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I am a Muslim and Asian Woman in the United Kingdom: Living Comfortably in an Uncomfortable Situation

Nur Hafeeza Ahmad Pazil
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Utilizing an autoethnographic stance and method, this article is based on my experiences as a Malaysian postgraduate student in the United Kingdom. I draw upon my memories of dealing with Islamophobia and xenophobia while living there, as a Muslim and Asian woman. Anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia can be experienced in many forms, ranging from feelings of discomfort to verbal insults and direct confrontation. As a visible Muslim and Asian woman, I reflect upon my own experience as a victim of verbal abuse on different occasions. This article offers an intersectional perspective taking into account interconnected and overlapping factors, such as gender, ethnicity and religion, to examine the multi-layered issues and challenges as an international student. I highlight the challenges in expressing and negotiating my intersectional identities while living temporarily abroad. Therefore, this article is important to raise awareness about Islamophobia as well as inadvertent or deliberate xenophobia towards Asian communities.

Keywords: Intersectional identities, Muslim, Asian, discrimination, xenophobia, Islamophobia

Living abroad is undeniably one of the most exciting and fulfilling experiences one will ever get. Students feel more comfortable and no longer feel like a tourist after living abroad for more than a year as they create a new sense of home. The feelings and idea of comfort and 'home' lessen the feelings of being "out of place" (Prazeres, 2016, p. 11) as students became familiar with their life abroad.

However, international students who live temporarily abroad may encounter problems of adapting socially to the local society. The experiences of a different lifestyle, language, food as well as the cultural and religious practices can be emotionally challenging. As an international student, living abroad is different from living in own home country, not only due to the weather, but also the lifestyle, social norms, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Despite the differences, international students tried to adapt to the unfamiliar higher education culture and at the same time tried to blend their own norms and practices into their daily life abroad.

Most of the existing work on international students in higher education is concerned with their sociocultural adaptation, social network, emotional and physical wellbeing as well as academic adjustment (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016; Gomes et al., 2014; Leong, 2015; Maundeni, 2001; Sandel, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sung, 2021; Swami et al., 2010). However, there are limited research that focuses on the culturally diverse subgroups of the international student population. This study brings attention to the Muslim and Asian students as they face with a set of entirely different challenges. The terrorist strikes of 9/11 triggered a backlash against the Islamic world and Islamophobia has increased significantly especially in the West. Following the incidents of the London Bridge attack and Manchester Arena bombing in 2017, the number of Islamophobic attacks in the United Kingdom notably went up (Gilks, 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic fueling anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia. Although United Kingdom's universities have encountered a notable increase in the number of Muslim and Asian students, it is important to highlight that these students face challenges in adjustment to living in the United Kingdom especially after these incidents.

Therefore, it is significant to learn how Muslim and Asian students adjust to their new cultural environments and at the same time negotiating their cultural and religious identity while living temporarily abroad. This study aimed to improve understanding of how Muslim and Asian students practices their intersectional identities and to provide insights to higher education professionals to appropriately support these international students in their campus communities. Utilizing an autoethnographic stance and method, this paper reflects my own experiences as an international student-cum-insider researcher with intersectionality as the orienting framework. This paper explores the complexities of my multiple social identities – as a Muslim, an Asian and a woman, by highlighting the ways in which I negotiate and express my identities in the situation of living temporarily abroad.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students who live abroad intend to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity in their daily life abroad not only to gain a sense of local belonging but also to form a new 'home' (Prazeres, 2016, p. 13). The feelings and ideas of comfort, familiarity and home are transformed through students' mobility abroad. However, it is challenging to make the unfamiliar become familiar and the

uncomfortable become comfortable to fit in with the local environment. Indeed, Lim and Pham (2016) argue that the international students may not feel completely welcome in their host countries but may also start to grow feelings of estrangement from their home countries. One of the ways to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity is to form new friendships abroad. International students preferred to befriend those who share a similar nationality, and then, to make friends with other international students and have limited interaction with host students (Bilecen, 2014; Coleman, 2015; Nielsen, 2014; Pazil, 2019). Maundeni (2001) in her study in the United Kingdom found that international students had little and 'formal' contact with British students because they are reluctant to initiate contact with them on the assumption that local students are reserved and preferred to socialize with each other. Indeed, British students played a minimal role in the adjustment process for international students, compared to co-national contact, which becomes more influential over time as co-nationals are important for promoting cultural adjustment and managing stress (Geeraert et al., 2014).

Personal, academic, sociocultural, and problem-solving strategies are four main concerns encountered by Southeast Asian international students while living abroad (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016). The students not only faced challenges of time management and academic achievement, but they also reported feelings of loneliness and homesickness as they did not fit in with the norms, languages and food. Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016) also point out that the Southeast Asian international students preferred to interact with co-national friends or other international students who had the same language, culture, and religious beliefs. They sought emotional support from co-national and Southeast Asian friends rather than local students. Being an international student, particularly in a big group of co-nationals, appears to strengthen rather than weaken national identity (Weiss & Ford, 2011). Nielsen (2014) discovered that shared social space, such as accommodation, classes, services, and societies on campus that develop activities for international students foster intercultural interaction. However, she points out that local students rarely participate in those activities. Therefore, the international students have fewer opportunities to develop close contact with local students compared to co-national and other international friends. Hence, it is clear to highlight that familiarity and a sense of home seem significant for students abroad.

Moreover, Brown (2009) discovered that religion is a part of adjustment experience for postgraduate international students in England. She argues that friendships are formed by a shared Muslim faith, and that Muslim students were drawn to develop these friendships as they sought to re-enact the rituals that remind them of home, to reaffirm and celebrate religious identity and to gain support and defense against the threat of Islamophobia (Brown, 2009). Muslim international students reported challenges to acculturation, identity shifts and gaps, as well as the importance of social support (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Men and women seemed to have different experiences with discrimination, with some women experiencing unfavorable reactions to wearing a headscarf and some men reported being perceived as terrorists (Ali, 2014; Guest et al., 2020). However, most of the Muslims in Europe appeared to face more discrimination

due to their visibility as minorities (Abdelkader, 2017) such as wearing a headscarf, their skin color, and accents instead of their Islamic beliefs.

Intersectionality can be a useful analytic tool for understanding the discrimination faced by the Muslim and Asian women in the Western countries. This term was coined by Crenshaw (1991) as a way of conceptualizing identity by highlighting the multidimensionality of marginalized individuals' lived experiences. The metaphor of intersecting roads is used to describe and explain how the prejudice and violence experienced by women of color are the product of intersecting patterns of both racism and sexism. Therefore, it is significant to show how intersecting power relations underpin social inequalities of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and religious beliefs in addressing social issues (Collins & Bilge, 2016). The complex interplay and the visibility of national identity, gendered racism and religious identity through physical appearances has placed Muslim international students, particularly women, outside of the norm. Although the numbers of Muslims students are increasing to 230,000 in the United Kingdom, there are perceptions among the students that Islam is intolerant towards non-Muslims and discriminates against women (Guest et al., 2020).

Zempi (2020) in her study argued that Muslim women became the targeted victim of 'gendered Islamophobia' due to the intersections between their visible Muslim identity and gender practices. Projecting a Muslim identity by wearing a headscarf in public when conducting her research allows Zempi (2017) to capture the experiences and feelings of being the Islamophobia victim. By employing autoethnography in her research, Zempi (Zempi, 2017; Zempi & Awan, 2017) was able to tell her story as she changed her positionality from outsider to insider researcher. Being an insider allows her to tell the story of other participants and at the same time incorporate her own views, thoughts, and personal stories to complement and enrich the story of her participants (Zempi, 2017). Moreover, by using the evocative approach, personal narratives foreground the researcher's personal experiences and emphasize the relevance of storytelling in understanding human experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Hence, based on my own experiences as international students and insider researcher, this paper will illustrate the various ways in which race, gender and religion interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Muslim and Asian's women experiences while living temporarily abroad by using intersectionality as the underlying framework.

METHOD

Narrative Autoethnography

This article draws extensively on my experiences as an insider researcher, by employing the narrative autoethnographic method. According to Adams et al. (2017) autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses self-reflection based on the researcher's personal experiences ("auto") to understand and interpret ("graphy") cultural experiences, beliefs and practices ("ethno"). Its purpose is for understanding and producing thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences rather than generalizing (Ellis et al., 2011). Social

research employs the autoethnographic method to understand intercultural practices and identity (Brock et al., 2017; Brown & Jones, 2013; Dimandja, 2017). Autoethnography begins with a personal story, in this case my story about living temporarily abroad as a Muslim international student and an Asian woman. As a narrator of my own life stories, I use self-observation and reflexive inquiry based on my personal experiences to explain different angles of the living abroad experience as an international student particularly in terms of my intersectional identities. I adopted Ellis's (1999, p. 675) autoethnography strategy of 'emotional recall' in which I visualize myself emotionally and physically returning to the experience of being a victim of Islamophobia and xenophobia while living in the UK. I draw on my personal memory and experience to make connection between my multiple identities and the situation of living temporarily abroad moments in my life story.

As my Ph.D. research engaged with the context of Malaysian students' experiences of living temporarily abroad (Pazil, 2018), I felt really connected as some of the findings reflected my own experiences and feelings. My research took place in the Northwest of England, United Kingdom and focus on 18 Malaysian students aged between 20 to 25 years old. Throughout the interviews, the participants shared their cultural experiences of being Malaysian students in a Western country. Some of them talked about their experiences of being Islamophobia and xenophobia victim. As an insider researcher, it is difficult not to relate my personal experiences, thoughts and feelings when conducting my research as it often relates to my personal daily interactions and intimacy practices. Following Ellis's (1999) description of the emotional recall process, I not only used my research notes and interview transcripts, but also made an effort to return to the scene emotionally. I use my memory as a way of reflecting on personal and collective lived experience to particularly addressing intersecting issue of Islamophobia and xenophobia in relation to the international students' intersectional identities. However, emotional recall on sensitive topics can be intimidating for the researcher, and it can also lead to new stress and powerful emotions (Gariglio, 2018). Trauma or unpleasant experiences from the past may resurface in new and unanticipated ways. From the thematic analysis, I categorized my findings into two categories which are expressing identity and negotiating identity that I will further discuss in the findings section. The narrative based on my own experiences alongside with the experiences of my participants and other international students are significant to represent our 'voices' regarding the nature, extent, and impact of Islamophobic and xenophobic victimization.

Insider Researcher

Being an insider researcher was advantageous as I acquired a greater understanding of my own culture, social norms, and religious beliefs. My knowledge and position as a researcher and a Malaysian student enabled me to tackle the issues related to roles, responsibilities, and daily lives (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Saidin & Yaacob, 2016) as voiced by the students during the interviews. This study used evocative approach in autoethnography as classified

by Bochner and Ellis (2016) to illustrate my own experiences as an insider researcher. Evocative approach offers accounts of my personal experience to complement the existing research that I conducted. Moreover, through this method, I am able to articulate my knowledge of cultural experience as an insider researcher (Adams et al., 2017). This study analyzing the researcher's embodied field experiences in relation to my intersectional identities and the issues of Islamophobia and xenophobia.

My positionality as an insider in relation to my 'visibly' identifiable Muslim and Asian identity as well as my gender practices is important in this study to gain additional insight into the experiences of Islamophobia and xenophobia encountered by international students. This study shows my intersecting cultural identities in my daily life as an international student in the UK. As a person who has directly experienced xenophobia and Islamophobia, I am able to talk about these issues in ways different from others who have limited experiences of this situation. My insider knowledge and cultural experience are more accurate, and I am able to tell my stories – about my experiences, thoughts and feelings in novel ways (Adams et al., 2017). Hence, this article offers an intersectional perspective taking into account interconnected and overlapping factors such as gender, ethnicity and religion to examine the multi-layered issues and challenges one experiences as an international student.

FINDINGS

It has been three years since I left the United Kingdom as an international student. Looking back on my Ph.D. journey in a Western country, it reminds me of the bittersweet experiences as an international student-cum-insider researcher as I conducted research on Malaysian students living abroad. My research focuses on Malaysian students' intimacy practices in close friendships, both geographically close and long-distance ones. Throughout my research, I often reflected upon my own experiences as an international student and my intersectional identities as a Muslim and Asian woman. Before I came to the UK, I made several contacts with Malaysian students in my university through the Facebook page of the Malaysian Students' Society. I asked for tips on how to get to the university from the airport, their advice on what to wear and what to bring from Malaysia, especially food. The fact that other Malaysian students were studying in the same university made me, as well as my family members, feel more secure and relieved. Moreover, to know that there was an Asian shop, selling Malaysian food made me feel 'at home' as I would be able to eat Malaysian cuisine. When I moved to the UK, I was able to speak in the Malay language with not only Malaysian friends, I also made lots of Indonesian and Bruneian friends, which reaffirmed my Malay and Islamic identity (Brown, 2009, p. 65) as we speak a similar language and come from a similar cultural background and religion. I discovered that I felt the sense of 'home' when I acquired familiarity with the language, people, and situations.

Being an international student with intersectional identities – as a Malaysian Muslim and Asian woman in a Western country, I preferred to mix with friends who share a similar background – cultural, religion as well as similar situation of

living temporarily abroad. I do have British friends, but the level of intimacy in our friendship is not similar to my friendship with co-national, Asian and other international friends. In my research, only two Malaysian students claimed that they have a close British friend – but both are Asian British. The students talked about the difficulties of blending into British culture due to their belief in religion and their personal values. Although O'Loughlin (2010) claims that people in contemporary society have more diverse friendship ties as they are less religious and more tolerant, somehow, I disagree with that statement. My research shows that obligations and values that derive from cultural and religious practices have significant impacts on the formation of friendships as well as the practices of intimacy (Pazil, 2018). I do have diverse friendship ties while living abroad, but not all of them are considered as close friendships.

Different cultural and religious practices limit the opportunities for the formation of close friendships. Malaysian students put less effort into blending into the local culture and are more concerned with maintaining their religious and cultural identity in their social interactions (Hussain, 2012; Pazil, 2019). Living in a foreign country to study brings many challenges due to acculturative stress. Language barrier is the major acculturation stressor faced by international students, followed by academic and sociocultural stress, discrimination and practical or lifestyle acculturative stressors (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students, especially Muslims and Asians encounter difficulties in practicing religion, facing ethnic stereotypes and expressing religious identity (Anderson, 2020). Therefore, drawing on my experiences as an international student and insider researcher, I highlight the challenges in expressing and negotiating the intersectional identities as a Muslim and Asian woman as well as explain the multi-layered issues and challenges that international student faced.

Expressing Identity: Being a Visible Muslim

Since the tragic terrorist attacks in the USA on 11th September 2001, Islamophobia has been on the rise. I intended to study abroad, but I was concerned about a possible backlash against Muslims especially in Western countries. The first time I introduced the idea of studying abroad to my family and friends, their responses were, "Do not go to the USA, some of them are racist and Islamophobic" and "more Malaysians reside in the UK or Australia, it is much easier to find Asian products and halal meat". Assuming that it would be much easier for me to adapt to the new environment setting while preserving my identities as a Malay and Muslim woman, I decided to further my study in the UK. Besides this, there was also the motivation to study at a world-renowned institution. When I asked my research participants 'what motivates you to study in the UK?', most of them shared the same answer – the university's ranking, Malaysian community in the UK and easy access to halal food. Hence, it is not surprising that the Malaysian student community in the UK is bigger than in other Western countries and Malaysian students are in the top 10 of non-EU students in the UK (Stacey, 2021).

Being a visible Muslim – as I wear a headscarf or hijab in public, I know that public expression using the hijab is a very controversial issue, especially in Western countries. Although it is only a piece of fabric, the hijab has become a powerful and divisive symbol worldwide. For Muslim women, it is a symbol of devotion and modesty. Nevertheless, for some people, it is a symbol of oppression, narrow-mindedness, and terrorism. When I first arrived in the UK, I realized that the Muslim population varies, and urban centers have higher proportions of Muslims compared to rural locations. The location of my university is not in a big city, thus there were fewer minorities. I would say that the cultural diversity in the city where I studied comes from the international students there. Although there were few Muslims, I felt safe to walk alone in the city despite wearing a hijab.

Never did I know that in the second year of living abroad, I would encounter Islamophobic, racist and xenophobic sentiments. These sentiments came in many forms, ranging from feelings of discomfort to verbal insults and direct confrontation. Islamophobia and hate crimes in the UK usually happen towards Muslim women in hijab (Abdelkader, 2017; Poynting & Mason, 2007). The incident that happened to me was momentarily when I was walking in a shopping mall with my Malay friends and all of us were wearing a hijab. While riding an escalator, there was a middle-aged woman standing in front of us. She mumbled and tried to say something to us. Suddenly, she pointed her finger to our faces and shouted, "You killed my son and now you go shopping!". Luckily, that woman did not physically attack us. She walked away but still shouting and telling everyone that we had killed her son. The incident caught the attention of the public and some of them tried to calm us down and said that we should just let her be. One Muslim woman came to us and said we could make a report of this verbal abuse. We did not make a report of this attack because we were just speechless and shocked. Although it was momentary and 'low-level' hostility, I still vividly remember that incident.

As an Asian and Muslim woman, my experiences might be different from British Muslim woman. Zempi and Awan (2017) in their autoethnographic study found that British Muslim women are reported to be verbally abused and encounter Islamophobia in 'white' areas compared to Muslim-dominated areas. However, the incident that happened to me was in a location with a large Muslim population. Before that incident, I thought that there would be less Islamophobic sentiment in areas with a large Muslim population because people would not really take notice of what you wear, especially in Britain's multicultural capital like London. The Muslim population in the UK is ethnically diverse with more than two-thirds of Muslims Asian – with those with a Pakistani heritage constituting the largest number (Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2018). Nevertheless, the main problem for Muslims in the UK is the way we are perceived by others.

Muslims have been associated with conflict, extremism, and terrorism. Negative stereotypes and discrimination have not only had the effect of marginalizing Muslims but also affected how they express their identity as Muslims in all spheres of life. I never encountered any problem in expressing my

identity as a Muslim in Malaysia even though Malaysia is a multicultural country. However, in the UK, I was identified first and foremost by my religion followed by my ethnicity and identity as an international student. Nevertheless, Muslim women are more 'visible' compared than Muslim men as we are required to wear a hijab. I agree with Zempi and Awan's (2017) view that the visibility of our perceived Muslim identity triggers Islamophobic hostility especially in public spaces. My experience of the verbal attack heightened my concerns that I could encounter similar situations and there was a possibility of physical abuse. As a victim of anti-Muslim hate crime, I am lucky that I did not suffer physical injury, but that incident affected my emotional health as it instilled a sense of fear, anxiety, and insecurity in me. I was afraid to go to big cities and I felt more cautious and nervous when I was alone in public spaces. However, social and emotional support from Malaysian and Muslim international friends helped me to cope with the stereotyping and discrimination towards Muslims (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016; Anderson, 2020).

Based on my own experiences, discrimination towards Muslim, especially women are not only verbal but also nonverbal. As an international student, I experienced unwelcome feelings, eye-rolling, and insulting jokes about Muslims. My Malay Muslim friends and I were verbally assaulted by a group of drunk people on public transport in Edinburgh. They called us 'kebab' – a Middle Eastern cuisine, just because we were wearing hijabs. Even though there were two Malay Muslim males during that incident, none of them were verbally assaulted. Similar incidents of Islamophobia and anti-Asian sentiment happened to my friends and my research participants. One of my Malay Muslim friends told me that she had been physically attacked by strangers while walking alone in the city. They tried to pull off her hijab and verbally abused her. Moreover, none of my male research participants reported to experienced Islamophobic incidents. For that reason, I highlighted that Muslim women are more likely to became the targeted victim of 'gendered Islamophobia' (Zempi, 2020) compared to men and I would claim that it is a product of intersecting patterns of both racism and sexism. The discrimination and sentiments particularly towards Muslim women make me ponder, why this piece of cloth has drawn so much attention and backlash.

Most of the studies on undergraduate Muslim international students showed that Muslim women who wore the hijab faced isolation and discrimination including verbal and physical attacks (Ali, 2014; Anderson, 2020; Chen et al., 2019; Dimandja, 2017). Islamophobia has increased significantly in the UK and elsewhere in the West. The London Bridge attack and Manchester Arena bombing happened when I was in the UK in 2017. The number of Islamophobic attacks in the UK notably went up after these incidents (Gilks, 2020). My family in Malaysia were worried about the Islamophobic incidents in the UK and they were afraid that I would encounter similar attacks again. My mother even asked me to wear a hat or a hoodie to cover my hijab. I did feel anxious to go out and pray in public spaces. Most of my Muslim friends – both male and female, reported the same feeling. We usually pray in the fitting room to avoid stare as we do not have access to designated prayer spaces in public. Although I experienced gendered

Islamophobia as a visible Muslim woman, but I never experienced sexism as a woman while living in the UK. I have had similar opportunities to participate in academic activities in my university and the staffs treated me equally as a woman. Sometimes I wonder if I did not wear a hijab, I might not experience Islamophobic attack, like most of my male Muslim friends. However, is it necessary for me to negotiate my religious identity and manage the visibility of my Muslim identity through my clothing when everyone has the right to freedom of expression?

Negotiating Identity: Being an Ethnic Minority

Living in a Western country as a Muslim and Asian woman, I struggled with the cultural adaptation and faced discrimination. Wearing a hijab and refusing to participate in the social activities at the local or college bar, I was seen as unapproachable and 'too Islamic to handle'. I tried to participate in social activities organized by my faculty and department even though I am not comfortable with the smell of alcohol and drunk colleagues. However, the reason I refused to go to the bar for any social activities was because it is not a norm for Muslims. Even though Malaysia is a multicultural country, Muslims are prohibited from going to bars or clubs and drinking is forbidden in Islam. I gave many reasons for not going to the bar and this affected the friendship with my colleagues. I believe that different cultural and religious practices limit the opportunities for the formation of close friendships. Past studies also revealed that Asian students put less effort into blending into the local culture and are more concerned with maintaining their religious and cultural identity in their social interactions (Hussain, 2012; Nasirudeen et al., 2014).

Similar to my experience, my research participants – both Muslims and non-Muslims talked about the difficulties of blending into British culture due to their religious beliefs and their personal values, especially in relation to drinking alcohol and mixing with the opposite sex. Although MacLean (2015) found that drinking alcohol is part of friendship-making practices that build intimacy for young people in Australia, this does not represent the findings of my study. Unsurprisingly, my research finding is similar to Ngow's (2013) argument that the drinking culture is one of the main reasons that influence international students and causes them to hesitate in mixing with British students. It is important to highlight that Malays does not have a drinking culture, and sexual practices are not publicly discussed. Accordingly, I found that the Malaysian students, including myself, put less effort into blending into the British culture and these differences became barriers for us in terms of making close friendships with British students. Besides my Ph.D. colleagues, I have fewer opportunities to develop close contact with local students compared to co-national and other international friends.

Homesickness is a serious problem for international students and food is one of major factors for this issue. Eating home country food offered emotional and physical nourishment, and international students felt comforted by familiar taste (Brown et al., 2010). As ethnic minorities, international students often encounter difficulties in obtaining home country food, and it is also hard for Muslim students

to find halal products while living abroad (Ali et al., 2017; Handani, 2021). However, consuming halal food in the UK was not really a problem to me because there were lots of options for halal meats and vegetarian food is easily found and labelled in the grocery store. Moreover, as previously mentioned, there was an oriental shop owned by a Malaysian family in the area where I lived where I can buy Malaysian products and food. The university also served vegetarian food and sometimes halal food upon request in any events or conferences. Some of my colleagues and international friends were aware of the religious restriction on food for Muslims. Although they did not really understand the concept of halal in Islam, they were respectful and concerned about sharing food with me. My Japanese friend even explained to me the ingredients of sweets from Japan she bought for me, and my Brazilian friend substituted her cooking with halal meat just to give me a taste of Brazilian cuisine.

Friendship plays a significant role in identity negotiation for international students because they can learn about different cultures and at the same time boost their confidence as they learn to adapt and communicate in the new environment (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). I found that national, cultural bonds and sharing the similar situation of living temporarily abroad are important in recreating 'family' and 'home' abroad. Familiarity makes sense of family-type connections between new friends and this "familiarity as a family" (Pazil, 2019) provides ontological security by making a new context feel more secure or homely. Moving to the UK transformed some of my co-national and other international students from strangers into friends and surprisingly into close ones in a short period. I found that the sense of belonging and connectedness as well understanding the struggle of living alone in the UK are the reasons why students believe that they need to help each other. I argue that co-national and Asian friends create a sense of belonging as they share common beliefs, values and social norms which can help them to cope with their diverse setting.

However, for me, language was the main difficulty that I faced when living in the UK, especially in the first year of my study. I am really grateful to have had two British supervisors who were really supportive and understood my language ability. Some of my Malaysian friends suggested I contact and seek help from the student advisor to improve my language and writing skills. However, I got negative feedback from one of them. The student advisor threw my writing on the floor and said, "Your writing is rubbish" and also said that I would never pass my confirmation panel with my language ability. I suffered from academic and emotional distress because of those comments. I never shared this problem with my supervisors or anyone in the university because I was not sure what their response would be to this situation. I did not want to have personal problems with anyone since I needed their academic support to finish my study. One of my Asian friends told me that her co-national friend faced psychological distress and decided to quit her study because of the same student advisor's comments. I told my friend about what had happened to me, and we discussed the reasons that international students like us have been treated like that. Did this incident happen because the student advisor was racist and xenophobic or were there cultural and language barriers that led to miscommunication?

Living abroad, albeit temporarily for the purposes of study, poses challenges for international students who must survive alone in unfamiliar surroundings at a relatively young age. Diverse views of the new cultural environment, social isolation, experiences of discrimination, religious identity and protective factors in adjusting to the unfamiliar country (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013) are five main challenges experienced by international students. International students seek social support especially from their university in order to negotiate our identity and to adjust in a new environment. Based on my reflection mentioned earlier, it is important for universities to choose student advisors or counsellors who can really understand academic, language and other difficulties faced by both local and international students. Living temporarily abroad is challenging and it is difficult for international students to negotiate their identity in a new cultural environment. Social support is needed for us to achieve the sense of belonging and to face the cultural change and acculturative stress while living abroad.

CONCLUSION

Twenty years after 9/11, Islamophobia continues to haunt Muslims and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated xenophobia and bigotry toward Asians especially in Western countries. Although verbal attacks are not physical and do not leave physical traces such as bruises, they can be as harmful as physical attacks, and can negatively impact the victim's emotional and mental health. However, the episodes of discernment, exposure and questioning faced by international students shifted their cultural identities but also strengthened their Muslim identity. When I returned from my overseas experience, it was with fresh eyes on my identity, my culture, academic life, and my religion. As an academician, I try to instill the awareness about intersectional identities and the importance of being respectful towards other differences in terms of culture, religious beliefs, gender, and sexuality. It is not easy to express and negotiate your identity in a situation of living temporarily abroad, especially in a country with different cultural and religious practices. Moreover, I believe that women, especially those with intersectional identities continue to face a myriad of challenges in the UK. Compounding oppression which includes racism and Islamophobia in addition to sexism, affects ethnic minority women and these different types of prejudice negatively impact women with multiple disadvantaged social identities. As an insider researcher, I identify crucial areas for improvement in the Western universities, such as the necessity for trained staffs who deal with overseas students matters. Universities must prioritize cultivating a multicultural environment as their campuses become increasingly varied. Higher education authorities in Western countries should also take this matter more seriously. Therefore, this article is very important to raise awareness about intentional or inadvertent Islamophobia as well as xenophobia towards Asians. Everyone has the right to practice their religion and the right not to be discriminated against or harassed because of their religion, gender, or perceptions about their nationality or ethnicity.

Implications

This study provides several insights for supporting Muslim and Asian international students especially those who are living in the Western countries. Colleges and universities particularly in Western countries should recognize the importance of welcoming international students and appreciating their differences. Intercultural competence and cultural awareness should be instilled by providing training for staff who will work closely with the international students. Moreover, universities should organize the activities that are welcoming not only for Muslim students, but also for all international students. To flourish the interaction between local and international students, campus authorities can try to arrange program that promotes cross-cultural activities and inclusive to all students from different cultural and religious background. This initiative will not only provide opportunities for local and international students to engage and interact with each other, but also encourage cross-cultural sensitivity among students, reduce discrimination and prejudice, and increase respect for foreign cultural values and customs. International students also should be informed about available resources, such as counselling and professional advice, to help them adjust to their new life in the UK. Most of the Islamophobic or xenophobic victim do not file a report for momentary and 'low-level' hostility incidents. They need counselling and support, but many students are not aware of many services available to them.

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NUR HAFEEZA AHMAD PAZIL, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and Sociology at School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her major research interests lie in the area of friendship and personal relationships, social media, gender practices and international students. Email: hafeezapazil@usm.my