Conceptual Framework

This study examined the relationship between international Arab student experiences in U.S. educational settings and any resulting personal development or changes to identity formation. Literature has indicated those institutions that ingrain tenets of CRT and strive to nurture culturally and racially diverse peoples are more conducive to student well-being and success (Sablan, 2019; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020). It follows that international students, particularly those from underrepresented scholars who adapt to new campuses and national cultures, will report increased personal, social, and academic well-being and success in their host communities (Montgomery, 2017; Rice et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007).

This intersectionality-driven study examined if and when international MENA students feel most valued and included and their effect on their development and sense of worth. The conceptual framework for this dissertation centered the impact of CRT and CSP on international students’ individual and racial/ethnic identity development. I hypothesized that affirming positive opportunities for MENA students to develop their sense of self in a new cultural context positively impact their personal and academic well-being. Just as students travel, so do their cultures through their unique lived journeys and the more significant trajectories of various diasporic migrations. Students not only migrate into different cultural contexts, but must translate these differences from new
languages to their mother tongue to ensure their literal, social, and academic survival (Hall, 2017). Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework that guided this study.

![Conceptual Framework](image)

**Figure 2.** Applied Conceptual Framework

*Note.* The conceptual framework for international MENA student identity development and subsequent positive self-reported feelings of success and connectedness within U.S. college and university campuses.

**Critical Race Theory**

Scholarship on CRT offered a rich and vital terrain from which to examine the MENA student experience in U.S. colleges and universities. Educators who employ a CRT framework are rooted in a tradition of advocacy that questions and challenges traditional modes of pedagogy and curricula that do not acknowledge the centrality of race and its power to incite racial violence and exclusion. Bell developed CRT in 1970 as a call to action to address the pervasiveness of racism in the legal system and all aspects of society (Bell 1992; Delgado 1995). A fundamental tenet of CRT is its acknowledgment of the centrality of race and racism and its intersections with other forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Tate, 1997). Other principles of CRT hold that experiential knowledge, known as counternarratives, should
and must challenge the reductive dominant perspective, and researchers must remain committed to social justice.

Yosso (2005) expanded on this to state that CRT, in particular, centers on “Outsider, mestiza, transgressive knowledge” (p. 70). By defying the erasure of subtractive and stereotypical myths, CRT-informed studies challenge hegemonic ideologies through “such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, chronicles, and narratives” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 473). Haney-Lopez (1995) defined race as contingent on shared historical and socially significant elements and ancestry, which aligns with Foucault’s (1988) notions of being; the agency lies with the person who occupies the unique position of their lived experiences. Knowledge should not be the object of the intellectual, whom Foucault (1988) described as the “bearer of universal values” (p. 132). Such traditions are rooted in the assumptions of white supremacy and the historical legacies and structures that have persecuted communities of color (Lynn et al., 2013). CRT is rooted in a critical stance and is deeply aligned with social movement building intended to improve the lives of the historically underserved (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Deconstructing the master narrative of who is and is not white—and when they are and are not allowed to claim said whiteness—traditions so-called scholarly objectivity and amplifies the unrecognized, diverse cultural knowledge and experiences of communities of color (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Taylor, 1988; Yosso, 2005). Oakes and Rogers (2006) concurred with this perspective in dismissing any notion of objective truth, as all forms of knowing are located in the sociopolitical and historical contexts governed by those dominant powers.
Culturally Inclusive Pedagogies

Inclusive educators have sought to achieve antiracist pedagogical practices to support their students and peers from minoritized backgrounds. These efforts have been borne of awareness of the power dynamics and the white-centric sociopolitical landscape that shapes every institution in the United States, including the education system (Feagin, 2013; Freire et al., 1970; Lynn et al., 2013). Scholars have developed culturally relevant pedagogical practices (Ladson-Billings et al., 1995) as a foundation for the advancement of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and CSP (Paris, 2012; Sleeter, 2011). Ladson-Billings (2014) spoke of the need to revisit and “remix” pedagogical practices to support the nuanced and compounding needs of students who, like their ancestors, have been consistently let down by systemic dismissals of their multiethnic and multilingual traditions.

Whereas some practitioners may fall into reductive understandings of culture to hokey celebrations, CSP states the dominant narrative does not acknowledge the diversity of individual and group identities as they are lived, and instead externally defines cultural diversity against a Eurocentric benchmark (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012). Such understandings are rooted in the knowledge that informed cultural awareness necessitates recognition of the countless societal consequences of racism and oppression and a need to uplift students’ experiences as assets, not deficits (Gay, 2013; Gorski, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Sleeter, 2011; Quezada et al., 2012).

Gorski (2016) built upon foundational literature to develop the equity literacy framework to equip educators with the ability to recognize, respond to, and redress inequity through sustainable anti-oppressive practices, even in the face of hegemonic
adversity (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014). hooks (1994) coined the phrase “teaching to transgress” those normed racial and cultural subjections adopted as commonsense, or the way things have already been and should be. CRP and other iterations of culturally inclusive pedagogies defy the normed “apolitical” or so-called neutral teaching tropes. Instead, there has emerged a need for advocacy for liberatory methods that highlight how all facts, figures, and forms of knowledge are products of a society’s systems of oppression and belief; neutrality does not exist (Freire, 1970; Lynn et al., 2013). Villenas (1996) similarly wrote of the merits of moving beyond the paradigm of “researcher-as-colonizer” by implementing CRP as a means of allowing historically minoritized groups to “mark the points of their own marginalization” (p. 729) and rebel against reductive narratives.

MCE (Banks, 1995, 1996) is another strengths-based tradition borne of the civil rights movement’s urge to value diverse cultures and ethnicities. An essential facet of MCE is common humanity, in which students of all backgrounds deserve equal access to resources and representation. One of MCE’s core principles is the goal of sufficient education reform to better meet the needs of racially diverse students and gender identities. The first principle of multicultural education is every student has the right to retain and celebrate their unique heritage and culture. This respect and celebration should be welcomed into all learning environments. An appreciation for MENA cultures would bolster MCE’s ability to offer support to a broader range of global students. Applying culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies—or what I code as a collective of culturally inclusive pedagogies—allowed for the diverse truths of MENA identities to defy erasure and stand out from the whitewashed shadows of the master narrative.
**Outsiders on the Inside?**

Ogbu (1974, 1978, 1998) researched the impact of students’ status as voluntary or involuntary minority students on their academic successes in the U.S. education system. His cultural–ecological theory considered the effects of educational, societal, and systemic treatments of immigrant and national students of color on their sociocultural adaptation and academic success. Ogbu (1998) defined minority status amid the “settler society” of white United States, where voluntary immigrants, like international students, have “an optimistic, practical attitude,” seek to improve their status in life, and “trust white-controlled institutions [and] what the institutions have to offer” (p. 174). Involuntary minorities, Ogbu continued, are those refugees, undocumented folks, and descendants of slavery whose journeys to the United States were forced and rooted in struggle, not hope. International MENA students, according to Ogbu’s theory, would be considered voluntary in their seeking out white U.S. learning spaces and their willingness to adapt to white U.S. norms. If Ogbu’s theory holds true, MENA students will idealize and emulate whiteness; thus, per Berry’s (2005) theories of acculturation and integration strategy, these students would experience less stress and achieve higher academic and social success through assimilation.

Notably, Ogbu’s (1998) model does not account for the conditional gradients of whiteness of MENA identity in U.S. culture. Further, consideration has been given to the temporary nature of international students’ time in their host culture. Student status in the United States is often contingent on a promise to return to their home nations which remain a constant presence in their lives, even while abroad.
Because international students’ legal status in the United States is so closely tied to their academic performance, the “tourist attitude” that Ogbu (1998) conjured does not fully explain the plight of MENA international students, who have historically been coded as anti-United States and dangerous refugees, as discussed later in this chapter. These facts would render MENA students as involuntary minorities in a white institution that, per Ogbu’s cultural–ecological theory, would struggle with assimilation, social isolation, and cultural devaluing. International MENA students thus likely occupy a blurred space between and in both categories on how they internalize and move through assimilation and acculturation processes. More insight into the international MENA student experience can allow students, their families, and their educators to understand each other’s cultures and thrive transnationally. Continued research may help educators to adopt habits that are affirming, additive, and supportive of diverse MENA values and traditions, even amid the overwhelming influence of non-school communities and global rhetoric.

**Individual and Social Identity Development**

Social identity development and social identity theory are emergent exploration areas for qualitative sociology, anthropology, political science, and education scholars. Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity theory has evolved into considerations of self-categorization and self-perception in intergroup settings. Central to understanding identity choice is one’s subjective understanding of identity, the salience of different identities, and the stability or instability of social and political identity groups. Scholars have found identity categories are more salient to individuals in the minority; for example, students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are
more likely to list their race as more salient to their self-conception than their gender, age, or socioeconomic status (McGuire et al., 1978; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). This finding is particularly true in settings where individuals’ identities are not valued: if students of color are exposed to racism or Muslim students are subjected to Islamophobia, they will display lower self-esteem and increased identity crises around their targeted identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004).

Huddy (2001) expanded on these findings to explore how racial and ethnic group identity development might explain the emergence or growth of ethnic and racial categories. Campaigns such as “Yalla, Count me In!” by activist groups like Arab American Action Network have illustrated how younger generations of MENA heritage seek their own racial classifications. For years leading to the 2020 Census, these groups petitioned the Census Bureau to include an independent MENA category, which the Trump administration ignored. The government’s decision on the omission of MENA identity aligned with Bhabha’s (1994) description of the hegemonic majority’s dependence on “the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (p. 66). The conflicting notions of fixity with the reality of diverse lived experiences results in a racial ambivalence that Bhabha (1994) elucidated as a cornerstone of “the most significant discursive and physical strategies of discriminatory power” (p. 66). Movements such as “Yalla, Count me In!” were neither universally sought after nor rejected within the Arab American community. Beydoun (2015) described the possibility of a standalone Census classification as a “racial Catch-22” that may, on the one hand, bring an end to Arab performative whiteness but may, on the other, bring about increased racial progress through concerted representation. Beydoun warned that although data
disaggregation could empower MENA Americans, it could also equip problematic entities (e.g., law enforcement or homeland security) with information to weaponize against Arab American communities. The issue of the MENA label highlights the placement of Arab identity both as “betwixt and between legal whiteness and sociopolitical subordination” (Beydoun, 2015, p. 731) and as collateral damage to the flawed rhetoric of race in the United States. MENA identity is simultaneously disregarded and systematically constructed as a colonial subject mired in foreignness and otherness.

As Huddy (2001) stated, decades before these seminal, historic events, identity formation cannot be solely explained or satisfied by group designation; simply put, life is more nuanced than the five choices the Census Bureau offers. Although the U.S. Census Bureau follows the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity, the Bureau (2022) stated its categories “generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country” (para. 11). Their positionality does not consider the sociocultural understandings of individuals and people who were not raised in the United States. Nagel (1995) spoke to this malleability of racial identity by coining the term “ethnic switching” to explain how identity acquisition transcends the presumably fixed categories of race and ethnicity. For example, a cursory glance at U.S. Census data between 1960 and 1990 suggests the Native American population more than tripled from 500,000 to almost 2 million; however, the reason for such a statistical jump is prior to 1960, the Census did not offer a distinct category of indigeneity for Native Americans to claim. The absence of the category led researchers to completely overlook entire populations. Indigenous communities existed long before they were included in Census
tallies, but the raw data did not acknowledge their existence in any way. People’s relationships with their racial identities can change in different contexts. As international students travel across the planet, ready to soak up new information and discover more about themselves and the world, they might subsequently experience changes in how they identify. This may be particularly true for MENA students whose heritage is not currently recognized by U.S. schemas, as their identity development remains consistently under-researched.

**International Student Identity**

Since the days of primer schools, educational institutions in the U.S. have taught their students social norms, national values, and the Christian ethos (Bell, 1992; Films Media Group, 2000; Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Wollenberg, 1975) and have historically encouraged assimilation into the extant racial hierarchy (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). As a result, international students at U.S. colleges often experience culture shock and the stresses of host-culture acclimatization to a new country. A growing body of research has covered the experiences of students from East Asia (Chen, 2017, Chen & Zhou, 2019; Freeman & Li, 2019; Major, 2005; Montgomery, 2017; Pham, 2013; Wei et al., 2007), the Caribbean (Bailey, 2017; Fries-Britt et al., 2014), and Central America (Chavez, 2016; Rodriguez & Parks, 2017). Rice et al. (2012) analyzed the effects of perfectionism and acculturative stress on international students. They found South Asian students experienced more symptoms of depression than other global peers, partly due to the discrimination they faced from their U.S.-born classmates and the pressures from their families to do well in school. Until MENA identity is considered distinct from Western white racial identity, there are no data on how international Arab students are doing.
International students’ understanding of their Arab culture and their very self-identification may be impacted due to prolonged exposure and educational experiences, especially in a nation with deep-rooted prejudices against their heritage. Molina (2020) discussed how others’ perceptions of her identity colored her self-conception, sharing that “being ‘of color’ suddenly became part of [her] perceived identity” (p. 192) though it had previously never been. Her identity and social experiences evolved to include new, often contradictory U.S. messaging around her homeland and culture. Recent scholarship has indicated an increase in Islamophobic views from Muslims in the United States (Beutel & Khan, 2014, Ikramullah, 2020). Bazian (2004) built upon these findings to highlight the real-life implications of racism and Islamophobia in how figures of authority, such as law enforcement and campus security officers, operate under a white protective effect that has resulted in stricter policing of Black and brown bodies than white ones. This absorption of negative perceptions of students’ home cultures can leave them isolated from their host-culture peers and their home-nation support systems.

Kim (2012) developed the theory of international student identity (ISI) to examine how time amid a new host culture impacts student self-perception. The ISI model comprises six key stages: (a) preexposure, (b) exposure, (c) enclosure, (d) emergence, (e) integration, and (f) internalization (Kim, 2012). These stages are malleable and do not present as linear steps toward a kind of self-awakening. Different experiences in a host culture can cause various attributes of race or ethnic identities to rise to the service of student awareness. Depending on their respective transitions to college life in the United States, international students may experience culture shock (Oberg, 1960) as they transition to their new lives. Whether a student feels welcomed or alienated from their
host culture has a massive impact on any acculturative stress they encounter and how they do or do not internalize host culture presumptions about their home culture’s values. Rejection by the dominant U.S. host culture, as may be anticipated in the case of MENA students, often causes students to reject U.S. norms or dislike themselves and their heritage if they continue to place U.S. values on a pedestal (Oberg, 1960). Pedersen (1991) considered the damaging mental health effects of this latter situation, given the extreme adjustment required in immersing oneself in an alien environment, learning challenging coursework in a second or third language, and striving to understand interpersonal and institutional cultural differences. The ISI model highlights how identity development is dynamic and, in many ways, contingent upon the interplay of the individual with their new environment. This framework provides a valuable reminder that identity is not static and that the exploration of post-9/11 international MENA identity must consider the escalation of outside social factors steeped in politicized Islamophobia. Should international MENA students seek to assimilate into U.S. norms, they risk self-isolation from home cultural supports, leading to increased depression and guilt (Tabbah et al., 2016). Moreover, should these students remain true to their heritage and MENA expressions of their Muslim or non-Muslim faith, students face being absorbed into the miasma of xenophobia that makes up U.S. discourse on North Africa and the Middle East. CRT and intentional mixed-methods study allowed me to understand MENA students to share both positive and stressful experiences and to situation the social isolation they had experienced relating to exposure to new racial schemas and stereotypes.
Learning Race in a U.S. Context Framework

Fries-Britt et al. (2014) developed the emergent framework on learning race in a U.S. context. Their findings indicated international students are particularly vulnerable to internalizing stereotypes about themselves and feeling disconnected from their home countries and their new campus cultures. The researchers highlighted, “Students in early stages of development internalize stereotypes and idealize whiteness” (Fries-Britt et al., 2014, p. 8). Fries-Britt et al. found Black/Afro-Caribbean students felt an acculturative pressure, and a shift in their identification as American Blackness was projected upon them. U.S. educators have the ability and, arguably, the responsibility to impact how their students view and value their home cultures. Everything from the mispronunciation of a student’s name to the lack of ethnic representation in classroom art and syllabi can have a compounded, deleterious effect on that student’s sense of belonging, self-worth, and cultural self-conception (Graham et al., 2020; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

Microaggressions are “subtle daily insults that, as a form of racism, support a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority” (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, p. 441). These microaggressions align with Wilkerson’s (2020) observation that dominant caste members in the United States (i.e., white people) are as invested in knowing their peers’ castes as the upper-class members of the Indian caste system.

People of “ambiguous” backgrounds are often interrogated about their ethnicity until all ambiguity is cleared up; it is simply not enough to fit under the “white” or white-adjacent umbrella. As someone who has been welcomed into different friend groups or treated warmly in an airport until disclosing my nationality, my inclusion was determined on an ad hoc basis rooted in the prejudices of those around me. These experiences must
be unpacked so educators can support and center the voices of MENA students who have been forced into the margins of their own stories. Fries-Britt and their colleagues’ framework allows students to reexamine and redefine their racial identities in a new context different from that of their upbringing. The socially constructed nature of race highlights that different social environments impact how one’s race is seen and, in turn, how one sees their own race as a result of interpersonal attitudes and cultural conventions.

**Ethnic Identity Scale**

Being a social construct, race is communicated, understood, and lived differently depending on one’s cultural context. The Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS), developed by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004), allows participants to self-identify their ethnicity so they are not forced to ascribe to geographically contextual categories; this function is particularly important to note, as identity is culturally informed and salience of targeted or privileged identity groups varies internationally. The option for participants to select the racial/ethnic label with which they feel most aligned also allows respondents to define themselves however they feel best. The EIS assesses three core aspects of ethnic identity formation: exploration, resolution, and affirmation. Personal and societal factors impact the ongoing evolution of identity development.

Self-selection allows respondents to identify what label is most salient to them, given these compounding influences. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) developed this scale by building up Tajfel’s (1970, 1986) social identity theory and allowing participants to define their own experiences even as they evolved. Identity resolution, or coming to terms with one’s identity, is a crucial facet of the EIS because it measures how positively
or negatively participants feel in their own skin. Positive self-esteem and social networks, or the absence thereof, result from positive identity exploration, resolution, and affirmation. Negative measurements on the EIS may indicate low self-esteem or positive associations with one’s heritage within a context that does not value their cultural traditions and values.

The application of EIS is particularly powerful in its empowerment of participants to name their own identities before reflecting upon them. Critical research seeks to encourage agency in participants instead of confining them within the parameters of externally enforced constructs. This scale offers insights into how students self-identify, why they identify in a given category, and how they feel about that category. In addition, EIS shines a light upon any internal and social tensions that might arise from members of a perceived particular group (in this case, MENA students) who might identify using different terminology that carries different racialized values as perceived by surrounding members of the host culture.

**Weaponization of Whiteness**

Mercader et al. (2015) focused on the nuanced and implicit ways in which power dynamics are replicated in educational settings. Bethune and Gilbert (2019) referred to “schools as institutions of cultural and economic reproduction” (p. 10) because educational institutions of all kinds quite literally teach and reproduce sociocultural norms and values in the manner in which they teach the content at hand (Entwistle, 1979). White-dominant classrooms that rely upon Eurocentric curricula may never explicitly address racism that the students of color experience. Love (2020) wrote that racism often needs no exploration, as it is “simply an ever-present part of our lives, like
oxygen— but unlike racism, oxygen is necessary to survive” (p. 43). The absence of this exploration not only allows for white supremacy to prevail, but also silences communities that have been racially and ethnically marginalized. Institutions of learning are where epistemologies are codified and portrayed as both fact and common sense. Culturally inclusive pedagogies state that individuals of all backgrounds have a sacred right to their heritage and culture, even in a learning environment guided by a dominant culture (Graham et al., 2020). If MENA identity is to be included, it must be acknowledged.

As Wilkerson (2021) stated, “whiteness had yet [and has yet!] to be settled” (p. 122). Perspectives rooted in CRT scholarship allow for the meaningful discussion of whiteness and white privilege that “consider the context, and how historical, cultural, social, political, and economic factors are diverse (and sometimes similar) in varying geographic spaces and nations” (Carr, 2016, p. 51). To expect that MENA students comfortably fit under the blanket of whiteness of a foreign nation is to dismiss their entire sociocultural heritage and the dignity of allowing self-identification. Wilkerson (2021) wrote of white supremacists and their cry of “whites don’t kill whites” (p. 9) while hate crimes against Muslims persist. The lack of scholarship on MENA international students speaks to a dangerous “color blindness” rooted in an ideology of “the essentialized politics of place on race” or the “violent identity reducing and flattening realities that assign social and historical place based on one’s genetic skin pigmentation” (Ulysse et al., 2016, p. 990). To reduce MENA identity to the pallor of some community members’ skin is to erase entire nations of people, their history, and the systemic limitations placed upon their present and future.
The dominant racial schema in the United States is not only present in Census classifications and obscure government databases but is also reenacted in the classroom. The presumed “‘natural’ division” (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006, p. 594) of racial groups is that of Blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans; however, whiteness is often associated with the national identity of American-ness, and the social status of being white is contingent upon U.S. citizenship (Devos & Sadler, 2019). The patterns of Islam as discordant with U.S. democracy are evident in the varying proximities that Muslim and non-Muslim Arab Americans feel to whiteness. Shryock (2008) found “73% of Arab Christian Americans identify as white, while only 50% of Arab Muslim Americans identified as such” (p. 92). Here are examples of an internalization of the racialization of faith and geographical origin formed, at least in part, through the social experiences resulting from the post-9/11 terrorist label (Singer, 2021). As a Muslim in the United States, I feel the ache of being forced to racially identify within the same category of whiteness as the white supremacist groups that regularly slander my faith and ancestry; however, Lipstiz (2006) wrote of white supremacy as “an equal opportunity employer; nonwhite people can become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards” (p. viii). For those MENA individuals of paler complexion, it may have been beneficial to erase their ethnic identities in favor of the safety and warmth the blanket of whiteness offers. Though no one can be begrudged for their identity or their decisions to seek safety over cultural expression, such conditional whiteness and aspirational witness do not challenge the hegemonic power that white supremacy wields over the Global West.
Freire (1970) described the ways in which elites (i.e., those of European descent) are often “anxious to maintain the status quo by allowing only superficial transformations designed to prevent any real change in their power of prescription” (p. 463). The legal categorization of MENA identity as white has historically not prevented the racialized Islamophobia that has persecuted Arabs in the United States for generations. This quieter oppression is akin to hooks’ (1994) critique of essentialism and how the whiteness of Arabs is tainted by the blaming of xenophobic “environmental causation” (Ryan, 1976, p. 6) of presumed faith. This reductivism further highlighted Freire’s (1970) call to understand the levels of consciousness that create identity labels rooted in superstructure ideologies; researchers must untangle the root causes of oppression to understand how today’s realities are structured to uphold systems of power. Without a critically conscious understanding of how MENA and Muslim identities are not synonymous, all MENA individuals will be presumed Muslim until proven otherwise, just as within subsects of white supremacy, all Muslims are presumed to be terrorists until proven otherwise (Akash & Mattawa, 1999; Cainkar, 2009; Marvasti, 2005). Such negative framing has not only the power to emotionally damage international MENA students, but it may deprive them of fair treatment from educators and administrators alike, who are the gatekeepers of knowledge and opportunity on their campuses (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006).

**Erasing Race**

To challenge one’s position in society, one must be able to name it. Without an ethnic/racial label to claim that is not whitewashed, MENA international students will not know how best to convey their struggles as targets of xenophobic discrimination. Research over the last century has indicated an evolution in how the word “race” is used
in various facets of society. South African scholar Leach (1983) discussed this Western cultural and linguistic shift in the following passage:

The way in which the word “race” has acquired the obscene connotations which surrounded the word “sex” during the last 3 decades of the 19th century deserves the attention of social psychologists, but we are stuck with the fact that is how things are. The euphemism “ethnicity” is a harmless, decontaminated word, which is so new that it does not even appear in the dictionary, so I dare say we can get along with it. But you all need to remember that your own inner prejudices will not disappear just because you give them new names. (p. 1)

South Africa, a nation with a history of apartheid that, in many ways, resembles the first generations of U.S. history, is the source of considerable scholarship on how language has sought to politicize and depoliticize racial hierarchies. South Africa’s nationalist government increased political division through the crude imposition of ethnic and cultural monikers as euphemisms for race (Dubow, 1994). The absence of race prohibits, or at the very least, implies that racism is neither present nor possible; however, discrimination persists regardless of the language used. Labels like “ethnicity” and “culture” function as “wild cards” that are culturally and historically created ideological constructs instead of fixed facts (Dubow, 1994). Lived experiences do not neatly fit into columns. Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) stated that cultural identity is particularly multifaceted and individualized for immigrants who are viewed through a lens of “otherness,” even if that “otherness” cannot be explicitly defined. These euphemisms are double edged as they disguise discriminatory power imbalances and remove the clarity of naming and correcting systemic oppression.
Furthermore, “in terms of segregationist discourse, culture represented a means of insisting on difference—crucially, without the need to define precisely on what grounds that difference was predicated” (Dubow, 1994, p. 358). This fluidity allows for essentialist bigotry to run rampant without check. Whether rooted in South African or U.S. Christian nationalism, this instance that race is not a factor in discriminatory practices is weaponized to protect the status quo. This erasure is evident in the U.S. treatment of MENA immigrants and Muslims as anti-U.S.; deeper consideration of MENA identity as racially/ethnically distinct is, therefore, silenced. This deliberate avoidance of consideration of MENA peoples as distinctive feeds into the inability of MENA community members to access vital support systems and spaces to voice the barriers they face to equitable inclusion in U.S. society.

A Nationalist Narrative of Misnomers

The Census Bureau defines racial and ethnic identity as “a fluid and mutable self-identified construct, which can change across time, experience, context, and other factors” (Reist, 2013, p. 39). The Census Bureau and its governing bodies have used this mutability to racialize different groups at different historical points, granting and revoking citizenship and often driving a wedge between communities of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Whitby, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020). In many ways, MENA identity is a “crisis-associated identity” that came to the forefront of the U.S. cultural zeitgeist due to the anti-terrorism rhetoric spawned from the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers. Whether strategic or accidental, the white coding of Arabs leaves MENA peoples alienated from the communities of color and any affirmative action opportunities. MENA demographics
and data are obscured and *absorbed* into whiteness in current practices around demographics surveys, educational studies, and beyond.

The Western construction and obstruction of MENA identity have historically relied upon the othering of Arab peoples. Said (1978) described the so-called Middle East as “a European invention,” a land of “exotic beings [and] haunting memories” (p. 9) manufactured to meet Western political and military motives. The denigration of MENA peoples has been fueled by mass media stereotypes that have combined xenophobia with racialized Islamophobia, portraying Arab men as barbaric, religious extremists, and Arab women as ignorant, submissive, and abused (Akash & Mattawa, 1999; McQueeney, 2014; Shaheen et al., 2006). These stereotypes have hinged on xenophobic Islamophobia thinly veiled as anti-terrorism and national pride. Such jingoistic racism blends “knee-jerk patriotism and homegrown white racism toward non-European, non-Christian dark-skinned peoples” (Abraham, 1994, p. 193) in a fury of media sensationalization and hyper-ethnocentrism. This conflation of MENA identity and religious extremism obscures the rich spiritual and cultural diversity of the Arab world, branding its people as anti-American threats.

The status quo has resulted in MENA students, whether Muslim or perceived to be Muslim, experiencing increased prejudice (Ramadan, 2021). Though coded as white, Arabs are not afforded the same privileges as their peers of European descent. Standard categorization results in the erasure of the unique, often pained, stories of Arabs who are neither afforded the dignity of accurate representation nor the comfort of the white norm. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on how MENA students navigate their perceived and lived racial identities once immersed in a country that ignores and vilifies them. This
simultaneous oppression and erasure leave Arabs gaslighted by a government structurally ignoring the hurt it propagates. Throughout the Trump presidency, leadership from anti-Muslim hate groups such as ACT for America met with the Trump administration on at least two occasions, highlighting how much more credence is given to those who discriminate against MENA people than the MENA community itself (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Hodson (2020) highlighted how the presidential equation of refugees with invasion and terror has dismantled the U.S. immigration policy through what the calls “the Islamophobia Industry”. Whether international MENA students are Muslim or not, they and their South Asian peers are often perceived as such. Sensationalized language from the Trump administration and Executive Order 1796 fed into the damning narrative that Muslims and Muslim-adjacent peoples simply do not belong in the United States. To disrupt this narrative, we must decolonize and delineate MENA identities from normed whiteness so that Arabs, foreign-born and otherwise, may be liberated from stereotypes and silence.

**Arab Americans: Between Arab and the United States**

Negative attitudes toward Islam, the Middle East, and North Africa are not new. Arabs have been in the United States since the Wahab family in the 1400s (Pickens, 2014), and approximately one third of enslaved Africans were Muslim (Austin, 2012; Diouf, 2021). The late 1800s also brought groups of Syrian Christians who fled religious discrimination from Ottoman forces (Haiek, 2022; Naff, 1985). The Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of 1967 also brought an influx of Arabs who were treated as “not quite white” (Pickens, 2014, p. 7) immigrants in numerous ways. Popular Californian media of the era referred to Arab business owners as violent (Naber, 2012), whereas East Coast platforms
described Syrians as “pack peddling . . . new colonies” (Naff, 1985, p. 130) that were distinctly non-Western. It is important to note that the early Syrian immigrants rarely referred to themselves as Arabs and that the Arab and MENA diaspora, despite shared cultural roots, clung to their respective identities as Persian, Christian, Muslim, or Druze (Naff, 1985); Arab-ness was not and is not a monolith. These diverse communities of Arab immigrants, a majority of whom were Syrian, did not prioritize their cultural preservation in pursuit of making a living in the United States. In the early 1900s, Arabs fought for the status of legal whiteness to allow them to sponsor emigrating family members and to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes of Blackness (Greenwood, 2020; Hall, 2017; Pickens, 2014). Aspirational whiteness is generationally more prevalent in earlier generations of immigrants for whom assimilation offered safety that their war-torn homelands did not. The lack of cultural preservation led to a predominance of white American narratives and stereotypes that spoke for MENA immigrants who served as a new target of xenophobic racism. Arab immigrants fell into the liberal trap of assimilation in which the United States promised belonging to “one ‘family of man’ provided you became more and more like us” (Hall, 2017, p. 88).

Cultural differences and ethnic distinctions were perceived as obstacles to the U.S. dream.

In more recent years, particularly since the Gulf War and the so-called War on Terror, U.S. culture has collapsed all of MENA and Muslim identity into a global enemy to democracy in much the same way that the Soviet Union was portrayed during the Cold War (Hall, 2017). The politically charged probationary nature of Arab-ness and Muslim-ness in the United States led to a simultaneous other-ing and invisibilizing of Arab
identity depending on the news stories of the moment (Pickens, 2014). Although the body of scholarship on international Arab identity in the United States remains remarkably slim, increased academic and activist representation from Arab Americans has worked to dispel the harmful messaging of the so-called War on Terror and the bigotry of the Trump administration. Alimahomed (2011) coined the phrase “Generation Islam” to describe the generation of Arab American Muslims whose youth and self-conception were impacted by 9/11 and the discrimination they faced in its aftermath. Their scholarship invited further questioning on how younger generations and newer arrivals to the United States have navigated their identities in the wake of the Muslim ban. Abu-Ras and Suarez (2009) reported 40% of white U.S. citizens admitted to being prejudiced toward Arabs, Muslims, or both. Alimahomed (2011) interviewed 60 young adult Muslims in Los Angeles to examine the impact of racialization on shaping the representation, prejudice, and self-identification of the Muslim diaspora. Their interviews highlighted how Muslim students are treated as the anti-nationalist other, how Arabs have never been identified as recipients of racially categorized affirmative action programs, and how Black and BIPOC initiatives often do not include people of MENA descent. This finding is key to note because an othered racial awareness informs Arab and North African identities through socialization, resulting in a “phantom whiteness” that does not reflect their lived realities (Abdulrahim, 2008; Alimahomed, 2011).

Because recent generations of MENA and Muslim youth have no other experiences or references for their current racial formations, their racial identification is particularly susceptible to their environment and sociocultural contexts. Researchers can predict that this vulnerability only partially holds for MENA immigrants from MENA-
majority backgrounds, but the effects of this socialized dissonance remain unknown. As government officials such as Trump and his administration continue to vilify Muslims as an imminent threat to the U.S., scholars must explore how younger generations navigate their identities in the wake of the Muslim ban. The repeated systematic subordination of Muslims is inextricable from the discrimination of MENA students from the Muslim-majority Maghreb and the Middle East. Thornberg (2015), who studied the effects of bullying norms on persecuted youth, described how targeted individuals, over time, can develop an ambivalence toward their own identity. Bullied youth absorb the bigoted and damaging opinions of their bullies; might this happen with a person’s racial identification after persistently being othered and denigrated?

Alimahomed’s (2011) research highlighted how Muslim students are treated as anti-nationalist others, often told to go back home to their presumed-other country, even though they may be U.S.-born and raised. According to Alimahomed (2011), “These remarks indicate the association of whiteness with the cultural and material privileges of U.S. citizenship. There is a strong assumption that Arab Americans are foreigners” (p. 391). Her study also discussed how Arabs have never been identified as recipients of racially motivated programs, and Black and African American initiatives often have not included people of North African descent. This isolation is key to note, because an othered racial awareness informs Arab and North African identities through socialization steeped in xenophobic Islamophobia. However, MENA individuals are also denied the affirmative action-oriented benefits for which people of color might qualify; thus, as the
politicized other, MENA and Muslim individuals forge a collective consciousness that is affected by racism while simultaneously being whitewashed and erased.

Shryock (2008) documented the socialized assimilation to U.S. racial schemas that reject prior iterations of Arab assimilation. Alimahomed (2011) identified a trend among Arabs who frame their own experiences of race as a gesture of solidarity with other minoritized groups who experienced discrimination at the hands of whiteness and white nationalism. This viewpoint speaks to the double consciousness that DuBois (1903) described, where Black folks have self-knowledge that is deeply at odds with how the world views them and can internalize assumed inferiority as a result of the social and systemic hostility they face. Abdul-Jabbar (2015) tapped into the concept of double consciousness when he examined the “internalized personality formation and the process of forming an ethnocultural identity within the Arab diasporic community” (p. 54) through a Duboisian narrative. Bazian (2004) further explored Arab identity from this viewpoint by examining how Arab Americans have internalized their status as the other in similar ways to Asian Americans who survived prejudice and internment in prison camps. The politicization becomes personal through a sense of guilt by association that wears down Arab and Asian self-conception due to the sheer frequency with which they are labeled as threats and outcasts. Scholars must unpack how such identity erosion might impact international students who are torn from the epistemologies of their home nations and immersed in the value systems of their U.S. campuses.

**Mental Health Implications**

Numerous researchers have uncovered that international students experience increased depression on their college campuses (Montgomery, 2017; Rice et al., 2012;
Victims of racism also suffer from adverse mental health after experiencing verbal, social, or physical abuse (Brondolo et al., 2016; Fernando, 1984; Samari, 2016). Recent scholarship has further indicated religious discrimination and social isolation result in Muslims attempting suicide at double the rate of other religious groups in the United States (Awaad et al., 2021; Samari, 2016; Singer, 2021). Islam is the most prevalent religion in the MENA region, and students—such as those from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, countries that offer full scholarships to their students—are either Muslim or have been raised in a Muslim-majority culture. Because of the normalization of Islamophobia in the United States, MENA students may be particularly at risk of depression and anxiety as they acclimate to campuses due to the continued increase of anti-Muslim hate crimes (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012). Black students experienced increased symptoms of depression and anxiety amid the increased anti-Blackness of 2020 (Mental Health America, n.d.); although no research as of yet confirms a connection, the same may be true for Muslim students (Carter & Reynolds, 2011). In post-9/11 United States, Muslim Americans’ rates of suicide and depression have grown alongside the Islamophobic sociopolitical rhetoric of the times (Abu-Ras, 2015; Amer & Hobey, 2012; Naser, 2020). College campuses are not immune to the ideological violence of their surrounding cultural landscape and often serve as places where this rhetoric is concentrated and examined more openly than in other settings.

Abdulrahim and Baker (2009) found Arab Americans who have acculturated report a higher quality of health than their peers who speak more Arabic and are more immersed in U.S.-based Arab subcultures. Abu-Ras (2015) reinforced these findings in
his research that Arab Americans experience increased stigma around accessing mental health services. Conversely, Suleiman et al. (2021) found that, although Arab Americans report poorer health than non-Latinx whites, Arab Americans experienced more positive health outcomes when they felt a greater connection to their heritage. These findings are consistent in both Arab American and Black communities who enjoy intimate, immersive connections within their ethnic group (Abboud et al., 2019; Pickens, 2014). Ajrouch and Antonucci (2018) provided significant evidence that Arabs are 30% more likely to report depressive symptoms than their white peers, and they advocated that MENA American social and health relations and disparities are distinct from the Black/white binary renderings of the discourse around them.

Pickens (2014) expounded on this thought in their earlier statements that “hierarchies of whiteness, double consciousness, communally sanctioned silence around illness . . . are never divorced from circumstances that create them” (p. 13). Although each of these aforementioned studies focused on Arab Americans, evidence exists that a lack of citizenship status also increased anxiety and depression in immigrants (Abu-Ras, 2015; Adulrahim & Baker, 2009; Amick & Donato, 2005). Both Arab Americans and MENA citizens have consistently reported lower health outcomes than those of white Americans who are afforded white privilege; for this reason, healthcare advocates such as the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities have suggested Arabs are designated as “health disparity populations” (Abboud et al., 2019, p. 1581). To whitewash MENA identity is to assume a positivist approach that reduces Arab health to an outlier and an afterthought: the status quo is antithetical to social justice considerations of underrepresented communities deserving of their own narratives and access to
sufficient, culturally responsive resources. To examine the well-being of international MENA students as they live and learn on U.S. campuses, this study employed a conceptual framework rooted in critical paradigms that prioritize student self-determination.

Chapter Summary and Conclusion

Further exploration of MENA student identity development and well-being can allow scholars to “break through the collective academic denial and acknowledge that the education most of us had received and were given was not and is never politically neutral” (hooks, 1994, p. 30). Lynn et al. (2013) stated CRPs must be made accessible “beyond the academy” (p. 605); this study explored if they are indeed present in the academy regarding the ways MENA identity is both treated and negotiated. Arab American scholars and activist collectives have advocated for increased consideration of the Muslim cause as Islamophobic rhetoric has echoed on news platforms from Fox News to The New York Times (Folkenflik, 2019; Levine, 1991). Such rhetoric is unavoidable and influences the ways in which students and educators alike do or do not welcome MENA students into shared academic spaces.

Researchers have explored the merits of CRT and CSP, along with the practical and ethical implications of racial erasure and the conflict between racial erasure and xenophobia of Arab Americans. Still, there remains a gap in the literature that must address the intersections of international and Arab identity on college campuses. It is critical to examine how MENA students immerse themselves in an academy whose governmental policymakers denigrate their native values and traditions. Students at this intersection live on a razor’s edge of alienation and acculturation that has not yet been
considered with the respect they deserve. The label of phantom whiteness inaccurately presents the diverse truths of MENA identity and the ways that the racialization of Islam has impacted Arabs both historically and presently. This examination of the well-being, self-analysis, and self-worth of MENA students honors the tenets of CRT and breaks through the confines of the conservative categorization of the master narrative. Thus, this study relied on the following research questions and subquestions as developed through careful consideration of existing literature:

RQ 1: How do international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students identify within a U.S. context?

a. What terminology do MENA students use to identify themselves?

b. Are these associations positive or negative?

RQ 2: What relationships do international MENA students experience while attending college in the United States?

a. Do they identify with/relate more to white peers, their fellow international peers, or U.S. classmates of color? Why?

b. How do these relationships influence their sense of racial, cultural, and religious identity?
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

If I listen, I have purpose.

—Moroccan Proverb

This chapter outlines the methodology by which international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) student identity in a U.S. context was explored. This study was rooted in a critical social justice perspective that sought to understand international MENA students’ unique positionalities and experiences in their own words. This chapter reviews the research design as well as the rationale and parameters of the study. I also cover the methodology using a concurrent transformative approach through a convergent parallel mixed-methods survey tool in harmony with the analysis of individual participant interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

As a transnational scholar, I live as a perpetual insider and outsider both in the United States and in my home country of Morocco. I understand identity is self-determined and yet deeply impacted by the perceptions and opinions of others. We construct ourselves and our social realities through our interactions and the meanings we make from those interactions (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This research was grounded in critical race theory (CRT) as explored through the prioritization of human dignity, which empowers participants as active agents, not passive recipients, and demands respect for all facets of who they are, regardless of how their truths may or may not be thematically consistent. I hope to extend this consideration.
Methodological Overview

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) wrote that meaning arises from actions and influences actions because, as people, we are active participants in our lives and the meaning we make of them. This methodological approach is rooted in this notion of constructivism that invites rich, multiple meanings rooted in socially impactful contexts (Creswell, 2009). A constructivist methodology addresses the transitory, subjective nature of humanity in which human experiences generate meaning that must account for the context of meaning-making (Seidman, 2019). Intentionally and respectfully striving to understand individuals’ experiences allowed for an understanding of even the most nuanced of issues because all “social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (Seidman, 2019, p. 7). By allowing individuals to speak their truths and share in an open, reflective space, marginalized individuals were empowered to be the protagonists of their own stories. This approach employed a mixed-methods design of qualitative and quantitative methods to best meet participants where they were and to maximize invitational access amid the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic and MENA and Muslim people’s understandable reluctance to participate in information sharing with anonymous entities.

This study was rooted in the human dignity framework (Mehta, 2019), which highlights the integrity of and respect for all people—emphasizing the need to protect the worth of those in the margins. The “buried knowledge of erudition and those disqualified from the hierarchy of knowledge and sciences” (Foucault, 1972, p. 82) are not afforded the political platform to gain promotion through standard education systems that encompass what people come to know as “common sense.” This critical methodology
embraced the “necessary entanglement” of “the past and future [being] brought into the present with the aim of productive social change” (Kuntz, 2016, p. 14). This framework allowed perspectives and processes to be openly shared on both sides as I engaged in a co-constructed, two-way interview process with participants (Mehta, 2019).

Bhattacharya (2017) similarly advocated for an approach that not only interrogates but inverts systemic localities of power. For this study, this process entailed my role modeling vulnerability; I also offered short stories of my own experiences when asked. This perspective hinges on scholars knowing their positionality and proximity to power. Using the privilege of my education, I assumed the “risky” position of “troublemaker from within” (Lester, 2017, interview) to challenge oppression and give my participants space to vent, laugh, and cry. Kuntz (2016) echoed the tenets of the human dignity framework with his focus on a social justice framework that seeks to “make methodology stutter” (p. 15). Part of this approach required remaining transparent and self-reflexive about my process and reactions with my committee, my participants, and myself as I memoed and reflected on my role as a MENA researcher.

**Grounded Theory From the Ground Up**

A key goal of a grounded theory methodology is the “mutual construction of knowledge by the researcher and participant and the ability to develop subjective understandings of participants’ meaning” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 510). This results in developing a grounded theory or findings grounded in the data through systematic and flexible analysis. A grounded theory requires a “detailed, focused and full” description that reveals “participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). The grounded theory approach
allows for exploring the data through iterative writing and reflection (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). Grounded theory encourages simultaneous and ongoing reflection and interpretation that allow emergent and evolving codes to take shape in organic ways that are particularly suited to topics and communities that are not well understood (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As stated, this approach affords “researcher-as-instrument reflexivity to spark a new methodological moment and draw on collaborative grounded theory processes” (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 55). Through the application of the grounded theory framework, meaning can be made narratively through the “living, telling, retelling, and reliving our lives within particular social and cultural plotlines” (Clandinin & Huber, 2002, p. 161). Meaning was made of the international MENA student experience through listening and relistening to each participant’s story.

This approach allowed for centering the participants’ contexts of living and learning in a new country. Grounded theory methodology offers concomitant theory and method through its interpretive and constructivist epistemology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Glaser and Strauss (1967) offered a firm reminder that researchers cannot approach reality “as a *tabula rasa*” (p. 3) and that each individual brings their respective perspectives to help sift through and make sense of data. The iterative nature of grounded theory relies on the researcher conversing with their data and allowing the data to converse with the emergent categories and themes. Grounded theory is a verb, a noun, a method of inquiry, and the very product of that inquiry (Charmaz, 2005; Lempert, 2007). Blurring the collection and analysis processes breaks down the research’s linear and potentially extractivist nature.
I owned my positionality to coexist with the unique perspectives of each participant so that it did not cloud their truths in the pursuit of mythical, apolitical neutrality. Qualitative research strives “to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it” (Hatch, 2002, p. 7) while paying keen attention to the ethical and political tensions of their surroundings (Creswell, 2009; Pillow, 2003). To contextualize these experiences, these students’ individual and social lives were analyzed (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). This approach allowed for participant experiences to be understood “in their own terms” and to draft a story of their experiences “as it is experienced by the person herself” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). To understand the experiences of others, researchers must be aware of their epistemologies, values, biases, and triggers. For these reasons, participants were offered the opportunity to engage in the process of reflection through various methods: online surveys, individual interviews, and short open-ended response fields.

Self-reflexivity allowed for an understanding of researchers as filters of meaning-making that may serve as variables in data collection and analysis. Researchers strive for *parrhesia,* or having skin in the game, and a “becoming with” the truths they seek to uncover (Bhattacharya, 2017; Foucault, 1972; Kuntz, 2016). This critical approach centers on *parrhesia* and an awareness that people’s livelihoods and dignity hang in the balance of the decisions we make in the name of truth and research. What follows is a description of the research design.

**Research Design**

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design that used online surveys and individual interviews with international MENA students and alumni. The
merits of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms were applied to examine the international MENA student experience. Edmonds and Kennedy (2017) favored the convergent parallel mixed methods approach, which begins with the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data followed by comparative analysis of the complementary data on the same focus. Creswell and Creswell (2017) also encouraged this design for its ability to recognize “the non-neutrality of knowledge, the pervasive influence of human interests, and issues such as power and social relationships” (p. 89). The use of mixed-method instruments allowed for the incorporation of the broadest possible range of responses from diverse participants with different comfort levels around engaging in virtual research settings. Figure 3 offers a flowchart of the methods used.

![Visual Flowchart of Research Methods](image)

Figure 3. Visual Flowchart of Research Methods

*Note:* This figure depicts the use of convergent parallel mixed methods. Though data collection was convergent, the initial analysis focused on qualitative interview findings as quantitative responses came in from participants.
Convergent parallel mixed methods enabled the application of grounded theory, which allowed for the interrelating of both inductive and deductive data. Mertens (2009) credited such concurrent transformative mixed methods for its ability to emphasize social justice and address the unique experiences of diverse groups. This approach was well suited to the MENA community, which faces Islamophobia and xenophobia within oppressive social structures (Mertens, 2003).

Data collection opened with an online survey tool that combined qualitative and quantitative methods. This questionnaire recorded basic information that may be overlooked in an interview, such as the participants’ ages and fields of study (Smith, 2019). The use of an online qualitative survey served as a wide-angle lens that accessed “data that ranges in focus from peoples’ views, experiences, or material practices, through to representational or meaning-making practices” (Braun et al., 2021, p. 641). The online questionnaire allowed participants to quantify their feelings and perceptions via a 4-point Likert scale and use open-ended text responses to share their experiences in their own words. When possible, findings from these online text responses were validated in later recorded interview discussions (Polkinghorne, 1989). This approach is appropriate for a diverse, marginalized population because the participants’ realities take precedence over hegemonic beliefs about the participants’ community.

Qualitative interviews were used to examine the representations of MENA culture to which international MENA students are exposed and their responses to these portrayals. This process also explored those with whom international MENA students related most closely, their white peers, fellow global peers, or U.S. classmates of color (i.e., RQ 1). The quantitative application of the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) assessed if
international MENA students experiences acculturative stress and how their relationships in the United States impacted their racial/ethnic identity development (RQs 1 and 2). Umaña-Taylor et al.’s (2004) EIS assessed individual identity formation across the three components of exploration, resolution, and affirmation with consideration of the participants’ “familial ethnic socialization and self-esteem” (p. 10). The EIS includes tenets of Rosenberg’s (1979) Self-Esteem Scale to directly assess how identity formation impacts individuals’ broader self-esteem and well-being.

The qualitative paradigm is, at its core, inductive and focuses on making meaning of complex narratives (Creswell, 2009). Seidman’s (2019) four themes were used to structure interviews: the temporal and transitory nature of human experience, subjective understandings, experiences as foundational, and emphasis on meaning and meaning in context. These themes served as cornerstones in developing a grounded theory approach that sought to answer the research questions. Through this approach, I crafted interview experiences that “come as close as possible to understanding the true ‘is’ of our participants’ experience from their subjective point of view” (Seidman, 2019, p. 14). Meaning-making was collaboratively achieved through shared language that affirmed the perspectives of the individuals while remaining cognizant of their respective community and values. These values were located within a definition of culture that “is not solely a race or a category, but rather, it an experience” (Avant, 2011, p. 119). As such, commonalities within the broader context of MENA engagement in U.S. settings were analyzed. Meaning-making is transitory and not fixed; throughout the interview process, participants were encouraged to be reflexive and situate their understandings within different contexts and times as part of their broader human experience.
Navigating Researcher Accountability and Access

A research process that uplifts the dignity of all involved hinges upon developing reciprocity and engaging in a mutual cycle of “hearing, listening, and equalizing the research relationship—doing research ‘with’ instead of ‘on’” (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Although memos were not shared with participants, reliability was ensured through member-checking data points and findings with cohort mates and a MENA doctoral student whom I met through the research process. Interview participants were given the opportunity to read Chapter 5 and offer commentary or voice discomfort with how I told their story. Triangulation occurred through the intentional consideration and comparison of data sources to ensure cohesive thematic and content findings while shining light on any discrepancies that required further examination.

Institutions of learning are where epistemologies are codified and portrayed as both fact and common sense; my participants deserved to know they were not invited as fodder for any ulterior motive, but were free and encouraged to share their truths, however dissimilar from my own and each other’s they may have been. Contradictory experiences and moments of tension around shared identities were gifted opportunities for deeper reflection that challenge hegemonic assumptions and systemic mistreatments of entire world populations.

As befitting the diversity of the MENA participants’ own racial and ethnic complexities, combining a qualitative online survey, quantitative scale, and traditional interview methods emphasized diversity rather than typicality (Braun et al., 2017). This multiperspective design offered two different avenues for data collection: an online survey and individual interviews. This decision resulted from several overlapping access
challenges in this study’s set-up stages. The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in fewer opportunities for face-to-face connections with community members of both MENA and non-MENA descent. As a resident of a fairly small community in Illinois, I did not have in-person access to a population of Arabs, students or otherwise. Given the history of U.S. governmental and societal suspicion of people from the Middle East and North Africa, I received minimal responses to cold-call-style outreach to international MENA students and the university administrators who mentor them. Recruitment emails and digital flyers were shared through various platforms, including the direct email of 24 U.S. college administrators, 12 MENA and Muslim college student affinity groups, and three Reddit subgroups of international student communities (see Appendix D). I also shared a call for participants on my personal LinkedIn profile, where my original post was shared 13 times by personal and professional connections.

**Population Sample and Data Collection Process**

The participant pool was composed of respondents from the recruitment email and subsequent snowball sampling of respondents’ connections who displayed interest in participating. Snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) allowed initial respondents to leverage their networks to broaden the research reach and provide a representative sample within a finite population. Snowball sampling included my personal and professional connections and those reached by initial respondents through word-of-mouth and shares on their respective social media channels. Four of the 10 interview participants voiced a desire to share my email and survey flier with their MENA peers. The data collection process also relied upon convenience sampling based on the accessibility of participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).
Data were primarily collected through an online survey tool that allowed for collecting demographic information confirming respondents’ eligibility to participate in this study (see Appendix E). Participants must have spent at least two semesters at a U.S. college and have been born and raised in any of the following MENA countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen. Of the 165 survey respondents, 107 were not eligible as they were not born in this region, resulting in 58 eligible participants.

**Participant Demographics**

All of the MENA region’s countries were represented in this study except Kuwait and the Western Sahara. Data were analyzed from those 58 eligible individuals, 36 men (62%) and 22 women (38%). Participants pursued degrees including bachelor of arts (n = 24), bachelor of science (n = 28), and associate’s degree (n = 4), with two (3.4%) reporting having worked toward undergraduate certificates. There were 17 graduates (29%), 30 current students (52%), and 11 individuals (19%) who did not complete their degrees. Participants’ age ranges varied from 18–22 (n = 26), 23–30 (n = 25), and 31–40 (n = 7). Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants’ countries of origin.
Table 1

Survey Respondent Demographics: Nationality/Country of Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A range of core demographic information was gathered from each participant to examine how their identities influenced their time and treatment. As recorded through
Umaña-Taylor et al.’s (2004) EIS, respondents self-reported their ethnicities through participant-generated classifications of Black Arab, white, North African, Middle Eastern, African, and Amazigh. Notably, six participants (10.3%) did not report an ethnic background. Their responses, although considered for all eligible questions, were not included in the EIS assessment as related to RQ 1, which relied on participant self-identification. Table 2 offers a breakdown of participants’ self-selected racial identities as collected through a short-text, open-response survey prompt.

Table 2

Survey Respondent Demographics: Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North African</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazigh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the core focus of this study was not on religious discrimination or spiritual connectedness, it would have been remiss not to consider faith as I examined the potential impacts of the consistent racialization of Islam and subsequent anti-MENA
Islamophobia on MENA participants (Abboud & Rabelais, 2019; Abraham; 1994; Alimahomed, 2011; Bayoumi, 2009; Beydoun, 2015). Table 3 offers an overview of the participants’ religious affiliations.

Table 3

Survey Respondent Demographics: Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Maronite</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Calder (2020) wrote, “Research is never an innocent enterprise: it is always a deliberate intervention in the world” and “has the potential to cause harm” (p. 93). Two of the 10 participants asked for a review of my protocol to ensure participant privacy before their participation. A third participant gently but firmly shared they did not wish to share any details of their college demographics for fear of exposing their identity. I did not push any participants to answer questions that caused discomfort, and I reminded each participant they were empowered to pause or stop the interview at any time. Informed consent was ensured before the interview process (see Appendix F), and each participant was reminded they were in charge.
One-on-one interviews were scheduled for 1 hour, confidentially audio-recorded, and then transcribed (see Appendix G). The opportunity to participate in an entirely MENA-rooted conversation where American-ness and whiteness were not prioritized allowed for a more profound reflection of internal values with minimal outside influence. Two participants presumed I was a white American at the start of the email and expressed not only mild surprise but relief that I am MENA. One said, “Oh good!” and the second shared salaams and offered kind greetings in Arabic.

To maintain their anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and uplift various qualities and themes at the heart of their disclosures. Due to his empathy and sincere care for his MENA peers in how he spoke, the name Anas, meaning “affection” and “love,” was selected for Participant 1. Participant 2 was given the name Badr, meaning “full moon,” as he shared light and humor even as he discussed his trials and struggles with acclimation. Participant 3 was referred to as Din, or “religion, way of life,” for his love of his religion and commitment to the Muslim community. The name Fadl, meaning “generous” or “honorable,” was chosen for Participant 4, who spoke with sincere kindness and encouragement when describing how he supported his Black and Muslim peers. Participant 5 was referred to as Jada, or “precious gift,” for the gifts of laughter and nostalgia she shared about our shared homeland of Morocco. The name Jawad, “magnanimous, liberal,” was selected for Participant 6, whose eagerness to celebrate gender diversity and U.S. cultural and technological advancements was unmatched. Participant 7 was given the pseudonym of Maheer, or “brave,” due to his dignity and fearlessness in facing violence and racist derision. Naseer, meaning “supporter, protector,” was chosen for Participant 8, who was tireless in dispelling
negative stereotypes about Muslims and Black communities. Participant 9 received the pseudonym of Rabab, meaning “blessings,” as our conversation was a gift of honesty, sisterhood, and shared grief for the recent passing of our fathers, may they rest in peace. The name Ruqsar, or “steady, confident,” was chosen for Participant 10, who demonstrated a fierce pride in her faith and heritage and a resolute commitment to her values. Table 4 reflects the interviewees’ demographics.

Table 4

*The Interviewees’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Self-selected racial identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anas</td>
<td>18–22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia and Sudan</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badr</td>
<td>23–30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Din</td>
<td>18–22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fadl</td>
<td>23–30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>North African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>23–30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Arab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jawad</td>
<td>23–30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maheer</td>
<td>23–30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Benin &amp; Morocco</td>
<td>Arab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naseer</td>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabab</td>
<td>18–22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruqsoar</td>
<td>18–22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>North African and Chinese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-reflexivity is a crucial strength of qualitative grounded theory, and each participant was invited to use the interview process as an opportunity to participate in the “construction of a discourse of solidarity” (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 526) to explore their subjectivities. By providing open-ended questions, participants
could reflect on their time in the States in a way that was honest, vulnerable, and just as impactful to them as to my research. Their reflections acted as a “bridge that merges the brown bodies in our communities with academia” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). As an international MENA student, my goal was to offer my participants a chance at healing and empowerment. The interview protocol was structured to ensure a safe space that encouraged openness while remaining attuned to the needs and comfort levels of my participants. My hope was by creating a space for their voices to take up as much space as they feel confident, I would, in turn, be able to represent their truths honestly and empathetically.

This method allowed for solid opportunities to triangulate data from multiple sources in various formats (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Braun et al. (2017) found online qualitative questionnaires are ideally suited to sensitive research and participants who may be hesitant to trust strangers who seek to question them about their lives. I approached this study with cautious optimism that participants would feel comfortable joining me in interviews on their experiences in the privacy of their own safe spaces; however, the anonymity of the survey tool was most valuable for response rates, as only 1 in 5 eligible respondents opted into the interview process. The online, opt-in nature of each method gave voice to my community that culturally is not as used to face-to-face disclosures or discussing vulnerabilities outside of the family unit (Davey et al., 2019). Participants were not required to turn on their cameras during interviews and were reminded to use pseudonyms on their Zoom accounts if they preferred. This anonymity was intended to help participants to feel confident their stories would be heard and their confidentiality maintained.
Quantitative Data Analysis

As a mixed-methods study, this dissertation employed the quantitative research design of an existing quantitative survey, the EIS (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). EIS assesses three aspects of ethnic–racial identity and, most importantly, allowed participants to self-identify racially and ethnically. Their self-identification was critical, so I did not use my biases and opinions to categorize my participants. Umaña-Taylor et al.’s EIS assessed individual identity formation across the three components of exploration, resolution, and affirmation with consideration of their “familial ethnic socialization and self-esteem” (p. 10). Exploration is the degree to which someone has explored their ethnicity, the resolution is the degree to which they have resolved what their identity plays in their lives, and affirmation refers to the positive or negative effect they associate with their identity.

Responses to key survey questions of the EIS were analyzed to examine how MENA/Arab, Black, and white self-identified international students from the MENA region experienced their identities in the United States. Questions 1, 7, 10, and 16 focused on participants’ feelings about their identities as either positive or negative. Questions 3, 12, 14, and 17 examined participants’ understanding of what their identities meant to them. Questions 9 and 13 directly asked survey respondents if they would change their racial/ethnic identities if they could. The remaining EIS questions around engaging in culturally relevant activities and with representations were not included in the analysis in this study for one key reason: it would have been a disservice to survey respondents to presume whether the media content they consumed and activities in which they engaged happened online or on/near their college campuses. Without this
information, it would have been impossible to truly understand how community-building occurs for this population. For this reason, questions on representation and relationship building were exclusively examined through the analysis of qualitative data. All but one interview participant largely responded they rarely or never consumed Western media and saw no representations of their cultural, racial, or religious heritages in physical spaces around them. Although the EIS questions on representation and cultural engagement are vital to understanding people’s identity development and community building, they were not suited to this particular study, as qualitative responses provided clearer and more salient findings.

A key strength of the EIS, which is directly aligned with RQ1, is the opportunity for participants to name their own identities instead of being assigned labels according to their new host culture’s perceptions. RQ1 focused on how participants self-identified, the verbiage they used, and their sentiments about their identities. Before any claims could be made as to whether or not participants felt positively or negatively about their racial/ethnic identity, I examined whether there was variance between how respondents of different labels responded to the EIS survey questions. ANOVAs were run between participants who self-categorized as “MENA or Arab,” “Black,” or “white.” ANOVAs allowed for an examination of not only the differences between how participants’ self-conception of their identities differed, but how their sentiments about their race and ethnicity, as understood within their new U.S. context, affected their desire to change their race and the clarity with which they understood their identities.

To ensure the correct data were assessed, each of the 53 participants who sufficiently responded to EIS survey questions was assigned a point value. Responses to
questions that corresponded to the variables of feelings about race/ethnicity, desire to change race/ethnicity, and understanding of race/ethnicity were averaged by participant. Both feelings about race/ethnicity and understanding of race/ethnicity each were assessed by four questions of the EIS instrument, and desire to change race/ethnicity was examined by two questions. For each participant, their response scores were averaged and any responses that directly contradicted other responses within the same variable questions were excluded. This step was done to ensure the psychometric validity of Umaña-Taylor et al.’s (2004) instrument, which included multiple questions per variable to ensure reliability of findings. Once ANOVAs were run to calculate variance between all three groups of racially self-designated participants, t tests were run between each pair of groups to examine which averages were statistically significant from one another: MENA/Arab as compared to Black, MENA/Arab and white, and Black and white.

The use of the EIS did, in some ways, uplift the positivist tradition in its efforts to report the trends within the surveyed group of MENA international students. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) listed the lack of qualitative methods as a limitation of their scale. They stated the inclusion of qualitative work would better highlight “the substantive issues associated with each classification” as well as “the relation between ethnic identity and outcome variables” (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004, p. 35). Adding qualitative instruments to this study was a response to their concerns and allowed me to flesh out emergent themes to best honor the lived experiences of each participant.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

Meaning-making for narrative researchers relies on extensive and iterative analysis and reflection. With this notion in mind, I analyzed the broader context and
themes and the “chunks” of data gathered (Fraser, 2004). Fraser recommended researchers pay keen attention to the stories and emotions that arise from both interview transcripts and the researchers’ interpretations thereof. By doing so, experiential narratives shifted from storytelling that shows, rather than tells (Bhattacharya, 2017), within the parameters of the academy. These stories were messy and emotional, and I had to remember that my initial codes, although wholly grounded in data, were provisional and had to evolve with my continued reflection and absorption of increased data (Charmaz, 2005).

Grounded theory required that I listen, review, and code each interview until data saturation was reached and no new codes or categories emerged (Charmaz, 2005; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). These analytical, constant comparisons generated “successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category to concept” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 607). I reviewed older transcripts and codes alongside more recent transcripts, and primary and secondary codes were simultaneously considered for compatibility and validity of findings. As Saldaña (2009) stated, “Coding is not a precise science; it’s primarily an interpretive act” (p. 4); interpretations were analyzed for bias and insight through iterative memo writing and reading alongside participant-generated data. These initial codes served as transitional objects to be revisited upon the collection and analysis of further data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In short, instead of employing what Kuntz (2016) labeled an extractivist approach, I investigated meaning by immersing myself in the worlds and words of my participants.
To ensure the integrity of my approach and keep my own biases and imposed preconceptions to a minimum, I embraced Pillow’s (2003) four strategies of reflexivity; “reflexivity as recognition of self; reflexivity as recognition of other; reflexivity as truth; and reflexivity as transcendence” (p. 181). I continually challenged my presumptions as I received and interpreted participants’ stories so I did not alter or overshadow their experiences with my own. Intentional coding and recoding served as the “bones of [my] analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45), to which only my participants could grant shape, substance, and motion. As Dey (1999) wrote, researchers must distinguish between the context of discovery and the logic of validation; otherwise, findings may be corrupted by using the same data for discovery and validation. This qualitative study put international MENA students in the driver’s seat of their own storytelling in a landscape that has not yet considered their unique life experiences and attitudes. I was also privileged to member check my codes with my phenomenal wife, Rachel Mesouani, and my dear friend and cohort-mate, Tommy Royston, with whom I have shared this dissertation journey.

**Memos as Tools of Reliability and Validity**

Central to the analytical process was the act of memo writing, which offered a new location for analysis and reflection. Toldson (2019) advocated for a “subjective connection to the data” (p. 9) that allows for the researcher to be in conversation with both their participants and their ongoing, evolving findings. A key aspect of qualitative research focuses on reflexivity to identify the researchers’ role in meaning-making. This reflexivity took the form of memo-writing responses to the question, “how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and
analysis?” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). Through an immersive understanding of individual experiences in community settings, including one’s own, any semblance of coherent and socially just storytelling can be achieved. Researchers are charged with collecting, organizing, and making sense of multiple truths to paint a picture that disrupts stereotypes and restores dignity to those who have been pushed into the margins of their own stories. Each data point was read, reread, and read again, while memos were written, read, furthered, and challenged to ensure a true depth of multivocal findings. Groenewald (2008) wrote, “Memos help the researcher to achieve an analytical distance from the raw data and force the researcher to conceptualize” (p. 506). Memo writing allowed for the excavation of rich, thick descriptions that grounded theory requires; memos were written early and often, helping to increase relationship-building and immersion in new stories that have yet to be told (Charmaz, 2006). Birks et al. (2008) noted memo writing cannot be a rote or prescheduled task because true researcher immersion allows for diminished subjective influences and increased multivocal meaning-making. I memoed frequently, more often than not, audio-recording while walking my dogs, who served as my unofficial canine committee of reviewers.

Memo writing, constant comparison, and triangulation were combined to avoid imposing linearity and to ensure I did not “force the data” (Lempert, 2007, p. 251). Through memo writing, “one is forced to question what one knows, how such knowledge has been acquired, the degree of certainty of such knowledge, and what further lines of inquiry are implied” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 165). I maintained an awareness of where the participant narrative ended and my potential bias and preconceptions possibly began, especially in those conversations where participants recounted painful
experiences. Although Lempert (2007) cautioned, at times, memo writing could feel like navel-gazing or “thinking in circles” (p. 246), Pillow (2003) offered the reminder that this process is critical to understanding “how the self is involved in the research process” (p. 181). Although I was and am personally invested in the context of this research, the goal of this study is to authentically relate the experiences of international MENA students so that they may see themselves represented and respected in academic research.

Sonkar (2019) and Tinker and Armstrong (2008) examined how all researchers share the status of both insiders and outsiders to their research subjects and, in that way, occupy a unique space for both the observer and the other in a communal setting. Sonkar (2019) noted this so-called dichotomy appears reductive, as there is more malleability between these two categories than is presumed. Shared identities and identity markers did not necessarily mean shared perspectives or experiences, as we do not all experience our race or gender similarly. Kuntz (2016) warned, in pursuits of meaning-making in the research process, researchers cannot generalize nor claim a static, objective truth because of the extractive nature of hyper-generalization.

**Limitations of the Research Methodology**

My perceived limitations of this study centered on an awareness of a potential dearth of respondents and a likely hesitancy of participants to share their experiences openly in an interview setting. The previously mentioned sociopolitical policing of Muslim and MENA identities has contributed to a climate in the United States where immigrants and students of color are often told to keep their heads down and focus on their studies (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Blake, 2010; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Kahn, 2019). By building trust through being transparent about my own
journey, I created a space where participants were open about the range of experiences they had on and around their U.S. campuses. I sat with the discomfort and internal anxieties that arose from hearing my participants’ stories, especially if their values and concepts of self-determination differ greatly from my own. Pillow (2003) reminded scholars to interrupt comfortable reflexivity and work beyond self-indulgence to create “the conditions necessary for emancipatory research” (p. 176). There is “no simple roadmap” (Calder, 2020, p. 93) to research, and my path diverged wildly from my preconceptions. Although Creswell (2009) cited the limitations of sociocultural norms around gender and ethnicity that might inhibit rapport-building and transparency, participants of all represented nationalities and genders spoke freely to me.

A core limitation of my research is the underrepresentation of Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti, who are the most represented communities of international MENA students. Despite concerted efforts to connect with potential participants of these nationalities, it proved far easier to connect with Moroccans and Egyptians due to personal connections and snowball sampling. Another limitation is that all but three participants did not have their cameras on during Zoom interviews which prevented my ability to read body language and participant’s affect. However, my inability to see participants’ faces meant that I could not see visible phenotypes, thus I did not have the ability to project what I perceived to be their race on their experiences. Because I could not see them and say that they looked like a certain race, I could not superimpose my biases or racial codings upon them. This allowed for greater researcher distance and influence on participants’ stories. Every participant expressed either surprise or discomfort at the sheer number of white people around them in higher education, and many spoke of feeling more comfortable
with Black peers. I asked participants what other people presumed to be their backgrounds, but without knowing how participants racially presented, a depth of meaning-making and social tension remained unexplored.

**Language as Context and Limitation**

Though I had presumed that choosing whether to speak English and French (the languages of the colonizer) or *darija* Arabic during the interviews might prove challenging, each participant spoke entirely in English, even when I offered traditional greetings in Arabic or shared a popular French saying in response to something they said. Sonkar (2019) noted using English could close off participants during open interviews by cementing the researcher as an outsider; however, participants were all consciously or subconsciously committed to speaking English, with two Moroccan participants giggling when I made a comment in *darija*. Admittedly this reaction may have been because, like Fadl, I think my *darija* has become a little rusty. It is likely that time in the United States had caused the participants’ English to be their default language of communication, especially as all but two interviews occurred while participants were on campus.

**Chapter Summary**

A convergent parallel mixed-methods methodology rooted in grounded theory allowed for an exchange of information and a simultaneous individual and collaborative co-creation of meaning. There is no singular voice of the international MENA student experience in the United States; thus, my study emphasized generation over verification (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach challenged me to investigate my “cultural intuition” and, instead, nurture a form of self-reflexivity to transparently conduct my collection and analysis (Pillow, 2003). Intentional interviewing
and creating MENA-centered spaces and conversations encouraged the exploration of transitional MENA identity without the fear or influence of host or home culture entities. The study’s structure amplified the experiences of these participants who live in a uniquely dislocated place of living on their campuses in a country that gives them an expiration date upon graduation. Chapter 4 reviews the quantitative findings of the research instruments in response to the study’s research questions.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

No land without stones, no meat without bones.

—Moroccan Proverb

This dissertation examined the experiences and identity negotiation of international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students and alumni at U.S. colleges. As a convergent parallel mixed-methods study, these experiences were explored through participant engagement in an online survey and individual interviews. Because research on international students has identified significant mental health challenges international students face as they adjust to life in the United States (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1991; Tabbah et al., 2016), participants’ social–emotional well-being became central to this process. Participants were invited to share as much or as little information as they wished and were reminded they could opt not to answer anything that made them feel uncomfortable. My awareness as researcher of the stressors international students face was compounded by the fact that previous research has focused on those who are easily categorized within the U.S. racial schema, unlike MENA students who are not. This study encouraged participants to self-identify as they shared both their interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences to honor their stories as counternarratives to current understandings of MENA identity (Bell, 1993; Foucault, 1988; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). This chapter provides an overview of the results of the following research questions and subquestions:

RQ 1: How do international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students identify within a U.S. context?
a. What terminology do MENA students use to identify themselves?

b. Are these associations positive or negative?

RQ 2: What relationships do international MENA students experience while attending college in the United States?

a. Do they identify with/relate more to white peers, their fellow international peers, or U.S. classmates of color? Why?

b. How do these relationships influence their sense of racial, cultural, and religious identity?

A review of the research method and methodological constraints precedes a presentation of the findings of this work. This chapter is organized into two core sections. The first section outlines participant demographics, whereas the second section responds to RQ 1 and RQ 2.

Overview of Findings

This study was designed around a concomitant, convergent parallel mixed-methods approach where survey responses were analyzed in conjunction with interview transcripts (Braun et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2018; Sablan, 2019). The purpose of the survey was to determine participant eligibility, gather key demographic data, and administer the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS). By offering both Likert-scale and open-ended response opportunities for participants to reflect on their individual experiences and relationship-building on college campuses, the EIS was used to assess how participants’ self-selected racial categories impacted their happiness with and understanding of the role of race in their lives (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Open-ended questions were included to invite responses from participants who may have hesitated to participate in an interview.
setting due to anxieties that could be lessened with the anonymity of an online
questionnaire. The interview questions were used to explore participants’ attitudes about
their racial and cultural identities and their experiences navigating U.S. cultural norms.
This chapter offers an in-depth examination of the quantitative results of this study. The
significance of the findings is examined in Chapter 6.

**Self-Identification**

The lack of a MENA or Arab category in the U.S. Census has proven problematic
for many Arab Americans (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Beydoun,
2015; Blake, 2010; Kahn, 2019), and this study sought to understand if that issue also
holds true for international Arabs. As such, the first area of inquiry addressed in this
study was that of participants’ self-identification within their new contexts of living and
learning in the United States. Participants were asked how they identified racially and/or
ethnically within the United States. The terminology used by participants to self-identify
was analyzed to examine their understanding of and feelings about their race or ethnicity.

**Communicating the Self: Terminology**

The survey asked participants to racially/ethnically self-identify in two ways.
First, participants were asked to select which racial category they selected for all legal
paperwork they completed as part of their onboarding and registration processes upon
entering the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This paperwork includes but is
not limited to relevant visa forms, college intake materials, or social security
documentation. Participants were required to select from one or more of the five
categories used by the U.S. Census: Black or African American, white, Asian, Two or
More Races, or Other. The options of “American Indian or Alaska Native” and “Native
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” were not included because these regions are not associated with the MENA region. Participants were also offered the option to select “Hispanic or Latino,” but no participants identified with this category. As Figure 4 shows, participants overwhelmingly self-identified as Black within the context of the dominant U.S. racial schema.

![Figure 4. Participants’ Census-Based Racial/Ethnic Identification](image)

Next, participants were asked to self-identify their race or ethnicity outside of the constraints of the U.S. Census categories. This opportunity for self-identification allowed participants to identify themselves using their preferred language or word choice. This survey instrument used language that Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) employed in their questionnaire. Participants were similarly offered their definition of ethnicity as the “cultural traditions, beliefs, and behaviors that are passed down through generations”
(Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004, p. 16) and offered examples. Figure 5 displays the percentages of responses to this open-ended question.

![Figure 5. Participants’ Open Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity](image)

Because six of the 58 participants did not self-identify, their responses were not considered for EIS analysis. There are notable differences in self-identification when participants are not limited to categories associated with the U.S. Census model. When self-identifying their ethnicities, the following changes occurred: fewer participants selected white and Black, with 20 fewer participants identifying as Black. Of the 58 participants, 22 chose new categories (Arab, North African, Middle Eastern, African, and Amazigh) that are not offered in the current U.S. taxonomy. Those selections highlighted the need for more representative terminology. This finding also supports Dubow’s (1994)
and Seidman’s (2019) arguments that racial and ethnic labels are subjective, temporal, geographically located constructs and not fixed facts.

Despite the disproportionate sample sizes of each group, data were still successfully analyzed to identify significant trends between groups. Only five of 53 eligible EIS participants identified as white. Although this results in a far smaller sample size than those of the MENA or Arab and Black groups, it is a telling data point in and of itself. When given the opportunity to self-identify, white was, by far, the least selected category, which suggested few MENA participants saw themselves as white.

**Emotions and Identification**

Umaña-Taylor et al.’s (2004) EIS assesses three aspects of participants’ racial and ethnic self-identification: exploration, resolution, and affirmation. Exploration refers to participants’ levels of self-motivation in understanding their ethnicity, and resolution strives to understand how participants conceive of the role their identity plays in their lives. The second research questions most closely examined participant affirmation or the positive or negative effect on participants associated with their identity. Based on their self-selected identities, participants were divided into the categories of “MENA or Arab,” “Black,” and “white.” The next section responds to both research questions by using $t$ tests to examine the differences in participants’ exploration, resolution, and affirmation of their racial and ethnic identifications.

To reiterate a guiding question of this study: How do international MENA students identify, and with whom do they identify most closely? To accurately answer these questions, results from the EIS were considered in addition to emergent themes. This chapter outlines disparities in how participants identified themselves within and
outside of the constraints of the U.S. Census. This investigation highlighted the nuances of participants’ self-conceptions and how their selections impacted their feelings and understanding of their race/ethnicity.

**Participants’ Negative Feelings About Race and Ethnicity**

Survey Questions 1, 7, 10, and 16 focused on participants’ feelings about their identities as either positive or negative which can be reviewed in Table 5. These inquiries were examined on a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements: (a) My feelings about my ethnicity are mostly negative; (b) I feel negatively about my ethnicity; (c) I am not happy with my ethnicity; and (d) I dislike my ethnicity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). These statements measured participants’ levels of unhappiness with their own identities. Responses for each of these four questions were aggregated during data analysis because each statement measured the same variable of participants’ dissatisfaction with their self-selected racial/ethnic identities. As reviewed, participants were grouped into three independent variable groups of MENA or Arab, white, and Black, and an ANOVA was run to analyze the variance between groups. Table 5 displays the variance of negative sentiments between racial groups about their identities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENA or Arab</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>84.167</td>
<td>3.5069</td>
<td>0.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>75.333</td>
<td>3.1389</td>
<td>0.409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.08125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

**ANOVA Single Factor: Negative Feelings About Race/Ethnicity**
A comparative analysis of each group’s average responses to their negative sentiments to their self-selected racial identities found the following: with an average response of 3.5 on a 4-point scale, MENA or Arab respondents displayed the least negative feelings toward their identities. Participants who identified themselves as MENA or Arab felt most positively about their heritage, followed closely by Black respondents, who averaged 3.13. Responses from white participants were almost a full point lower, averaging 2.6, which was indicative of more negative feelings about their race. Table 6 shows a significant variance in group responses, which highlights the importance of participants’ race on their self-conception.

Table 6

Participants’ Negative Feelings About Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>F crit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>3.676</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.838</td>
<td>6.481</td>
<td>0.00315*</td>
<td>3.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>14.180</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.284</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17.856</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. p <* .005.

The results showed a significance level of 0.003 (p < .005), indicating the self-identification of groups impacted how they felt about their identities. White respondents felt most negatively about their self-proclaimed whiteness. According to the results of this study, MENA or Arab participants responded with an average of 3.507 on a Likert
scale, where 4 meant strongly disagree, whereas white respondents averaged 2.6. Given the current U.S. Census policy prohibits MENA or Arab students from identifying as anything other than “white” or “other,” this finding highlights the importance of allowing international MENA students to name and claim their identities on their own terms.

To confirm the results of Tables 5 and 6, t tests were run between groups to respond to RQ2, which asked if participants identified more closely with white peers or classmates of color. Prior to running all following t tests, F tests were conducted at every stage of variance comparisons to verify whether there were equal or unequal variances between pairs. The use of F tests ensured the validity of the t tests that compared pairs of groups. Table 7 shows the responses between MENA or Arab and white participants.
Table 7

**Variance in MENA or Arab and White Participants’ Negative Feelings on Race/Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>MENA or Arab</th>
<th>white</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.507</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.193</td>
<td>0.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled variance</td>
<td>0.177</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized mean difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>4.148</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T ≤ = t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.703</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T &lt; = t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.0003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.052</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, participants who identified as MENA or Arab felt more positively about their identities than those who identified as white. As reviewed in Table 5, Mena or Arab participants’ mean response was 3.5, strongly leaning toward agreement of positive sentiments, as compared to white respondents who averaged 2.6 on the 4-point scale. The degrees of freedom were within the range of significance for these findings. Furthermore, there are notably different variances in responses between the two groups. Table 8 offers a comparison of responses between participants who identified as MENA or Arab and those who selected Black.
Table 8

Variance in MENA or Arab and Black Participants’ Negative Feelings on Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>MENA or Arab</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.507</td>
<td>3.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.193</td>
<td>0.409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled Variance</td>
<td>0.301</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>2.323</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.679</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were closer averages and variance levels between MENA or Arab and Black participants. These results highlighted that MENA or Arab students and alumni align their identities more closely with Black respondents than they do with white respondents. Five of the 53 respondents selected white compared to Black (n = 24) and MENA or Arab (n = 24). This result indicated MENA or Arab alignment of identifying as people of color. Such a finding supports the research of Pickens (2014), who found deep similarities between Arab and Black experiences in the United States. These results show when participants identify as Black or MENA or Arab, they experience fewer
negative feelings about themselves, as evidenced by their comparable mean responses of 3.14 and 3.5, respectively. This finding harkens back to scholarship that examined the empowering effects of allowing people to name their own truths instead of being labeled by others (Blake, 2010; Graham et al., 2020; Kahn, 2019; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

What follows is an examination of how participants’ self-identification affected their understanding of their racial and ethnic identities.

**Participants’ Understanding of Their Racial and Ethnic Identities**

Questions 3, 12, 14, and 17 analyzed participants’ self-rated clarity about their identity and the role their race or ethnicity played in their lives. These statements asked if participants strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the following statements: (a) I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me; (b) I understand how I feel about my ethnicity; (c) I know what my ethnicity means to me; and (d) I have a clear sense of what my ethnicity means to me (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Tables 9 and 10 outline the analysis of variance between the three groups of participants.

**Table 9**

*ANOVA Single Factor: Understanding About Race/Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENA or Arab</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39.25</td>
<td>1.635</td>
<td>0.217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42.25</td>
<td>1.760</td>
<td>0.342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.089</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 offers further insight into the intergroup and intragroup variance of responses between and within Black, white, and MENA or Arab groups.
Table 10

Understanding About Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>F crit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1.829</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.915</td>
<td>3.4595</td>
<td>0.039*</td>
<td>3.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>13.218</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.2645</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15.047</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

As with all aspects of EIS, the applied Likert-scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Table 9 outlines the use of an ANOVA which shows that participants who identified as white least understood their racial/ethnic identity, averaging 2.3 as compared to MENA or Arab and Black students, 1.64 and 1.76, respectively. Table 9 highlights that Black students, at 1.76, most understood their identity, which was corroborated within participant interviews that are explored in Chapter 5. Results on participants’ understandings of their racial or ethnic identity were significant at 0.039 (p < .005). These data suggest for international MENA or Arab students who select white or are labeled as white, racial understanding may be harder to achieve. As a social construction, perceptions of race are geographically located and do not fluidly cross over from country to country (Dubow, 1994; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Leach, 1983; Ogbu, 1998); in this fact lies the danger of presuming a universally understood meaning of whiteness. This is evident in that white respondents possessed the least variance in their responses as compared to Black and MENA or Arab participants,
who reported higher levels of understanding about the role of race in their lives. What Feagin (2013) coined as “the white racial frame” (p. x) is located within a Western context that cannot be transposed or translated to the MENA region. For many international students who travel to the United States, access to financial, educational, and linguistic privileges back home place them in closer proximity to “whiteness” than they enjoy when they become the minority upon arrival in the United States. These results suggest similar lived experiences between Black and MENA or Arab respondents and the relative ease of identification MENA students and alumni felt with Black communities. This theme is further explored in Chapter 5’s presentation of qualitative thematic findings. Table 11 offers a comparative analysis of Black and MENA or Arab responses.

Table 11

Variance of MENA or Arab and Black Participants’ Understanding of Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>MENA or Arab</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.635</td>
<td>1.760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Df$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$ Stat</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.819</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P(T \leq t)$ one-tail</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$ Critical one-tail</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.681</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P(T \leq t)$ two-tail</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.417</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$ Critical two-tail</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arab and MENA respondents reported similarly to Black respondents in both mean (1.63 and 1.76, respectively) and variance (0.22 and 0.34, respectively) of understandings of their identities. Table 12 highlights the larger difference in self-reporting between MENA or Arab and white participants. This finding shows a lack of identification with whiteness that 90% of the 53 participants experienced.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>MENA or Arab</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1.635</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled Variance</td>
<td>0.198</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized mean difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>-3.036</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt; = t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.703</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt; = t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.0512</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In conclusion, on the 4-point scale, MENA or Arab participants self-reported 1.6 on the Likert scale, indicating a strong agreement with understanding the role that their race plays in their lives and what their race means to them. Black respondents closely followed at 1.76, with white respondents edging toward less agreement at 2.3. Chapter 5
presents an analysis of interviewees’ experiences highlights that the linguistic and educational advantages MENA students may have experienced in their homeland would have offered closer proximity to whiteness, as described by Molina (2020) in her journey with international education. The lack of certainty a white-identified MENA or Arab student may feel when self-selecting their race prompts the question of whether these students feel pressured to ascribe themselves to whiteness by the U.S. status quo; this is reinforced by the fact that only five of the 58 participants independently selected white when U.S. policy would categorize all 58 as white. This question is further explored in Chapter 5 where some participants voice feeling pressured into identifying as white. The next section examines respondents’ desire to change their self-selected racial categorizations.

Participants’ Desire to Change Race/Ethnicity

Questions 9 and 13 directly asked respondents whether they would change their racial/ethnic identities if that were a possibility. Statements 9 and 13 asked if participants strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the following statements: (a) I wish I were of a different ethnicity; and (b) if I could choose, I would prefer to be of a different ethnicity. Table 13 outlines the results of this section of the EIS. To review, the Likert-scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Table 13 displays the results of the ANOVA I ran to explore intergroup variance in participants’ desire to change their racial identities.
Table 13

ANOVA Single Factor: Participants’ Desire to Change Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENA or Arab</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>0.652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 displays the intergroup and intragroup variance of responses between and within participants’ subgroups.

Table 14

Participants’ Desire to Change of Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>F crit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>4.574</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.287</td>
<td>3.795</td>
<td>0.029*</td>
<td>3.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>30.133</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.603</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34.708</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

Table 14 shows a closer relationship between patterns of MENA or Arab and Black identification than that of white respondents. Specifically, MENA or Arab participants least wanted to change their identity, with an average response of 3.25. Yet, MENA and Arab participants are forced to identify as white on the U.S. Census when they are the group that least wants to change their racial identity. Black respondents averaged a response of 2.83, indicating a preference not to change their race, whereas
white respondents, who would also be legally labeled as white, averaged a response of 2.3 indicating that they most wanted to change their race. Ironically, it is only white-identified participants that would not be required to change their racial identity in a U.S. context. This result suggests the group who would most like to change their identities is white; yet whiteness is the category enforced on each group once they enter the legalized racial schema of the United States. Table 15 outlines similarities between Black and MENA or Arab responses, highlighting the parallel between both average responses and variance of responses in each group.

Table 15

Variance of MENA or Arab and Black Participants’ Desire to Change Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>MENA or Arab</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>0.623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled Variance</td>
<td>0.638</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesizes mean difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>1.807497014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt; = t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.03861333034</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.678660356</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt; = t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.07722666067</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.012895567</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These results show that MENA or Arab and Black participants had the least variance in their responses at 0.65 and 0.62 respectively, indicating a relatively consistent appreciation of their racial identities. This finding allowed me to infer that due to their lower desire to change their identities, Black and MENA or Arab participants, who averaged 2.83 and 3.25 respectively, experienced more pride in their respective racial/ethnic communities. These participants would be forced to identify as white while completing paperwork for social security cards, visas, or identity-based scholarships. Table 16 shows white respondents also displayed significantly less variance in their responses, amplifying the difference in their self-conception between those of their other peer groups.
Table 16

Variance of MENA or Arab and White Participants’ Desire to Change Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>MENA or Arab</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled Variance</td>
<td>0.585</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesizes mean difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Df</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>2.526</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt; t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.703</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt; t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.052</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationships

Participants were also asked about their relationships with their college peers and professors and how they did or did not continue to communicate with friends and family back home. The purpose of this line of inquiry was to examine in which spaces MENA students felt most comfortable and to whom they felt most connected. Although MENA identity is coded as white, previous research has indicated relationship-building for MENA and Arab individuals most organically occurs with communities of color (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Blake, 2010; Kahn, 2019). Developing close friendships and communities of trust is vital to international students’ ability to thrive and also influences the ways in which they outwardly and internally engage with their own
racial, cultural, and religious identities (Alimahomed, 2011; Blake, 2010; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Kahn, 2019).

Each of the 10 interview participants shared a strong preference for media, including movies, music, news, and social media content, from their respective home countries. Nine of the 10 interviewees shared their main media outlets were Twitter and YouTube, which, especially the former, are too broad to categorize as entirely U.S. or MENA-created content. Only one of the 10 participants had the opportunity to see representations of MENA or Muslim identity in their course materials or classroom settings, and that representation framed her Muslim faith negatively; such exclusion from and prejudice within representation has proven isolating for members of minoritized communities (Graham et al., 2020; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Three of the 10 interviewees shared although they did not actively engage with curricula about their heritage, they participated in both affirming and racist interpersonal conversations with their professors and/or peers. For this reason, RQ 2 focused on the relationships and real-life interpersonal interactions of participants during their time in the United States.

Finding Home Abroad

RQ 2 asked what relationships international MENA students experience in their U.S. college campuses and how they maintain connections with family and friends back home. Relationship-building has significant consequences on mental health for MENA Americans and Muslim Americans (Greenwood, 2020; Suleiman et al., 2021). This section of the chapter reviews the ways participants approached long-distance relationship maintenance and nurtured new friendships on campus. This section then
reviews the two dichotomous approaches of how some participants reach out to or disconnect from their parents and family members in their home countries.

**Chosen Families on Campus**

Survey respondents displayed clear trends of the communities with whom they felt most comfortable socializing. Of the 58 participants, 55% reported having many or few MENA friends on campus, and 44% of whom reported socializing with them often. Despite the low presence of MENA peers on campus, 50.6% of participants reported often or always feeling connected with their MENA heritage and cultural values, both independently through media and interpersonally through relationships. These numbers did not vary significantly among peer groups of different backgrounds: 53.9% of participants had many or few U.S. friends (45.1%) and international Muslim (53.9%) friends on campus, and 45.1% of whom often socialize with them. However, there was a slight dip in connectedness between Muslims as only 48.4% of participants reported often or always feeling connected with their faith communities. Table 17 offers a breakdown of how comfortable participants feel with different groups of peers.
Table 17

*Survey Participants Reporting Positive Comfort Level With Different Peer Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial affinity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International MENA peers</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International peers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black American peers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab American peers</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx American peers</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American peers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White American peers</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17 indicates disparate levels of comfort with different peer groups, most notably, a substantial drop in comfort levels with white U.S. peers. Interview participants stated spending time with Black and Muslim friends, including Black Muslims, was easier in terms of shared communication styles and home values. Alimahomed (2011) examined this trend among Arab Americans who similarly felt more connected to peers of color who have experienced racism and prejudice; it is in spaces of shared experiences that both support through persecution and celebration of cultural pride can be safely found while navigating a new white-majority landscape.

*Family at Home: Two Perspectives*

International MENA students reported having two distinct approaches to staying in touch with their families back home; for example, 17.6% of participants reported always talking to family, whereas 34.1% reported communicating often, and 6.6%
reported rarely communicating with their parents. Additionally, 41.7% of participants preferred not to disclose their communication habits with their families at home, which in and of itself, gives pause for consideration as to why they may have shown reluctance in doing so. As the interviews showed, the motivators for communicating or not communicating with home stem from two perspectives, seeking support from family and, conversely, not wanting to burden their families by seeking support. These motivations are further explored in Chapter 5.

*Relationships and Esteem*

Participants were asked how their relationships with others influenced their relationships with themselves and their roots. There was a slight discrepancy in how often MENA participants shared their national pride with peers and how often they felt that pride. Of the 58 participants, 50.6% reported always or often talking about their home respective countries while in the United States. However, 59.4% of participants reported always or often feeling proud of their nationality and heritage. This finding indicated MENA students might not always feel comfortable or appreciated enough to verbalize this pride, with almost 10% of participants feeling pride they do not share with others. This cultural sense of self manifests in different ways, which I cover in the broader thematic analysis that follows in Chapter 5.

**Summary of Results**

Participants who self-identified as MENA or Arab felt more racial pride, positivity, and understanding than peers who identified as white. International MENA students felt most comfortable with peers of similar racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, although they had different degrees of pride in those aspects of themselves,
a finding that is supported by other scholars (Alimahomed, 2011; Blake, 2010; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Kahn, 2019). Half of the surveyed respondents did not neatly fit into U.S. schemas of race, nor did they feel at ease in spaces of whiteness. Participants had distinctly different approaches to sustaining themselves by either seeking familial support or self-silencing. Chapter 5 explores the themes that emerged from the survey and interview processes. The themes expand beyond the scope of the core research questions to provide a more detailed picture of life in the United States for MENA students.
CHAPTER FIVE
THEMATIC FINDINGS

He who leaves his house in search of happiness pursues a shadow.

—Moroccan Proverb

Throughout the research and analysis processes, key themes emerged within and beyond the initial scope of this study. This chapter provides a detailed thematic analysis of the international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) student experience. As this dissertation employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, both qualitative and quantitative research elements were blended to answer each research question and code themes shared between participants’ experiences through concurrent design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). In total, 58 participants completed the questionnaire, whereas 10 opted to take part in an interview. Chapter 4 presented a quantitative analysis of the survey results, including students’ self-selection of their ethnic and racial identity and its influence and effect on their self-concept. Table 4 in Chapter 3 offered an overview of the interviewees’ demographic details. For this study, saturation was operationalized as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” (Guest et al., 2006, p. 65). Significant themes recurred so frequently that thematic saturation was achieved. The theories presented in Chapter 5 relied on iterative coding and careful analysis of the affect of all interviewed participants, with attention paid to their word choices, tones, silences, and exhalations.

Despite the variety of experiences and attitudes of participants’ time at U.S. colleges, each participant yearned to achieve a feeling of belonging that validated their most salient identities. Four clear themes emerged from their narratives: Affinity,
Hybridity, Resilience, and Loneliness. These themes emerged through an analysis of all 10 individual interviews and the open-ended responses to the survey. Students experienced belonging by embracing opportunities in the United States, connecting with various communities, and feeling valued for their heritages. The theme of hybridity was constant in their recounting of connecting international peers and global diversity and how international students felt belonging most in non-U.S. spaces and only felt accepted with white peers when assimilating to U.S. norms. Resilience was prevalent when participants held their heads high in the face of ignorant assumptions while affirming their self-worth in the face of American exceptionalism. The theme of loneliness was riddled through each participant’s story as they described their survival strategies through loneliness, tokenization, invisibility, powerlessness, and anxiety.

Overview of Themes

This chapter examines these themes through an in-depth examination of participant experiences. These findings include a synthesis of the core themes present in participant data. The wording of these thematic labels is excerpted from participants’ direct quotes. All participant quotes were directly transcribed to preserve their unique voices without the restrictions of grammatical norms or Western English syntax. Some interview participants disclosed more than others; this chapter presents findings from each interview, though a core few are represented more than those participants who shared less. Table 19 outlines the core themes and subthemes discovered through the research process.
Table 19

*Emergent Themes From Qualitative Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Number of participants who expressed theme</th>
<th>Instances of theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affinity</td>
<td>Black Americans</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other international MENA students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family at home</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybridity</td>
<td>Diversity of deen⁶</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Between belonging</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing the game</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Rejecting U.S. exceptionalism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fighting assumptions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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This chapter explores these results to share thematic findings and offer individual accounts of how they understood and emotionally processed their ethnic and racial identification. Every participant expressed a desire to belong and find a community in

⁶ In Arabic and Muslim traditions, deen refers to faith.
which their religious, racial, and cultural heritages were celebrated and not merely tolerated. This chapter is divided into four sections that correspond to four core themes: affinity, hybridity, resilience, and loneliness. Responses to research questions are woven throughout the discussion of each theme and their following subthemes. This journey begins with an examination of the ways that international MENA students and alumni recalled how they sought to find communities and spaces of belonging on and around their campuses.

**Affinity**

The core message of each participants’ interview was the desire to belong. Every participant expressed how they felt belonging or a lack of belonging in different spaces based on how others responded to one or more factors of their identity. Sentiments of belonging hinged upon participants’ feelings of innate companionship and shared values with those around them. International MENA students reported actively seeking community among different groups of peers of color, fellow Muslims, and other international students. As reviewed in Chapter 4, participants felt less comfortable with white peers than with classmates of color and were most at home with fellow Muslims and MENA students. Students reported making friendships in spaces where code-switching and assimilation were not required and with people they could trust as they experienced feelings of homesickness and loneliness. A commonality between each of the following accounts is an awareness of how ever-present racism and the pervasive Islamophobia of U.S. culture places MENA students on the outside of the norm. In moments of bigoted tension when participants were judged for their faith, race, or culture, participants felt the least belonging as their identities and values were disparaged. For
these reasons, participants felt the most affinity with Black Americans, fellow Muslims, other international students, and, for some, family members at home.

**Affinity With Black Americans**

Participants experienced belonging in affinity groups with peers who looked like them. Given the shared experiences of racism and colorism, participants, especially those of a darker complexion, felt an immediate affinity for Black classmates and community members. Jawad, Rabab, Jada, and Fadl said most of their friends were Black U.S. citizens. Their shared lived experiences of Blackness were more powerful connectors than any dissimilarities they had based on having different national origins. Fadl, a male student from Morocco, shared:

> You know, in a country that is discriminated by the white, you know, the white American, . . . I enjoy when I see a Black, and I—especially Blacks that are Muslims, and most especially if I see any one of them who is a Moroccan or in the MENA countries.

Fadl, like other interviewees, did not consciously dissect individuals’ identities across a single axis of identity binaries such as Black or not Black, or Muslim or not Muslim. However, his first response indicated that he was most drawn to the shared Blackness of his peers rather than the potential for shared faith, though, as the following section will explore, faith was also an important node of affinity. He went on to emphasize his affinity with fellow Moroccans and MENA community members. Here, Fadl shared his anxieties about being in predominantly white spaces while reminiscing about happier moments of being able to celebrate various aspects of his lived experiences with others. As reported in Chapter 4, survey participants reported feeling more
comfortable with Black and Arab peers than white peers. All but five of the 58 respondents and every interviewee identified as Black or MENA, which highlighted a self-identified association with Blackness and Arab-ness. Participants experienced the most affinity with those who similarly did not look white. Participants consistently noted their most meaningful relationships were with those who were conscious of not only the existence of whiteness as a privileged category, but their global and individual proximity to it. Participant awareness of their fleeting belongingness in white-majority spaces necessitated an understanding of their unique positionality that still allowed for cultural pride. Abdul-Jabbar (2015) built upon DuBois’s (1903) conception of double consciousness to highlight the ways in which Arab identity is fractured across spaces of diasporic understanding and experiences of othering and isolation.

Jada rarely connected with white classmates and reported exclusively making friends with Black community members whom she met off-campus. She felt valued for her Blackness by Black Americans who welcomed her into their friend groups and supported her through her homesickness and the search for good food. This finding harkened back to Alimahomed (2011), whose scholarship noted Arabs often understand their own experiences through a lens of solidarity with other minoritized groups who experience white supremacy. The overlap of racism and spiritual isolation also speaks to the racialization of Islam that Pickens (2014) and Beydoun (2019) centered in their research. This study similarly found that shared faith was a key locus for those who yearned for communities of belonging amid a landscape in which Islam was othered.
Affinity With Muslims

In both the interviews and survey responses, participants shared increased ease around fellow Muslims, creating affinity groups of people who believe as they do. As evident in Fadl’s interview, Black Muslims, in particular, were the core of participant friend groups because of the dual points of shared identification: faith and racial identity. Where proximity to a downtown area allowed, participants visited mosques or off-campus communities with more spiritual and racial diversity than their predominantly white institutions (PWI). Jada, who identified as Black, shared she longed for connection with fellow Muslims and people of color, particularly on her predominantly white campus, which she said included too much profanity, drinking, and partying. Din shared that communal Friday prayers with friends were among his top priorities.

For those who could not physically engage with Muslim peers, there was an increased sense of isolation, as I present later in this chapter. Participants who could connect with Muslim peers recalled coming together over Friday prayers and their shared dismay over the lack of Halal campus food options at mealtimes, especially during Ramadan. It is noteworthy that participants had to look off campus to combat loneliness as they struggled to find companionship or representation on campus. It is particularly significant to note that need for Muslim companionship increased during Ramadan, the holiest month of the year, which is typically overlooked on campus calendars that prioritize Judeo-Christian holidays as part of the core academic calendar. For participants like Jawad, an Egyptian man, who could not connect with a local Muslim community, the only option for spiritual affinity was through individual prayer, online content, and calls to home that he felt most seen. Participants consistently noted an unawareness of the
needs of Muslim students by college administration and faculty that impacted their ability to feel at home on campus.

Rabab shared she and her Muslim boyfriend petitioned their campus cafeteria for more awareness on cross-contamination and food separation to no avail. Staff and students frequently use the same utensils to serve pork-based dishes as pork-free options. Though Rabab found humor in describing the food as so low quality it may as well be “3D-printed,” she was worried about her Muslim peers who could “only eat pizza or fries.” She was anxious that her Muslim peers were not only socially isolated but not having their physical needs met. The absence of support for MENA students transcended the various levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; not only were they unable to achieve belonging, esteem and self-actualization, they also reported feeling unsafe and, in terms of religious dietary needs, not having their basic needs met. Participants reported that when they experienced a lack of support from U.S. peers and campus administrators, they turned to peers with shared identities who could relate to their struggles. For most, a core point of affinity was with fellow international students from the MENA region due to their many points of identification over shared traditions and adjustment strategies to life in the United States.

Affinity With Other International MENA Students

When asked who his people were, Anas responded, “I would say, maybe international, um, more than race . . . I think we all have that connection.” Every international student has a unique, personal journey as they live and learn in the United States. Each interviewee commented their closest friendships and relationships were with MENA, Arab, and African international students. Participants felt comfortable and most
valued with international and, more specifically, international MENA peers who shared
the common experience of being newcomers in a new land. Participants felt affinity with
other international MENA students regardless of previous exposure to U.S. culture and
international travel. Participants like Rabab, who spent a year in Japan, had already
experienced cultural shock in a completely different culture but still connected most with
other international students. The same was true for Anas, who adjusted to Saudi and
Sudanese life, and Maheer, who had lived in both Benin and Morocco. Despite varying
degrees of familiarity with U.S. culture, international MENA students still reached out to
each other for support and to feel at home.

Anas grew up watching U.S. media which facilitated his ability to engage easily
with U.S. peers, whereas Maheer, who was not familiar with U.S. traditions such as
Halloween, recounted being both afraid and confused when strangers dressed in costumes
approached him for candy. Even though Anas grew up with more exposure to U.S.
media, enjoying Hollywood movies and pop culture, he felt similar levels of discomfort
with adjusting to a new way of life. Jada, who was not familiar with Western media and
U.S. culture, found adjusting to the profuse cultural use of profanity on campus proved
especially challenging, causing her to spend as much time off campus as possible.

The shared experiences of being new in the United States created an easy affinity
between participants and other global students. Jada, Rabab, and Ruqsar shared their
happiest times at college were with fellow incoming international students before the
semester started and U.S. students arrived. They felt a shared sense of excitement and
togetherness with other international students striving to settle into their new
environments. Rabab reminisced about the easy nature of building friendships during
international orientation before the domestic student population arrived on campus.

Rabab, Maheer, and Anas shared they always found international students more patient and understanding as they navigated the academic and social landscape, often laughing together over shared struggles and strange new norms. The theme of seeking non-U.S. spaces for solace and camaraderie was clear in the way Maheer and Din, respectively, started playing cricket and soccer to meet fellow international students, particularly from the MENA region. Rabab shared that she and her Senegalese boyfriend “trauma bonded” over their struggles with culture shock. Diversity among communication practices was also a factor of note in terms of how students moved through social settings. Naseer similarly shared his international English language learner (ELL) peers offered him the most support both socially and academically. He shared:

> I enjoy a lot of people with different cultural backgrounds and races. When I started school, that was when I had difficulties within communication because when you have to ask questions in classes, you feel most times feel very, you know, shameful to ask questions, you know, during like, just because of your accent. And you know, with Zoom, “can you hear me? I hear you.” [sighed] So during lectures, I tend not to ask questions too much because they wouldn’t really understand everything I asked. So, I—I had difficult things trying to adjust, you know, but my friends, they help me, we build courage together.

Naseer shared that his fear of being mocked by U.S. peers and professors left him feeling silenced but connecting with friends and encouraging each other rebuilt his confidence. Research on international student adjustment to life in the United States often limits cultural tensions between foreign-born students and their U.S. peers; however, as
these participants’ experiences suggested, there is no sole international culture. Participants were specific in sharing that they specifically pursued friendships with other MENA students as opposed to international students in general. Existing scholarship has shown that international students of color experience the United States and create community differently than international students who identify as white (Freeman & Li, 2019; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Gorski, 2006; Montgomery, 2017; Wei et al, 2007). As MENA students are coded as white but are not afforded social or institutional white privilege, their experiences are unique from other international students. Ogbu (1998) framed minority status as othering experiences amid the “settler society” of white United States; interviewee’s anecdotes about their time at U.S. colleges clearly fall into this category. Each interviewee commented their closest friendships and relationships were with MENA, Arab, and African international students. Participants felt comfortable and most valued with international and, more specifically, international MENA peers who shared the common experience of being newcomers in a new land.

Interview participants universally stated they seldom or never watched U.S. television or popular media, which they felt, and as other studies have shown (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012; Shaheen 2003), too often portray Islam in a negative light. Instead, all participants but Ruqsar and Anas almost exclusively watched Islamic and Arabic language YouTube channels in favor of Western media, a preference that other studies have also corroborated (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012; Shaheen 2003). Rabab combatted homesickness by watching Lebanese news and, more frequently, comedies on a loop,
partially for personal enjoyment but also to connect with old high school friends about shared shows and to remain in touch with her culture. Maheer shared that he avoided Western media and social media because he constantly questioned what was true, and it made him fearful of being around white U.S. citizens. This fear of exposure to messaging that damaged participant self-esteem as Muslim or MENA caused tension in both interpersonal conversations and in classroom discussions. Most participants shared that they felt pressured to represent their faith and culture, which was emotionally taxing and distracted them from their studies. As a later section of this chapter will explore, this apprehension of being tokenized caused many participants to self-isolate and avoid socializing with white peers.

Even for those participants who did engage with white U.S. citizens, those relationships felt strained and distinctly different from the interactions they had back home. Rabab felt that U.S. conversational habits were superficial and always had an ulterior motive of upward mobility, noting:

I just, I think the U.S. culture has a lot of small talk and a lot of, um, networking but it’s kind of like, you do it for a purpose; you don’t do it with everyone. You don’t like . . . in life, for example, in my Lebanese Arab culture, and in like, I think Arab cultures in general, like Middle Eastern and North African, you like, you’re very generous, you open the door, you like welcome—you’re very welcoming you’re very open to anyone, but here I think I—I learned more boundaries.

Rabab’s awareness of the potential for ulterior motives in conversations had caused her to put up walls and become less open with peers than she might be in
Lebanon. The individualistic nature of campus interactions and the ways that peers sought to extract information from her instead of share in reciprocal conversation created a hesitation around disclosure with others. This reluctance to be open about one’s vulnerabilities often extended to how participants did and did not share their challenges with family at home.

**Affinity With Family at Home**

Literature shows that international students who safeguard their pride in their heritage regularly socialize with family members (Chen & Zhou, 2019). Perhaps this is because, as Hall (2017) noted in their study on foreign-born Arabs, participants struggled to find nonconditional camaraderie in the United States that was not rooted in open and tacit demands for assimilation. Similarly, I found participants who identified most strongly with their heritage consistently nurtured relationships with people who are also MENA, Muslim, international, or people of color. Participants also maintained in their relationships with their families back home, they took two distinct approaches: one group actively sought companionship and support from their parents, whereas another group became detached and withheld any information that they felt would stress their parents. In the latter group, participants spoke somberly as they acknowledged the sacrifices their parents and loved ones made for them to live and learn in the United States. Participants who regularly communicated with parents, siblings, and other family members reported feeling more comfortable than those who did not. Homesickness was a frequent topic of conversation both with interview participants and throughout the survey tool. To counter their homesickness, Ruqsar and Badr called their parents on a semi-daily basis both to ask for advice and to stay connected with immediate and more distant family members.
Maheer was grateful that his uncle, who had lived in the United States for 15 years, frequently took him on day trips to the local big city and had been able to join him during his campus orientation.

As discussed in Chapter 4, many participants felt a need to sugarcoat their stresses when talking to family back home, but this did not diminish their desire to remain connected. WhatsApp calls served as a continuation of how some participants related to their families and friends back home; in turn, this protected them from overwhelming feelings of isolation, even if they struggled to connect with college peers (Montgomery, 2017; Rice et al., 2012). Ruqsar told her mother “all details, from start to finish,” and solicited feedback and advice on the various forms of culture shock and academic and financial challenges she faced. Ruqsar’s relationship with her mother was unique among her fellow participants as her mother, who was born in China, had experienced similar culture shock when she moved to Egypt. Though Anas was reluctant to share his loneliness and financial insecurity with his parents, he was close to his Sudanese sister-in-law with whom he was living near campus. Anas said afternoon tea, cookies, and gossip with his sister-in-law was his safe haven in the United States. It was in those moments that he felt most supported and closest to home while abroad. When asked how often he communicated with family, Badr stated:

I—Um, very, very often, because family is first in everything I do, family first. Yeah, in as much as I wouldn’t want to make them feel bad, like home is not better. But I tried to let them know. Yeah, that I’m—I’m, I’m very safe. I’m very much safe here [paused] um, I’m . . . well, to do. Yeah, I’m good. Definitely [laughed] so they don’t feel bad, so they don’t think too much.
This desire to communicate stems from a desire to remain connected, but there is a core thread of reluctance to disclose the challenges they face on U.S. soil. Whether the difficulties participants are exposed to are racist rhetoric or financial anxieties, there is a shared, self-imposed pressure to be self-reliant and not burden their families who had already sacrificed their comfort for their children’s education. This was evident in the theme of loneliness; many participants actively disconnect from family members to protect them from anxieties about how Arabs are often treated in the United States. For each participant, there were countless moments between belonging and loneliness, moments of hybridity. This hybridity was the second key theme found in this study.

**Hybridity**

Bhabha (1994) theorized on the notion of hybridity through their application of a postcolonial, global lens. Bhabha’s work examined how hybridization occurs culturally, politically, racially, and linguistically, rendering it so that a monolithic view of one’s cultural identity is not only reductive but impossible. For participants like Anas, who was born in Sudan and raised in Saudi Arabia, or Ruqsar, who is half Chinese and was born and raised in Egypt, these concepts seem self-evident. However, Bhabha’s (1994) notion of that “middle space” between belonging and being othered was experienced by each of this study’s participants whether they were mono-national, mixed race or not, or Muslim or non-Muslim. Although college procedures assume that the term “international” sufficiently encompasses 95.75% of the global population, these nuances in identity establish the absurdity of this premise. Not only do current understandings of international student needs erase international and intercultural diversity, they also do not offer consideration for intragroup differences. The notion of cultural purity does not
exist: Maheer self-identified as a white-presenting Black African, while Rabab is an anti-colonial French speaker and Christian pro-Palestinian activist.

For international MENA students in particular, there is a between-ness in how their religious and racial identities are perceived in U.S. spaces. Not only do MENA participants exist between whiteness and non-whiteness, their stories amplify three further subthemes of hybridity: religious diversity, being between belonging, and playing the game to fit in.

*Diversity of Deen*

Disparate views on faith are not exclusively encountered between Muslims and non-Muslims but also exist within shared faith groups. Although participants recalled seeking community with groups of people who look like them, believe like them, or have shared lived experiences to them, there were still in-group moments of tension when participants navigated colorism and different ways of practicing their respective faiths. Among the study’s nine Muslim participants, there were different attitudes about how time in the United States either increased their connection to their faith or, conversely, alienated them from their religious community and traditions. Though each of the Muslim participants favorably spoke of their spirituality and shared that it was a key part of their identity, experiences in the United States caused participants’ relationships with their religion to change. For participants who experienced belonging with other Muslims, their identity as Muslims was reinforced and remained positive. For those who witnessed or experienced a lack of belonging due to Islamophobia, their sense of self as Muslims became fractured.
Anas shared his Muslim faith had always been important to him but that he grew more spiritually closed off the longer he witnessed how his older brother’s time in the United States has soured his relationship with Islam. Anas’ brother arrived in the States in the 1990s and faced relentless racism and Islamophobia which rendered his faith a source of bitterness and self-isolation as he clung to his religion for comfort. Anas feared becoming as “serious” and “on the extreme side of Islam” as his older brother. Anas said, Let me tell you something, my brother [paused] I don’t know what moving to America did to him . . . staying alone, and being secluded for a long time, really changes a person, [he’s] very moody, and like someone who’s very, you know, radical when it comes to religion . . . and he kind of like hyper fixated. So, I—I really, you know, the I think one of my biggest fears of moving here is losing myself and kind of becoming an image of him, whether it be, you know, to the radical or being like radical, so like, you know, like Arab Muslim side.

Anas was aware that he was consciously distancing himself from his spirituality and heritage as he adjusted to life at a PWI. While he felt internally conflicted about the role his religion would play in his ability to adapt to life in America, he did not want to shun his spirituality completely. He continued, “I don’t want to lose all my culture and my traditions becoming just like fully Americanized and just like losing everything. It’s very sad . . . It’s the trauma piece.”

Anas highlighted feeling tension between turning towards his faith or distancing himself from it. He valued this aspect of his identity but was aware that disclosure of his religion could lead to bias or persecution. Although he voiced fear that his feelings of social loneliness could lead to radicalization, he held his faith in high regard and did not
want to lose that part of himself. Similarly, Ruqsar, who is a proud Muslim, grew
despondent when her Egyptian classmate, whom she knew from their shared high school
years in Cairo, began to lose his connectedness with Islam. She shared:

So, my Egyptian friend came in as Muslim, and then toward the end of like—I,
he—he’s like, he didn’t fast or pray, and he started to eat pork, so that was a little
instance, I asked if he was still Muslim and he said he didn’t really see the point
of having a religion. So, I was like, “Okay, you do you,” like—like I can’t really
tell him anything. It’s his choice. But he sometimes tell [an atheist friend] like
when [that atheist friend] asked me about religion, he would back him up and tell
him something from his experience, like, “no I’m against Islam.” So yeah . . . I
didn’t mind talking to [our atheist friend] but like with [my Muslim friend], I feel
a little bit hurt—like because you were once a Muslim but then you suddenly left.

Ruqsar and Anas experienced emotional reactions to witnessing fellow Muslims
either retreat towards or turn away from their religious upbringing. The theme of
hybridity is present in the finding that participants simultaneously feel both a lack of
belonging from fellow Muslims for both being too Muslim, like Ruqsar with her friend,
and not Muslim enough, like Anas and his brother. Acknowledging the tensions between
in-group diversity shines a light on the fact that there is no sole Muslim identity just as
there is no unique international identity. These differences lead to the second subtheme of
hybridity, which causes students to exist in a space between belonging and othering.

Some participants navigate this discomfort by choosing to play the proverbial game and
assimilate into typical patterns of U.S. socialization by downplaying aspects of their
heritage to focus on their experiences as students in the United States.
Playing the Game

For several participants, assimilation was the easiest approach to feeling elements of belonging on campus. However, this belonging was not true inclusion as it relied upon the stymying of various aspects of their identities, whether it was through avoiding topics of race and religion, or laughing along with inappropriate jokes that mocked aspects of their heritage. This conditional acceptance afforded participants the opportunity to blend in with those around them but required participants to mask core aspects of themselves and, at least outwardly, disassociate from one or more of their identities.

As each interviewee noted, this assimilation to U.S. norms came at a price both in terms of their own self-conception and regarding their ability to connect with members of their home communities. Ruqsar, who had since returned to Egypt, spoke of her reduced ability to easily socialize with her high school friends who said she had changed too much since being in the United States. As a Sudanese man who spent his adolescence in Saudi Arabia, Anas’s sense of belonging and worth lived in an in-between space depending on which aspects of his life and culture were, or were not, understood by U.S. campus constituents. Anas’s story, though not the only one, is one rooted in hybridity and a sense of not fully belonging nor solely occupying one space or identity. Anas felt increasingly less comfortable with his friends and family in Saudi Arabia and Sudan as he felt they had few things to talk about while, at the same time, he felt he was not familiar enough with U.S. culture to easily relate to U.S. peers. Anas shared, “It kind of puts me in, sort of like, a box alone where I have to learn how to mingle with [U.S. peers], and kind of, you know, have the same sort of ideas and stuff like them.”
When asked if he shared his social struggles with family at home, Anas shared he did not feel he had a common language with which to explain these challenges, sharing, “my parents are really—they’re older so, and they—they’re very traditional people, and I mean my mom even didn’t have a phone with a touch screen, I think, until, like 2017!” From his experiences of watching his older brother be unable to seek support from home, Anas felt that there was no benefit in seeking advice from his parents as that would only stress them out due to their deep love of him and their lack of knowledge of U.S. customs. He shared that his focus was striving to fit in on campus and find people with whom he could relate.

Rabab’s story echoed those of Anas and Ruqsar as she spoke about her internal discomfort at adapting to U.S. culture which she described as individualistic. Rabab said:

I think, like, I literally changed my personality in that way because some people can take advantage of your, like, generosity. So, I became more socially—I guess like U.S. American, like, Americanized socially a little, because I know, like now, okay, we’re doing this. This is what they’re gonna expect; this is what they want; small talk here, small talk there, but don’t get too deep like, you know? You, you kind of have to do to like survive here . . . You, you kind of have to, like, read the room.

Rabab spoke of having to be hypervigilant so that she did not break any form of social custom or expectation that would result in her being tokenized or othered for being Lebanese. Rabab made a clear distinction between not only her comfort level with white versus MENA groups, but how she carries herself and how much support she feels from those around her. Money anxiety, though a persistent fear for every interviewee, was not
the key takeaway from Rabab’s comments. Throughout our conversation, she reiterated
U.S. life does not come with safety nets; she and her fellow students carry the pressure of
having to succeed alone. It was up to her and her fellow participants to evaluate the cost
of sticking out too much in either MENA or U.S. spaces and to consider where belonging
mattered most. These different kinds of belonging were often discussed as oppositional to
each other, and participants often felt as though they were somewhere in between
belonging and not belonging in either space. She lamented feeling that she had to remain
distant from U.S. peers due to negative experiences where others took advantage of her
kindness and left her feeling used.

Ruqsar was similarly aware of her assimilation as a means of survival. She shared
that she struggled socially because she felt that her peers were too individualistic and the
United States prioritized money over family. She said, “if you want to survive, you have
to adapt to that unless you are just around Arabs or around people from your culture.”
These participants describe MENA versus U.S. spaces as though they were placed on
opposite sides of an invisible barrier. They could choose to be in MENA spaces in which
they felt more comfortable, but it would come at the expense of learning more about how
to live in U.S. spaces. Similarly, they could dive into the U.S. context but risk internal
and social distance from their MENA identity and loved ones. Participants felt that they
could belong in both spaces and worked hard to, but that they did not feel fully integrated
into either space. Participants experienced hybrid belonging by having to consciously
connect to or cast aside aspects of themselves depending on the company they were with.

This almost-belonging occurred across identity lines of religion, culture, and race.
As a darker-skinned man, Badr discussed how he “tried to blend into the system” and
seek safety in anonymity by keeping his head down and remaining socially isolated. He expressed that this was his habit due to his fear of anti-Blackness both on campus and beyond. Badr told me that to be safe, he had to be friendly, and he sighed deeply as he talked about trying to mimic U.S. social niceties and patiently respond to microaggressive situations. Din echoed this fatigue when he said, “I don’t want people to say that because we are from Africa, we are having bad reps. That we are always known for bad things.”

Din’s hyperawareness of how he is perceived had made him cautious in every social situation, distancing fellow Africans for fear of how white peers might stereotype him. Din spoke of feeling most like himself when he was with Black and more melanated African peers, but that he still felt “white eyes” were on him which made him uncomfortable. Din was aware of how belonging with one group, his Black peers, came at the expense of fitting in with white peers who might judge him based on his individual Blackness or his friendships with Black, African, and MENA peers. This hybrid belonging highlights how different aspects of international MENA student identity can become fractured: this is due to the ways in which whiteness or perceived-whiteness and Blackness or perceived-Blackness can be both loved and reviled depending on social context. The proverbial elephant in the room of these experiences is Islamophobia and U.S. xenophobia against MENA communities. This will be further explored in the ways in the next subtheme of between belonging in which participants share how their conditional inclusion in their respective campus communities was based on the racialization of their heritage and religion, or perceived religion, of Islam.
**Between Belonging**

As a community consisting of members that both self-report as Black and white, international MENA students simultaneously identify across the racial spectrum without really belonging at any point on the Western-defined racial continuum. As Dubow (1994) wrote, racial categories are “wild cards” that morph to the needs and objectives of the powers at any given point in time. As described in Chapter 2, this intentional fluidity is evident through the manipulation of racial categories of the U.S. Census to promote or impede the immigration of different communities. Although the meanings of these identity markers are malleable and, like race itself, social constructs, they carry with them very real ramifications for the individuals and groups they categorize. In the case of international MENA students, their racial mixedness results in a state of almost belonging in both white spaces and spaces of color. This sense of existing between states of belonging and exclusion was prevalent in the interviewees’ accounts of their time in the United States. Anas shared:

I think, for my identity. I always had that sort of like, suffering that middle ground of not knowing what I identify with, because you know, to Black people and Africans, you know I’m not . . . I’m not like, you know, the typical. I’m not the typical, you know, Black person or the typical . . . you know, uh, image of an African person. And to Arab people, you know, I’m not the Arab with the fair skin and the, you know, the soft hair, so it’s always kind of like, [I’ve] been in the middle.

Even within entirely MENA spaces, Anas expressed a tenuous feeling of almost belonging, sharing that strangers often presume he is South Asian, making it hard for him
to meet people without being questioned about where he is “really” from. Anas noted when he shared he is both Sudanese and Saudi Arabian, he was met with questions about where home really is. Rabab, a Lebanese Christian, shared that she is often presumed to be Muslim and tries to tactfully correct the misconception without seeming as though she is disparaging Muslims. Although Islam has had a significant impact on the culture of Lebanon and most of the MENA region, not all MENA peoples are Muslim. Even in all Muslim spaces, there were tensions over how individuals did or did not practice their faith. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Anas shared although he loved his brother and felt at home with him, Anas struggled with his brother’s increasingly regressive beliefs, sharing that his brother, through his isolation, had sought solace in traditionalist Muslim communities. Ruqsar, a practicing Muslim, experienced a shifting sense of belonging with her fellow Egyptian Muslim classmate who told her that he was atheist. She felt it was their duty as Muslims to protect their faith. Although her classmate shared in the knowledge and traditions of their common upbringing, she knew her spiritual affinity with him was firmly rooted in the past. Fadl experienced similar discomfort with friends whose relationships with their deen shifted. Fadl shared:

I have a lot of friends that are MENA, although most of them are . . . [paused] they were Muslims . . . But since they are in America, you have most of them have changed to their religion from, you know, Islam to Christianity, and all that. And at that point . . . [sighed deeply] I would see that my friends are also constantly changing their religion from Islam to Christianity and having a lot of friends from MENA country . . . still culturally, I can’t change my culture or religion from Islam to understand it here.
Here Fadl shared he used to feel more belonging with his peer groups when they practiced Islam together, but as time progressed and some of his closest friends converted to Christianity, he felt the loss of their shared faith. Although he still has shared history and values with these friends, he no longer felt the same level of rapport and belonging.

This sense of almost belonging was also prevalent linguistically for many participants. Ruqsar shared she struggled with her written and spoken English because she was educated in the British system and not in U.S. schools. Participants also noted feeling self-conscious about their accents, both when speaking English in the U.S. and when speaking in their native tongues to family at home. Ennser-Kananen et al. (2021) wrote about accents lending to a hierarchization of international students where international students would be more socially welcomed in U.S. spaces if they “lost” their accents. On the contrary, these same students would experience less belonging in conversations with their home countries, even their own families. Maheer noted people similarly questioned his noticeably international accent, as did Naseer, who shared even his family back home commented on how his vocal patterns were becoming more Americanized. Although participants could communicate fluently in English and Arabic, they often felt they were not viewed as belonging to either English or Arabic-speaking communities because of their accents and shifting vocabularies. Jada echoed the findings of Ennser-Kananen et al.’s (2021) work, sharing her initial challenges with English have, over the course of 2 years in the United States, morphed into a loss of fluency of darija Arabic. Belonging is not a zero-sum game, yet striving to fit in with one linguistic group came at the expense of acceptance of another. This is similar to the earlier subthemes finding that efforts at belonging to either U.S. culture meant reduced comfort in MENA
spaces and vice versa. Every interviewee reported these mental gymnastics of code switching and self-tone-policing were exhausting, but their continued efforts to live and learn in the United States led to the study’s third core theme of resilience.

**Resilience**

Most participants shared they were taking advantage of all the opportunities that studying in the United States afforded them. Badr enjoyed theater and learning about transgender identity, whereas Jawad raved about his newfound access to the newest gadgets and technology that are unavailable at home. Fadl challenged his negative preconceptions about non-Muslims, saying, “College has taught me a whole lot actually, a whole lot about love.” A key subtheme of these opportunities was the hope of a more financially secure future. Rabab and Fadl both shared they wanted to return home, but only when they were financially able to offer more support to their families. Jawad echoed these sentiments and shared he hoped his degree in aeronautical engineering would bring much-needed knowledge to his home country. Whether standing up to racist rhetoric, taking college courses in a second or third language, or surviving the isolation of campus COVID-19 lockdowns, each participant showed resilience in the face of every challenge.

Even amid the potential for trying or tokenizing conversations with peers, Jada, Fadl, Ruqsar, and Jawad took pride in answering questions about their homelands and culture while on campus. This pattern of holding one’s culture and faith close was also apparent in participants’ leisure pursuits. By virtue of their living and learning in the United States, each participant, or at least someone in their respective families, valued U.S. educational opportunities as superior to those of their respective homelands. Despite
this, participants did not completely buy into the tropes of U.S. exceptionalism and, instead, stood in defiance of stereotypes that would frame their heritage as less significant or less valuable than that of the United States.

**Rejecting U.S. Supremacy**

Participants spoke of three key areas in which they combatted beliefs that things were simply better in the United States; these areas were racialized colonization, knowledge, and infrastructure. Regarding race, participants of all skin tones were aware of the white supremacist beliefs in which they were immersed, not only on U.S. campuses, but across cultures. Rabab recounted how a U.S. friend encouraged her to apply for a job babysitting for one of their professors. Her friend instructed her, “Don’t tell them you’re Lebanese; tell them you’re French, like concentrate on your French accent, because they—so they accept you as a babysitter.” Rabab was rattled by this interaction for many reasons, not least of which was because her friend was Latina.

Rabab could not see the point in hiding her truth or feeling shame about her culture for a part-time job, sharing:

> I was like, “Oh, my God, I’m just gonna like lie about my identity to go like, take care of pooping babies? Like I want to do this?” I—I’m actually just a normal person like my identity [takes a deep breath]. I could actually just—just get so much—I could teach them like 3–4 languages so I was like, “what?” I think for her, she didn’t realize too, like, that she was like being, like, rude and she shouldn’t say that, but yeah, I was very annoyed.

Rabab also faced inadvertent supremacist colonial overtones from her own family as she recounted that her family often told her that the United States is better than
Lebanon. Because her family firmly believed and repeatedly told her that the “Western world is better,” Rabab could not as easily disclose her moments of hardship for fear that her parents would not understand. Lebanon, at the time of my writing, is ravaged by war, poverty, and a lack of basic amenities for 80% of the population (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Rabab was hesitant to tell her parents about the prevalence of racism in the U.S., both for fear of worrying them and because she did not want to sully their conviction that allowing Rabab to study at a U.S. college was the best decision for her present and future happiness. This caused her to feel reluctant about sharing any of her fears or frustrations with them.

Despite this, Rabab was able to tell her mother about the incident with the babysitting job prospect. Her mother agreed that despite their country’s struggles, they should never be ashamed of their roots. Rabab, Ruqsar, and Jada shared similar stories of their parents hoping for a better future for them in a world with more opportunities for women. However, each woman shared they faced sexism in the United States, whether from Western feminists who presumed religious oppression or from white perversion and objectification of their foreign, often darker, bodies.

Anas spoke of ignorant tokenization with similar frustration. Throughout our 1.5-hour conversation, he voiced increasing exhaustion at the emotional toll it took on him to correct those he called “uneducated Americans” who lacked cultural competence. He said that this lack of global knowledge was deeply disappointing, sharing:

I think it even goes into a deeper conversation about, you know, Imperialism and the American—you know, the capitalist system, and how it’s set up, and you know—how they kind of keep them[elves] shut out from international, and
diverse, and like global stuff. So yeah, I think it’s like very, very bizarre to me.
You know what I mean? When I see like full grown adults who sort of—or not, um, I want to say are not as aware as like you know, people from younger ages back in my home country, but, like you know, people are like full-grown adults. . . You know you can only blame them so much for the education that they received in their, you know, dinky public schools.

From the alternation between his contemplative pauses and rapid venting, Anas was clearly frustrated by the general lack of knowledge that white Americans had about majority Black and brown nations and how quickly his skin color was objectified as different and, therefore, an object of curiosity. In his comments, Anas offers a critique of U.S. education as myopic in its focus on the United States and its disregard for world history or current events. Naseer voiced similar disappointment about the lack of understanding on MENA identity and campus support systems but, instead of externalizing these frustrations, he took a moment to share he was proud of himself for “living an upright life” and that he firmly believes Arabs are good people, no matter what some others may believe.

Din, like Naseer, could not seek spiritual comfort locally and instead turned inwards or to the internet to nurture his Muslim identity. His sense of worth was not externally located in his immediate surroundings, as he did not have Muslim friends in his immediate social group; he shared it was through individual prayer, accessing online content, and calling to home that he felt most seen and most like himself. Ruqsar shared she felt tokenized for her Muslim faith and recounted some of the ways that U.S. faculty and students presumed Muslim women live in oppression as she discussed a religion
class. Instead of backing down from these conversations, she grinned as she recounted a story about correcting a faculty member’s ignorant remarks about Muslim women.

Ruqsar shared,

I took women in religion class. So it’s like women in different religions and how women were treated in each, and there’s one class where it says like women cannot fast during Ramadan when they’re on their periods because they’re considered “impure.” So relating purity to like only men and not women . . . [rolls eyes] And then when someone said, “Okay, how does a woman know when she can get back to fasting?” And the professor [took a deep breath], I don’t think she’s well… the professor says, “they probably ask God, like the ask the sheik, ask about it.” I was like. “I wish I had that kind of connection with God! [laughed] Yeah, like asking permission from God? I’m like nooooo!” [laughed]

She was a religion studies teacher!

Unfortunately, neither her professor nor her classmates challenged that the suggestion that Muslim women could not track their own periods without divine intervention and so Ruqsar spoke up but felt that her classmates failed to miss the point. Rabab also spoke of the experience of learning about one of her core identities, her culture, through U.S. eyes. Rabab struggled in not deferring to professors or peers who had read different news sources than her own. As with each participant, there was a silent hesitation before responding to how she might react to peers who voiced either reductive or incorrect presumptions about the MENA region. When she requested to write a paper about Palestine; Rabab’s professor told her that discussing Palestine “was not a good topic” and to keep it “shallow.” Rabab challenged her professor but conceded:
I mean, if you’re in a class, and the history book says that, you can’t go over the history book and write a paper about how the knowledge the professor is giving is probably not that accurate, so you just go with it. . . . we trust books, you know? We think books have the truth; we think websites have the truth. And if this is just one person against all this media you’re gonna think, “Oh, you’re just wrong, and you’re not educated enough for them,” like, if you—if you read these books and websites and you know these dates and names you’re educated.

Naseer shared similar stories in the classroom as he was taught his own history through a Western lens. He shared that both his classmates and professors suspiciously stared at him when they discussed Osama bin Laden in a history course, even though Naseer is from Turkey. Naseer advocated for walking away from these conversations, even in the classroom to “protect our peace,” which displayed resilience and appreciation for what he, like Rabab, knew to be the truth of their home nations instead of what their colleges taught through an orientalist lens. Naseer strove to take a gentle approach when white classmates continually questioned how safe life was in Turkey. Naseer described peers’ stereotypes about the MENA region as dangerous came from the fact that U.S. “media has blindfolded them” and denied them “truthful information.” As participants’ recollections of tiresome and presumptive conversations with peers has thus far indicated, this leads to another of the most prevalent struggles of participants: combatting negative assumptions about their respective identities.

**Fighting Assumptions**

Each participant attended a PWI where the international student population ranged from under 2% to just over 15%. For many of their classmates, participants were
one of the first, if not the first, MENA or Muslim people they had met. Rabab sighed heavily as she spoke about the beginning of her college career when she was asked relentless questions about her culture. These conversations were not reciprocal but instead turned her into people’s personal Google, where she was asked increasingly personal questions but was not given breathing time to ask questions of her own. Ruqsar was able to laugh at the sheer number of times she was asked about the pyramids of Egypt, though her voice caught in frustration when she stated there was so much more to her country than the pharaohs of its past.

Fadl and Naseer shared they often found themselves at the center of conversations where they had to defend their faith in groups of people who equated Islam with terrorism. Both Fadl and Ruqsar said, when being asked a series of questions about Islam, that they learned their respective inquisitors were actually asking about governmental structures and cultural traditions, not their faith. He said he always tries to correct the misrepresentations of the media but that it is emotionally taxing. Ruqsar mentioned a challenging series of conversations she had with an atheist classmate who attempted to quote the Bible and Qu’ran at her to disparage her faith. However, she victoriously shared she “countered” him and was able to share the beauty of Islam with him. Jada echoed this communally felt fatigue when she shared that people “always ask me if Moroccan women are free” as though she were not standing right in front of them.

Naseer shared, even before his arrival in the United States, he had seen U.S. media representation of Arabs as “criminals” and he struggled with feeling stigmatized by the prevalence of Islamophobic rhetoric like that which Shaheen (2007) dedicated his research to addressing. Rabab also had difficult time fighting politicized stereotypes
about Islam and the MENA region. She recalled being very surprised by the degree to which her college course in political science discussed the MENA region, saying:

They really study us . . . it’s like, oh, like them—like us against them because that’s what history has been like [since] 9/11, and things like this. And that’s what we were studying. We were also discussing, “Why—why did the U.S. go to Afghanistan, for example?” And then the teacher was like, “It’s not for oil,” and I was like in my head, “It’s for oil,” but they were like, “No, it’s different than this.” It’s very confusing like because I don’t want to gaslight myself, but I also don’t want to be a victim. So I’m just caught up in like, like, they . . . “they are not racist,” “they are racist,” “they are not racist,” “they are racist” [sighed heavily] So I’m like—it’s just—so I don’t know it’s very confusing and like it’s tiring.

Rabab touched upon several tension points; as the sole MENA student in her classroom, she was aware she listens to opinions and discussions to which Arabs had previously not been privy. She struggled with an internal debate of whether or not her professors and classmates were racist because of what they believed to be the reason for the so-called War on Terror. She knows she is in the minority not only in identity but in her thoughts on the conflict, and she stated that she had to remain cognizant of her own worldview so as not to be gaslit into believing everything her U.S. professor taught her about her own homeland.

Anas shared similar frustrations about when he was perpetually asked to explain his heritage, especially when people presumed that his life in Sudan and Saudi Arabia must have been “really hard” and “really difficult.” Whenever he shared his nationalities,
he was met with “sad faces” and reductive stereotypes about Isis, terrorism, and poverty.

He said:

When I answer questions, and people ask more questions, but those questions are getting progressively and progressively worse and more stereotypical and more, you know, just very ignorant questions. I will start to give short answers of “yes” or “no,” and not actively sort of give educational information or affirmative-informative information.

Anas shared he always tried to dispel the stereotypes by saying he had a happy childhood and loved living in the Middle East; persistent questioning caused him to become defensive and exhausted. Ruqsar, Anas, and Maheer shared U.S. peers asked if they went to school on camels and both Ruqsar and Anas, in respective moments of exasperation while describing their first months in the States, yelled, “It’s not just pyramids!” The longer Anas, Jawad, and Din spent in the United States facing the same barrage of questions, the more they refused to participate in conversations with faculty, staff, and peers who did not take the time to educate themselves. This refusal to engage leads to the fourth core theme of this study, the loneliness that affected every interviewed participant.

**Loneliness**

Each participant voiced painful, often frequent experiences of loneliness while living and learning in the United States. Social isolation was experienced in various ways, self-isolation through avoiding white spaces and disconnecting from family. Each interviewee shared it was not only the enforced quarantine of the COVID-19 global pandemic that caused them to self-isolate but a sense of self-preservation. In the
following anecdotes, participants voiced feeling a need to retreat to their dorm rooms to protect their inner and, in one case, physical peace. They felt the need to avoid the continued presence of Islamophobic rhetoric, racist remarks, and snide commentary on how “undeveloped” and “dangerous” the MENA world is. Participants also reported feeling powerless and both racially and culturally invisible. Paler participants were mistaken for being Latina and more melanated participants were presumed to be African American; while this invisibility afforded them the safety of not being constantly tokenized as MENA, it caused feelings of insecurity in them about their race. As this theme will explore, in moments of loneliness, participants felt devalued for their MENA-ness which, for some, created feelings of shame and unworthiness.

**Self-Isolation**

Participants who retreated from social settings to avoid tense conversations did so for three main reasons: the emotional labor of being tokenized, the pressure of religious persecution, and the prevalence of racist rhetoric around MENA identity. The emotional labor of tokenization took a toll in every interviewed participant and caused them not only to self-isolate from U.S., particularly white, peers, but also to distance themselves from family at home.

On their respective college campuses, eight of the 10 participants believed non-MENA peers, faculty, and staff expected them to explain their home cultures to U.S. citizens. They especially felt pressured to defend their heritage and Islam from the stereotypical rhetoric of U.S. media and current events. Anas shared his frustrations were further exacerbated by the lack of investment peers had in independently learning about countries other than the United States. Anas said:
Having to actively educate someone who has, you know, who had access to technology, and books and classes, and education just for them to sort of not use that access and want me to like, oh, you know, come, come—for them to come to me with those, you know, questions and those ignorant, you know, assumptions, and me having to educate you in—in contrast to people back in my home country who have mostly no access to technology, you know, the poor education that we get back in our countries, but we’re still culturally aware about people that are not us, about places that are not us. Oh, my God! I’m like you know what it’s not. It’s not my place to educate. They—the Internet is free. All these stuff is free! So, it kind of is, it does get ridiculous, you know? I’m like, “Oh, my God! Like how? How?” [slumped back in chair].

Rabab similarly shared fatigue at responding to questions that got progressively more intrusive and offensive. She shared several stories of people turning regular student conversations into cultural inquisitions. She shared a particularly frustrating example when she was tired and trying to eat a salad between classes and a peer interrupted her meal to ask, “Ooh, do you eat the same salad in Lebanon?” Like Anas, Rabab often felt hesitant to sit in public spaces for fear of being asked personal or problematic questions when she was simply trying to make it through her day. Badr was more direct in his self-isolation, stating, “I don’t really pick up this topic [of his culture], I distance myself from such a discussion.” Survey respondents reported similar feelings of isolation, sharing that they felt “sad,” “unwanted,” and “outcasted” as well as “powerless.” Religious discrimination and tokenization were also frequent occurrences for participants.
Much like Ruqšar having to explain Muslim women do not commune with God about their menstrual cycles, Fadl and Anas had to contend with ignorant questions that often left them speechless. Anas shared he was often asked if he is “Islamic” or from the Nation of Islam while Fadl spoke of how a majority of U.S. citizens he met assumed that all Muslims are terrorists. Rabab, who is Christian, was frequently asked about Islam despite being Christian. Jawad, Maheer, Naseer and Jada each shared they avoided conversations because they felt they led to feelings of loneliness and problems. Badr also spoke about avoiding religious discussions because he felt that other Muslims might not see him as Muslim enough. He said, “You know, everybody will not be like me. No . . . Most of the people are, um, too religious, and they, they don’t want to, um, change any aspect of whatever. That’s why I keep it private.” A recurring subtheme of this self-isolation on participants’ campuses was a distinct discomfort, often fear, of engaging with white people.

**Discomfort Around White People**

Although the U.S. Census has continued to categorize MENA people as white, every participant shared at least one experience of racial discrimination while on campus, particularly from white peers. Participants voiced a distinct sense of discomfort and fear in predominantly white spaces. This finding correlates with the quantitative results that white-identified participants experienced the most racial discomfort and the greatest desire to change their race. The lack of belonging in white spaces fractured white participants’ understanding of their own whiteness. Though they independently identified as white, they were not treated as such and, instead, faced racism, largely through racialized Islamophobia.
Participants also noted being overwhelmed at the sheer volume of white people they encountered on and around campus. Jada said she felt “surprised” at seeing so many white people when she first arrived on her campus. Maheer, who had never previously met a white person, shared, “most of the time, I was [laughs nervously] you know, I was scared, very, very scared meeting a lot of white folks [laughs nervously] so as a Black one, it was very scary.”

Jawad struggled to verbalize his discomfort, stopping and starting as he said:

I, uh . . . still felt somehow, when I got to the campus because of my skin color . . . you know, because most whites, they don’t actually really like Blacks so I was feeling kind of somehow, even just alone with some white guys . . . so I just feel somehow.

Despite having a hard time finding the right words to describe his feelings, Jawad was very aware his teachers treated him differently from his white peers. He shared once his professors learned he was Egyptian, he received less support and was left to fend on his own academically. Jawad spoke somberly of knowing that asking for support from his faculty was simply not an option because of their racism. Din felt similarly, sharing,

I’ve heard numerous stories of people especially people that are very Black in complexion, whereby they are being bullied. Yeah, being—okay, and they are being looked in a very angry way. They’re being neglected by people because of their skin, and most times they are also being sidelined.

Participants were very aware of the threat of racism in the United States, with some, like Naseer, having been warned by loved ones prior to their arrival on campus. Naseer’s father told him,
You should be careful of everything you see in America because you can get, um, discriminated. You’re gonna get abused and, you know, you’re gonna hear so many things. And I don’t want you to—to feel very bad about it. You should know. People say a lot of things about us.

The fact that many participants and their loved ones alike accurately predicted experiences of racism speaks to an innate awareness that MENA people are not treated as white in U.S. contexts. Twelve survey respondents wrote that they felt “cheated,” “sad,” “depressed,” and “uncomfortable” on their PWIs. Naseer’s warnings from his father unfortunately rang true for Maheer during a violent incident with a white cricketer on the opposing team at a local game. As Maheer’s team celebrated victory, the white man slapped Maheer on the back and scoffed that Maheer was too much of a n***** to be Moroccan. Maheer was livid and the interaction resulted in a physical fight that sent Maheer into a period of deep fear and depression in which he seldom left his room to avoid seeing that white cricketer again. This example is especially poignant, as Maheer reported that his friendships with his cricket team of MENA and South Asian international students were some of the few relationships in which he felt belonging. He shared that his team were his “family like from home,” so it was especially damaging to his well-being that racist violence violated his safe space and caused him to further fear interactions with white men.

Like Maheer and Din, Jada actively avoided white spaces referencing white American socialization habits as uncomfortable, saying:

Some things a white person would say, I wouldn’t say. So an American person can jokingly call someone a name that you may find offensive. Okay, so they may
not take it very serious, but where I’m from, I might take it very serious, because, you know, we are not taught to be rude or insolent, or speak to people anyhow we want to. So that’s just it. . . . I avoid white people, not like I’m scared of them [laughs nervously], but I just—I avoid white people. I’m more free with Black Americans than white Americans [who] are dominating and all that.

Jada, like each of the female participants, reported feeling objectified by white peers for their race. Though Jawad was able to joke about how much “white girls love Africans,” each of the women interviewed spoke of their frustration, and disgust at being called exotic. Female participants experienced the intersections of sexism and racism that resulted in their fetishization by white peers. Ruqsar shared when she told her roommate she was Egyptian, the first thing her roommate said was, “Oooh, how exotic!” Rabab, in particular, struggled with the frequency with which white classmates called her exotic. Rabab rolled her eyes and used air quotes every time she used the word in her interview, saying:

Please, note down this word; it’s the word that I get called the most like “Ooh, exotic. Wow! We love you; you’re exotic,” like, I don’t think it’s a compliment; it’s a microaggression! It comes as a compliment but if you tell them it’s offensive, they gaslight you like, “Oh, I meant it in a good way,” “Ohh [sarcastic] like in a good way, oh sure.” [rolled eyes]

This discomfort around white spaces did not necessarily mean that participants were able to create community by connecting with friends and family. Though many respondents and interviewees voiced homesickness, others actively shrunk away from conversations with loved ones back home.


Disconnecting From Home

The desire to maintain a distance and self-isolate in times of trouble was constant, with the exception of Ruqsar and her close relationship with her mother. For other participants, there was a desire to protect their parents and loved ones from the realities of culture shock and new manifestations of racism in their host country of the United States. When asked whether she shared her struggles with racism and loneliness with family in Morocco, Jada shared that she preferred to “keep things neutral” despite her homesickness and desire for trust and intimacy in relationships. Even Anas, Maheer, Din, and Fadl, who each lived with or near family members, did not regularly discuss their struggles with their respective family members. Maheer’s voice grew hushed as he told the story of the incident at the cricket match and, when asked if he told his father, he said, “I always walk away . . . to tell him would make it worse, he would feel so bad.” This self-isolation only increases their feelings of isolation and their desires to connect with others who feel similarly. MENA culture, as reported by several participants, is deeply family-oriented, but this self-isolation created intentional distance between participants and their families. Their self-isolation was more reflective of U.S. individualism than their traditional familial relations. Naheer also shared he could really open up about the challenges he faced with younger siblings who were considering coming to the United States from a desire to protect them more than to seek support. He shared, “I need to tell them you come here to experience life in another man’s country, you will feel discriminated.”

Naseer spoke directly and without any call for sympathy or trace of resentment in his voice; his tone was neutral and he was aware of the power dynamics of being a
MENA international student when he described himself as a “guest” in another man’s country. In MENA tradition, it is a massive faux pas to criticize anyone’s hospitality, but with Naseer, there was a palpable tension that anything he told his parents about the United States that was not exclusively positive would be received as ingratitude for the sacrifices they had made for his education. Similarly, Anas shared his fear of burdening his parents both financially and emotionally:

> At the end of the day, I think my parents doing this for me and sending me out here and funding my schooling is already such a huge, you know, um, punch to their wallets, so I don’t wanna you know, add an extra load, and I don’t want to have them—I don’t want them to, you know, cut short on some of their finances back home so they could make me happy to please me so I could have those extra little privileges. And you know those, those wants, and not needs. So I think. Yeah, it’s very. It’s very hard.

There was a universal awareness of the financial sacrifices both participants and their parents had to make to live and learn in the United States. Every interview participant spoke about how they hoped to use their education to better the lives of their family and loved ones back home. However, Anas spoke most openly about how that money insecurity was so emotionally laden. Anas stated:

> I think for my parents, I always try to keep them on just, I—I never want to have them, you know, stress about things that I’m worried about here, whether it be my financial situation or school situation, or academics, or anything like that. So, I always try to smooth things out and give them the nice image of things. I can’t, you know, have them carry stress for me that, you know . . . that is, like, kind of
my own responsibility that I made, that I made that choice of coming here. So it’s
my time, you know, to kind of like, carry that weight on my shoulders of being
like this is, you know, this is a reality of being here.

Anas felt pressured to protect his parents by keeping his distance from displaying
vulnerability or asking for help. His and his peers’ awareness that his family is at a
financial deficit for him to pursue his academic goals, results in a form of self-isolation,
an intentional separation from loved ones who could be a key source of support. Anas
shared he could not open up to his brother because of the shared traumas they had faced
since moving to the United States. Anas shared his fear of retraumatizing his brother,
whether by reminding him of similar ignorant comments they both had faced or,
conversely, by sharing Anas had an easier time making friends than his brother. With the
exception of Ruqsar, participants voiced feelings of guilt both for wanting support in the
struggles they faced and for spending money more than the bare minimum on expenses.
They also felt tension around sharing their successes with others for fear of coming
across as smug or disrespectful of the sacrifices their families made.

Each participant had a different relationship with their home nations, but there
was a thread of dissatisfaction with their homelands for a handful of participants. For
example, Anas described Saudi Arabia’s residence laws as “janky,” and Jawad opined the
lack of access to interesting technology in Egypt. Badr shared he increasingly grew
unhappy with many aspects of his home nation of Sudan, stating:

I feel like everything here . . . we are in bondage [in Sudan]. When you look back,
like most of their norms they put to us—some of them might have been some kind
of bondage, but if you expose yourself to a place like America you start to decide things for yourself.

In particular, Badr was excited to learn about transgender issues which he had only seen negatively portrayed in Sudan and Sudanese social media. This was a topic that he did not feel he could share with family or friends back home. Ruqsar similarly felt disconnected from her way of life and loved ones at home upon her return to Egypt. She discussed her reverse culture shock at the slower speed of Egyptian life when she returned home after completing her bachelor’s degree. Ruqsar shared she loved being Egyptian and was deeply proud of her heritage, but she felt internal pressure to ascribe Western constructs of time and productivity to her work back in Egypt which was a source of frustration. She felt the more flexible attitudes toward time and deadlines in Cairo frustrated her because she had “learned the American way” but could not apply it to her career. This reverse culture shock was a funhouse mirror of her first months in the United States where she struggled with professors’ strict enforcement of due dates that surprised her. She shared she felt misplaced in both settings and was not able to share her perspective in either setting.

This distancing from family was critical to participants’ self-conception and connectedness to their heritage as some interviewees felt that they had to close off that aspect of their identity to protect loved ones. Others seemed to have allowed U.S. norms and ways of living to become their gold standard which caused them to disparage their home countries. These feelings of self-isolation caused participants to negatively compare their home nations to the United States, which several labeled as “more developed” than the MENA region. For participants like Badr and Ruqsar, time in the
U.S. caused them to feel more disconnected from and less appreciate of their heritage. Despite this appreciation for U.S. culture and ways of life, participants did not experience more acceptance from campus peers. A theme of participant interviews was their feelings of invisibility and inability to be seen or valued for their strengths. As evidenced through results in Chapter 4, this step back from family members and their home community impacts participants’ sense of cultural pride and connectedness. Participants’ lack of consistent, nurturing community leads to powerlessness, a core theme of the international MENA student experience.

*Powerlessness*

An under-researched aspect of the international student experience is the tenuous, conditional nature of student’s tenure on their U.S. college campuses. Students are expected to maintain minimum grade point average (GPA) requirements to remain on campus and in compliance with the visa restrictions that allow them to remain in the country. When asked about his adjustment to life in America, Anas shared that he was constantly worried about how he was going to balance his finances and maintain a 2.5 GPA to avoid deportation for the next 4 years.

Every interviewed participant spoke about the financial pressures of living in the United States, especially the high cost of rent and finding accommodations on or near campus. Jawad said “accommodation is the problem” and Din discussed the cost of living as a more significant challenge than adjusting to a new language or culture. Rabab lamented not being able to receive sufficient financial aid and feeling like she could not share her money anxieties with her family because of the economic crisis in Lebanon. When asked what his time at college has taught him, Badr sighed heavily and said, “it
about financing back home.” A key reason participants did not disclose hardships to family at home was the sense of pressure they felt to ensure they were not wasting the financial sacrifices their families had each made for them to study in the United States. Each participant used the word “expensive” several times during their interviews and discussed the challenges of converting their home currencies into dollars, a more valuable currency. Rabab, Jada, Anas, Maheer, and Ruqsar voiced feeling physically trapped on campus as they could not afford to purchase a car which left them feeling powerless and lonely, especially over the holidays when their campuses were closed. Current U.S. student visa regulations stipulate that international students can work a maximum of 20 hours per week exclusively at campus jobs which typically pay minimum wage (Homeland Security, n.d). As Rabab shared in her story about being told to pretend she was French, not Arab, to become a babysitter, participants felt they were at legal, cultural, and linguistic disadvantages to being able to financially support themselves.

When discussing his desire to hang out with friends off campus, Anas said:

I can hang out with these people, and they can be my best friends, but they’re never—I’m never going to be equal to them. I’m never going to have what they have. I think that was the—the really bad part, because I’ve never experienced anything like that, you know, even in Saudi Arabia, me and my friends, you know, we had the same rights. But here . . . [sighed heavily and shrugged].

Interviewees were deeply aware of the inequality of their experiences in the United States as compared to U.S. students. This inequality was not only experienced through a hypervisibility for their differences from white American citizens but also
through feelings of invisibility that they experienced when others did not understand or respect their cultural, religious, or racial identities.

**Invisibility**

Feelings of invisibility occurred in different ways for different participants. Most felt overlooked in the classroom when they raised their hand and left out of conversations on campus diversity and student accommodations. Participants also felt excluded from social settings that either did not welcome them or centered a culture of drinking that most participants avoided. They reported feeling their needs were ignored whether it was in friends organizing parties or campus clubs organizing lunch meetings during the month of Ramadan. Participants also felt that their heritage and ethnicity were invisible to white peers. Rabab shared her exasperation at continually being mistaken for Latina and recalled a cafeteria worker who she had known for 2 years that repeatedly attempted to speak to her in Spanish despite her sharing her Lebanese heritage. She said:

He was like, “What is Lebanon? Is it in Latin America?” He thought I was Latina this entire time! And he was like “Oh, my God, I thought you were a Latino I didn’t know you’re from Lebanon,” and I was like but I don’t even look like—that’s crazy to me, because of my accent, you could clearly tell I don’t speak Spanish! I don’t know what maybe for them like an accent is an accent, it’s the same [shrugged].

Anas similarly shared he was consistently mistaken as being Indian or South Asian while Jada, Fadl, and Jawad were regularly mistaken as being Black American. Unlike Anas or Rabab, Jada, Fadl, and Jawad enjoyed being perceived as Black Americans which gave them a sense of easy belonging in Black groups though they still
felt hyper visible in white spaces. As the following subtheme will explore, participant skin color was a key factor in their perceived invisibility in U.S. social spaces.

**Skin Color.** Any conversation or research on ethnic and racial identity must address how race is outwardly perceived, most commonly, what melanin a person does or does not have. As most participants were only audio-recorded and did not turn on their cameras over the Zoom calls, it is unknown whether most presented as Black or not. Din shared he presented as white and often felt pressured to prove his Blackness when he told people his heritage; Fadl, Maheer, and Jawad did not share this experience and were presumably of a darker complexion. Each participant spoke of their core friendships as Black Muslims and did not separate their Blackness from their Muslim faith. The intersectionality of these identities created a core base of understanding between the participants and the communities that welcomed them.

Among participants, there was a range of sentiments: for some darker participants, their Blackness was both visible and celebrated. For others of a similar complexion, there was a discomfort with claiming Black identity as they identified more with their Arab roots. For paler participants, presenting as white or Latinx caused friction as their MENA identity was whitewashed and overlooked. There was also an open awareness that this racial invisibility afforded them a privilege not afforded to darker peers, a privilege they reluctantly accepted as they lived in that hybrid space between invisibility and belonging.

Rabab recalled one of her first American experiences receiving her social security card in a Midwestern administration office. As a Lebanese woman with a lighter complexion, Rabab noted her privilege afforded her much more kindness and patience
than the Somalian immigrants who sat beside her whom she said were outwardly
discriminated against. She shared her lighter skin color also gave her ambiguity which
frustrated her, saying:

We—we could just be anything, right? Like our race is like—we are, we look—
we could look white or we could look like any other race. So I think for them
[white Americans] like, I don’t know if it’s disinterest but it leads to [our]
invisibility.

Maheer, who was paler, and Din, who was dark, felt most invisible due to their
complexions. Maheer recalled the altercation where a white man accosted him for being
“too Black to be Moroccan” while Din shared:

I’m a Black dude but because I’m white in nature but I tell people, that I’m Black
that’s when they say “no,” and they find it very odd . . . they have doubts, and I—
you have to tell them that ‘I’m from Africa.’ That’s when they understand.

Din’s sadness at having to constantly explain and justify his identity was evident
and laden with fatigue; however, he was also aware his lack of belonging with his Black
and African peers kept him safer than he might otherwise be. Din reflected, “I’ve heard
numerous stories of people, especially people that are very Black in complexion, whereby
they are being bullied. . . . they’re being neglected by people because of their skin, and
most times they are also being sidelined.” Skin color rendered him invisible instead of a
target, and he, like Rabab, could not sit comfortably with this idea as though they were a
square peg trying to fit into a round hole. Their understanding of their own identities
simply does not match Americans’ perceptions.
In these stories, the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) play out in nuanced ways. Racism is permanent, as participants such as Anas, who feels too Black to be Arab and too Arab to be Black, struggle with not fitting into their racially assigned seats in contextual racial schemas. Whiteness is the property of privilege that keeps white-presenting people of all backgrounds immune to the same biases and violence faced by their darker-complexioned peers. However, the counternarratives of Rabab and Din suggested this privilege comes at a cost. Their proximity to perceived whiteness comes at the expense of their ability to identify with their communities of color. Though Din’s friends are Black Americans, he had to work to prove his Blackness and belonging before being welcomed into the fold. Although Rabab can navigate legal hoops with the ease of white-perceived assimilation, she has to explain and re-explain her heritage whenever students and staff speak to her in Spanish.

Participants’ experiences uplifted CRT’s tenet of the transient, geographically located constructed notion of race as they struggled to self-categorize when pressured to by campus and governmental procedures. Naseer recalled not knowing what label to select when he completed his social security card application, saying, “I clicked on ‘other,’ I click on all the ‘other,’ I couldn’t find my race.” Ruqsar expressed frustration and rolled her eyes as she discussed the presence of racial categories on U.S. forms, saying, “there’s always this question that says, ‘what’s your race?’” She shared she felt pressured to select the white category even though she did not identify as white.

When recounting his visa application process at the U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia, Anas said:
I was very conflicted when it comes to the race, um, choices that they had, and then the ethnicity, because for race they only had, you know, white, and I think, um . . . Black? . . . that was a very messy moment for me where I kind of like suffered, and like, I didn’t know what to do.

The differences between responses to the survey’s open-ended and Census-based questions which were reviewed in Chapter 4, highlight the disparities in how participants self-identify when given the freedom to choose who they are outside of a Western, Eurocentric context. Though the experience sounded notably less emotional for participants who self-identified as Black and had darker complexions, there were deep moments of hurt that racialized invisibility caused participants such as for Maheer who went into a deep depression after being told he was too dark to be Moroccan. It was during his isolation after the violent incident with his racist peer that Maheer shared the most heartbreaking theme of regret that ran through some of the participant experiences.

**Regret**

Though participants expressed how stressful and damaging to their self-esteem the challenges they faced had been, most did not seem to voice regret about their decision to come to the United States. However, three participants expressly stated that they feared their time in the United States had come at too great a cost. Maheer, who had never been violent before the incident with the white cricketer, sunk into a deep depression after striking the man. Maheer shared he was haunted by the possibility of running into a similarly racist situation or encountering that man again.

Jawad shared when he first learned he was the only Egyptian on his campus, he really wanted to go back home and the only reason he stayed was for access to
technology for his major. Ruqsar’s regrets were more financial in nature. After returning to Egypt, she learned her degree from the United States was not worth as much as she had hoped, stating that she wished she had stayed in Egypt.

Rabab voiced deep regret at not being able to be in Lebanon with her father when he passed away. She and I wept together as we recounted how we both lost our fathers to lung cancer in 2022 and we could not be there with them in their final months. She shared:

I felt really alone because I was so away from my family. So I was like—fuck! Like I just wish I was—I’m sorry for cursing. . . . like I’m . . . I just [paused] I wish like my family was here or like I was from this country, or I lived in my country because I just didn’t want to be this far. I think people like don’t understand how hard it is on like, on the daily for us to like just like adapt to another reality that’s not ours, especially for example, when the explosion happened in 2020 in my city and, like the entire city, like 3,000 people, 300,000 people are homeless. My family was there, and my dad got hurt on his head, so I was literally like [caught breath] I became so depressed like I was having—I was living like a double reality, like a cognitive dissonance of like, “Okay, here I have my food. The weather is nice. I’m having—I’m making money, I’m working on the summer. I’m doing this and this,” and then my family is suffering back home. So I was very like, unwell with like accepting that that like I’m very so far.

These feelings of regret and powerlessness spoke to the isolation each participant had felt at some point in their academic careers in the United States. Of note is that these feelings of regret came from the spirit of participants knowing they deserve better than
they are receiving. Such sentiments of regret caused the earlier themes of self-isolation and powerlessness that caused emotional hurt and a fracturing of identity as participants were judged for aspects of themselves that were valued at home. It must be noted that these feelings of regret do not negate the resilience of each participant who shared that their focus on the future and the chance to support their communities helped them navigate moments of isolation and unhappiness.

**Summary of Findings**

There is no single, monochromatic international MENA student experience of living and learning in the United States. There are, however, threads of a common story of successes and struggles that participants share. Interview participants felt affinity with peers who looked like and prayed like they did as well as fellow international MENA students who shared similar experiences of culture shock as they adjusted to life in the United States. Participants felt tensions around aspects of their racial, religious, and cultural heritages which were celebrated or shunned in different spaces; this led to experiences of hybrid belonging where they struggled to fit in with members of their home and host cultures. Often, these feelings of not fitting in led to self-isolation, othering, and loneliness from the PWI experience that is advertised on campus websites and brochures. Despite these challenges, participants showed resilience and belief in themselves and their respective abilities to persevere and better themselves and their home communities with the degrees they are pursuing. Chapter 6 offers a discussion of these thematic findings and concludes with a series of recommendations and implications for future research.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

He who gathers the wood will be warm by it.

—Moroccan Proverb

The purpose of this research study was to examine international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students’ experiences living and learning at U.S. colleges and universities. This objective was achieved through the analysis of participants’ racial self-identification and its impact on their individual and interpersonal well-being in the United States. The MENA region is both historically and presently under-researched and amorphously defined by the Western world (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016; Vikor, 2013) though political rhetoric and media representation consistently demean MENA, Arab, and Muslim identities as a monolithic enemy to U.S. democracy (Akash & Mattawa, 1999; McQueeney, 2014; Shaheen et al., 2006). Though the U.S. population consists of between 1 and 3.5 million citizens and international peoples of MENA heritage (Arab American Institute Foundation, n.d.; Wang, 2013), the U.S. Census offers no specific categorization for MENA communities except “Some Other Race” or “white” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). This lack of representation has caused a lack of accessible data on and resources for MENA individuals of both U.S. and international origin. The absence of representation is particularly difficult for international students who are confronted with the realities of U.S. xenophobia for the first time in an academic setting where they look to predominantly-white leadership for knowledge. This renders them particularly vulnerable to absorbing other entities’ definitions and connotations of MENA identity, even if they differ from their own lived traditions and values back home.
Because the focus of this paper was on undergraduate international MENA students, the following questions and subquestions guided this study:

**RQ 1:** How do international Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students identify within a U.S. context?

a. What terminology do MENA students use to identify themselves?

b. Are these associations positive or negative?

**RQ 2:** What relationships do international MENA students experience while attending college in the United States?

a. Do they identify with/relate more to white peers, their fellow international peers, or U.S. classmates of color? Why?

b. How do these relationships influence their sense of racial, cultural, and religious identity?

**Review of Methodology**

To prioritize the integrity of the diverse lived experiences of MENA and Arab international students, a concurrent transformative approach guided the convergent parallel mixed-methods process that combined an online survey tool and individual participant interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). This was achieved through the application of grounded theory methodology (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009).

**Overview of Sample, Data, and Analysis**

Data were initially collected through a mixed methods online questionnaire that employed open-ended questions on identity and participant reflections, as well as various quantitatively assessed questions that included aspects of Umaña-Taylor et al.’s (2004)
Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS), which measured participants’ understanding of and feelings about their racial and ethnic identification.

In total, 165 participants completed the survey though only 58 were eligible as they had spent at least two semesters at a U.S. college and were born and raised in any of the following MENA countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen. Of the 58 participants, 62% were men, and 38% were women. The total sample included 17 graduates (29%), 30 current students (52%), and 11 individuals (19%) who did not complete their degrees.

Participants were predominantly aged between 18 and 30 with a mean age of 21 and had pursued or were pursuing undergraduate degrees. Ten participants opted to meet with me for individual online interviews that lasted between 35 and 90 minutes. Of these 10 participants, seven were men, three were women, five identified as Black, and five identified as MENA. Eligible survey responses on racial self-identification were examined through the use of ANOVAs, $f$ tests, and $t$ tests, all of which offered the opportunity to dive into a comparative and descriptive analysis of participant groups. The use of these quantitative tools, which analyzed intra-group variance of MENA, Black, and white peers as well as differences between group responses on racial affirmation and understanding, highlighted that participants who identified as MENA were uniquely different from their peer groups in their understanding and appreciation of their MENA heritage. Interviews were iteratively coded to explore how participants did and did not experience belonging depending on which aspects of their religious, cultural, and racial
identities were appreciated or denigrated by those around them. This study identified core emergent themes of affinity, hybridity, resilience, and loneliness that painted a rich picture of international MENA student experiences in the United States.

**Overview of Findings**

When given the opportunity to self-identify their race and ethnicity outside of the confines of the U.S. Census Bureau’s limited categories, the overwhelming majority international MENA students did not select “white,” the label that the United States legally assigns to them. Within the context of the dominant U.S. racial schema, 77.6% of participants identified as Black, 10.3% identified as white, 6.9% identified as Asian, and 3.4% and 1.7% identified as Other and Biracial, respectively. When self-identifying in their own words, 20 fewer participants identified as Black, and 22 identified as MENA, using terminology including Arab, North African, Middle Eastern, African, and Amazigh, which are not included in the scope of U.S. racial groupings. These results highlight the need for more representative terminology, as explored in Dubow’s (1994) and Seidman’s (2019) assertions that race is a subjective context whose meanings and connotations shift from country to country.

The ability to self-identify was empowering to participants, as evidenced by the finding that those who self-identified as MENA felt more racial pride, positivity, and understanding than peers who identified as white. This finding is significant because self-identification is closely tied to feelings of self-worth among minoritized communities (Alimahomed, 2011; Blake, 2010; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Kahn, 2019). Findings supported previous research that indicated students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) identify most strongly with their race than any other aspect of their
identities (McGuire et al., 1978; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). For MENA students, this identification was not with their U.S.-governmentally assigned whiteness but with their religiously racialized identity as Middle Eastern and North African. Participants related most strongly with students of color and their stories most aligned with those of other racially minoritized groups who did not fit into standard, Eurocentric constructs of whiteness and Americanness.

The racial affirmation and understanding of MENA participants most closely resembled those of Black peers than white peers; this finding directly contradicts the current U.S. practice of categorizing MENA peoples as white instead of a unique community of color. MENA students sought belonging with peers with whom there was a shared understanding of being part of the few Black, brown, or Muslim students at their colleges. Participants experienced the discomfort of occupying spaces of hybridity where they felt too Black or too white to be MENA and too MENA to be American. There were also challenges around belonging with fellow international peers and Muslims with whom they shared different degrees of cultural Westernization and traditional spirituality. Often, participants self-isolated not only from white peers but from family back home due to feelings of depression, financial insecurity, and shame that they would be letting down or worrying their loved ones if they voiced their struggles. Through these challenges, participants developed tenuous relationships with their own racial and cultural pride, either denigrating their home nations or rejecting the U.S. ideological supremacy that led them to seek academic opportunities in the United States that they and their families did not believe were achievable in their countries of origin. These findings
are supported by previous research on international students, Arab Americans, Muslims, and students of color.

**Findings and Related Literature**

This study serves as a continuation of existing research on the lives and self-conceptions of international students of color who live and learn in the United States. A key difference of this study is that my participants saw themselves as people of color and not as white which the U.S. Census would have us self-select. Core findings highlighted the ways in which international MENA students experience negative mental health consequences in the same ways that groups of color do, as evident through the racialization of Islam and the lack of campus understanding of MENA identity.

**International MENA Student Solidarity**

Throughout both the survey responses and interviews, participants placed prime emphasis on their identities as international MENA students. Participants used more language about their nationalities and their spiritual and cultural heritage than terminology about their respective races. Given the broad range of phenotypes across the MENA region and that two of the 10 interview participants identified as biracial, participants did not consider their skin color their most salient trait; instead, national pride, connections with MENA communities, and spiritual community-building were priorities. Even for participants like Naseer who identified as Black, his skin color, which he described as “white in complexion,” was not the reason for his Blackness. He spoke of his connection to Turkish culture, Islam, and the Middle East as core to his Blackness which set him apart from U.S. whiteness. This result was in accordance with findings about the damage done by xenophobic governmental policies such as the Muslim Ban.
and aggressive media stereotyping of Arab men as violent rapists and Arab women as weak and oppressed (Akash & Mattawa, 1999; McQueeney, 2014; Shaheen et al., 2006) which explains his lack of identification with white U.S. peers and culture.

Like their fellow international students from other areas of the globe, participants had to adjust to the U.S. education system and college courses in English, a second or third language for many. Rabab spoke of enjoying her campus life in the week before U.S. students arrived because it allowed for shared excitement and culture shock as they acclimated to a new landscape. Naseer fondly recalled study groups with international friends as they grappled with scientific terminology in English as compared to Arabic, his native tongue. But MENA international students also had to contend with a social context steeped in anti-MENA rhetoric that equates being Muslim with being an anti-U.S. terrorist (Beydoun, 2015; Freeman & Li, 2019; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Singer, 2021).

These similarities of lived experiences within their MENA homelands and then on their new U.S. campuses allowed for a shared understanding of what DuBois (1903) and Abdul-Jabbar (2015) called double consciousness, or the ways in which we come to see ourselves through our own eyes and the eyes and impressions of others. Their time in the United States made participants deeply aware of the paradox of legally being categorized as white while being treated as the other because of their Muslim, or presumed Muslim, faith (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1991).

**Racialization of Islam—Participants Protested Assigned Whiteness**

For decades, the United States has monitored and policed Muslims, both U.S. and international (Ajrouch & Antonucci, Cainkar, 2009; Pickens, 2014). Since the Gulf War and the on-going War on Terror, U.S. culture has debated and denigrated Muslim and
Arab identity, often lumping both identities into one miasma of other-ness (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012; Akash & Mattawa, 1999; Singer, 2021). To be Muslim, or perceived as Muslim, is coded as being un-American and unaligned with the majority white status quo; this is true for Arabs and Muslims who are U.S.-born or newcomers to the United States. This racialization of Islam is steeped in xenophobia that does not grant MENA peoples white privilege, whether legal or social, despite the racial schema endorsed by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Abdulrahim and Baker (2009) found Arab Americans who assimilate to whiteness and distance themselves from Arab culture and from speaking Arabic report better mental health than those who retain their cultural heritage. With international Arab students, the exact opposite is true. Students who self-identified as white experienced increased depression, cultural isolation, and loneliness. Unlike their MENA-American peers, international Arab students were less depressed the more they were able to connect with their Arab heritage. This finding aligned with existing research that highlighted how Black students experience more self-worth in Black spaces instead of PWIs (Abboud et al., 2019; Pickens, 2014). The loneliness and frustration participants feel as the token Arab in a new culture is reminiscent of Ajrouch and Antonucci’s (2018) scholarship, which found Arabs report 30% higher rates of depression than their white peers. The legal categorization of MENA identity as white cannot erase the lived experiences of MENA participants who are not treated as equitably or inclusively as their white peers.

**Mental Health Concerns: “We Gaslight Ourselves”**

International students of all backgrounds experience culture shock and the challenges of making friends from different cultures while learning in a new education
system (Bailey, 2017; Chavez, 2016; Chen & Zhou, 2019; Rodriguez & Parks, 2017; Rice et al., 2012). For international MENA students, these stressors are amplified by the dominant U.S. narratives against MENA and Muslim identities. Rice et al. (2012) found South Asian students who were presumed to be Muslim experienced similar levels of loneliness, tokenization, and vitriol as did the participants in this study. Although only Maheer expressed coming close to experiencing suicidal thoughts during his time in the United States, the xenophobic treatment participants receive speak to the face that American Muslims attempt suicide at twice the rate of other religious groups (Awaad et al., 2021; Namer, 2012; Naser, 2020; Samari, 2016; Singer, 2021). Most study participants could neither connect intimately or in-person with their spiritual communities which amplified their feelings of loneliness, especially in instances like those of Ruqsar, Naseer, Jada, and Rabab’s Muslim boyfriend who could not conveniently access halal food or prayer spaces.

Of the total 58 survey respondents, 22 identified as Black and 23 as MENA or Arab; this is significant as rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide are higher for Black and brown students than they are for white college students (Mental Health America, n.d.). Jada, Fadl, and Jawad shared it was only with Black friends that they felt at home, whereas Rabab, Anas, and Naseer felt most like themselves when surrounded by other Arabs. It should be noted that these two groups are not mutually exclusive; instead, participants were drawn to different peers because of shared identification of Arab-ness or Blackness depending on which identity was most salient to them. Yet, the five survey participants who identified as white experienced the less satisfaction with and understanding of their racial identities than their Black and MENA peers; this disconnect
shows that the whiteness with which they identify does not afford them the white privilege or mental wellness of their Eurocentric-white peers. Interview participants spoke of the gaslighting they experienced when learning about MENA history through U.S. textbooks that directly contradicted their lived experiences and painted Arab and Muslim peoples as violent and even evil. The theme of hybridity, or not quite belonging, led to feelings of insecurity as participants were mistaken for other ethnicities such as Latinx or South Asian instead of recognized for their true heritage to which they held dear (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1991). Furthermore, every participant faced reductive and offensive questions, even violence, from white U.S. peers who consistently asked to be educated about all aspects of MENA life even when participants were simply trying to enjoy their lunch or play cricket.

**Reduced Social Support, Increased Depression**

The findings indicated international MENA students experience increased feelings of social isolation, financial shame, and powerlessness than their white U.S. counterparts. Jada shared despite a welcoming orientation program during her first week on campus, she felt she had no one to talk to about her loneliness on campus and her money anxieties. Jawad was deeply aware of how his teachers treated him differently than his white peers, who received more time and attention in the classroom than he did. Teranishi and Briscoe (2006) wrote about how the ubiquitous negative stereotyping of minoritized racial groups such as MENA students cause marginalized students to receive poor treatment in the classroom and feel as though their identities are invalidated by the educators’ and administrators’ lack of knowledge of their cultures given their roles as keepers of knowledge. Such treatment was experienced by every participant but Din who
uniquely felt that his culture was valued by one of his professors. This ideological and social loneliness was a heavy burden for participants. Every interviewee except Ruqsar felt that they could not talk to their family members back home about the racism or financial obstacles that they faced. Participants consumed media from their respective homelands to feel connected to their culture, and Naseer and Rabab turned inwards to the healing practice of meditation in moments of emotional distress. Spirituality was also key, but the somewhat contested source of mental well-being as some participants like Anas feared becoming “too religious” while others like Ruqsar wanted to connect with their Muslim community but did not have the opportunity to do so.

Implications and Recommendations

The under-researching of MENA identity as a unique and valid racial identity has led to a deficit in scholarship, policy, practice, and consideration for the challenges and needs of international MENA students. As MENA and Arab people are coded as white, they are denied access to affirmative action support systems such as scholarships while simultaneously being told to identify themselves in the same category of whiteness as the majority white spaces and media platforms that vilify them. It is only recently that scholars such as Abdulrahim and Baker (2009), Beydoun (2018) and Pickens (2014) have focused on the racial identity and lived experiences of U.S. citizens of MENA heritage; with so little access to knowledge about this ethnic group, their stories are often untold and their struggles unsupported. As an undergraduate student, I was turned away from the campus Multicultural Center because I was “white,” even though I had sought support after being the target of hate speech from a classmate. I felt echoes of this moment in Rabab’s comments about PWI academics and student affairs gaslighting her into feeling
as though she was being dishonest about her identity. This worrying trend of self-doubt coupled with alienation from family and lack of representation and support leads me to offer the following recommendations for policy makers, future researchers, educators, student affairs administrators, and international MENA students.

**Recommendations for Governmental Policy**

Arab American campaigns such as “Yalla, Count me In!” petitioned the U.S. government in 2020 to develop an independent U.S. Census category for MENA identity; although the Trump administration did not make that change, activists such as the New York Times journalist, Zraick, have continued the work of highlighting the need for MENA representation in governmental policy and practice (Huddy, 2001; Zraick, 2022). This is a continuation of the research conducted under the Obama administration to examine the need for a “MENA box” in federal demographic collection processes (Zraick, 2022). As Bhabha (1994) wrote, identity is not a fixed concept that can be assigned to others; this feels especially true in a nation founded on the principles of freedom and representation. At the time of this study, the U.S. Census Bureau plans to revise its standards by Summer 2024, which could lead to a significant change for Arab Americans and international MENA students who must racially self-identify in the current system that whitewashes their heritage.

As this study found, only five of 58 participants identified as white, this could be a radical change that lessens the pressures of racial conformity in a country whose Islamophobic ideology causes Christian Americans to be 46% more likely to identify as white than their Muslim American peers (Shryock, 2008). Although scholars like Beydoun (2015) have warned a unique MENA racial category could streamline systems
of racial profiling that target MENA individuals in legal and law enforcement protocols, both prior research and this study show that such profiling is already happening in a system of discrimination without representation.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Critical race theory (CRT) addresses the centrality of race and racism and how prejudice can oppress people of color in all areas of their lives (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Tate, 1997). CRT also prioritizes experiential knowledge and the importance of allowing minoritized peoples to tell their own stories; these stories, or counternarratives, often contradict the white supremacist status quo and are undermined as a result. This has been the case with the development of Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit), which was developed as a framework that stood against the persistent subordination of Latinx communities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). I propose the creation of MENACrit, which gives MENA identity similar consideration as to the overlapping legal, ideological, and interpersonal oppressions they face in the United States. This study has highlighted that international MENA students do not identify with whiteness and experience racism and xenophobia across the lines of U.S. nationalism, anti-Blackness, and Islamophobia. As with Latinidad, I argue MENA identity is a cultural ethnicity that transcends phenotypes and deserves increased recognition and scholarly consideration.

**Recommendations for Educators**

A rich body of research has found that educators who have an awareness of and work to incorporate the tenets of CRT in their classrooms create more successful and inclusive learning spaces for students of color (Sablan, 2019; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020). Research further suggests such cultural awareness is especially important for
international student well-being (Montgomery, 2017; Rice et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007). Given the lived experiences of international MENA students who face a range of discriminations, educators must acknowledge that their MENA students do not benefit from white privilege in an educational system that has historically and currently centers Western whiteness (Feagin, 2013; Freire, 1970; Lynn et al., 2013). Lived whiteness and its privileges are synonymous with the American-ness and citizenship status neither of which international MENA students enjoy (Devos & Sadler, 2019). The patterns of Islam as discordant with U.S. democracy are evident in the varying proximities that Muslim and non-Muslim Arab Americans feel toward whiteness. Just as Ladson-Billings (2014) advocated to “remix” pedagogical practices to uplift multiethnic traditions and diverse identities, I advocate that care be given to understanding MENA identity as distinct from European whiteness and the cultural and political privilege it affords (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012). It is by rejecting the whitewashing of Arab identity that educators can increase cultural, social, and academic support systems and representation for their MENA students through an asset-based lens instead of one that either views Arabs as deficient or simply do not see Arab identity at all. This approach would also allow for student affairs staff, particularly those who support international students, to better support this community.

**Recommendations for Student Affairs Administrators**

The first recommendation is for higher education administrators to make a concerted effort to learn more about MENA identity and stay abreast of U.S. diplomatic relationships with the Arab world. This recommendation does not presume that every administrator will become an expert of international geopolitical affairs, but just as staff
should stay informed of current events that politicize Blackness and immigration status in the United States, they should be aware of U.S. treatment of Arab and Muslim identities. Every interview participant shared that they did not feel they could approach college personnel because staff “don’t understand.” Jada shared, “We are trying to adapt to a new environment. So, we need guidance. We need the protection. and also we need to be assured that we are in good hands.” In order for participants to receive appropriate mentorship and support, college administrators need to be informed about the rich diversity of MENA identity in the United States.

Secondly, administrators charged with orientation programs, particularly those for international students, should incorporate trainings and conversations of how race and racism are constructed and enacted in U.S. culture. Only one of the 10 interview participants noted that race and racism were addressed in their orientation programs that occurred at the start of their college careers. These programs which, as Jada and Jawad shared, are often upbeat and focused on college resources and social amenities, should allow international MENA students the chance to understand their host culture and engage in honest conversations about how to manage tense situations and loneliness. Though racism is both permanent and pervasive, race is not a fixed concept nor is it universally defined or experienced across the globe (Bell, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Dubow, 1994; Seidman, 2019). Orientation programming should provide an overview of the role that race plays in U.S. society, examples of appropriate and inappropriate language around diverse identities, and specific resources for those who are profiled or stereotyped. Administrators and educators should strive to engage in cultural reciprocity as part of their duty of care to students, investigate their own cultural values and potential biases to
avoid teaching and leading from a monocultural norm (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Staff, in particular international student offices, should strive to nurture culturally informed conversations to destigmatize depression, mental health, and financial insecurities, all of which are topics that participants voiced hesitation discussing with family and friends at home.

Lastly, college campuses often celebrate diverse cultural identities of other groups through events such as Black History Month galas and Lunar New Year Celebrations. Events that not only celebrate traditions such as Ramadan and Eid al’Adha should be honored though there also needs to be open discussion about the prejudices that MENA students, like their peers of color, face in nationalist, white supremacist learning spaces (Bell, 1993; Films Media Group, 2000; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Wollenberg, 1975). It is vital for international MENA students to see themselves as honored and valued given the research that longer immersion in U.S. host cultures often leads to acculturation and the devaluing of their heritage as U.S. identity is not only coded as normal but esteemed (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1991). Consideration of MENA identity could prevent the internalization of idealized whiteness that so many international students of color absorb during their time on U.S. campuses (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Quezada et al. (2012) stated, “Cultural proficiency is an individual’s or a group’s belief system that holds students’ cultural backgrounds of language, race, gender, and socioeconomic as assets on which we are to construct their educational experiences” (p. 6). Therefore, professional development for all staff, students, and faculty should pay attention to MENA identity and Islamophobia and incorporate language that is asset-based and inclusive.
**Recommendations for MENA International Students**

To my international MENA peers, in the words of Rabab, “If someone’s racist to you, it’s their problem.” Do not let other people’s opinions become your truth. We are sponges for the messaging around us and allowed to protect ourselves from the relentless media stereotyping about aspects of our culture or faith that we value most. This study has discovered that participants who identify as white, as U.S. governmental policy would have them do, experienced more unhappiness and less certainty about their race. There is no shame in your culture, as Rabab shared we get to embrace our identities on our own terms. Only you get to decide who you are and what fits language fits best to describe yourself.

Do not be afraid to take up space. Participants expressed the most comfort and belonging with people of color: you do not need to be boxed into whiteness unless that is where you feel you belong. Reach out to your campus multicultural centers, offices of inclusion, and international student support staff. Know your resources and do not be afraid to use them or your voice. Every participant spoke about protecting their mental health and avoiding sources of frustration in some capacity; you are allowed to walk away from the people and situations that drain and devalue you. Sometimes those people will look different than you do, but sometimes they will be fellow Muslims or peers from the MENA region; there is no single way to be Arab, or MENA, or Muslim and you are allowed to nurture the relationships that affirm you most. You deserve to be in the United States as much as anyone else does and you deserve to do so without sacrificing your well-being or your sense of self. As an ummah\(^7\), “we are like one body; when any limb

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\(^7\) Ummah refers to a community, in a Muslim context, this refers to all Muslim people.
aches, the entire body feels pain” (Al-Bukhārī, 6011). Find your people and do not be afraid or ashamed to share any challenges you face with family, friends, and other loved ones.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with any dissertation or independently conducted research, several limitations were encountered. The first of which was the general hesitation of MENA participants to respond to my call for participants due the United States’ historical and current tracking and persecution of Muslims and perceived-Muslims (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Ikramullah, 2020; Singer, 2021). This resulted in a smaller participant pool than I had desired though, while few, each participant offered rich insight into their lives for which I am eternally appreciative. Part of the reluctance to disclose was evident in the fact that only three of the 10 interview participants chose to turn on their cameras during our interviews. While reducing racial identity to skin color is reductive, it would be foolish to presume that phenotype had no impact on participants’ treatment on and around their campuses. Moreover, the lack of ability to make virtual eye contact or to connect in person due to COVID-19 meant I did not have as much of an opportunity to connect with my participants and see their faces or physical responses to my questions.

Another limitation of my study was my initial failure to remind my first three participants that I am neither white nor a U.S. citizen. Despite my disclosure that I am a Moroccan woman who is not seeking either endorsement or denigration of U.S. education, my pale complexion and Americanized accent led my first participants to initially believe that my survey was more of a customer service check-in to see if they were happy to be in the United States. Once I was able to reassure participants that their
responses would be entirely anonymous and that I had no ulterior motives or power to impact their standing in the United States, they opened up and were able to speak more honestly with me.

**Concluding Remarks**

This study has highlighted that 91% of the international MENA student participants in this study do not identify as white though that is their legal categorization in the United States. Of the surveyed 58 participants, 22 identified as Black, and 22 chose new terminology that fit under the MENA umbrella. Their identifications as Arab, North African, Middle Eastern, and Amazigh highlight the need for more representative terminology in U.S. policy. Their self-selected terminology also speaks to the internal and social distance participants feel from whiteness. Participants felt most comfortable with Black and MENA peers and in spaces where they did not have to deflect inappropriate questions or commentary about their Muslim or presumed Muslim faith.

As participants navigated through their new lives at U.S. colleges, they experienced moments of belonging with peers of color and they nurtured their resilience as they strived to maintain both their well-being and the requisite 2.5 GPAs they needed to stay in good legal standing as international students. However, participants faced moments of deep loneliness, self-doubt, prejudice, and confusion about their identities as they were faced with ubiquitous xenophobic Islamophobia in predominantly white communities.

The application of CRT and a convergent parallel mixed-methods process allowed international MENA participants to share their experiences of living in the liminal space of being both racially invisible and racially hypervisible. Their stories of hiding their
challenges from their home cultures as well as their social isolation on campus speak to a pressing need for more awareness of their experiences as well as increased support systems so that they may thrive on an equitable playing field with their white peers. The current coding of MENA individuals as white creates an ideological distance between them and their Black and brown peers who experience similar prejudice while living and learning in the United States. I stand with those movements that, at the time of this writing, are lobbying for a distinct MENA category to be recognized by the U.S. government. I offer this study as a chance to uplift the ignored, white-washed stories of a vulnerable population that are deserving of fair treatment and belonging both in and out of the classroom.
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APPENDIX A

1991 New York Times Cartoon

APPENDIX B

2012 New York Post Caricature

APPENDIX C

2008 The New Yorker Cover

Salaams!

My name is Hannah Mesouani, and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Education for Social Justice program at The University of San Diego. I am conducting a study on the experiences of international MENA students during their undergraduate college years in the United States. I would love your perspective!

To participate in this study, individuals must meet the following criteria:

1. Have been born and raised in the MENA world consisting of the following countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen.
2. Have completed at least two semesters (one year) of an undergraduate degree program at a U.S college or university

Please consider taking a 20-minute online Qualtrics survey to help examine the MENA experience in American higher education.

Additionally, you are invited to participate in an audio-recorded hour-long online interview through Zoom.

If you are eligible and willing to participate, please contact me at xxxxx@sandiego.edu. If you know others who meet the eligibility criteria, please feel free to forward this information. If you participate in the survey, you will be entered into a raffle to win one of two $100 American Express gift cards. If you participate in a one-on-one interview, the researcher will give you a $10 Starbucks gift card via email.

Jazāk Allāhu Khayran,

Hannah Mesouani, MS

Doctoral Candidate, Education for Social Justice; University of San Diego

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Reyes Quezada
Professor and Chair of Department of Learning and Teaching
School of Leadership and Education Sciences, University of San Diego

xxxxx@sandiego.edu
APPENDIX E

Survey Instrument

Introductory Questions:
Name / pseudonym:____________________
Age: _____________________
Gender Identity (eg., female, male, nonbinary): ___________________
Are you currently a student in the United States?
Yes \ No, I have returned to my home country \ No, I am not a student, but I still live in the U.S.
Were you born and raised in the Middle East or North Africa?
___ Yes, please continue the survey ___ No, you are not eligible for this survey; thank you for your time!

Within a U.S. context, how do you identify? *You may select more than one option.*
- American Indigenous or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Some Other Race (please specify) ____________________

What U.S. university or universities do/did you attend?
*The name of your university/universities will not be shared. I am collecting this information to gather general data about the student population at the time you attended the institution.*

What year did you arrive at the university? _____________________
What degree did you pursue? _____________________
Did you complete your degree?
Yes \ No \ In Progress - I am still a student
If so, when did you graduate? ____________
How long have you studied in the United States? (mm/yyyy - mm/yyyy) ____________

What is your nationality/country of origin (where were you born)? ____________
Did you return to your home country after college? _____________________
Why or why not? _____________________
What language(s) were spoken at your home growing up?
__________________
Religious Affiliation (if applicable): _____________________
Have your parents or siblings ever been to the United States? ____________
Living and Learning in the United States:

Please answer the following questions while considering your most recent semester at a U.S. college and your experiences during that time:

Do/did you have MENA (Middle Eastern / North African) friends on campus?

- Many
- Few
- One
- None

How often do/did you socialize with Arab/MENA friends on campus?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

How often do/did you socialize with Arab/MENA friends off-campus?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

How often do/did you feel connected to your Arab/MENA heritage?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you have Muslim friends on campus?

- Many
- Few
- One
- None

How often do/did you socialize with Muslim friends on campus?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

How often do/did you socialize with Muslim friends off-campus?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, how often do/did you feel connected to your Muslim heritage?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never
- Not applicable

Do/did you have Muslim international friends on campus?

- Many
- Few
- One
- None

Do/did you have non-Muslim international friends on campus?

- Many
- Few
- One
- None

Do/did you have Muslim American friends on campus?

- Many
- Few
- One
- None

Do/did you have non-Muslim American friends on campus?

- Many
- Few
- One
- None

Do/did you feel comfortable around fellow international Arabs/MENA students?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you feel comfortable around fellow international students?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you feel comfortable around Arab Americans?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you feel comfortable around Black Americans?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you feel comfortable around Latinx Americans?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you feel comfortable around Asian Americans?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you feel comfortable around white Americans?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Considering Your Heritage Represented in the U.S.:

Please consider your time studying in the U.S. as you respond to questions in this section.
Do/did you see Arab/MENA identity represented in the student body on campus? *(for example, were any of your professors or campus staff Arab/MENA?)*

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you see Arab/MENA identity represented in the off-campus community?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you see Arab/MENA identity represented in your coursework?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you see Arab/MENA identity represented in popular media in the U.S.?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, overall, do/did you think these representations are accurate?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, overall, do/did you think these representations are favorable?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, overall, do/did you think these representations are offensive?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, how do/did you outwardly respond to inaccurate or offensive representations of Arab/MENA identity?

- [TEXT RESPONSE] ___________________________

If applicable, how did those inaccurate or offensive representations of Arab/MENA identity make you feel?

- [TEXT RESPONSE] ___________________________

**Considering Your Faith in the U.S.**

*Please consider your time studying in the U.S. as you respond to questions in this section. If you do not identify as Muslim, you will be directed to the next section.*

Do you identify as Muslim?

- Yes
- No

Do/did you see Muslim identity represented in the student body on campus? *(for example, were any of your professors or campus staff Muslim?)*

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you see Muslim identity represented in the off-campus community?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you see Muslim identity represented in your coursework?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Do/did you see Muslim identity represented in popular media in the U.S.?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, overall, do/did you think these representations are accurate?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, overall, do/did you think these representations are favorable?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, overall, do/did you think these representations are offensive?

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

If applicable, how do/did you outwardly respond to inaccurate or offensive representations of Muslim identity?
• [TEXT RESPONSE] ___________________________

If applicable, how did those inaccurate or offensive representations of Muslim identity make you feel?
• [TEXT RESPONSE] ___________________________

Self-Reflection

Do you feel proud of your Arab/MENA heritage?
  • Always  Often  Rarely  Never

(if applicable) Do you feel proud of being Muslim?
  • Always  Often  Rarely  Never

Are you proud of your home country?
  • Always  Often  Rarely  Never

How often do you talk about your home country?
  • Always  Often  Rarely  Never

How would you describe your home country?
• [TEXT RESPONSE] ___________________________

Do you think you have changed since coming to the United States?
  • Definitely  Only while in the U.S.  Somewhat  Not at all

If applicable, how do you think you have changed since coming to the United States?
• [TEXT RESPONSE] ___________________________

How often do you talk about your time in the United States to friends and family back home?
  • Always  Often  Rarely  Never

(open-ended) How would you describe your time in the United States to friends and family back home?
• [TEXT RESPONSE]

Identifying Yourself in a U.S. Context

The U.S. is made up of people of various ethnicities. Ethnicity refers to cultural traditions, beliefs, and behaviors that are passed down through generations. Some examples of the ethnicities that people may identify with are Latino, indigenous, white, Serbian, Persian, Arab, Middle Eastern, North African, and more. When you are answering the following questions, we’d like you to think about what YOU consider your ethnicity to be.

This portion of the study uses the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) as developed by Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez in 2004.

Please write what you consider to be your ethnicity here ____________________.

Refer to this ethnicity as you answer the following questions and consider your most recent (or current) semester in college as you respond.

1. My feelings about my ethnicity are mostly negative.
Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
2. I have NOT participated in any activities that would teach me about my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
3. I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
4. I have experienced things that reflect my ethnicity, such as eating food, listening
to music, and watching movies.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
5. I have attended events that have helped me learn more about my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
6. I have read books/magazines/newspapers or other materials that have taught me
about my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
7. I feel negatively about my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
8. I have participated in activities that have exposed me to my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
9. I wish I were of a different ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
10. I am NOT happy with my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
11. I have learned about my ethnicity by doing things such as reading (books,
    magazines, newspapers), searching the internet, or keeping up with current events.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
12. I understand how I feel about my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
13. If I could choose, I would prefer to be of a different ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
14. I know what my ethnicity means to me.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
15. I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
16. I dislike my ethnicity.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
17. I have a clear sense of what my ethnicity means to me.

Closing Questions - Thank you!!

Are you interested in participating in a confidential interview over Zoom?
  ● Yes
  ● Not sure at this time.
  ● No.

If so, please enter your email address:  __________________________________
Would you like to be considered for a raffle to win a $100 gift card?
- Yes
- No

If so, please enter your email address:
APPENDIX F

IRB Adult Consent Form

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Adult Consent Form

Racism without Race:
The Racialization of Middle Eastern and North African Students at U.S. Colleges

1. Purpose of the research study
Hannah Mesouani is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. This research study aims to explore international MENA students’ experiences studying in U.S. colleges and how their time in the United States impacts their racial self-identification and sense of self.

2. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete a 20-minute online survey about your experience in the U.S.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 20 minutes.

*If would like to participate in a 1-hour audio interview, you will be sent a separate consent form prior to meeting with the researcher.*

3. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free or text, 24 hours a day:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255

4. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how international Arab students navigate U.S. college campuses in a country that has a complicated relationship with communities from the Middle East and North Africa.

5. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research
project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

6. Compensation

Participants who complete the online survey will be entered into a raffle for a $100 gift card and all participants who partake in a one-on-one interview will be given a $10 gift card for coffee. You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire survey or interview session.

7. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you’re entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

8. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Hannah Mesouani
USD Email: xxxxx@sandiego.edu

2) Dr. Reyes Quezada
USD Email: xxxxx@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

__________________________________________
Signature of Participant Date

__________________________________________
Name of Participant (Printed)

__________________________________________
Signature of Investigator Date
APPENDIX G

Zoom Interview Protocol

The following questions will be used as guiding prompts throughout the interviews I conduct. I will begin each interview with an informal conversation to build rapport and earn the trust of my participants.

Theme - Who are You?
1. Where are you from?
2. How do you identify?
3. Please tell me about how you came to identify as ________?
4. Please describe your learning environment in your home country?
5. When did you first become aware of your race?
6. What does your race/ethnicity mean to you?

Theme - Coming to the U.S.
1. Where did you go to school for your undergraduate degree?
2. Why did you come to the United States for college?
3. What did you expect before you came?
4. What did your parents/guardians expect?
5. What surprised you the most when you arrived at your college campus?

Theme - Support System
1. Who supported you during your transition to life in the United States?
2. Who were your first friends in the United States?
   a. Where were they from?
   b. What were their backgrounds?
3. What are some memories from college when you felt the most belonging?
4. Tell me about your friend group in college in the US.
   a. How are they different from your friends from home?
   b. What did you connect most and least about?

Theme - Race and self-identification
1. Can you walk me through how race was (or wasn’t) discussed in your college orientation programming in America?
2. Tell me about the first time you had to identify your race in an American context?
3. What did you learn about perceptions of MENA identity in the U.S?
4. Did any of your friends, classmates, or professors talk to you about the MENA region?
5. Did any of your friends, classmates, or professors talk to you about Islam?
6. What are some examples of MENA and Arab representation that you encountered in the U.S?
   a. How did those make you feel?
7. Were you ever asked to explain your home country/culture?
   a. How did you respond?
b. How did you feel?

8. How did you talk about your time in the U.S. with your family back home?
   a. Did conversations with your family change as you spent longer in the States? If so, how?

9. Do you think you have changed since spending time in the United States? If so, how?

10. If applicable - Can you walk me through what it was like returning to your home country after time in the US?

11. Is there anything I missed that you would like to add?
IRB #: IRB-2023-2
Title: Racism without Race: The Racialization of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Students at U.S. Colleges
Creation Date: 2/9/2022
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Hannah Mesouani
Review Board: USD IRB
Sponsor:

Study History

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Key Study Contacts

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project proposal for expedited or exempt review at any time.

Sincerely,

Truc Ngo, PhD
IRB Administrator

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