

Research Article

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Experiences of Indonesian Muslims at a Christian-Majority Philippine University: Struggle and Resilience

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Abstract

Background/purpose. This research focuses on the lived experiences of Indonesian Muslim students and staff at an academic institution with a predominantly Christian ethos in the northern Philippines. It examines the way they faced challenges related to religious practices, social integration, and culture shock within a Catholic institution. This study also seeks to identify some of the cultural and institutional dynamics surrounding their adaptation processes, which may inform ways to engage in more inclusive spatial-temporal practices of internationalization.

Methods. A phenomenological-transcendental approach was employed to capture the participants' individual narratives and reflections. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with eight (8) Indonesian Muslim students and two (2) staff from 2019 to 2024, exploring their experiences in observing religious practices and beliefs (e.g., prayer space, access to halal food, access to Islamic holidays), intercultural socialization, and coping.

Results. The findings indicated that participants encountered key barriers, including the lack of religious accommodations and occasional feelings of solitude. Nevertheless, they overcame these barriers, by drawing their strength from their faith, finding support in a community of peers, and gradually engaging with the host culture. Filipino hospitality and shared Southeast Asian cultural values facilitated their adaptation, while the Catholic ethos of the institution, though prominent, was not entirely exclusive.

Conclusion. The study emphasizes the significance of inclusive university policies, including prayer rooms, halal food options, and intercultural programs, in promoting the well-being of international students. These perspectives add to the existing conversations surrounding culturally responsive support systems for international students in diverse academic settings.



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1. Introduction

The process of integrating international students in faith-asymmetric contexts has distinct problems and challenges, particularly in contexts where a Christian majority influences institutional culture and practices. In many cases, Muslim minority students navigate this complexity as they respond to dominant university norms while establishing their own behavior and religious practices in what is sometimes tension, which has been understood, at least in the literature on schooling and Islam, for decades (Halstead, 2005; Niyozov, 2009). This study examined those dynamics of integration for Indonesian Muslim students and staff members at a state-funded university in the northern Philippines.

With the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has a predominantly Christian population in the Philippines. Approximately 86% of the Philippines is Christian (Pew Research Center, 2020), and the majority, when narrowed further, are Roman Catholic (PSA, 2020). Philippine higher education is secular in its formal guidelines, but it allows for significant Christian influences or nearby rituals reflected in calendars, ceremonies, and student life (Halstead; Niyozov, 2009). For Muslim students, this can mean many barriers to religious observations and social experiences determined by being Christian.

Since 2016, the host university has had a sustained engagement with Indonesian partners through its South East Asia (SEA) Teacher, credit transfer, and cultural and immersion programs in accordance with the Philippine Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) internationalization agenda (CHED, 2014) and SEAMEO initiatives (SEAMEO, 2019). Post-pandemic mobility increased after the fact, in accordance with CHED's recovery strategies (CHED, 2021). Political commitments at policy levels are not backing opportunities for religious accommodation locally. This gap will expose a contrast between the internationalisation rhetoric and the 'everyday' infrastructures/issues of creating/making available prayer space, halal food/witnessing halal food, and offering agendas that support recognition of the calendar, which shape their adjustment and well-being.

Scholarship documents on international student adaptation broadly, but there is limited empirical work on the lived experiences of Muslim international students within Christian-dominated Philippine campuses, where institutional and cultural practices converge (Halstead, 2005; Niyozov, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2020; PSA, 2020).

This study contributes to addressing the lack of empirical research by examining the struggles, coping strategies, and support needs of Indonesian Muslim students and staff at a public university in the northern Philippines. The study aims to link the physical/organizational arrangements of campus life (e.g., spaces, food, calendars) to indicators of adjustment and belonging, providing evidence for inclusive internationalization policy and practice (CHED, 2014, 2021; SEAMEO, 2019).

1.1. Space and Contribution

There is a considerable body of work on international student adaptation, but sparse scholarship examines how Muslim international students in Southeast Asia, specifically in the Philippines, manage their identities and practices in Christian-dominated higher educational institutions. This study seeks to address this gap in scholarship by integrating global theories of intercultural adaptation and intergroup relations within the local socio-cultural frameworks of hospitality and pakikipagkapwatao. Beyond theory, the findings provide applied insights for policymakers and higher education institutions on the inclusive internationalization of HE (CHED, SEAMEO) and institutional policies that foster intercultural harmony: facilitating access to worship, halal food, and responsive intercultural programming.

This research examined the lived experiences of Indonesian Muslim partners who are studying at a public university in a Christian-majority country in the northern Philippines. In particular, the

study was concerned with the challenges status partners experience, how they adapt, and how they manifest resilience. In addition, this research examined recommendations for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for these students, which supports peaceful coexistence within the university's diverse community.

Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What struggles do Indonesian Muslim university students and staff experience in a Christian-dominated university in the Philippines?
2. How do they demonstrate resilience in overcoming these struggles?
3. Based on the findings, what recommendations can be formulated to enhance support systems and promote a more inclusive environment for Indonesian Muslim partners within the university?

2. Literature Review

2.1. International Student Mobility and Religious Diversity

As higher education has become increasingly globalized, a research agenda has emerged specifically related to the experiences of multicultural international students, particularly in complex cultural and religious contexts. Research on international student mobility often explicitly discusses issues related to cultural adaptation, focusing on the challenges faced by international students in adapting to different languages, social norms, and religious practices (Furnham & Bochner, 2011). Much of the research on international students and mobility focuses on the specificities of students from minority backgrounds in a dominant culture, particularly with respect to religious practice and integration (Halstead, 2005; Niyozov, 2009). The research emphasizes the need and importance of creating inclusive environments that can accommodate international students of diverse backgrounds.

2.2. Interfaith Relations and Spiritual Coping

In the context of internationalization, an emerging body of research has examined the contributions of religious diversity on university campuses, specifically how students from faith traditions negotiate their identities in either secular or religiously affiliated contexts. These studies highlight the complexity of interfaith relations when one religion clearly dominates (Esposito, 2003). Other studies have explored how religion and spirituality support students during the transitions and psychosocial challenges they encounter (Padela, 2017). Taken together, this area of literature illustrates how religion, culture, and subjective experiences construct the international student experience.

2.3. Southeast Asian and Philippine Context

Much research on intercultural exchange programs in Southeast Asia has focused on examining the advantages and disadvantages of international mobility for students from Southeast Asia, particularly in terms of access, reciprocity, and relevance. Evidence suggests that where there is cultural commonality, there is an ease of intercultural disposition and an appreciation of the perspectives and experiences of the cultural 'other', resulting in less experience of culture shock (Anderson, 2008). There are, however, nuanced cultural variations that may arise in a more culturally uniform regional context, which need to be recognized and addressed in intercultural relations (Enriquez, 1990).

More specifically, in relation to the Philippines, scholarship about the country and its universities highlights the significant role that Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, plays in the cultural and organizational structure of universities (Brooks, 2017). Values and practices are usually meshed with academic and social life on the campus, and can be perceived as obstacles to students with different

Faith (minority) traditions. As research on intercultural relations in the Philippines highlights, *pakikipagkapwa-tao* is a key Filipino value emphasizing mutuality in identity and interconnectedness (Enriquez, 1990), with wider implications for how international students can be integrated and feel welcomed into the campus community.

Empirical research has increasingly focused on the material infrastructures for Muslim students in non-Muslim majority universities, such as halal food options and multi-faith prayer rooms. In the US, recent research has identified inconsistencies in halal food access across campuses, creating inequities in student well-being, as noted by McLean et al. (2024) and Keleher et al. (2024). In the UK and Scandinavia, scholars have noted that Muslim students typically occupy multi-faith spaces, and institutions manage access and visibility (Gilliat-Ray, 2005; Christensen & Warburg, 2019; Smith, 2016). Furthermore, narrative accounts of Muslim students in minority contexts reveal the everyday strategies they employ to access halal food and create spaces for prayer (Afreen, 2018; Febriastuti, 2023).

2.4. Microaggressions and Religious Visibility

In addition to structural barriers, research on microaggressions and religious visibility highlights the psychosocial difficulties Muslim students cope with. There is well-documented evidence indicating that covert acts of Islamophobia, including stereotyping, intrusive questioning, or assuming they are foreign, can present challenges, including stress and exclusionary experiences, while in higher education (Nadal et al., 2012; Manejwala, 2019). Visibility, and especially, visibility through donning the hijab, has been shown to correspond to increased experiences of discrimination and psychological distress faced by Muslim students (Uddin, 2022). Evidence from Europe reveals comparative employment and social integration-related disadvantages associated with religious visibility (Weichselbaumer, 2016; 2020). More recent qualitative studies in the UK highlights how Islamophobia is continuing to impact the daily lives of Muslim university students (Allen, 2025).

2.5. Comparative Perspectives: Europe and Latin America

European and Latin American exemplars of comparative transferability may also serve as helpful points of reference. Some European universities have created institutional “rooms of silence” and multi-faith spaces to respond to religious diversity (Gilliat-Ray, 2005; Christensen & Warburg, 2019; Guest et al., 2020), and also noted how Spain's public universities have been engaged in public debates over prayer facilities in countries with a predominantly Catholic patient (Álvarez, 2013). With regards to Latin America, most Muslim minority infrastructures are located in cities (i.e., mosques, cultural events, etc.) such as Buenos Aires and São Paulo, so students relied on community-based networks for halal food and places of worship rather than provision through a space on campus (Karim, 2002; Oliveira, 2006; Pinto, 2019). These illustrative comparative examples of institutional models and community-based approaches may be useful in providing directions that can inform policies in the Philippines.

2.6. Policy Context in the Philippines

There is limited research regarding international students in the Philippines. Existing research has addressed academic adjustment, social integration, and cultural adaptation (Ward, 2001); however, there is a limited body of research on the experiences of Muslim students in Christian academic contexts. These studies added value to the development of culturally responsive support services.

In terms of policy, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has substantially advanced the internationalization of Philippine higher education through its policies and programs (CHED, 2014, 2021). Policy initiatives, such as the SEA Teacher Program (SEAMEO, 2019), expanded mobility and intercultural exchange, emphasizing CHED's thrust to create globally competitive universities and

enhance understanding across cultures. These policies highlight the need for targeted research on the impact of institutional arrangements (such as halal food, worship spaces, and intercultural programs) on student adaptation.

2.7. Theoretical Frameworks

To unpack these dynamics, the study is organized around three related theories that together help explain the challenges and practices of adaptation for Indonesian Muslim students and staff in a Christian-dominated university context.

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and that intergroup distinctions become more salient when one group is dominant and another is in a minority position. In this study, Indonesian Muslim students and staff constitute a visible religious and cultural minority within the predominantly Christian campus environment. Their identity as Muslims becomes heightened in relation to the surrounding Christian ethos, which is reinforced by religious symbols, practices, and institutional routines. This heightened awareness often leads to an "in-group versus out-group" dynamic, where belonging, solidarity, and cultural practices are reaffirmed within the Muslim peer community, even as individuals negotiate participation in the wider Christian campus culture.

On the other hand, Intergroup Relations Theory (Allport, 1954) details the complexities of prejudice, stereotyping, and intergroup anxiety, particularly when there are inequalities of group status and the availability of meaningful contact is limited. In Christian dominant institutions, Muslim students can expect a range of marginalization experiences, from their religious practices being ignored to microaggressions and misunderstandings about Islam. This theory also highlights the conditions under which positive intergroup contact reduces prejudice, including equal status, institutional support and cooperativeness. In Canadian contexts, Filipino cultural values such as *pakikipagkapwa-tao* and internationalization programs can create opportunities for positive contact; however, the lack of structural accommodations (e.g., prayer rooms, halal food) can reinforce feelings of exclusion.

Similarly, Berry's (2025) theory of acculturation provides four possible ways that minorities can relate to host cultures: integration (keeping one's own culture while participating in contrasting host cultures); assimilation (abandoning one's culture for the host); separation (keeping one's own culture but excluding the host culture); and, marginalization (losing both cultures and memory of the host). This is relevant to Indonesian Muslim students in this study because some applied these strategies, as represented through their stories, after arriving for their study abroad experience. There are students who will integrate with a Filipino welcome through food-related generosity, while maintaining their religious practices. Others (alluded to culturally) will see one of their acculturative strategies and consider separation as an option when they perceive that their university in the Philippines is unable to support their efforts. Marginalization will occur, although it is much rarer, when students feel disassociated because they lack institutional support and face the challenges of sustaining their own practices. The application of acculturation theory demonstrates that institutional arrangements play a crucial role in understanding how students both adapt and shape their identity construction. Mapping student experiences onto these strategies allows us to see not only how students are responding to their challenges and coping, but also how the institutional arrangements helped shape their adapting options.

Considering all three frameworks, they provide a multi-layered account of understanding: Social Identity Theory explains an increased salience of being Muslim in a space dominated by a different religion, Intergroup Relations Theory describes the dynamics of prejudice and whether the experience was constructive or exclusionary; and Cultural Adaptation Theory explains the strategies that students use to navigate this space. Together, these three frameworks contextualized the

experiences of Indonesian Muslim students and staff within a structural (institutional policies, the predominant or religious ethos) and interpersonal (daily interactions, peer group support, microaggressions) perspective to bring a holistic approach to examining adaptation in internationalized higher education.

3. Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of Indonesian Muslim partners, including teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as students, during their time in the Philippines. Phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on understanding the essence of participants' experiences in this specific context, particularly their perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies (Creswell, 2013). This method was selected for its emphasis on uncovering the core of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher plays a key role in helping integrate international students, faculty, and staff as the director of the university's international affairs. While this position offers valuable insights into the overall process of internationalization, it also recognizes the risk of preconceived notions. The phenomenological approach, with its focus on "bracketing" (Moustakas, 1994), allowed the researcher to temporarily set aside prior assumptions and biases. By using bracketing, this study ensured that the interpretations and themes emerged solely from the participants' stories, rather than being shaped by the researcher's own views or experiences.

This research included in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of the participants. This method gave them a chance to share their unique experiences, struggles, and resilience while in a Christian-dominated university environment in the Ilocos region, a northern area of the Philippines. The study was guided by the idea of "lived world" (Van Manen, 1990), aiming to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences from their own viewpoints.

3.1. Research Site and Participants

The study took place at a state-funded university in the northern Philippines. This university is known for its active involvement in international mobility programs. These programs include SEA Teacher exchanges, classroom immersions, credit transfers, and various initiatives for exchanging students, faculty, and staff with Indonesian partner institutions. The research focused on the experiences of Indonesian Muslim participants who took part in these programs between 2019 and 2024 at the university's three campuses.

Participants were from Indonesian higher education institutions and included teachers, administrative staff, and students. To qualify, participants needed to have been involved in mobility programs for at least two weeks on-site. This duration was considered enough for meaningful intercultural engagement. The host region, with a Catholic majority of 82.0% according to the 2020 Philippine Census, presented unique socio-religious dynamics that shaped the experiences of the participants (Gaikwad, 2013).

The study used purposeful sampling to select ten participants from various academic disciplines, genders, and program types. Their diverse backgrounds helped create a rich understanding of how Muslim individuals experience and adjust within a Christian-majority educational environment.

3.2. Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the well-being of all participants. The researcher obtained informed consent before collecting data. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the data and keeping it secure. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any penalties (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began after receiving necessary approvals from the offices that manage international student programs. The researcher contacted eligible Indonesian Muslim partners and provided them with a consent form. This form detailed the study's purpose, procedures, and participant rights. Participation was voluntary and informed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person during a December 2024 meeting in Indonesia or via video conferencing for those with geographical limitations. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed word for word.

To protect confidentiality and encourage inclusivity, participants' names were anonymized and replaced them with aliases in the presentation of findings.

Thematic analysis was used, applying open, axial, and selective coding to identify, connect, and refine emerging themes. This process followed Kleiman's (2004) five-step phenomenological framework: first, the researcher read the data for a holistic understanding; second, he divided the data into meaningful units; third, he grouped the sections; fourth, he identified essential themes; and fifth, he validated the findings with the original transcripts.

For clarity, Braun and Clarke's (2013) iterative thematic approach was also followed. The researcher developed initial codes line by line and grouped them into categories, and distilled them into core themes. This ensured a thorough and grounded interpretation of the participants' lived experiences.

4. Results

The findings and discussions of this study highlight the ways Indonesian Muslim navigate life in a Christian-majority Philippine university. Their experiences reveal how religious identity becomes more salient in contexts where institutional and cultural norms reflect dominant Christian practices. The themes show both the challenges they face—such as limited access to prayer spaces, halal food, and recognition of Islamic holidays—and the strategies they employ to adapt and cope through faith, peer support, language learning, and selective participation. At the same time, the role of institutional structures and inclusive practices emerges as crucial in promoting a sense of belonging and equity.

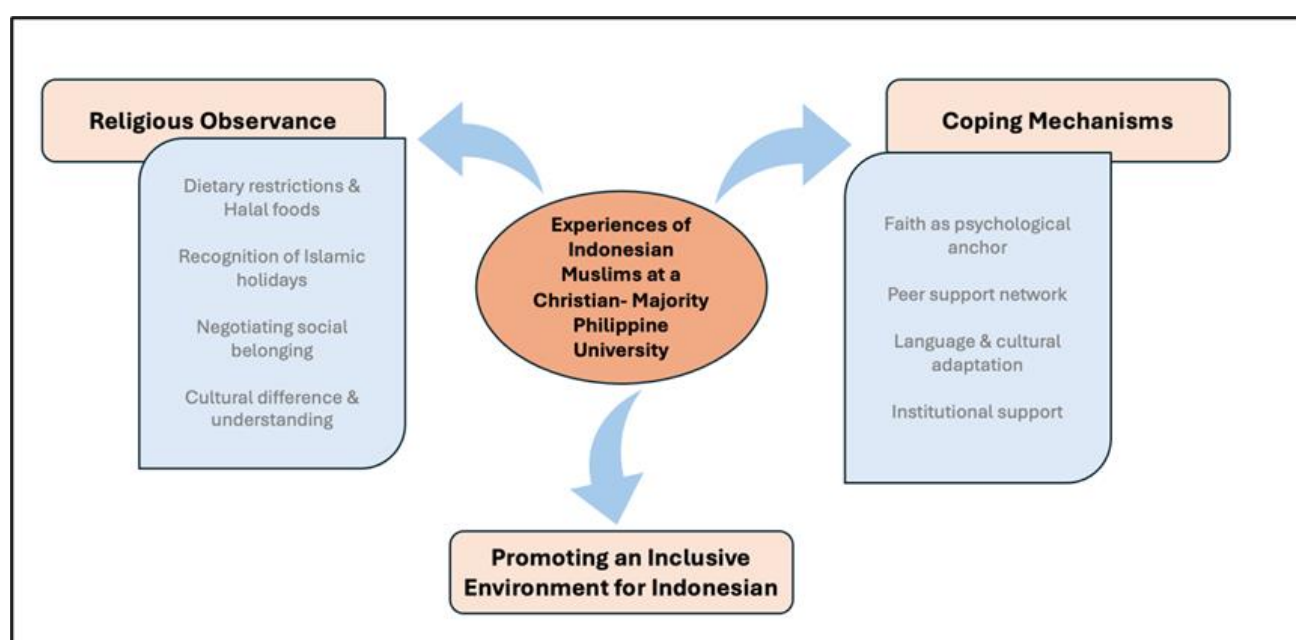


Figure 1. Thematic map of the lived experiences of Indonesian Muslims in a Christian-majority Philippine university

4.1. [Question 1] Religious Observance in a Predominantly Christian Environment

Participants reported heightened awareness of their religious identity in an environment where Christian practices permeated campus life. Prayer facilities, in particular, were a major concern.

"Finding a place to pray here is one of the most stressful things," Sarah recalled. "Sometimes I have to pray in the comfort room because there's nowhere else... It feels like we're hiding our faith."

The absence of dedicated spaces disrupted their routines, reinforcing their minority status and fostering feelings of marginalization. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains this increased salience of religious identity as individuals define themselves in contrast to the dominant group.

"It's a constant balancing act," said Rafa. "Sometimes I have to prioritize my studies, but it makes me feel guilty missing a prayer."

In addition, Intergroup Relations Theory (Allport, 1954) helps explain the internal conflict participants experienced as they adapted to dominant norms while avoiding visible expressions of religious difference.

4.1.1. Dietary Restrictions and Halal Food Accessibility

Access to halal food emerged as a consistent challenge. Most university food services did not cater to Islamic dietary laws, leaving students to rely on limited self-prepared meals or packaged foods.

"I'm tired of eating instant noodles every day," Amir shared. "I miss the variety and nutritional value of home-cooked meals."

Participants employed separation and integration strategies (Berry, 2005), choosing to uphold dietary restrictions while participating minimally in local food culture. The lack of shared meals also hindered social bonding, as communal dining is central to Filipino social life.

4.1.2. Limited Recognition of Islamic Holidays

The university calendar's alignment with Christian holidays limited participants' ability to fully observe important Islamic events.

"It was difficult being away from my family during Eid," said Adu. "The campus was buzzing with activities, and I felt like I was missing out on my own celebration."

This exclusion reinforced their status as outsiders and contributed to homesickness and social isolation. Social Identity Theory posits that such lack of cultural representation within institutional structures may reduce a minority group's sense of belonging.

4.1.3. Negotiating Social Belonging

While Filipino hospitality was widely acknowledged, participants still described nuanced experiences of social distance and self-censorship.

"When the conversation turns to religious things, especially around holidays like Christmas or Holy Week, I just kind of stay quiet," Rafa admitted. "I don't want to say the wrong thing or make anyone uncomfortable."

This silence reflects intergroup anxiety (Allport, 1954), wherein minority group members avoid topics that might reinforce group difference or trigger exclusion.

Siti explained: *“We talk about classes, movies, and other things, but religion is kind of a taboo subject. I guess it’s easier to just avoid it altogether.”*

Such interactions highlight the invisible boundaries participants navigated daily, revealing how even inclusive environments can elicit cautious behavior when minority identity is perceived as incompatible with dominant norms.

4.1.4. Cultural Differences and Subtle Misunderstanding

Despite shared Southeast Asian values, participants encountered cultural contrasts, particularly in attire, physical gestures, and humor.

“Everyone here wears shorts, but I always wear pants. Sometimes I feel overdressed,” Zambrio observed. *“And the slippers... it’s a more relaxed style than I’m used to.”*

Female students wearing the hijab became cultural touchpoints rather than sources of stigma.

“People ask me questions like ‘Why do you wear it?’ It’s not offensive—just curious,” said Aisyah.

“I use it as an opportunity to explain my faith.”

Participants exhibited integration strategies (Berry, 2005), maintaining cultural distinctiveness while learning local norms, demonstrating flexibility in non-religious cultural adaptation.

The findings show that minority identity stands out in settings where institutional and cultural norms reflect dominant religious values (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although overt discrimination was uncommon, participants felt marginalized due to limited accommodations for prayer, diet, and holidays. At the same time, intergroup relations were generally friendly but marked by careful interactions. This often led to self-censorship and partial assimilation (Allport, 1954). Their coping strategies, including integration and separation, align with Berry’s (2005) acculturation framework and demonstrate resilience despite structural and social barriers.

These insights highlight that inclusive internationalization must offer more than just administrative support. It needs culturally responsive environments that recognize and accommodate religious and cultural diversity.

4.2. [Question 2] Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Despite the challenges faced in a predominantly Christian academic setting, Indonesian Muslim students and staff exhibited remarkable resilience. Their coping mechanisms reflect a synthesis of internal, communal, and environmental strategies shaped by their cultural and religious values, and contextualized through Cultural Adaptation Theory (Berry, 2005), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Intergroup Relations Theory (Allport, 1954).

4.2.1. Strengthening Faith as Psychological Anchor

Faith emerged as the most consistent and powerful source of strength for participants. Their spiritual practices, including regular prayer and Quranic recitation, provided a sense of routine and continuity. These religious rituals served as emotional stabilizers and a means of anchoring their identity in a setting where their beliefs were not widely shared.

“When I feel overwhelmed or homesick, praying and reading the Quran brings me peace. It reminds me that I’m not alone, that God is with me,” said Aisha.

Amir echoed, *“No matter what’s happening around me, I have my prayers. It keeps me grounded.”*

These narratives highlight Berry’s integration strategy, in which individuals maintain their cultural and religious identities while engaging with the host culture. According to Social Identity Theory, such

expressions reinforce group identity, especially when the surrounding environment primarily reflects different norms.

Participants actively engaged with local and online Muslim communities to cope with feelings of isolation and cultural dislocation. These networks offered not just companionship but also practical resources like information on halal food, prayer spaces, and religious observance.

"Going to the mosque nearby is like a breath of fresh air. It's where I can be myself," shared Adu.

Rafa added, *"I'm part of a WhatsApp group for Indonesian students in the Philippines. We discuss everything – prayer times, where to eat, and how to adjust. It's a lifeline."*

These connections functioned as intergroup buffers (Allport, 1954), mitigating the stress associated with cultural difference and enabling safe spaces for mutual support.

Maintaining contact with religious leaders and family in Indonesia was another key coping mechanism. These interactions provided moral clarity, spiritual guidance, and emotional encouragement.

"Talking to my parents weekly keeps me emotionally grounded," said Ali. *"Their advice gives me strength to face the challenges here."*

Siti shared, *"When I had questions about praying in a Catholic country, my father helped me figure it out. It really eased my mind."*

These long-distance consultations underscore the importance of transnational spiritual continuity, reinforcing identity and offering adaptive strategies without compromising the participants' faith or their engagement with the host culture.

4.2.2. Establishing Peer Support Networks

Relationships with fellow Indonesians provided emotional stability and cultural affirmation. Shared language, customs, and experiences created a familiar environment that helped alleviate feelings of cultural estrangement.

"It's so nice to be able to speak Indonesian with someone," said Aisha. *"It makes me feel less homesick."*

Putri remarked, *"We all understand what each other is going through. We help each other with everything – it's like having a family here."*

These peer connections also facilitated cultural celebration, such as shared religious observances and Indonesian Independence Day, reinforcing collective identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Engagement with Filipino classmates and faculty emerged as a valuable support mechanism. Friendly interactions helped demystify local culture and contributed to a sense of belonging.

"My Filipino classmates are very welcoming," Ali shared. *"They taught me local expressions and introduced me to Filipino food."*

Sarah added, *"I've learned a lot about their culture, and they've learned from mine. It's been enriching."*

According to Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), such interactions reduce stereotypes and promote mutual understanding when they are characterized by equality, cooperation, and institutional support.

4.2.3. Language Acquisition and Cultural Adaptation

Learning Tagalog and Ilokano was an empowering tool that enhanced local engagement.

"Saying 'Magandang Umaga' [Good Morning] makes people smile, Adu noted. 'It helps me feel connected,'" Putri shared, "I can haggle prices in Ilokano at the market now. It gives me a sense of independence."

These acts reflect behavioral adaptation strategies, enhancing the ability to navigate everyday life and build rapport within the host culture (Berry, 2005; Lambert, 1999).

Participants engaged selectively in institutional events, choosing activities that aligned with their values while avoiding those that conflicted with their religious identity.

"Cheering during Intramurals was so much fun," said Sarah. "It helped me connect with others." Ali commented, "Foundation Day was eye-opening. I got to see traditional dances and learn about the university's history."

This reflects integration as defined by Berry (2005), where cultural identity is maintained while engaging meaningfully with the host culture.

Participants built friendships through shared interests, transcending cultural or religious boundaries.

"My classmate and I bonded over K-pop," said Sarah. "Now we're close friends", Aisha shared, "We study together. It's a good way to exchange ideas and learn from each other."

Common ground created relational bridges that supported emotional well-being and mutual learning, reinforcing inclusive group dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

4.2.4. Leveraging Institutional Support

While formal student services were not widely used, the university's Office of International Affairs played a critical role in student adjustment.

"They helped us with everything from documents to finding halal food," said Rafa. Zambrio suggested, "A dedicated international student center would help build community."

Supportive institutional frameworks improve cultural integration by addressing the specific needs of minorities (Furnham & Bochner, 2011; Ward, 2001).

Participants took part in a changing mix of cultural retention, adaptation, and identity negotiation. By grounding themselves in faith, forming supportive communities, seeking guidance, and engaging selectively with the host culture, they practiced the integration strategy of acculturation. These coping methods not only helped them survive in a new environment but also enriched their personal growth and the diverse makeup of the university community.

The findings highlight the need for culturally responsive institutional support and community-building efforts to maintain the well-being of international students from minority religious backgrounds.

4.3. [Question 3] Support Systems and Promoting an Inclusive Environment for Indonesian Muslim Partners

This research highlights the necessity of culturally-responsive support structures that provide Indonesian Muslim students and staff with the tools to negotiate their lives in a Christian-majority context. Key recommendations include implementing spaces for prayer that ensure privacy and cleanliness and allowing for flexible scheduling on Fridays for prayers, as well as holidays related to Islamic festivals, which were also echoed in the studies of Esposito (2003) and Padela (2017). Professional development to faculty and staff is critical in providing an awareness of Islamic practice and mitigating microaggressions (Halstead, 1997; Niyozov, 2009). The university should also be sensitive to the dietary requests of Muslim students and should engage with local halal vendors as

partners, as well as train cafeteria staff on the correct handling of food. Even though accommodating some of these requests does entail additional effort on the part of the institution, it marked respect for the religious practices of students and staff and bolstered their cultural identity and emotional health (Berry, 2005).

Beyond religious accommodation, broader integration ideas are recommended here. Participants suggested that coordinating intercultural events and promoting non-sectarian and student organizations may help promote inclusion and respect (Paige et al., 2012). In addition to language support and first language classes in either Tagalog or Ilokano, other culturally oriented programs will help students overcome social barriers and build on the sense of community. Even a basic understanding of local Catholic customs may lessen culture shock, thereby promoting civil coexistence and respectful interactions (Gaikwad, 2013). Lastly, inclusive teaching practices and faculty development programs may enhance engagement in, and awareness of, the curricular needs of minority (and potentially diasporic) populations in classrooms (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Overall, these findings from these and other studies provide practical suggestions that theoretical frameworks can be adopted, as educators strive to promote inclusion, equity, and internationalization of Philippine higher education.

5. Discussion

The results of this study confirm that Indonesian Muslims at a predominantly Christian university in the Philippines experienced daily struggles as they tried to incorporate prayer, food, and holidays. The scarcity of prayer spaces and halal/halal-style meals as a minority on campus showcased their status as marked and not in the usual, majority milieu. The students' understanding of their identity became sharper at the edges in reference to the dominant identifiable group within the frame of being identifiable, as Tajfel and Turner (1979) have claimed. For example, feeling "hidden" while conducting a faith practice illustrates how students can feel marginalized through structural gaps.

Social interactions were characterized with carefulness and silence. Students frequently avoided discussing topics related to religion to avoid discomfort, consistent with Allport's (1954) understanding of intergroup anxiety. Despite the hospitable nature of, in particular, a host family setting, subtle exclusions also framed how they connected with fellow students. The lack of an institutional recognition of Eid, among other practices, created a sense of isolation and homesickness.

Participants experienced barrier but were able to show resilience. Participants viewed their faith as an anchor to their identity, and emotional recourse was found with WhatsApp groups that linked them back to their mosques and family in Indonesia. These coping strategies are similar to elements of Berry's (2005) modes of integration and separation in acculturation. Language acquisition and practice began with greetings in Tagalog, progressed into exchanges at the market with the sellers in Ilokano, and reinforces Lambert's (1999) observations that adaptation is created from everyday practices.

Peer and intercultural friendships also helped in the adjustment process. Shared interests in music, food, and campus culture often broke down stereotypes. This is consistent with Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory. Participants acknowledged the importance of informal networks that created "safe spaces" while promoting cross-cultural learning.

Institutional structures played a key role here. The Office of International Affairs used some of its power leverage to help students access appropriate documentation and halal availability. And this reflects how supportive structures can help ensure that smooth adaptation happens (Furnham & Bochner, 2011; Ward, 2001). The requests for prayer rooms, halal partnerships, and cross-cultural training highlighted concerns shared by Esposito (2003), Halstead (1997), Niyozov (2009), and Paige et al. (2012). It is believed that these findings highlight the deeper implications of internationalization

as institutional practices do not just need to move beyond mobility; they also must move beyond exclusionary or inequitable practices to inclusive and equitable ones that advance culturally relevant practices in post-secondary education.

6. Conclusion

This research sheds light on the experiences of Indonesian Muslims, who rely on faith (to pass the time and drop the weight of uncertainty and anxiety), peer support, and cultural accommodation to deal with an educational experience without structural accommodation at a Christian-majority university in the Philippines. The informal strategies used to build resilience are certainly valid but are also limited without structural accommodations (such as space to pray, halal options, recognition of the holidays for Islam, etc.). The experiences of Indonesian Muslim students and staff indicate how different day-to-day arrangements on campus enabled the emergence of not just daily success, but identity, belonging, and well-being, based on how identity, habits, and ways of belonging were determined by accommodations/no accommodations with respect to everyday activities on campus.

The findings of this study distinctly argue that the notion of internationalization cannot be limited to mobility, support for mobility and administrative support but must also extend to equity and inclusion. The study draws upon Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Relations Theory, and Cultural Adaptation Theory to demonstrate that institutional design and policies are as important as personal resilience. Therefore, universities wishing to be relevant in a global context must consider expanding university infrastructure with culturally relevant practices and procedures that allow minority students to flourish.

7. Limitations

This study was limited by its small sample size, which included only Indonesian Muslim students and staff within one Christian-majority Philippine university, making it difficult to generalize to all populations of Muslim minorities in the Philippines or to any population of international students. Also, all data came from self-reported experiences, which could also include selective memory and/or individual interpretation. Finally, this study also focused primarily upon the religious and cultural aspects of the adjustment process my respondents made, while not directly addressing academic performance, economic conditions, or differentiating the responses of male and female Muslim participants in their university experience.

8. Suggestions

Future research may consider including other Muslim and non-Muslim international students across additional institutions to potentially provide comparisons. Longitudinal studies may better demonstrate how coping strategies and institutional responses change or evolve over time. On a practical level, universities should provide prayer space, develop halal food service, and acknowledge Islamic holidays in their campus calendars. It may also be a critical step to provide faculty and staff training on being interculturally and inter-faith sensitive. Finally, it may be argued that universities ought to develop intercultural programs to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue, with local students that support social belonging, reduce stereotypes, and contribute to inclusive internationalization.

Declarations

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