

Negotiating Islamophobia: The Experiences of College-Age Muslims in North Carolina

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When Donald Trump was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States on November 8, 2016, Azra was sitting in her living room in North Carolina with her mother and sister.¹ For Azra, it did not feel like much was going to change. It never occurred to her that this election would have a ripple effect and would cause her mother to warn her against wearing her *hijab* outside of her home or would result in strangers yelling at her to “go back to ISIS” or saying she “shouldn’t be in this country” (PI 6/20/19). Having come of age amid the intense Islamophobia that took root in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Azra and other college students like her highlight how they view themselves and their sense of belonging in American society. According to the 2017 Pew Research Center study, 74 percent of Muslim-Americans say Trump is “unfriendly to them” and see his dislike reflected in actions such as the travel ban, which aims for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (“U.S. Muslims”). In this study 86 percent of U.S. Muslims said the President made them feel worried, a sharp rise from a survey in 2011, where 24 percent of U.S. Muslims said they were “dissatisfied” with Barak Obama as President (“U.S. Muslims”).

Drawing on extended ethnographic research and 45 interviews, this paper analyzes the experiences of college-age Muslims in North Carolina and examines how they negotiate their religious identities in the face of stigmatization, Islamophobia, and political and social turmoil. Where the majority of academic literature takes 9/11 as its point of departure and isolates pre- and post-9/11 Muslim identities (e.g., Ahmed 2015; Ali 2018; Al-Khatahtbeh 2017; and Bayoumi 2009), most of the students I interviewed were born in or after 2001 and therefore have no real awareness of pre-9/11 realities. As such, I argue that the identities of the current generation of college students are instead definitively shaped by the policies and general Islamophobia that characterizes the Trump presidency, broader anti-Muslim rhetoric, and mass shootings and attacks targeting Muslims. Their narratives and my two years of community-based fieldwork reveal that although Muslim college

¹ All names of my research participants are pseudonyms. All personal interviews are cited as PI with the date of recording.

students labor under the multiple burdens of explaining and representing their religion, negotiating perceived disapproval and mischaracterizations of their faith and practices, and navigating their minority identities in majority college cultures, they also report increasingly tangible expressions of solidarity from non-Muslims that provide needed respite from the prevailing Islamophobic climate. In what follows I present an overview of the way Islam has been perceived in the United States in both eras before describing the current climate for Muslims. Using my interview data, I then examine the impacts of Islamophobia on Muslim college students' evolving identities and experiences as minorities on campus, their struggle to find community, and, finally, describe the support that students say has been extended to them in recent years.

In addition to the 45 formal interviews I recorded with students from North Carolina universities, dozens of related, informal conversations formed a vital background to this two-year research study.² My participants came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds with the majority being of South Asian descent. My research aims to present the voices of the generation navigating college during the Trump presidency, where shootings, hate speech, and overt racism are found on social media, on the news, and in neighborhoods and classrooms. After being welcomed into countless Muslim homes and communities, I learned that despite the pronounced increase in mistrust and even hatred, these students have also experienced significant support from those outside of their tradition. College-age individuals have inherited a social and political climate where threats are real and attacks feels imminent, leaving them feeling targeted and confused about their futures here in the U.S.

Putting the Pieces Together: From 9/11 to 2019

For older generations of Muslims in the U.S., their lives can be distinguished between how they were understood pre-9/11 and how they were perceived post-9/11. In post-9/11 America, the

² The schools included: North Carolina State (NC State), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), Elon University, Duke University, and University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG).

rhetoric surrounding Islam has been polarizing and fear inducing with media, scholars, and political leaders calling Islam “inherently terroristic” and “violent and supremacist” (Ali 2018, 24). Being Muslim in the early 2000s meant constant tracking, targeting, and, sometimes, unlawful arrests (Ali 2018, 5; Bayoumi 2017, 12). For many, the so-called “War on Terror,” felt like “a war on all of Islam,” (Al-Khatahtbeh 2016, 56). Following the 2016 presidential campaign certain forms of Islamophobia—as evidenced by increased hate speech, anti-immigration policies, and hate crimes against Muslims—have intensified (“Map of Islamophobia”). Hate crimes committed against Muslims spiked in 2015 and 2016 when the U.S. experienced an uptick in instances of harassment and vandalism amid political campaigns and elections steeped in Islamophobic sentiments (“Map of Islamophobia”). Events like these have become more visible and seemingly even publicly acceptable since the election of Donald Trump, who, in his first week in office, enacted Executive Order 5680, which banned all travel and refugees from eight predominantly Muslim countries. For many Muslims, this was the moment they realized that this presidency would have a dramatic impact on their lives.

Amira, an American citizen from Syria, says that she realized, “I now have a president that hates me.” After receiving a degree in computer science Amira added a guest room to her North Carolina home for her parents to live in once they arrived in the U.S. At the time, she thought, “Now I will never be able to get my parents here from Syria. My president would not allow it and I know he will never care” (PI 6/15/19). Muna Ali, an ethnographer who has written about Muslim youth in the U.S., observes that “belonging is essential to one’s sense of self identity” (2018, 202). In Amira’s case, that sense of belonging shifted when Trump took office. She felt like she could not fight his actions, but would have to learn how to accept them, no matter how unjust they seemed. Similar to Amira’s notion that her president no longer cared about her, Ali concluded that Muslims have felt like they had targets affixed to their backs, a sentiment that has only increased since 2016 (2018, 45).

Current Discrimination

According to a 2017 FBI report, there has been a 17 percent spike in hate crimes against Muslims in the U.S. over the last five years (“Hate Crime Statistics”). As Figure 1 demonstrates (see Appendix), this is the third consecutive year this number has increased (“Muslim Advocates”). Eighty-two percent of Americans now say that Muslims are subject to at least some discrimination in the U.S., including 52 percent who claim that Muslims are discriminated against “a lot” (“Many Americans”). For many of the students interviewed, discrimination seems to mostly lurk in the background on an everyday basis, with overt taunts and instances of being singled out being startlingly common. Rehan, a student at NC State, remembers the moment he realized he was Muslim and his classmates were not: “The day after bin Laden was killed, I was sitting in English class in seventh grade. My friend walked up to me and asked if I was sad my granddad was dead. From that moment I knew I was different” (PI 6/23/19). For many young Muslims, it is events like the Boston bombings, bin Laden’s death, and ISIS attacks that made them recognize their own “Muslim-ness” and to associate that identity with something negative or shameful (PI 6/20/19). These sentiments have become more acute due to specific remarks made by the President, such as his claim that Islam is “out to get us” and that he would “watch and study the mosques” and develop a “database that tracks Muslims in the U.S.” (“Donald Trump”). As President, his words matter. Their tangible effects can be seen in criminal acts committed by individuals “inspired” to physically attack the very people Trump verbally targets in his speeches and tweets. One example is the suspect charged in the New Zealand terrorist attack, who cited Trump “as a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose” (Klaas 2019). Recognized white supremacist and former Klu Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke also credited the President when he labeled the Charlottesville rally a “turning point” for his movement, which seeks to “fulfill the promises of Donald Trump” (David and Green 2019).

When I asked students how the Trump presidency has impacted them, most of them talked about changes in how they view their safety, belonging, and sense of self in response to the mass

shootings taking place within the U.S. and internationally. For many of them, the Chapel Hill shootings, where three Muslim students were murdered in their North Carolina apartment, brought the idea of violence much closer to home. In an emotional interview with Sana, a student from UNC, she shared with me her feelings about that day: “I knew the victims personally, but had never experienced Islamophobia myself. That day changed everything and it is still hard for me to comprehend” (PI 6/14/19). Similarly, the New Zealand attacks, where 51 people from two mosques were murdered, students were left to recognize, for the first time, that they might be in danger due to their religious orientation (PI 6/19/19). Sarah, a student at UNCG, said the way she carried herself is “different” now because she knows that her presence in a room could “feel threatening” solely because she has chosen to wear the *hijab*, making her visibly Muslim. Because she chooses to cover her head, feelings of marginalization have shaped her college experience: “It’s hard to process that there are people out there that hate me just because of the things I believe. It never feels good to be hated,” she said (PI 6/14/19).

This fear and hatred has caused mosques (as well as churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship) around the country to hire security officers to guard their doors during services. The day after the New Zealand shootings, and fearing their congregation could be a future target, my local mosque voted to have a police presence at every future gathering they hosted (PI 6/19/19). The anxiety sparked by murderous acts depicted on the news and hateful speech hurled in their everyday lives has also caused some college students to mask or deny their religious identity. In *Muslim American Women on Campus*, ethnographer Shabana Mir observes that the choice to be openly Muslim on U.S. campuses is fraught due to the stigmatization of Islam and circulating misconceptions about Muslims, leading many college-age women to try and be “ordinary” by conforming to mainstream Anglo, Judeo-Christian identities (2014). Mir found that being marginal to everyday bonding activities such as drinking, dating, and fashion forced Muslim students to accept their peripheral status on college campuses (2014). But, in contrast to Mir’s findings, my interviewees

claimed that the primary reason they withdrew from campus Muslim groups is the prevalence of attacks targeting Islam.

When Your Identity is Feared

One university chaplain explained that institutions have had a hard time knowing who is Muslim on campus because so many people do not self-identify. “I can’t say I blame them,” she said. “They just feel like people are suspicious of them, that the essence of their religion is being misunderstood” (PI 6/12/19). For many Muslims heading to college, their biggest fear is finding community. Having grown up in their home mosques, it feels daunting to step into a space where they cannot easily identify who is like them versus who may be afraid of them or even cause them harm. For others, however, the transition into active Muslim student life has been seamless and even more supportive and fruitful than their communities at home. Despite these differing views, those I interviewed were articulate in detailing the challenges inherent in finding balance across their multiple identities (whether racial, ethnic, religious, or nation of origin) and describing the pressure and anxiety associated with representing a minority faith to the majority Christian population. Figure 2 (see Appendix), presents Mir’s findings regarding the stark divide between stereotypes and “normal” attributes (2014, 38) and underscores why being Muslim makes one distinct on college campuses. Many of my interviewees agreed that being Muslim meant being different and having to balance multiple identities, which do not seem to align easily. Ali, too, found that students often felt torn between the religious world offered through Muslim Student Associations (MSA) and mosques, the cultural world provided by their families, who seek to preserve their home traditions, and the world of secular mainstream society (2018, 15). In *Young Muslim America* Ali observes that students cannot discuss “self image, self-presentation and representation of Muslim Americans and their position in society without examining the competing discourses to which they are a party” (2018, 62). She highlights how important belonging is to one’s sense of self-identity, and concludes that Muslim students are often not given the privilege of seamlessly fitting in (2018, 64).

Hannah, a junior in college, said she achieved her sense of belonging through her campus Muslim group, but initially struggled to find that community. She argues that full “acceptance” is not what she strives for anymore, but rather a place of mutual respect and understanding; “All we as Muslim-Americans want is people to view us as regular people and not try to constantly apologize for treating us horribly on a national level. We just want to be treated similarly [to others] and for people to understand and value our ideas and not limit our ability to practice our faith” (PI 6/12/19). Comments from Habeeb, a college sophomore, confirmed Mir’s identification of “restricted, oppressed” as one stereotype Muslim women labor under: Habeeb noted that her biggest frustration living in the U.S. is that Muslim women are frequently viewed as “oppressed and weak” (PI 6/12/19). Furthermore, these students agreed that they are uniquely positioned to defend their faith in any given situation. One recent college graduate, for example, observed, “Especially today with the media misrepresenting Islam and the amount of negative stereotypes out there, its even more important for every Muslim, regardless of age, to be on the spot and show people what the religion actually is.”

The Pressure to Perform

Many of my interviewees pointed to the pressure to be positive examples of Islam in order to change people’s preconceived ideas that Muslims are “violent,” “intolerant,” or “terrorists” (PI 6/11/19, 6/13/19). Alaya, a student from Pakistan, said she was in a unique place when coming to college in the U.S.: “I have this pressure on me to behave really nicely so that people can see that, ‘this is what Muslims are like.’ I feel like I am representing a part of my community, which I don’t think other people have” (PI 6/17/19). Muhammad, a college junior, expressed how he has never known what it was like to fit into the religious majority: “Being Muslim in America, especially in the North Carolina school systems, means that you will always have to answer questions, you will always have to be on your best behavior, and you will always be the one that no one understands. You are always on” (PI 6/20/19). Students agree that because of misinformation being spread by the

media, it is crucial for Muslim college students to “be on the spot” and “explain why Islam isn’t a horrible thing . . . in five seconds” (PI 6/13/19). These conditions have given rise to situations where college-going Muslims are increasingly confident in their religion and in answering hard questions, which they note is not the case for most students in Muslim-majority countries, where they face “less scrutiny” (PI 6/14/19). In a more positive vein, this need to “play defense” has the potential to strengthen community and foster individual connections to one’s religious identity.

In an instructive conversation, Nina, a college junior, protested a question I had asked dozens of times without meeting any resistance: What is the hardest element of being Muslim in college? For her, struggle and hardship has only deepened her faith. According to her, “I know that when I suffer, God sees it, and I will be rewarded for it in the afterlife” (PI 6/14/19). Nina is someone who has found her niche within her MSA; she noted that joining that community helped her achieve peace with maintaining her Islamic values in college. She observed, “It helps to not feel as challenged when you surround yourself with people that share similar values to you.” (PI 6/23/19). This conversation alerted me to the fact that many Muslim students do not want sympathy for their minority standing and feel instead that they have been able to rise to the challenges thrust on them. Nevertheless, I also discovered that “overcoming” these challenges often comes at the cost of feeling isolated from majority campus culture. The students who said they do not feel impacted by mainstream college life, for example, confessed that they live with other Muslims (or in their family homes), spend most of their free time working with their MSAs, and primarily only have Muslims friends. The situation is complex, however; these same students noted that they have experienced meaningful support from non-Muslims students and different organizations on campus. Nina, for example, simultaneously expressed frustration about the consistent injustices Muslims face in the U.S. and their hyper-victimization, and also argued that solely focusing on these realities does not provide the space for Muslims students to talk about the outward support and encouragement they have received from fellow students and others at their universities (PI 6/14/19).

Increased Understanding

One of my standard interview questions was to ask students what they wished non-Muslims knew about their faith, and I was compelled by the animated responses this query drew. Their answers varied from “Muslims are very peaceful people;” (PI 6/11/19), to “I just wish they would calm down about Sharia law” (PI 6/11/19), to “I one hundred percent wish they realized that we are not terrorists, we are not oppressive to women, and that we aren’t bad people” (PI 6/13/19). Others said, “It’s my decision to wear the *hijab*” (PI 6/15/19) and, “We have more in common than we do differences” (PI 6/22/19). One woman confessed that she struggles with peoples’ assumptions that more restrictive Islamic societies are representative of Islam and the fact that they do not consider the religion’s internal diversity, especially since, in her view, these “Muslim countries are not reflective of the faith” (PI 6/23/19). Another woman said, powerfully and succinctly, “Honestly, I just wished they knew *something*” (PI 6/15/19).

Among the dozens of interview questions I posed, a single one elicited immediate and unanimous agreement. Asked if they wished non-Muslims knew *something* about their faith, every student immediately said, “yes, of course.” Their reasons were neither self-serving nor judgmental, but rather offered insights into how they think commonality can be found despite difference, how unity and understanding might be achieved, and how fear and stereotypes can be overcome. Each student expressed apprehension about sounding too critical of Muslims’ treatment, yet refused to sugarcoat the fact that Americans need to develop a better overall understanding of Islam for relations to progress. John, a recent high school graduate, put it well when he said: “If we learned about each other’s faiths, we would not be fighting” (PI 6/15/19).

When I look holistically at my 45 interviews, it is clear that each student has a unique perspective on their positionality as a Muslim in American society. Some individuals resisted sharing experiences of discrimination and stigmatization because of their acute awareness of their public persona as minorities. In seeking to position themselves as “fully American,” they sometimes hesitate

to appear too critical, or even “ungrateful.” In one instance, Sarah, a *hijabi* student, confessed that she had drawn religious slurs at her job as a cashier. She explained why she initially did not want to disclose this fact: “A lot of times Muslims are portrayed as whiners, and I don’t want anyone to think that I am not grateful for my job. And, it has only happened a couple of times” (PI 11/03/19). Sarah’s desire to conceal, “explain away,” or otherwise mitigate these painful encounters must be understood as part of the complex landscape sketched by these college-age students, who described the sense of being constantly misunderstood and made to feel like outsiders in the U.S. alongside the sense that they are fully welcomed and known.

Not “American” Enough

When asked what it means to be Muslim in America, many students explained that because of their religious convictions, they would never *fully* be American, but to them, that was a risk they wanted to take in order to “live out their Islam” (PI 6/13/19). Amira, for example, described her religion as something that sets her apart from mainstream American college culture: “The morals and ethics Islam brings me is kind of how I differentiate myself from the general American public because my perspective looks a lot different than your average day American citizen or college student” (PI 6/13/19). The same students who expressed their appreciation for having a distinct “Islamic code of conduct” also admit that being a Muslim college student in America presents them with challenges they feel like they would not face elsewhere (PI 6/12/19). Interestingly, while the academic literature emphasizes the role of drinking, dating, and dress in shaping Muslim student experiences, leaving them isolated and unable to blend in (Mir 2014), these perspectives did not surface in the narratives I recorded. Rehan, a student from Lebanon, said the pressures to fit in, both from those in the Muslim community and from those outside of it, can be very intense at times. He observed, “You really are surrounded constantly by temptation on one side [from American culture] and condemnation [from Muslim communities] on the other. Because in the U.S. you have so much freedom to do whatever you want, it can be tough to hold onto your religious principles” (PI

6/14/19). Other students sum up their experiences practicing Islam as: “A trial. A tribulation. A constant test” (PI 6/23/19). But, as we shall see, other students were quick to highlight the ways they have felt immense support and encouragement as Muslims here in the U.S.

Support in the Face of Hatred

Given the climate of hostility towards Islam on one side and religious extremists distorting their religion with violence on the other, many of the students I interviewed were eager to describe the not-often-mentioned support that non-Muslims have extended to them. Shaher, a college senior, said he has experienced an outpouring of encouragement in the last five years. According to him, “Yes, times are hard for Muslims in the U.S. But, it is also the first time I have seen non-Muslims defend me and my faith in such a visible way” (PI 11/12/18). This trend can be seen globally in the aftermath of terrorist attacks targeting Muslims. In the days following the New Zealand shootings, people around the world demonstrated solidarity with the mosques in their areas by becoming active on social media and assembling crowds of people to surround and protect Muslims during prayer (Mezzofiore 2019). In addition to these international events, students who I interviewed experienced small-scale, yet meaningful, encounters where individuals approached them to say that they are loved, welcomed, and supported in the U.S. (PI 6/13/19; 6/14/19). Sarah, a *hijabi* woman, was walking near her college when a local mailman recognized her as Muslim and got out of his truck to speak with her. She recounted: “The mailman told me that if this country wouldn’t allow me to be here because of the travel ban, then he didn’t want to be in this country. It was simple, but it really impacted me and made me feel welcomed” (PI 6/12/19). Although Zayn is another student who has felt this support, she would not go so far as to say it has been enough for her to feel fully welcome and able to practice her religion freely and openly at all times. She described her experience as feeling “like half of the country doesn’t want Muslims here, and then there’s the other half that are trying to support us. It’s very confusing and it makes me question people’s motives when talking to me” (PI 7/1/19). The reality for many Muslim students is that

people's points of view and opinions of Islam are powerfully polarized, leaving students unsure of where it may be safe for them to visibly mark themselves as Muslim.

A Complex Picture

While existing scholarship has highlighted the impact of 9/11 on the evolving identities of Muslims in America, my interviews have provided insight into the unfolding consequences of the current political and social climate on the lives of college-aged Muslims. These 45 interviews underscore the challenges students face when trying to navigate discriminatory government policies, negative media rhetoric, and the outward hatred for their religion expressed by many Americans. Islamophobia has motivated them to respond in two distinct ways: with silence and outspokenness. For some, the fear of not knowing who to trust has led them to rely solely on their Muslim community. Senior Aman admitted that he struggles with trusting people and building community on campus. He explained, "The way I view Islam has stayed the same, but the way I approach others, with all the prejudice out there, that is very different" (PI 6/12/19). He continued to explain how much more guarded he is in expressing his faith outwardly. But Muhammad, another student, said he believes the only way stereotypes about Islam will change is if Muslim speak up and defend their religion. He explained, "If the world is only seeing Muslims in the media and how the President portrays us, and in no other way, then there needs to be more outspoken Muslims. That way when they are trying to figure out what Islam is or who is a Muslim, they will have some personal relationships to think of and think 'oh well that person isn't doing what the media is saying Muslims are'" (PI 6/12/19). Despite their experiences with hate crimes, verbal abuse, and discrimination, all 45 interviewees expressed some sense that positive change is afoot, evidenced by various forms of support they have received from individuals outside of their community. Ultimately, every Muslim college student with whom I spoke could agree on one simple request: we should all know *something* about Islam.

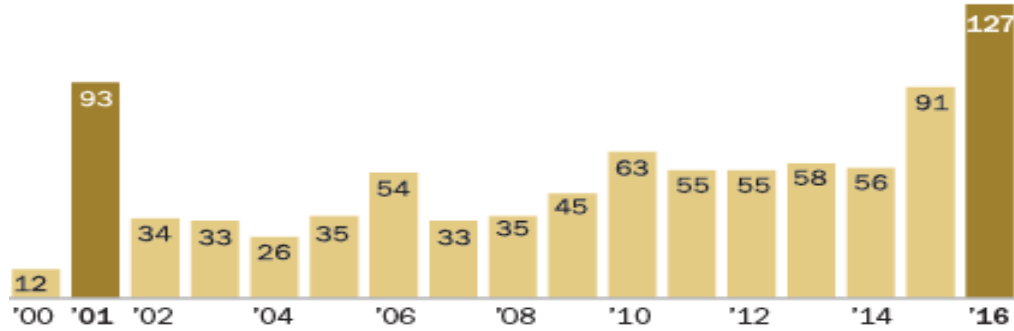
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Appendix
Figure 1:

Anti-Muslim assaults exceed 2001 total

Anti-Muslim assaults in U.S. reported to the FBI



Note: Includes simple and aggravated assaults.
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/ft_17-11-14_muslimhatecrime/

Figure 2:

Table 1. Stereotypes of Muslim Women and Their Performative Responses to Them

| STEREOTYPES | “NORMAL” ATTRIBUTES |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Marginal | Core |
| Restricted, oppressed | Free, independent, exercising choice |
| Uptight, boring, a “stickler” | Uninhibited, easygoing, fun, broad-minded |
| Shy, timid | Confident, adventurous, extroverted |
| Naive, provincial | Sophisticated, worldly, cosmopolitan |
| Terrorist, pugnacious | Peaceful, friendly, “mainstream” activist |
| “Extreme” | “Moderate” |
| Weird | Normal, ordinary |

Figure 2: Mir, Shabana. *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pg. 38.