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An Exploration of Arab International Students' Campus Engagement Experiences

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Abstract

Arab international students are considered an integral part of American universities bringing cultural and academic perspectives that enrich campus diversity. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of development, we seek to understand the mutual interactions of ecological factors contributing to Arab international students' campus engagement and academic success in the United States. We used open-ended questionnaires with 18 Arab students to capture their overall lived experiences and conducted semi-structured interviews with five students to get rich insights into their experiences. The findings of this study have revealed the significant role of global and sociopolitical context in shaping Arab international students' social and academic engagement, identity, and wellbeing. Implications of this study drive the need for a sociopolitical turn in designing a culturally engaging campus environment and enacting critical pedagogy to support diverse students' engagement and identity development.

Keywords: Arab international students, Bronfenbrenner's theory, discrimination, engagement, identity, systems of support

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Introduction

The United States has witnessed an increasing influx of international students, with 948,518 international students accounting for five percent of higher education students in 2022 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022). International Arab students in the United States make up a large population representing 5.6 percent of enrollments at American universities during the 2021-2022 academic year based on the Open Doors report (IIE, 2022). International students are an integral part of the campus community as intellectual, cultural, and social assets bring diverse perspectives and enrich the campus sociocultural milieu. Research has indicated that Arab international students like international students in general, contribute to the economy, ethnic, cultural, and intellectual diversity, and college program sustainability (Hegarty, 2014). However, these students face many challenges regarding their cultural engagement and language communication and struggle with religious practice and social and academic integration on campus (Wu et al., 2015).

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The need for engaging and welcoming campus environments for diverse students and the dearth of research on Arab international students' experiences as an understudied, marginalized population (Aldawsari, 2020), drive this exploratory case study. We take a critical and strengths-based approach to raise Arab international students' voices by exploring their lived experiences in a Northeastern University during an unprecedented challenging time of discrimination and pandemic (COVID-19). We mean by "Arab international students" those who come to the USA with a student visa from Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia. These students' native language is mainly Arabic in different dialects, and they have diverse ethnicities and religions. The majority of Arabs are Muslims, but some identify as Christians, Jews, and followers of other religions, such as Druze and Yazidi. We use the words ecology and ecological as defined by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological theory to refer to the continuous interaction of Arab international students with their immediate and larger environment.

We seek to explore the influence of macro and micro-level ecological factors that shape Arab students' social and academic engagement and their identity development. This understanding will help design ways to provide an engaging and culturally responsive campus environment (Museus, 2014) to accommodate this student population's specific needs and strengths. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of development provides an interesting lens for our study by looking at the environmental effect and interconnectedness of historical, political, economic, and daily events and practices that shaped Arab students' academic and sociocultural engagement on campus. For this purpose, we answered the following research questions: 1) How do the ecological context and practices influence Arab international students' campus experiences and engagement?, and 2) To what extent do systems of support offered on the campus promote these students' engagement?

Literature Review

Arab international students come to the United States for a quality educational standard, in search of a better life, and to develop their academic and social engagement influenced by personal and environmental factors (Abu Rabia, 2017). This section reviews the extant literature about Arab international students' experiences at higher education institutions, including their academic and social engagement, the impact of discrimination on student engagement, and the needed systems of support.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is defined as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to [the] desired outcome of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). In this study, we refer to student engagement as their active involvement in educational practices and their commitment to educational goals and learning (Christenson et al., 2012). Student engagement includes their participation in academic activities as well as social experiences (Kuh, 2009; McCormick et al., 2013). The student's level of social engagement has been linked to their persistence in their studies (Abu Rabia, 2017; Hu, 2011), and socialization, academic performance, and academic success (Kuh, 2003). Student engagement was also connected to student development and success and to institutional culture (Becker, 1977) and categorized as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Fredericks et al., 2004). It was centered at the intersection of environmental factors and students' intentional efforts (Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Academic engagement is linked to the student's ability to cope with the new educational environment and academic demands regarding their motivation to study, purposefulness, performance, and satisfaction (Schartner & Young, 2016). Studies have indicated the influence of Arab students' English language proficiency on academic achievement, social adaptation (Alsahafi & Shin, 2019), and their willingness to contribute in class discussions and interaction with peers (Mwangi et al., 2019). Due to their unfamiliarity with the American educational system, Arab students need to master language skills and communication styles and develop critical thinking to adjust to the new learning environment. Moreover, research has revealed types of interaction that students experience in learning, including student-faculty interactions and their interactions with their peers, which show how faculty's care and responsiveness enhance students' engagement in the community and motivation that influences their drive for learning (Jean-Francois, 2019).

Studies on Arab international students focused on deficits such as language barriers and communication problems as hindering new social network development (Chen et al., 2019) and cultural backgrounds conflicting with their interactions and socialization and affecting their academic performance (Wu et al., 2015). These students confront institutional racism

that views their cultural background as a hindrance to their success while exclusionary behaviors from their peers further impede their acceptance within academic circles.

Religion plays a central role in the Arab way of life in daily practices and religious commitment. Although Islam is the primary religion of most Arab students, not all Arabs are Muslims, and each Arab country interprets and implements the Islamic rules differently (Abunab et al., 2017). There is a lack of familiarity with Arab religious practices such as praying, fasting, non-consumption of alcohol, holidays, and eating habits (Chen et al., 2019). Consequently, this lack of knowledge about students' religion leads to misunderstanding and deepens their isolation.

Additionally, social engagement has been linked to difficulties in psychological wellbeing and serious mental health problems, and a high level of anxiety resulting from cultural shock, homesickness, or perceived stereotyping (Goforth et al., 2016; Quinton, 2019). These mental issues could lead to physical health problems as well (Ogunsanya et al., 2018). Yan (2020) stated that international students tend to engage in maladaptive practices as a way to integrate in the new culture, such as drinking alcohol, even when it is prohibited in their own culture (e.g., Muslim). Also, racist behaviors toward international Muslim students have a lasting impact on their wellbeing (Brown & Jones, 2013, p. 1013). They often encounter global stigmatization as terrorists, bias, discrimination, and misunderstandings regarding their religious beliefs and practices (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). Thus, Arab international students' cultural and social engagement is threatened by attitudes and misunderstanding and by their response to the acculturative stress leading to wellbeing unbalance that affects their social and academic life.

Global & Sociopolitical Environment

Bjork and colleagues (2020) asserted that international education sociopolitical factors influence the context and life aspects of students. The sociopolitical agenda reveals racial and ethnic discrimination that can threaten students' psychological wellbeing (Krieger, 1990; Schmitt et al., 2014) and academic engagement and performance (Teney et al., 2013). Moreover, the stress and pressure that international students face, caused by stereotypes, bias, and discrimination, designates lower international students' satisfaction and hinder their communication with their peers and faculty (Wadsworth et al., 2008), leading to disconnection and isolation (Beoku-Betts, 2004).

Discrimination and academic (dis)engagement of ethnic-racial minority students are seen as a social identity threat perspective (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Arab international students may "face simultaneous discrimination for not being White and for not being American" because of their racial identities and foreign cultural perspectives and practices (Shaheen, 2019, p. 66). Although there is a tendency within higher education institutions to treat international students as economically important, higher institution systems continue to perceive them as academically deficient (Coate, 2009). These perceptions deepen the misguided discrimination and educators' attitudes towards this student population.

Discrimination against Arab students has been linked to rampant Islamophobia, and a hostile climate exacerbated by the 9/11 event (Seppy, 2018) and continued with anti-immigration sentiment from the Trump administration (Costello, 2016). In this context, Arab-Muslim students encounter negative stigma and misrepresentation due to their multifaceted identities, including their religious, ethnic, racial, and gender identities. This intersectional identity explains the discrimination based on religion and race, and ethnicity, leading to feelings of othering (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Specifically, Arab women who wear hijabs (head scarf) and other visibly Muslim students face a heightened risk of experiencing prejudice, bigotry, and racialized sexism (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). Arab students' race, religion, and gender intersectional identities add layers of complexities to their on-campus sense of belonging, feeling un-American and using coping strategies to mitigate racialization (Karaman & Christian, 2020). To overcome marginalization, international students are often expected to adapt to the host culture as quickly as possible and are considered as lacking normative skills and knowledge. Kettle (2017) recommends a shift in research from a deficit approach (focusing on their linguistic and cultural challenges in need of interventions) to a more constructive and strengths-based approach (focusing on their assets and strengths and considering the environment and structures as the source of challenges). Considering international students as assets to higher education instead of a burden is important in improving their self-confidence and sense of belonging, thus, their engagement and wellbeing. These students enrich diverse campus environments, bring multiple perspectives, and foster intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004).

Within this environment, international students encountered specific challenges due to the pandemic being stranded in the United States and facing financial insecurity with scarce job opportunities and intensified social isolation and emotional vulnerability (Daiya, 2020; Dickerson, 2020). This situation exacerbated their vulnerability to racism and discrimination (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022). The shift to virtual classes has also impacted these students' engagement

and elevated the anxiety and depression that they had already experienced before the pandemic (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Okruszek et al., 2020). Being abroad and away from home can impact the wellbeing of international students, especially during crisis situations (Aucejo et al., 2020). What worsened the situation is that the pandemic pushed international students to prioritize health security and safety when they had to decide between staying or leaving the US during the pandemic (Marginson, 2020). These students needed to find ways to return to their home country when some colleges closed their housing and dining services (IIE, 2020). They experienced additional stress related to the uncertainty around their legal status and temporary shift to online learning on top of their difficult living circumstances. In July 2020, the Department of Homeland Security announced prohibiting international students from remaining in the U.S. if their universities decided online-only instruction due to the pandemic (Whitford, 2020). In addition, multiple incidents of racial discrimination against international students were reported during the pandemic period (Berger, 2020; Horton, 2020). These students also had to bear more stress related to uncertainty and the wellbeing of their families (Kafka, 2020). These issues point to the need for supportive systems at universities and colleges.

Systems of Support

A review of the body of literature emphasizes the campus environment as crucial for educational staff to support international students through teaching and learning quality (Chen et al., 2019). One of the factors that support student' engagement is building a social network by developing additional connections to the campus and building a sense of belonging in their new community (Leong, 2015). Studies revealed that these students get support mainly from their friends in the home country as well as from local people who came from the same home country, followed by parents and faculty. Additionally, academic advisors (Zhang, 2018) and counselors (Anandavalli et al., 2020) are a major source of support for Arab international students to provide them with academic guidance, counseling, and wellbeing support.

Therefore, international students' sense of engagement in a culturally responsive campus can be enhanced through academic support programs (Abu Rabia, 2017), English language fluency development programs (Al Zubaidi, 2012), high-quality, high-diversity courses, and collaborative leadership programs (Glass et al., 2015), psychoeducational opportunities and outreach services (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015), and peer/mentor programs (Nilsson, 2019).

Extant literature on international student experiences takes a deficit-based approach portraying them in need of adaptation and adjustment, making them responsible for their own integration into the new culture (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Zhao et al., 2005). Previous literature also deals with international students as a homogenous group and fails to address the specific needs and interests of different racial and ethnic groups (Lee & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2019). Literature on international students usually takes an acculturative, reductionist approach positioning the host country's language and culture as superior and further marginalizing students' identities and cultures (Liu & Rathbone, 2021). Our study focuses on student engagement as a strengths-based approach and a way to locate the shortage in the campus environment in need of attending to diversity. Unlike other studies associating discrimination to engagement with a focus on minority groups such as African Americans and Hispanic students (e.g., Powell & Arriola, 2003), our study centers Arab international students' engagement in the COVID-19 and heightened discrimination context. Internationalization of higher education is about integrating an intercultural or global dimension into post-secondary education to enhance the quality of education and research (de Wit et al., 2015). We support strength-based approaches to international student engagement and join scholars from critical internationalization studies calling for a transformative approach to promote global engagement by challenging existing power dynamics and inequalities within the internationalization process (Stein, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model with multifaceted settings that intertwine together to promote international students' development. Bronfenbrenner argued that "development never takes place in a vacuum; it is always embedded in and expressed through behavior in a particular environment" (p. 27). The rationale behind using this theory is that individuals' development and growth do not happen in isolation but instead through interaction and interconnection with others: family, friends, peers, faculty, campus, community, and society. By placing Arab international students at the core of the ecological system, this theory frames our understanding of students' sociocultural and academic experiences, taking into consideration the following levels: 1) Microsystem, 2) Mesosystem, 3) Exosystem, 4) Macrosystem, and 5) Chronosystem. Each system level consists of different social contexts that explicitly and implicitly influence the

students' lived experiences starting from the direct effect of the microsystem to the impact of events over time in the chronosystem.

The *microsystem level* consists of the relations between international students and the immediate environment that they interact with. It includes friends, parents and family, residence, campus, and academic courses. In this study, the main microsystem areas that directly influence students were family, friends, faculty and staff, advisors, and the workplace. The interconnection between multiple microsystems forms the *mesosystem level*. It includes dynamic and reciprocal interactions and activities between peer groups, friends, family, faculty, community, workplace, university, and faith-based organizations. The main areas that cut across various elements of the microsystem in this study were cultural beliefs, language, faith, and wellness. The *exosystem* comprises indirect factors of the environment that shape students' campus experiences based on interpersonal relationships contributing to their development (Glass et al., 2015). Areas that emerged in this study were the educational system, clubs, and media. The *macrosystem* consists of historical, cultural, and societal structures. The macrosystem factors include the broader attitudes or ideologies of the culture that consists of social forces of events in the home country, the culture of higher education, student college expectations, belief systems, and cultural capital. These cultural contexts include socioeconomic status, poverty, race, and identity. Racism and discrimination made up the macrosystem in this study. Finally, the *chronosystem* encompasses the socio-historical context and environmental events and transitions in the students' lives and within which the different systems work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For this study, we focused on the impact of COVID-19 on students' campus experiences.

Additionally, we seek to understand the mutual relationships and interactions between the multiple systems, including the specific influence of contextual, global, and sociopolitical factors on student engagement and wellbeing. We advance the application of the theory by applying a critical lens and asset-based approaches from the culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) that aims to foster the sustained affirmation and valuing of diverse cultural backgrounds and identities within learning environments, and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993) that emphasizes diverse students' development of critical thinking and empowerment to challenge societal norms, inequitable conditions, and power dynamics.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was applied both locally and globally as a guiding framework in various studies that shed light on the influence of the campus environment on students' experiences. Zhang (2018) used the ecological framework in the American context with international students' academic advising and found that environmental factors such as culture, politics, economics, and daily interpersonal interactions contributed to international students' development. Globally, Bronfenbrenner's developmental theoretical framework was also used with international students' integration in the UK (Elliot et al., 2016), Australian (Nomnian, 2018), and Canadian (Soetan, 2020) contexts.

Research Methodology

We used qualitative research methods, in particular case study (Yin, 1984). In this case study, we invited Arab international students enrolled in a United States Northeastern university we call InClude University to complete an online open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Case Study Design

We used a case study methodology to capture a wide range of descriptions of meanings of international students' engagement experiences and give them an opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences with the goal to understand the phenomenon. The rationale behind using a case study is to uncover the "what" and "how" (Creswell & Poth, 2016) of Arab international students' experiences of engagement at InClude University as a shared phenomenon. Case study was proven effective for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within the lived environment (Yin et al., 2018). Furthermore, a case study is situated within a "real-life context." It enables researchers to capture a thick description and examine a small unique group of participants to reveal a phenomenon (Yin, 1984). For this purpose, we used an open-ended questionnaire to seek overall lived experiences from a larger sample of Arab international students and an in-depth semi-structured interview with a few participants.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at InClude University's main campus in a Northeastern suburban area in the USA in the Spring 2021 semester. The university is a public research institution with a total of 253 full-time international students. To

align with the institution's mission, efforts are made to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion to drive university-wide culturally sustaining initiatives and equitable opportunities. Following IRB approval, we distributed a flyer with the Qualtrics link to the online open-ended questionnaire in the university's centers (e.g., the international center, the Arab Cultural Club, and the Muslim Student Association). The recruitment criteria were being a current student at InClude university over 18 years old and identifying as an Arab international student. Recruitment efforts to disseminate the questionnaire lasted for two months. As a result, 18 students identified as Arab international students completed the questionnaire. They were invited to participate in the interviews at the end of the questionnaire. Five students agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews, which were scheduled at their convenience in the following month. The recruitment, collection of the questionnaire responses, and conducting of interviews were all carried out during the university's Spring semester.

A total of 18 Arab international students have completed the questionnaire, ten males and eight females (see demographics in Table 1 below). The majority of these participants identified as Muslims, spent less than 4 years in the US, and speak more than two languages. From this sample, five Arab international students took part in the interview (see demographics in Table 2 below). They represented different genders (three men and two women), educational levels (two Ph.D., one Master's, and two undergraduates), and Arab countries' origin (two Moroccan, one Tunisian, one Jordanian, and one Saudi Arabian). All these students identified as Muslim and multilingual.

Table 1: Questionnaire Participants' Demographic Frequency Table (n = 18)

Demographics	Frequency (Percentage)
Gender	
Male	10 (55.6%)
Female	8 (44.4%)
Other	0 (0.0%)
Age	
18 to 20 years old	4 (22.2%)
21 to 25 years old	6 (33.3%)
26 to 30 years old	4 (22.2%)
Over 30 years old	4 (22.2%)
Pursued Degree	
Doctoral	6 (33.3%)
Masters	7 (38.9%)
Bachelo''s Degree	5 (27.8%)
Religion	
Muslim	14 (77.8%)
Christian	2 (11.1%)
Other	2 (11.1%)
Years Spent in the US	
1-2 years	7 (38.9%)
3-4 years	4 (22.2%)
5-6 years	2 (11.1%)
7 years and more	5 (27.8%)
Spoken Languages	
English and Arabic only	6 (33.3%)
More than the two languages	9 (10.5%)
Did not respond	3 (16.7%)

Table 2: Interviewed Participants' Demographics (n = 5)

Participant Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Education Level	Country of Origin	Spoken Languages
Mousa	Male	27	Ph.D. level	Morocco	Arabic, French, English
Nada	Female	28	Ph.D. level	Tunisia	Arabic, French, English
Amina	Female	26	Master's level	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English
Yacine	Male	20	Undergrad	Morocco	Arabic, French, English
Osama	Male	25	Undergrad	Jordan	Arabic, English

Data Collection and Analysis

We used an open-ended questionnaire in an attempt to seek overall lived experiences from a larger sample of Arab international students and a semi-structured interview to get in-depth into their experiences. Data was collected from the questionnaire from 18 participants and semi-structured interviews from five students.

First, the 15-minute open-ended questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics to capture information about the overall lived experiences of Arab international students at InClude University. The questionnaire included questions about the following sections: demographics, their experiences concerning their sociocultural and academic engagement, systems of support, and interaction with their peers or other faculty members. A sample question is: *Do you think that stereotyping and bias against Arab international students is an issue on campus? in American society?*

Students willing to participate in one-on-one interviews were asked to leave their contact information at the end of the questionnaire. Then, five diverse volunteering students were selected for 30-minute semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol comprises questions about the overall perception of campus climate, the academic and social engagement, and the systems of support for campus integration. A sample interview question is: *How is the overall campus environment supporting or hindering you to reach your goals?*

The open-ended questionnaire and interviews were scrutinized and analyzed through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). We used open coding by examining sentences from the open-ended responses and transcripts to uncover the participants' experiences. Thus, we overlaid Bronfenbrenner's ecological model on the analyzed data to create and organize the findings into themes.

Rigor

In order to follow the trustworthiness techniques set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), data were collected over the span of a semester period and from two data sources (a questionnaire and interviews) and accounted for the credibility and dependability of the study. Participants were invited to a member check (Hatch, 2002) and had the opportunity to validate or invalidate the accuracy of the shared findings to ensure their voices had been honestly represented to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. We made significant efforts to include a diverse range of Arab students from various countries and religious backgrounds in order to mitigate any biases resulting from our positionality stated below. However,

the number and diversity of our participants were limited, and the findings rely on self-reported information provided by our sample.

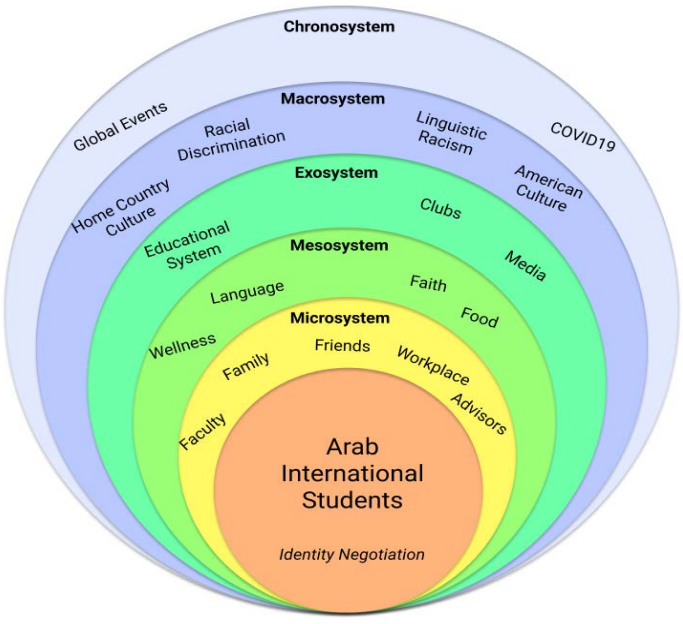
Positionality

As researchers, we state our positionality as we come to the research world with a set of beliefs and historical and cultural aspects of our intersectional identities that affect our way of thinking and interpreting the world. We identify as Muslim Arab multilingual immigrant women who grew up in a post-colonial country driven by oppressive and cultural imperialistic systems. We recognize our intersectional identities as a power in raising the missing voices in research about international students' experiences and challenges in US higher education. We pay close attention to peoples' attitudes and issues of systemic marginalization and power dynamics at the intersection of multiple identity markers that we have experienced ourselves, and we advocate for marginalized people of color. This positionality involves our connectedness and engagement with our research participants to contribute to the theory and practice in higher education to enhance diverse students' experiences and outcomes.

Results

Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, we examined the interactions of the five levels of environmental factors that impacted Arab international students' sociocultural and academic engagement. Six major themes emerged: (1) Arab international students' identity negotiation, (2) interactions and communication patterns, (3) linguistic and cultural barriers, (4) unfamiliarity with the educational system and underrepresentation, (5) perceived racism and discrimination, and (6) unprecedented socio-political context. These ecological factors are critical to the engagement of international students who face challenges from different systems and structures. The ecological analysis provides a comprehensive framework to understand the various contextual factors that influence student experiences and emphasizes the complex interactions between students and their environment, recognizing that their experiences are shaped by multiple nested systems. It is essential to consider the interplay between these ecological levels to obtain a comprehensive analysis of the data and ensure a more accurate understanding of the interconnectedness and influence of various environmental factors and the unique complexities involved in student engagement. Our findings are organized by ecological systems that relate to emerging themes depicted in Figure 1 below. We are using participants' pseudonyms throughout the paper.

Figure 1: Arab International Students' Ecological Systems



The Individual: Arab International Students' Identity Negotiation

Results have shown that Arab students negotiated their identities in order to adapt to the new campus environment. Different identity shifts have emerged, ranging from maintaining cultural assets to embracing US culture (see Figure 2 below). Some students preserved their cultural assets in engaging with the new culture. Others needed to give up some of their cultural customs and traditions to adjust to the new environment.

The Microsystem: Interactions and Communication with Friends, Family, Faculty, Advisors, and Workplace

When asked about their overall experiences in the questionnaire, the majority of students expressed their satisfaction with their engagement at the university. However, some of them did not perceive themselves as engaged, and others considered their campus experiences challenging. One of the students from the latter group shared that "Adjusting to the university is an ongoing challenge, in which it is hard to figure out where exactly I belong."

Students revealed their strong relationship with parents as significant to their engagement on campus, placing the family as an essential part of the microsystem. When asked about the engagement process challenges, Yacine shared, "It was just a different environment. I got homesick, I missed home. I missed my family, and there were just a lot of things that I had to get used to, to succeed in my classes." Participants expressed their reliance on emotional and financial support from their families as contributors to their engagement experiences.

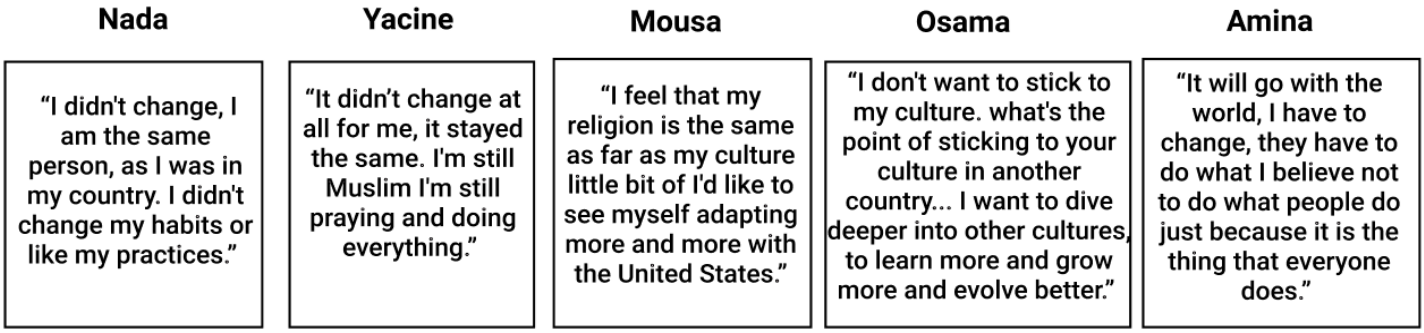
Regarding friendship building, our participants resort to the same ethnic friends to sustain their cultural aspects (language, traditions, religion, food), but they also tend to make local friends to learn the local language and culture to ease their adjustment. However, Nada reported her social experience with American peers. She stated, "I share my culture with my Arab classmates like few Americans are really interested in my culture. And they are really distant; they don't really interact with us too much." These perceived relationships with friends and peers could influence these students' engagement in the campus community.

Additionally, building relationships with faculty and staff was considered an integral part of the student's academic and social engagement (faculty and staff microsystems). Some participants' supervisors and faculty cared about the student's performance and wellbeing. However, one participant reported "that professor only cared about his work. They do not care about students."

Overall, students believed that close relationships and interactions with faculty helped them reach their expectations. For example, Yacine's close interaction with one of his professors outside the classroom supported him with career development. Furthermore, respondents valorized the vital role that advisors play in their psychological and social development, helping them adjust, engage, and feel secure. Nada stated that "whenever I feel down or have a challenge, I contact my advisor to solve the situation."

In terms of the workplace environment, students shared employment stories and emphasized their experiences of hard work and perseverance to prove themselves in the workplace. Nada shared her story about some previous lab work she did with one of her professors that affected her engagement and motivation. She revealed:

Figure 2: Participants Cultural Identity Negotiation



> The work environment was very toxic...the relationship with postdoc was not good, and they were very demanding, and they really exploit students to work for them, and whenever the work is okay, they presented as if they did it. Whenever the work is not done, there is a challenge… the bad experience I had before affected me, now it is affecting me. I'm still recovering from it.

The Mesosystem: Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

The interaction between the various microsystems presented above adds more influence on these students' experiences through the mesosystem. The mesosystem components that came out in our study include language, food, faith, and wellness which are detailed in the following sections.

One of the main challenges that the majority of participants shared was the lack of language proficiency. Participants as multilingual students came to the US with particular linguistic assets. They speak, code-switch, decode, and translate texts from and into Arabic as a Semitic language with its dialects and varieties. They found oral fluency and academic writing challenging. Nada stated that "Language barrier is an issue...in a sense, it relies too much on communication, reading skills, and academic writing."

Some Muslim students talked about their difficulties in finding Halal food (Kosher). Mousa expressed his diet concern when ordering food at restaurants saying," I don't eat pork, but sometimes they give it completely different names that you never know until you get the food." Another questionnaire respondent recommended that "the university needs to work on its food culture by offering more varieties with consideration of its diverse population."

The majority of "the students who took the questionnaire identified as Muslim who raised the difficulty of practicing their religion (prayers) on campus daily. One student said, "the lack of praying rooms made it hard to practice on time." Students' commitment to religion was influenced by their interactions with their family and friends. Mousa stated his attachment to religion as a part of his identity, stating, "Some of my friends would push me to practice my beliefs. So honestly, I'm very happy with the full situation. So, my religion is always the same. It did not change."

About a third of the questionnaire respondents had reached out to the wellness center to overcome their academic and social stress and anxiety. They expressed their confidence in seeking help when needed. One participant expressed his satisfaction with the mental health service provided on campus. While two participants were discontent with the limited length of the program and the counselors' lack of experience with the Arab international student" culture, Amina stated, "15 sessions only! This is not making sense because when we go to the counselor, we need something for the long term... The person that I met is not experienced with international students."

The Exosystem: Unfamiliarity with the Educational System and Underrepresentation

The exosystem components that emerged from our study include the educational system, clubs, and media, as detailed below.

More than a third of the questionnaire respondents elaborated on their difficulties in engaging with the new educational system. Despite the students' unfamiliarity with the interactive classroom, participants showed their admiration and engagement. Nada said that "most of the classes are discussion and reading based, which is something I've never done before... I think that the classes here are more engaging." However, Osama explained, "It took me a year to understand the system of education and how they teach you." Students highlighted that such a system invokes their academic motivation. Mousa emphasized that "work hard, play hard always remind you that you have to give all your effort to succeed." Nada shared her additional pressure and said, "I want to get my Ph.D., and I don't have any other choice. I think there is no time to go back. So that's what keeps me motivated."

Arab students elaborated on the importance of their membership in the university's clubs and organizations. They also raised a concern related to Arab people's representation on campus. One respondent proposed that "The university should work to provide course material that focuses on and acknowledges Arab students as a marginalized group and incorporate them into the inclusivity campaigns."

The Macrosystem: Perceived Racism and Discrimination

Participants revealed degrees of systemic perceived discrimination and prejudice primarily based on the media portrayal of Arabs (macrosystem) they face in their daily campus lives. More than a third of the questionnaire respondents claimed that they had confronted situations of discrimination on campus and outside it. When asked about discriminatory situations, one respondent stated that "Since 9/11 every Arab has been viewed by others as a terrorist who is seeking to harm non-Arabs in the name of Allah (God). This stereotyping has affected many innocent Arab lives." Another one confirmed, "I did get discriminated against at work; they gave someone else a promotion that I deserved." This perceived stereotyping of Muslims pushed Amina to change her religious dress code to look similar to Americans: "This is not hurting my religion as well for the dress. I still cover my body with a different style to be engaged and assimilated to the new culture, but with a balance."

Osama shared a story about a verbal microaggression in one of his English classes portraying the Middle East as a place for war and terrorism, which made one American student in the class express his hatred towards the Arab region. This event pushed Osama to defend his people and engage in conversations with his classmates: "Is he racist?... Everybody thinks the way they do for a reason, what they've been exposed to. I believe I'm not gonna judge the kid...he doesn't know." The same student was confronted with another situation where he experienced discrimination as a worker in a restaurant. He stated,

> So, it was the time of the year where they choose who the certified trainers are for a promotion, and they take the people I trained over me… That just hurt, honestly, because I gave them everything. I would do work that is not in my job description. And I would just go above and beyond because I felt like I had to prove myself as an outsider.

Regarding systemic linguistic racism, one participant perceived that "the Arabic language itself would be enough to cause alarm or spark a confrontation at the university, and I believe this is true of the wider US population." In terms of Arabs' representation on campus, one respondent shared that "Arab students are one of the least represented at the university. As a result, those employed by the university are provided minimal or no guidance on dealing with the particular struggles that Arab students face."

The Chronosystem: Unprecedented Global and Socio-political Context

Past and current socio-political events, including the pandemic, have threatened international students' safety and wellbeing. This pandemic period was accompanied by anti-immigration policies and global anti-racial events that put pressure on these students. Participants in the questionnaire have linked the current situation to their engagement experiences stating that "the pandemic period affected too much everyone's life and experience on campus. I think if COVID-19 didn't happen, the experience at the university would have been better." Another student said that "If it wasn't for COVID-19, my adjustment at the University as an Arab international student would've been at ease." From interviews, Mousa pointed to the challenge related to online learning during the pandemic stating, "He [the advisor] knows that I was having problems understanding the lecture with this pandemic and all. He advised me to go see a counselor." Nada shared the negative impact of the pandemic on her interactions with people, "with COVID, things became worse so that there is no opportunity to interact with the American people or even Arabs."

The application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system has revealed a strong connection between student subsystems. So, when one system is interrupted, the student's other system may be affected too. The main interaction that emerged from the findings is the impact of stereotyping and discrimination (Macrosystem) on mental health (Mesosystem) and identity negotiation (Individual) which will be further discussed in the next section. All of these systems have contributed to the overall student engagement on the campus.

Discussion

Arab international students' engagement experiences are deeply impacted by the mutual and meaningful interactions between various systems. Although participants described the campus as a friendly environment, some of them have revealed several incidents of discrimination, feeling discomfort in practicing their religion, and displaying their

identities. This finding is in line with Shammas's (2015) and Kishawi's (2012) studies, where Muslim students face an unfriendly campus climate that negatively impacts their academic and social engagement. Similarly, students' identities and engagement experiences are influenced by discriminatory acts (macrosystem), socio-political climate, and anti-immigration policies (chronosystem). Discrimination against Arab students is considered as a threat to social identity development, compromising social identity needs, including a sense of belonging, self, esteem, and sense of control (Verkuyten, 2019). In response to the environmental factors, students made decisions to adapt or assimilate into the host culture leading to identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This is what happened to Amina, who resorted to shifting her cultural identity under pressure to assimilate and comply with the new culture as protection from potential discriminatory behaviors and acts.

Studies on discrimination have revealed its negative effects not only on student identity development but also on psychological wellbeing (Schmitt, et al., 2014). An example from our study is Nada's story of disengagement and alienation when she felt excluded by her supervisor and advisor. It is clear that advisor's care and empathy towards Arab students make them more engaged in their academic performance. Similarly, other studies indicate that students benefit from diverse mentors who have similar experiences and are highly informed about these students' integration process (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Therefore, we recommend a representation of a diverse student population in universities' advising and mentoring bodies.

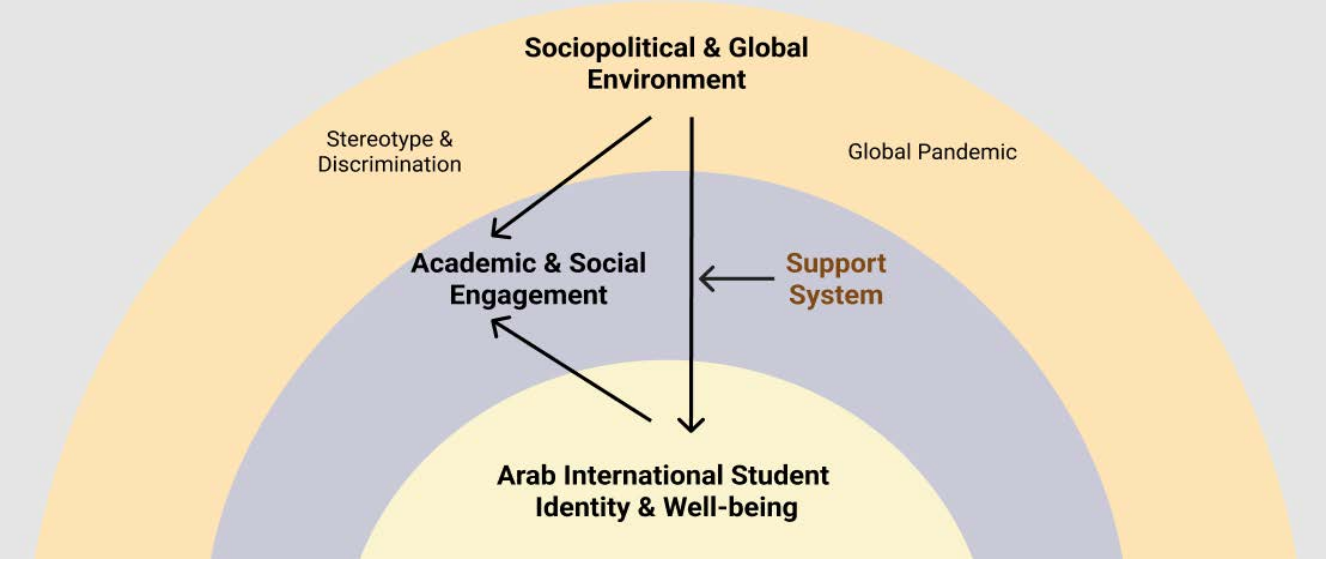
Student negative experiences of discrimination affect their mental health, especially since they come to the US with a strong commitment to get their academic degrees seeking a better life than the one they had in their home country. Many participating students resorted to the wellness center, but they were confronted with counselors' lack of cross-cultural understanding resulting in perceived ineffective consultation. The mental health assistance is not always meeting her Arab identity and cultural expectations. This idea is reinforced in Arthur's (2017) and Abu Rabia's (2017) studies. Yet, international students are less likely to access mental health services due to stigmas and cultural concerns, lack of awareness of mental health services, and increased difficulty in accessing those services (Hwang et al., 2014). Thus, counselors' intercultural competence is needed to increase the efficiency of these students' counseling services.

These discrimination experiences were exacerbated by the effect of COVID-19 as expressed by many students in our study, limiting their access to social interactions and academic support and worsening their situation. During the pandemic era, international students were perceived as threats and had a greater risk for microaggressions and discrimination. This situation heightened their mental health effects due to increased isolation, reduced access to resources, and continued neglect by their host countries and universities (Han & Richardson, 2015; Chen et al., 2020). Offering culturally responsive and accessible services and critically engaging these students in discussing issues of discrimination and social justice would help develop awareness and reflection about discriminatory attitudes and practices.

In response to this pressure, students turn to social relationship support as a buffer to counteract the negative effect of discrimination. Our findings highlight the importance of students' relationships with family, friends, faculty, and staff as microsystems whose interconnection forms their mesosystem. Participants elaborated on their strong collectivistic culture characterized by strong family ties (in Arabic الروابط الأسرية) as the family is foundational in Arab'' cultural identities (Hamdan, 2009). Arab students relied on their family bonds for emotional and social support, which shaped their individual development and influenced their sense of engagement. Additionally, this population was inclined to make close friendships with students from the same ethnic group, which helped minimize their isolation and the degree of culture shock. This result is similar to Brown's (2009) study, where international students felt more secure when they made multinational friends, sharing an "identity of strangers in a foreign country" (p. 246). Thus, universities should offer these students opportunities to socialize with their multinational peers in a safe and welcoming environment.

Our study highlights the effect of discrimination and mental health on Arab students' engagement in the COVID-19 context. It shows the major influence of global and sociopolitical context (macro and chronosystems) on Arab students' identity and wellbeing (individual characteristics) and, consequently, on their academic and social engagement at the university level (micro and mesosystems). This study emphasizes individual student characteristics and contextual factors that moderate these interactions. The systems of support from university staff, families, and friends act as a buffer against

Figure 3: Ecological System of Campus Engagement Framework



the negative effects of exclusionary context, policies, and practices (Benner, 2017). These ecological factors of engagement are represented in Figure 3.

Implications and Conclusion

Even though our study was conducted in one university, our findings connect to literature and have valuable implications based on the unique students' lived experiences. Campus stakeholders are encouraged to deeply understand the unique experiences of Arab students to tailor outreach programs and a culturally responsive campus environment to cater to their needs and interests. We should view these students as organized within sociopolitical and historical context, social structures, and everyday practices that are rooted in discriminatory, deficit-based assumptions. This sociopolitical turn could not be achieved without a radical shift to democratic and critical educational policies and practices and cultivating intercultural competence.

Critical Pedagogy

Promoting a radical educational view is a premise for developing Arab students' cultural identity (Chen, 2005). A critical education is based on critical pedagogy that promotes equity, empowerment, problem positing, and dialogic learning allowing students to develop their critical thinking through discussions, arguments, and explanations (Freire, 1993) and enables students to reflect, critique, and make a transformative change (Darder, 2012). This perspective allows for a shift from a deficit-based and assimilative context to a critical, pedagogical approach where diverse students are valued and actively participate in the construction of knowledge. Thus, it is crucial to understand that some Arab international students are discriminated against because of the national order that places power over their so-called "ex"colonized countries (Lee & Castiello, 2019). To counteract this colonial thinking, educators should enact critical teaching, advocate for oppressed countries, and promote emancipatory acts. This should be understood as a common shared responsibility for every human being not only to remove injustice but also to decolonialize the minds (Fanon, 1963).

To do so, scholars recommended adopting critical education that focuses on analyzing authority and power, where students' sociopolitical macrosystems are the actual problem, not the people (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Giroux (2010) defined critical pedagogy as, "the educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (p. 73). In such classrooms, teachers design a curriculum that meets diverse students' needs, encourage problem solving tasks, and discuss controversial issues in the US and globally. In other words, when Arab international students engage in a

critical pedagogy, they are critical thinkers, bring their international perspectives and experiences in their Arab countries, and become aware of social justice issues that give power and privileges to some people but not others (e.g., colonial history, the Arab revolution). Thus, these analytical skills teach students how to reflect on the acquired knowledge (Giroux, 2010) and enable them to engage in learning and become agents of change toward social justice and equity.

Intercultural Competence

Arab students' perceived identities and cultural negotiation coupled with their friendship behavior invoked the need for embracing linguistic and cultural diversity. Discrimination and stereotyping should be counterbalanced with a supportive campus environment promoting access, success and equity for students in the margins through a culturally engaging campus environment (Museus, 2014). Campuses should promote the intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004) of faculty, staff, and students through not only organizing events where American, Arab students, and other ethnic groups work together and learn about each other's cultures but also ensure accessible resources for these students on campus (e.g., prayer rooms, Halal food, clubs, and organization). In addition, the implementation of cultural pedagogies such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) and tapping into students' funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2006). These campus practices boost international students' social skills and motivation to explore the new culture and make friends from similar and dissimilar cultures (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Moreover, counseling ought to be tailored to support Arab international students (Zhang, 2018), considering their specific faith-related beliefs about mental health and their collectivistic culture. This cultural sensitivity would prevent the risk that counselors apply western liberal advice that may oppose Arab family and community culture and values (Alajlan, 2016). In the same vein, cross-cultural supervision and advising are essential to understand the needs of international students who may not be informed of how to utilize campus resources (Reid & Dixon, 2012). Accordingly, counselors need to be aware of the Arab student ecological systems' change over time, stay tuned about current events, and utilize professional advocacy efforts to support these students (Anandavalli et al., 2020). This advocacy position cannot be achieved without setting pre- and in-service programs for faculty, staff, and counselors that focus on intercultural competence and enable not only changing teachers' attitudes but also promoting experiential and reflective activities that promote diverse perspectives and cultural understanding.

Contribution to Research

The current study contributes to the field of diversity in higher education and to critical internationalization studies (Stein, 2019) in various ways. First, it raises the voices of marginalized students, offers insights into their unique ecological systems that affect their engagement, and emphasizes the historical and sociopolitical forms of marginalization that shape student experiences. Second, we further develop the ecological theory toward a critical framework tracing the connection between discrimination, identity development, and engagement with the systems of support acting as a protective factor. Third, we advocate for new ways to provide a welcoming and supportive campus environment taking a sociopolitical and critical approach toward these marginalized students. Further research can dig deeper into the process of identity shift taking an intersectional lens based on racial, ethnic, and religious constructs and their implications on student cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Researchers and practitioners should collaborate to bridge theory to practice with the goal to build and sustain diversity and inclusion in American higher education using critical and strengths-based approaches.

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