DIVERSIFYING NARRATIVES OF THE UMMAH:

BLACK MUSLIM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

by

HUMAMA KHAN

(Under the Direction of Rosemary Phelps)

ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the United States. Black Muslim Women are an overlooked subgroup within the Muslim community. To create a foundation for present and future research, it is important to gain knowledge of the unique experiences of Black Muslim women. The research questions for this study were:

1) What are the common gendered experiences of Black Muslim women specific to the Black Muslim Diasporic community?
2) What are the common experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion of Black Muslim women in the larger Muslim community in the U.S.?
3) What are the common experiences of Black Muslim women within the larger Non-Muslim U.S. society?

Qualitative interviews were conducted with twelve Black Muslim women residing in the U.S. exploring their experiences through a Black Feminist Thought framework.

Findings of the study indicate the following three conclusions. First, Black Muslim women within their Diasporic community share experiences of occupying a socialized place that

affords them less than equal positions in their homes and communities which engenders a sisterhood and acquisition of knowledge which empowers them. The second conclusion is that the women share the common experiences of isolation, otherness, and sexism within the larger Muslim community, while carrying an understanding of their marginality that affords them this tangential acceptance, mediated by unity in a shared faith and self-determination. The third conclusion is that Black Muslim women share the common experiences of isolation, hostility, and racism in their U.S. existence as Muslim women and find that these common experiences create a consciousness that cultivates an intersectional and humanitarian advocacy as an act of resistance. The findings identified through this study have implications for clinical practice and future research with Black Muslim women. In addition to recommendations for research and practice, continued efforts towards collaboration and cohesion for Muslim communities and the U.S. were proposed.

INDEX WORDS: Black Muslim Women, Gender, Racism, Islam

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father, Asra and Raziuddin Khan, who I am indebted to for their continuous sacrifices and unmatched love.

To my sister, Sidrah Khan, the holder of my narrative for whom I'm most grateful and the ultimate symbol of Sisterhood. To my brothers, Safi and Shajee Khan for their constant support and always keeping me laughing.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the United States. Black Muslim Women are an overlooked subgroup within the Muslim community. To create a foundation for present and future research, it is important to gain knowledge of the unique experiences of Black Muslim women. The research questions for this study were:

4) What are the common gendered experiences of Black Muslim women specific to the Black Muslim Diasporic community?
5) What are the common experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion of Black Muslim women in the larger Muslim community in the U.S.?
6) What are the common experiences of Black Muslim women within the larger Non-Muslim U.S. society?

Problem Statement

Muslims have been a thread in the history of America for centuries, contributing in significant and meaningful ways. Muslims can be identified in every sphere from law and medicine to the Olympics and Hollywood. Despite this community's notable presence in the United States, Muslims have continuously struggled to find acceptance in American society. They consistently have been vilified through slander and perpetuation of stereotypical images presented in the media, and through creating a "sensational and shocking" discourse of the Muslim Other (Powell, 2018, pg. 1). Furthermore, the media's influential, incomplete and

negative depiction of Muslims has an added oversight; overlooked amongst the make-up of diverse, rich ethnic backgrounds that constitute the Muslim community, are Black Muslims.

Black Muslims constitute a significant portion of Muslims in the U.S., some estimates indicating that Black Muslims are the largest group of Muslims in the U.S. (Wood, 2002). Black Muslim women, a core part of this community, hold multiple marginalized identities. The intersection of these identities at race, gender, and religion paints a complex picture which has not been examined in the literature. Though Muslims have had a turbulent past in the United States, a resurgence of discrimination, hate crimes, and Islamophobic rhetoric after 9/11 has emerged and been well documented (Powell, 2018). Considering the sociopolitical climate and potential compounds of stress, it is important for the field of Counseling Psychology to better understand the unique experiences of Black Muslim women to better address mental health concerns within this community. Additionally, it is important to understand Black Muslim women's experiences within their Muslim, Black, and U.S. communities given that each environment may bring unique, impactful factors. The lack of research leaves many gaps in the field's understanding of the intricate lives Black Muslim women lead, leaving clinicians and others to seek the narratives of these women, ensuring that this community is not further marginalized.

This community has laid down the foundation for success, with immigrants working hard to gain an education, and inspiring future generations to come. Muslims have contributed in every sphere from law and medicine to the Olympics and Hollywood, shifting the emphasis from all-White, male dominated spaces. The Muslim populace accounts for a significant portion of the population in America and is rapidly increasing due to "immigration, conversion, and high birth rates among Muslims," (Hamdan, 2007, p. 99). While Muslims have received increased

negative attention recently due to political events, they have had a noteworthy presence in the country. There are 1,200 mosques of which most were established starting in 1980 (Hamdan, 2007). Despite their positive and nuanced presence in America September 11, 2001 brought about a resurgence of racism and discrimination, though this anti-Muslim rhetoric has always been present. Muslims have become subjected to many prejudices and hardships, compounding the psychological distress that they may already be facing adapting to the majority culture. Muslims, regardless of ethnicity, have undergone "acts of vengeance from sectors of the American public in the form of hate crimes, defamatory speech, harassment, job discrimination and Islamophobia" (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2011, p. 1). Though one would logically conclude that this has spurred research in scientific communities, this is not the case. Bearing in mind the current sociopolitical climate, the rising numbers of the Muslim populace, and the current wave of cultural revolution, it is imperative that researchers and clinicians seek to understand the various experiences of Muslims in America to not further disenfranchise a marginalized community.

History of Black Muslims in America

Contextualizing information in a holistic framework permits a deeper understanding and constructing a foundation from a historical perspective of Black Muslims in the U.S. can lead this discourse. Often the conversation on Black Muslims begins with the establishment of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a sect of Islam established in the 1930s by Wallace Fard Muhummad emphasizing Black nationalism in the context of Islam (Wyche, 2004). This emphasis on NOI overshadows the fact that Black Muslims have been integrated into the fabric of the U.S. since at least the 1500s, contributing to the exploration of the North American continent (Smithsonian, 2019). The Western account of African slaves includes the concept that the majority "practiced

traditional African religions" and that Christianity was the first exposure to monotheism (McCloud, 1995, pg. 8). Though the exact numbers of African Muslims that were forced to the U.S. is unknown (Smithsonian, 2019) the locations in Africa where they were taken from were predominantly Muslim and had been exposed to Islam for six to seven hundred years by that point in time (McCloud, 1995). Black Muslims who were enslaved, utilized their faith and language as a form of resistance and support (Smithsonian, 2019). Artifacts and narratives recount the experiences of *Mahometans*, how Muslims were referred to in that time, depicting their presence during the time of slavery; Black Muslims facing the east to pray, using Arabic to communicate in secret, and making use of skills to increase physical movement within White spaces (Smithsonian, 2019). Although this wave of Islam did not last long due to forced conversions and suppression of Black people and their religion, influences can still be noted today such as the "Ring Shout" in Gullah-Geechee practices and the circular patterned movements that mirror the religious ritual of making rounds of the Kaaba in Mecca (Smithsonian, 2019).

The Nation of Islam and Black nationalism movements are given credit for the revitalization of Islam for the Black community in America (Karim, 2005). During the 1930s, W.D. Fard made it his mission to empower Black communities, "he came in the heart of the African American ghetto, peddling fabric, and he would tell African Americans, 'You were not always what you are now. You came from the Muslim land. Your people were Muslim," (Karim, 2005, pg. 499). The Nation of Islam was established, and the Civil Rights movement served as a catalyst for more conversions. Malcom X and Warith Deen Mohammed, notable proponents of the NOI, were well respected and had a large following of Muslims. When they left the NOI and began practicing *Sunni* Islam (orthodox Islam), due to differences on ideology, around 200,000

individuals followed suit leading to a mass exodus (Espositio, 2010). Black Muslims have now evolved as a community, most having departed from NOI and ascribing to *Sunni* teachings of Islam, hailing over 2 million members (Karim, 2005). NOI, Black nationalism and the Civil Rights Movement fueled the resistance to the Anglo-Protestant domination, to reconstruct and reassert the presence of Black Muslims in America.

Adding to the Black Muslim community are immigrants from Africa and other principalities that identify as Black. Estimating the number of Muslims that have entered the country is difficult, since the census does not inquire about religious identity. The Pew Research Center (2017) states that about 9% of U.S. Muslim adults are from sub-Saharan Africa, and that 25% are from North Africa, though not all identify as Black. One statistic indicates that there are over 2.1 million African immigrants in the States but does not identify Muslims amongst that population (Pew Research Center, 2017). African Muslims, amongst other immigrants, face challenges due to entering racialized climates that they are not accustomed to in their country of origin (Mohamed, 2017). The specific experiences of African Muslim women add to the dialogue of Black Muslim women, establishing a unique and imperative narrative. Understanding the stories of Black Muslim women as a diverse community with complex and involved narratives will help to broaden the fields concept of Muslims in the U.S.

Presence of Black Muslims in America

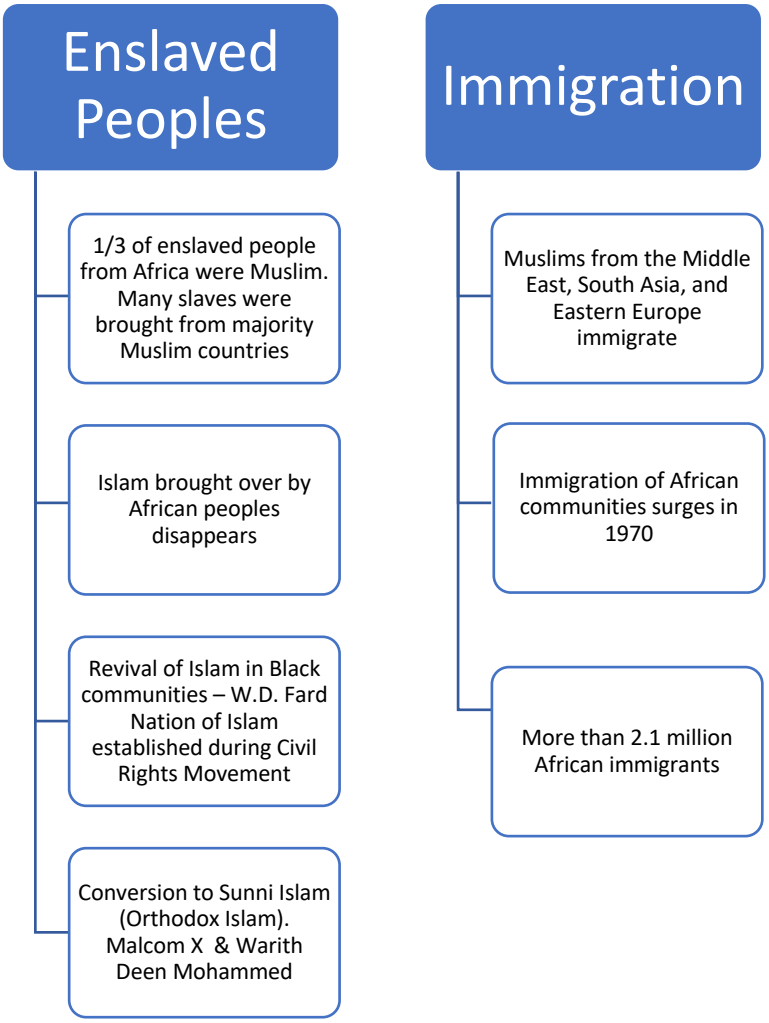

Figure 1.

Intersecting Identities and Mental Health

One framework that is useful when understanding the complexities of human experience and identities is the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality posits that a "single-axis framework maintained a focus on either race or sex and subsequently failed to consider how marginalized women are vulnerable to both grounds of discrimination" (Crenshaw, 1990, pg. 12)

Crenshaw discussed how a view that is not multimodal can remove the experiences of Black women when having a conversation on gender discrimination.

Considering the level of environmental and historical stressors that Black Americans have had to endure it is imperative to consider their roles as Muslims in America, specifically those of Black Muslim women. Black women face unique issues due to both historical and current environmental factors which create multiple stressors leading to elevated levels of depression (Ashley, 2014). When compared to White women who seek mental health counseling, Black women do so at lower levels though there are higher rates of depression (Howell, 2008). Due to mental health issues being perceived as a weakness, Black women may hide their distress, though there can be the development of somatic issues which may speak to the increased levels and manifestation of depression in this community (Baker, Buchanan, & Corson 2008).

Not only is it important to not have a homogenous conceptualization of Muslim women, but to acknowledge the breadth of various identities that come together to tell a unique story. Being Muslim, Black, or a woman can be expressed and experienced differently for one who may hold any of those identities, and it is incumbent to recognize these diverse, and complex experiences. Individuals who have these identities may experience prejudice within their Black communities since Christianity is more prevalent. Furthermore, the majority U.S. culture may discriminate on religion, gender, or ethnicity at the least. Lastly, it is important to mention the racism that exists within the Muslim community, particularly towards Black Muslims.

Women in Islam

Moving into a more nuanced conversation on women in Islam, it is important to challenge the stereotypes that prevail about Muslim women around the world. Often Muslim

women are viewed through the eyes of the West as those who need saving, this idea perpetuated repeatedly through news reports conducted after 9/11 (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This biased view is often tailored around *hijab*, an often-misunderstood concept. In the literal sense, *hijab* means barrier or partition in the Arabic language though in Islam it has a broader conceptualization, which is engaging in modest attire and way of being for both men and women. Women will often wear a veil of some sort to practice hijab, though there are many ways that Muslim women define hijab which may or may not include a veil. The veil or head-covering is often seen as a subjugation of women across the globe, though that is one of many narratives. Hijab is often a source of agency for women, choosing to cover-up in male-dominated spaces and having an outward symbol of their devotion to Islam. Hijab is among many other debated topics in Islam which includes women's education and careers, a discussion which is strife with patriarchal interpretation, colonization, and Western interpretation.

Black Muslim women who wear the hijab can encounter being "othered" even though most have been here for generations if not centuries. The growing but limited literature on the narratives of Muslim women around the world are often focused on Asian women and North African women due to the large Muslim population in these areas. Though America has joined this conversation, Black Muslim women who substantiate much of the Muslim community in this country are often overlooked. Muslim women are not homogenous, and each part of the narrative adds to the richness of the Muslim women community, emphasizing the significance for the inclusion of Black voices.

Erasure of Blackness

No conversation on Black Muslims in America is ever complete without the mention of the Civil Rights Movement and the Nation of Islam. Names such as Martin Luther King Jr. and

Rosa Parks may come to mind, as those who fought for equal treatment in the U.S. for the Black community, though the movement was influential and impactful for all. The Nation of Islam (NOI), created as a resistance to White suppression and influences, was part of this movement and served as a revival of Black Muslims in America (Gibson, 2012). Important figures such as Malcom X, Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and Muhammad Ali are noted for their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and affiliation with NOI; though some left the NOI, all remained committed to Islam.

Black Muslims constitute about one-third of Muslims in America (Pew Research Center, 2017), though they are often overlooked in both the Muslim community and American society. Islamophobia has taken root through the media, often painting Muslims as evil, violent people from the Middle East (Sheehi, 2011). Stereotypical images are rampant, such as fully-veiled women and brown men with beards usually in developing-countries surrounded by weapons harmful to all Muslims. Islam is the second largest religion in the world, comprised of a multitude of ethnicities and nationalities ranging from the far East corner of the world to the West (Pew Research Center, 2017). Regardless of this fact images of and conversations about Muslims often do not include Black Muslims. Within the Muslim community, Black voices are also overlooked due to racism and colorism. Additionally, subsects of Muslims sometimes believe that they have more of a link to Islam since it was founded in historical Saudi Arabia. In the face of discriminatory conversations, it is important to note that Muslim ideology does not promote racism. One paramount example is when Prophet Muhammad stated:

"There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black, nor is the black superior over the white -- except by piety,"

- *(Hadith Al-Bukhari, Hadith 1623, 1626, 6361)*

Although there is no place for racism in Islam, often culture, history and power dynamics have ensured its existence. Making clear the importance of Black Muslims in the history and development of Islam and also in the present make-up of America, their inclusion provides a more holistic and just overview of Muslims in the U.S., ensuring that all narratives are heard and incorporated.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to establish a foundation to begin filling the gap about the daily lived experiences of Black Muslim American Women. When searching for literature on Black Muslim American Women the results yielded very little. Hence it is important to bear in mind that this community is continuously marginalized through multiple facets. Although it cannot yet be known for sure, there may be compounding effects of race and religion that need to be evaluated especially in today's political climate with the Black Lives Matter movement and the anti-Muslim rhetoric that is prevalent in America. This study seeks to examine challenges and resiliencies among Black Muslim women who hold simultaneous identities that create unique and complex experiences. Including these narratives in conversations of Muslims, Blacks, and the U.S. can provide groundwork in Counseling Psychology for clinicians and researchers to better serve this community, allowing for a more nuanced and holistic discourse. Counseling Psychology is a specific branch of psychology focused on issues of social justice and diversity along with examining the strengths of individuals. This study intends to uphold the values of Counseling Psychology by adding to the discussion of multiply marginalized communities. Additionally, highlighting these cultural contexts and resilient experiences can help all people engage in promoting discourse that can be helpful in overcoming challenges. With the rise of discrimination and prejudice post-9/11, the ever-present racism towards the Black community in

a Trump era, and establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement, current experiences may include time-relevant details. Moving forward, findings from this study can help elucidate the gaps in care and knowledge of Black Muslim women for researchers, clinicians, Muslims as a whole and the U.S.

Definition of Key Terms

Muslim: A follower of Islam, an Abrahamic religion brought to the people by Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).

Black: Belonging to an ethnic group that descends from African heritage i.e. Black Americans, African Americans, Africans, Caribbean

Discrimination: The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex (Oxford, 2017).

Depression: Symptomology that includes a lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities, significant weight loss or gain, insomnia or excessive sleeping, lack of energy, inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. (APA, 2017)

Resilience: is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences (APA, 2017).

Sunni Islam: the largest denomination of Islam, often referred to as the Orthodox practice of Islam (Denny, 2010).

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the United States. Black Muslim Women are an overlooked subgroup within the Muslim community. To create a foundation for present and future research, it is important to gain knowledge of the unique experiences of Black Muslim women. The research questions for this study were:

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When reviewing the literature on Black Muslim Women there are limited articles and studies. Although there are some studies on identity there are very few that focus on the mental health of Black Muslim women. Additionally, there are many studies that have looked at the mental health and identity of Black women as a whole, but not at the intersect of gender, religion, and race. The paucity of work that has been done in this area highlights the need for more contributions to the development of understanding the lived experiences of Black Muslim women.

This chapter sought to highlight relevant literature to provide context for this study on the lives of Black Muslim women. Discourse will include historical context of Black Muslims in America, Black women's mental health, and resiliencies in the Black community.

Muslim Women in a Global Sphere

Women's participation and roles in organized religion contextualizes the experiences of Black Muslim women. Women make up significant portions of all major organized religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. There exists 1.9 billion Muslims making up 24.4% of the world's population, Christians account for 2.2 billion people, Hindus 1.1 billion and Buddhists 0.5 billion. Muslims partake in societies in Middle East-North Africa (MENA), Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia-Oceania, Europe and the Americas. The ten countries with the largest Muslim populations include: Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Algeria, and Iraq. When considering this information it may appear that Muslims are relegated to the Eastern hemisphere. This is not true as Muslims are a prevalent part of many countries including the U.S., Canada, Australia, and many European countries. Muslims often live as minorities, though still significant, "China has more Muslims than Syria and Russia has more Muslims than Jordan and Libya combined," (Pew Research Center, 2017). Viewing Muslims through a lens of plurality is essential to understanding the breadth of individuality.

There are more than half a billion Muslim women in the world (Offenhauer, 2015). It is hard to know exactly how many Muslim women there are in various Muslim countries. Though the sex ratio is typically equal (some skew towards males) across the human species various circumstances can cause this to be imbalanced, and this is particularly relevant to some countries which have a significant Muslim community such as Pakistan, India, and China. Men outnumber

women in these countries due to the natural skew, cultural preferences for males, selective abortions and immigration. China and India have other majority religions, and it is not clear how the Muslim community is impacted by these various reasons. Gender trends in many Muslim countries tend to follow the general sex ratio though in some large Muslim countries the ratio is skewed even more toward males. Since this discourse revolves around gendered concepts it is important to know that the numbers may have an impact on gender inequality and representation.

Across the world Muslim women belong to various socioeconomic and education levels, once again signaling the plurality of these communities. As difficult as it is to capture the experience of Muslim women in all of these countries, general trends have been reported which can begin to shape the larger picture of the Muslim world. Though historically in the minority, Muslim women comprise the majority of university students. The percentage of university students that are women increased from a reported 2% in 1970 to 33% (Zahidi, 2018). In 2008, 30% of women in Saudi Arabia attended university which has now increased to 50%. One survey found that amongst 18 countries, women comprised 40% of STEM students – half of these countries are Muslim majority. For comparison in Saudi Arabia 38% of students in STEM are women, Iran 34%, in the UK 36% are women, while in the US it is 30%. Working women now represent 30% of the 450 million women in Muslim-majority economies. This contemporary picture has a historical model, Khadija – a wealthy businesswoman and merchant who hired the Prophet Muhmmad for trading missions, and went on to become the first convert to Islam and married him.

Feminist Critique of Organized Religions

The discussion around gender in organized religion is nuanced with similarities and one unified sentiment, “men are the representative, ritual and legal center” (Joy & Neumaier-

Dargyay, 1995, pg. 3). Some feminist critics have wondered if the texts are acceptable while others are attempting to understand the works outside of misogynistic contexts. Jewish feminists have noted that "the world of traditional religion is hopelessly patriarchal and irredeemable," (Joy & Neumaier-Dargyay, 1995, pg. 5). Other feminists have stated that it is not enough to give women equal rights or access to positions but that women must be given a place in the abovementioned center. Meanwhile, some feminists have described space for contemporary Judaism which moves towards innovation while still keeping respect for a past full of meaning.

Similar to the feminist critique on Judaism, Islam has two primary camps of thought. One in which there are re-readings of Islamic texts through a feminist lens, which holds that Islam and women's rights are not at odds with one another. The blame for inequality lies with the patriarchal cultures and geopolitical events which cause maintenance of women's disprivileged status. The other camp, deemed as "orientalist sensationalism," focuses on the oppressive nature of Islam towards women and supports that women should not be considered through a religious lens at all; they should be seen solely through a secular and human rights view. Majority of the current literature rejects the notion that Islam is the causal factor in the status of Muslim women worldwide.

Muslim Women Concerns

Narratives surrounding Muslim women have been monolithic, focusing on the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), which only accounts for 20% of the world's Muslims. Often these conversations overlook smaller communities of Muslim women in Western countries or focus on MENA and South Asia, excluding Eastern Asia and post-soviet Muslim nations. Other foci in the literature have been on "interesting nations"0 which include countries in crisis or of some other interest to the West such as Palestine, Iran, and Sudan. Scholars have begun to fill in gaps but

considering the extensive communities the Muslim umbrella covers there are many areas which require more research and understanding.

Available research indicates that Muslim women face issues such as gender-based discrimination and inequalities due to the patriarchal cultures of Muslim-majority countries. Some concerns are related to "male domination, early marriage, restrictive codes of female behavior, the linkage of family honor with female virtue, and occasionally polygamous family structure" along with sex-segregation and veiling. These issues are not inherently Islamic in nature and affect other women of various religions in the same culture. The impact of within-culture differences and socioeconomic factors, creates the necessity of a multi-layered approach to understanding issues that Muslim women face. An example of this is access to abortion, though abortion itself is a contentious subject, upper-class women have access to safe abortions when it is deemed obligatory. These issues have not been specified as race-specific and are issues that Black Muslims also face, though the aforementioned research is speaking to Muslims in the MENA region.

Veiling is a topic which inevitably arises in the discussion of Muslim women. Western media has depicted women veiling their faces and bodies in the context of "fundamentalist Muslim" groups such as Al-Qaeda forcing women to cover their bodies, or it was interpreted as women's support of an endorsement of "fundamentalist" interpretations of Islam. In East Africa, Zanzibar was considered one of these countries that Al-Qaeda had a growing occupancy in and that the women there were being forced to cover. It was found that this was not the case at all, that these women enjoyed their coverings as a symbol of fashion with various sequin and embroideries – and that it had little to do with Osama bin Laden or Al-Qaeda (Renne, 2013, pg. 102). For the 95% Muslim population of Senegal, hijab has been noted as a sign of reformation

and protest against "economic crisis, immense unemployment, out-of-control political corruption," (Renne, 2013, pg. 56). Across cultures it is seen as a symbol of faith, one way in which women can express themselves daily.

Experiences of Black Muslim Women

Most of the literature on Black women does not include the discussion of a potential Muslim identity. Yielding miniscule results, the literature review on the experiences of Black Muslim women was scant, though the limited studies still offered valuable information. One qualitative study conducted by Byng (1998) on the lives of twenty Black Muslim women in a large city in the northeast, examined the impact of discrimination. This study conveyed the confusions and frustrations that discrimination can impose on people's lives. Many women in the study wondered if they were discriminated against due to the color of their skin, or their religious identity which was symbolized by the hijab, "I just try to answer the question within myself. What is it now? Is it because I'm black or is it because I'm Muslim," (Byng, 1998, pg. 477). Stories described in this study speak to the intersection of identities, and the unique experiences that result at the apex. Byng (1998) provided a narrative of empowerment throughout her study, explicitly countering a previous study by Feagin and Sikes (1994), which seemed to utilize a more deficit-focused lens. Political and societal contexts are influential in the creation of experiences, making it worth noting that this study was completed pre-9/11.

Another study considered the position of Somali Muslims in Canada and their "triple consciousness" associated with their identities as being Black Muslim women (Mohamed, 2017). Their narratives bring an important component to the conversation on these topics, as they have immigrated from Africa. This study included immigrants along with generations that have been in America for centuries. This research on Somali Muslim women's experiences spoke to the

specific challenge that comes with immigrating to a racialized country, "It was a shock becoming Black, politically Black. We are homogenous in a lot of ways, in our existence in East Africa. And we entered into a politicized body" (Mohamed, 2017, pg. 21). This sudden change in societal implications presents a different negotiation of identity, one that was not in effect in their nation of origin. The participant goes on to add, "In Canada you become Black before anyone cares about your heritage, before you enter that space and with it anti-Black racism carries an additive trauma for our community" (Mohamed, 2017, pg. 21). This present study sought to understand the challenges and experiences of immigrant and native Black Muslim communities who have been in the U.S., adding significant variations to create a holistic narrative.

Other studies have discussed more specific topics in relation to the Black Muslim Woman experience, such as hip-hop and body image (McMurray 2008; Odoms-Young, 2008). They offer perspectives on resistance, community, and strength of Black Muslim women while exploring important topics pertaining to everyday life.

Muslim and Black Women's Mental Health

Strides made by the Black community in the face of the many challenges faced in a racialized country is exemplary. This speaks to the strength of the community. Despite the successes and accomplishments of the Black community, health disparities still exist (Jones et al., 2007), along with the multitude of systemic barriers that have been consistently present. Numerous studies have explored and established racial discrimination as a link to major depression and other negative mental health outcomes (Brown, et al., 2003; Neighbors & Jackson, 1996; McNeilly et al., 1996; Pak, Dion & Dion, 1991; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). This includes concepts such as "internalized racial oppression, discrimination, and stigma, which in turn lead to low self-esteem and racial self-hatred," (Jones et al., 2007, pg. 209).

Discussion on the mental health of Black women is more inclusive when considering the heterogenous composition of the community. The intersection of race, gender, socioeconomic status is influential in the presentation of mental health (Kohn & Hudson, 2002). When controlled for socioeconomic status, Black women experience depression at increased levels when compared with Black men (Kohn & Hudson, 2002). Poverty was noted in multiple studies as a predictor of mental health issues (Kohn & Hudson, 2002), although in recognizing the diversity of Black women it would be important to note that mental health has the potential to look different for professional Black women, on whom limited discourse exists.

One limitation of the available literature is that it groups cultures and genders together without addressing the various experiences of individuals within the community. Although gaps exist, researchers have written about general problems which have been noted in the community. Ahmed and Reddy (2007) discuss the experiences of Indigenous Muslims, which includes Black, Latin and European communities who have existed in the U.S. In outlining mental health issues related to these communities "family tension", "guilt", and "identity" were listed. Furthermore, a reexamination of identity in reference to the individual's new identity as a Muslim, if they converted, can occur which may lead to compensatory identification with the culture of whomever introduced them to Islam (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007). This specific article provided a significant overview of mental health challenges in the Muslim community, but it lacked deeper and more nuanced experiences and perspectives that may or may not be specific to the Black Muslim community.

Resiliency and Resistance

Many of the studies reviewed have highlighted the strength of the Black community in the face of adversity and systemic oppression. Many immigrant communities are thrown into a

racialized world upon entering the U.S., while many Black Muslim women have been navigating the sociopolitical landscape of America for decades. Learning about the resiliencies and negotiation of race, gender, and sex from Black Muslim women can be essential for immigrant Muslim communities in recognizing protective factors as they navigate similar challenges.

Communal connection and engagement among Muslim women were reported by Black Muslim women as a space of support, stating that they were "drawn to this community of women" (Wyche, 2004, pg. 326). This follows suit with studies discussing how participation in a religious group "provides social supports in the form of social networks" which are comprised of "loyalty, reciprocity and solidarity" (Robinson-Brown & Gary, 1985, pg. 42). In institutional spaces, women are often in male-dominated spaces; religious organizations allow for women to find autonomy, mobility and solidarity by taking on leadership roles (Warner, 1993). Along with religious solidarity, Black communities find resilience through familial support (Black & Lobo, 2008).

Religion creates a structure and way of life to deal with life events such as marriage, birth, and death (Wyche, 2004). Through religion, Muslim women are able to engage with their spirituality while engaging in traditional rites of Islam creating spaces of comfort and alleviation of stress (Wyche, 2004). With the majority culture of the U.S. being White and Christian, Islam and masjids are a source of pride and development for Muslim women, which foster their identities in an environment where little attention is paid to Muslims. Furthermore, engaging in Black nationalistic narratives can be empowering and a proactive stand against perceived discrimination that occurs in the U.S. (Karim, 2008).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the United States. Black Muslim Women are an overlooked subgroup within the Muslim community. To create a foundation for present and future research, it is important to gain knowledge of the unique experiences of Black Muslim women. The research questions for this study were:

1) What are the common gendered experiences of Black Muslim women specific to the Black Muslim Diasporic community?
2) What are the common experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion of Black Muslim women in the larger Muslim community in the U.S.?
3) What are the common experiences of Black Muslim women within the larger Non-Muslim U.S. society?

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design. This method is particularly useful in developing understanding of how people create and attribute meaning (Patton, 2014). Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for studies which seek to ascertain detailed and specific knowledge. The purpose of the present study was to gain a rich understanding of the lived experiences of Black Muslim women. There is limited knowledge on the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the U.S, qualitative research methodology will allow the researcher to discover unanticipated nuances and phenomenon (Maxwell, 2012).

Napoles-Springer and Stewart (2006) discuss qualitative inquiry as a research approach that is considerate of minority groups, allowing space for factors ignored by Eurocentric and monocultural methods. Specifically, Vaz (1997) stated that qualitative methodology is suited to research with Black women, whose experiences have been historically silenced and overlooked. In the design of this study, the identities of the participants were kept at the forefront of each stage of development to ensure an ethical, responsible, and respectful approach. From the choice in methodology to the completion of interviews, every effort was made to not perpetuate the cycle of disenfranchisement.

In sum, the use of a qualitative research design will be valuable in the exploration of the experiences of Black Muslim women. Throughout history and present-day the voices and challenges faced by Black women have been trivialized and consistently overlooked (Collins, 2000). Strategic construction of a qualitative study can provide a supportive conduit to the voices of the participants in this study. As mentioned above, social construction of meaning highlights the variety of lived realities, making this design appropriate for the varied experiences at the intersection of significant identities.

Narrative Inquiry Elements

Stories are an "artisan form of communication," (Kim 2015, pg. 9). Broadening people's conception of the world, stories exist, "beyond the here and now, reflecting power relationships and domination" (Kim, 2015, pg. 9). Humans recount their own lives and the lives of others, expressing the self through stories composed of narratives (MacIntyre, 2007). Entering the sphere of research from the lens of narrative inquiry permits voices to construct a complex and autonomous depiction of women's lives. Johnson-Bailey (2001) indicates that in studies with Black women, narrative inquiry can be especially pragmatic. Gaining a nuanced understanding

of Black Muslim women's lives through narrative research will be inclusive of the intersecting identities and experiences, while creating a more holistic portrayal. This method of inquiry facilitates the understanding of the various factors and contexts that form Black women's stories, for which significant attentiveness is required of the analysis (Etter-Lewis, 1991). Moreover, narrative inquiry provides the space for counter-narratives to be discovered, one that adds dimensionality to the conceptualization of the Muslim community. Narrative inquiry elements allowed the voices of the participants to challenge the dominant discourse placed upon them by multiple structures of power through sharing their life stories.

Theoretical Framework

Choosing a theoretical framework that engages with the experiences of Black women while capturing their complex experiences can be difficult – especially when adding religious identities. Theories that have been traditionally employed often overlook the distinct components of the lives of Black women, which are different from narratives of other women and Black men (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) provides a perspective that empowers rather than oppresses the lives and experiences of Black women (Collins, 2003). In historic and present research Black women have faced consequences due to the oppressive interpretations of White males which in turn continuously veiled the matrix of domination; this theory emphasizes "the importance of intersecting oppressions" (Collins, 2003, pg. 251). As a critical social theory, Black Feminist Theory posits that it was formed by Black women to clarify the position of Black women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Due to the intersection of oppressions outlined in the review of literature, Black feminist theory critically engages with the androcentrism and Eurocentrism present in society in which the participants reside.

Black Feminist Thought is based on distinctive tenants, the first of which is the necessity of BFT's existence as an activist response which will be required so long as intersectional oppressions exists to resist injustices and empower Black women (Collins, 2003). Second, though Black women experience common sets of challenges the experiences of Black women are varied which creates a collective knowledge base. Third, Black women's historical and present experiences with oppression foster self-definition, which in turn promote activism. Fourth, Black women's experiences qualify them to be Black women intellectuals, and their standpoint may not be appreciated by others, calling for an examination of their social locations. Fifth, that Black Feminist Thought needs to be dynamic to exist as a social justice endeavor, especially since social-contexts continue to evolve. Sixth and last, Black women's concerns are intertwined to a larger struggle for "human dignity, empowerment, and social justice," (Collins, 1990. pg. 41).

Consistent with the goals of Black Feminist Thought, narrative inquiry complements this theoretical stance, placing high value on lived experiences which are taken as credible and respected within the Black community, "even more so than statistics" (Gwaltney 1980, pg. 7). The integration of narrative inquiry with Black Feminist Theory parallels the esteem that valued ideologies of knowledge hold in the Black community. The collective lived experiences of Black women provide not only knowledge but wisdom, because "knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinates" (Collins, 2003, pg. 257).

Participant Selection

The sampling technique used for this study was purposeful sampling. Sampling approaches are aspects that delineate qualitative and quantitative research in which qualitative researchers often rely on purposeful sampling, and quantitative researchers focus on samples that

are larger and selected at random (Patton, 2014). Purposeful sampling is defined as "strategically selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated" (Patton, 2014, pg. 265). In order to answer the research questions for this study and about this particular community, gathering information-rich data was useful.

Inclusion criteria outlined that participants self-identify as a Black Muslim woman from the United States, over eighteen years of age. Due to the large community of Muslims around the world that may identify as a Black Muslim woman, it was helpful to seek the experiences unique to the United States to capture particular experiences in navigating this specific society.

Sample Size

Determining the sample size in qualitative studies can be unclear, since it is difficult to define (Fusch & Ness, 2015). One agreed upon concept in defining the sample size for qualitative designs is data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2016). Deciding if a study has reached data saturation is determined by whether "there is enough information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained and when further coding is no longer feasible (O'Reily & Parker, 2013; Walker, 2012; Guest et a., 2006, pg. 16). This present study aimed to reach data saturation based upon the aforementioned rules, in addition to collecting rich (quality) and thick (quantity) data (Dibley, 2011) through interviews.

Site Selection & Recruitment

Participants were recruited through various social media platforms which included Facebook and Instagram, allowing access to different online groups. Determining social media as

the site of recruitment was intentional, as it provided a path to engaging with participants across the nation that I would not have been able to reach otherwise. Furthermore it allowed me to reach a more robust group of Muslim women, adding potential for nuanced and diverse experiences. Being a Muslim woman-of-color myself, I was able to post the flyer (See Appendix A) in multiple groups that I am a member of. Participants expressed interest via email, after which they were provided the consent form (See Appendix B) and demographic questionnaire (See Appendix C).

Twelve participants were recruited and twelve interviews were conducted with women who identified as Black, Muslim, and American. One participant identified her country of origin as The Gambia, while the rest identified with the United States. Their ages ranged from 23-68. All participants identified as Sunni Muslim except four, two of whom identified with no sect, one Sufi, and one a follower of 'Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad' (PBUH). Seven of the participants were not born into a family that identify as Muslim. Six of the participants had children, ranging from one child to ten children.

Data Collection

Ideally the methods chosen for a study will work together with the theoretical framework and design, meeting the objectives in a conducive manner. Both Black Feminist Thought and narrative inquiry hold in esteem interviewing as a method to gather complex and rich data (Collins, 2012; Kim, 2015). Primarily, researchers utilize interviewing to go beyond observation and gain an insider's perspective (Patton, 2015). Perhaps Oakley (1981, pg. 41) says it best "Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed door there is a world of secrets". This quote resonates with this study;

when not focused on generalizing yet expanding knowledge, I believe that interviewing can provide unique stories, adding meaningful narratives.

Semi-structured Interviews and the Interview Process

Semi-structured interviews are not meant to direct the participant, yet only provide a framework for the "guided conversation" (Richards & Morse, pg. 194). The nature of the interview questions provided guidance to participants in sharing their experiences as Black Muslim women, though not confining their stories with strict structure. Equally, semi-structured and open-ended questions foster exploration and phenomenon to arise from within participant.

Naryan and George (2012) suggest that to be an effective interviewer the focus is not only on asking the proper questions, but in the engaged way the questions are asked. Providing a sympathetic hear and reserving questions can provide the context for participants to shape their own stories. Similarly, the process of interviewing may call for the interviewer to respond to questions from the interviewee, engaging in a reciprocal interchange. Reciprocity will be beneficial in balancing the power dynamic between the researcher and participant since "power-based dynamics inherent in any and all research and have suggested that power is something to not only be aware of, but to negotiate in the research process," (Merriam, S.B., 2001, pg.78). Interviewing will directly support the foundational theory and design of the study, while gathering data that will contribute to the final thematic answers. The interview guide used for this study is attached in Appendix D.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom, a HIPPA compliant, video-conferencing platform to accommodate participants and their location across the States. Each interview varied in length from one and a half hours to two hours. Though participants received and signed the IRB-approved informed consent form in advance, I started the interview with a review of

informed consent and ensured that all of the participants' questions were answered. After gaining verbal consent, I used a digital audio recorder on my iPhone along with a screen recording of the session.

Artifacts

Each participant was asked to bring an artifact to the interview that captured their experience as a Black Muslim woman. Artifacts are known to add an essential dimension and context to the research and can be viewed as a reflection of identities in an individual's actual life (Roswell, 2011). Speaking about the meaning that artifacts hold creates a path to narratives that may not otherwise be accessible (Hurdley, 2006). Participants discussed meaningful items, pictures, and quotes and described the importance the artifacts had in their life stories.

Fieldnotes

Best practices in response to the topic of faulty observation include recording decisions made by the researcher, along with reflecting upon each interview; for this an analysis journal can be used (Patton, 2014). Descriptive notes are used to capture observations from engaged involvement, however, it is important to remember that fieldnotes are speaking to an "observed reality" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, pg. 9). Further, since fieldnotes are written by one interpreter of the events, there is no one way to write them. Throughout the process of creating this study, and specifically before, during, and after each interview I took note of perceived participant reactions along with my own. One navy blue notebook and digital Word document were used to document reflections and thoughts which numbered thirty and ten pages, respectively. Included in my journals were not only thoughts around the interview, but concepts that I needed to research further, this included details related to artifacts. Creating memos allowed me to remember the context of the interviews along with behavioral observations for

consideration of future analysis. Throughout the examination of the transcribed interviews, I would memo and reflect on thoughts which would assist in the comparative method that was adopted for this research, capturing how the study and themes evolved.

Data Management

Rigorous and organized data management is vital to the credibility of the study and maintains the integrity of the data (Jeanfreu & Jack, 2010). All consent forms, demographic questionnaires, and other research related documents were labeled and organized in folders according to their subject matter, on a password protected computer. The audio files were named according to the date of the interview to protect participant identification, after which they were uploaded. After the interviews were transcribed using a webservice, Rev.com, they were renamed with pseudonyms picked by the participants; the aim being to be respectful in the choice of assigning pseudonyms with giving autonomy to the women in choosing how they would be addressed. Transcripts of all participants totaled 360 pages, which were double checked against the audio. Checking the accuracy of the interviews was necessary especially since participants and I used Arabic words and other uncommon references, which had to be corrected. Although I listened to each interview in total twice, I would often visit pieces of the taped interview to capture any context that I might have missed. I read the interviews at least ten times each, and again referenced parts of the interviews at least 10-15 times more as I went through the process of analysis. This allowed me to become familiar with the interviews, and most importantly the participants. All interviews were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis and research software which allows users to import sources and code data – it is known to be a high quality data management and analysis software.

Data Analysis: Constant Comparative Method

Aims for the study included an analytical method which would be inductive in nature in order to capture the emerging themes from the narratives of the participants. Constant comparative analysis is a method which is typically associated with Grounded Theory, though is known to be used outside of that framework (O'Connor et al., 2008). Constant comparison method ensures the systematic comparison of all data to "all other data in the data set," (O'Connor et al., 2008, pg. 41). Boeije (2002) recommended using constant comparison in the analysis of interviews, for which she created a process to apply constant comparative method. The steps which apply to the current study included the first step of comparison being within a single interview followed by all of the interviews being compared to one another in the dataset (Boeije, 2002).

Phase one of the analysis included reading through the first interview, while memoing on the transcript and in my analysis journal. The first review of the interview was to get a general sense of what was being spoken about and capturing the essence of the interview. As discussed by Pidgeon and Henwood (2004) constantly comparing incidences, details, along with potential categories and themes leads the process of analysis, I was continuously engaged in comparing various experiences and topics my participants brought up. During my second review of the transcript, I started coding chunks of the interview comparing quotes and elements within the first interview to itself. Coding is a form of content analysis in which categorizing and labeling the text is an effective way to scan data for relevant themes (Patton, 2014). Finishing with the first interview, I read through the next three interviews, engaging in the same process of comparison while developing codes. Only this time I was comparing and contrasting each new interview to the previous ones, even going back to the initial ones as I developed codes. This

process of constant comparison was applied to the other eight interviews as well, as I began to develop categories form the codes. Initially there were three hundred codes, this is due to some mistakes in double or triple coding the same concept in Atlas.ti, along with spelling errors. When they were collapsed resulted in seventy-five codes along with twenty subcodes, which then fed into categories. Integration of categories with the memos and fieldnotes I had captured in my analysis journal led to the development of themes. Ensuring that the developed categories and themes were in fact mentioned by the majority of participants, I created tables with portions of data from the interviews underneath each theme. Lastly, my analysis journal was especially helpful in creating categories and themes across interviews, assisting me in remembering what appeared to be relevant and important.

Assessing Data Quality

Rigor in qualitative research is assessed on its credibility, referring specifically to the dependability, trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and plausibility of the study (Tracy, 2010). Plausibility refers to a study's ability to demonstrate that the purported reality is a realistic one, or that it at least appears to be in the realm of reality (Tracy, 2010). Another aspect of quality research is transparency, in which the researcher is open and honest about what occurred during the research process (Tracy, 2010). Transparency feeds into another marker of quality research which is sincerity, where the researcher approaches the study with a sense of genuineness and vulnerability (Tracy, 2010). An example of transparency and sincerity combined would be the acknowledgement of those who helped on the research project such as colleagues or student assistants.

Descriptive Validity

Internal and external validity are not preferred terms for many qualitative researchers since it can be reminiscent of quantitative research, hence other terms have been constructed (Nyashi, et al., 2019). Maxwell (1992) outlined descriptive validity as a method of building credibility in which the researcher does not exaggerate or change the accounts events or facts. That is to say that the researcher should ensure that they are recounting what was actually heard or seen, this is specifically mentioned in the logging of fieldnotes and interviews. Since the researcher's description is the basis for which qualitative research is founded on, it is imperative to report with as much accuracy as possible.

Interpretative Validity & Triangulation

Having no counterpart in the quantitative realm, interpretative validity is unique to qualitative research (Maxwell, 1992). This validity typology is focused on the meaning that is constructed, specifically referring to the participant's perspective. Though the focus is on the meaning the participant is expressing, it is the researcher who interprets and constructs the meanings. As Lincoln (1990) states there is no singular version of reality, making it the responsibility of the researcher to interpret responsibly and respectfully, the experiences and meanings shared by participants. This method of credibility is especially important to this study due to being oriented by Black Feminist Thought, where Black women's voices have been dominated by others, such as Eurocentric masculinist thought, it is essential that the researcher not perpetuate this by imposing themselves on the women's experiences (Collins, 1989).

One method used to assist in maintaining data quality was triangulation, which was founded in the realist paradigms intending to decrease bias in the data (Tracy, 2010). Triangulation is broadly defined as using various sources for data, multiple theoretical frames, different methods of collection and even multiple researchers (Denzin, 1978). When these numerous points of data converge, it enhances the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 1978). Data source triangulation uses diverse methods in data collection, which can be achieved in many ways (Decrop, 1999). Interviews, literature, objects, observation and fieldnotes are a few of the sources which can be included in data triangulation (Decrop, 1999). In sum, triangulation allows for more credible and richer interpretations, guarding against biases elicited from a single data source or investigator bias (Henderson, 1991).

Researcher Methods of Establishing Validity and Reliability

In completing this study, I employed various techniques to demonstrate reliability and validity of the research process. First, in order to establish descriptive validity I listened to the interviews multiple times, while comparing transcripts and fieldnotes to ensure that I was working with factual accounts from the interviews. Threats to interpretative validity were mitigated in the interview process by summarizing and requesting clarification from the participants on any point that was ambiguous. Further, as I am a tool in the analysis of this study, I drafted a reflexivity statement outlining my subjectivities, positionality, potential biases and the humility with which I approach this study. Journaling throughout the various phases of the study, buffered against imposing on the data by being reflective at each stage. Another way to bolster the credibility of the study was to triangulate the data which included audio and video-taped interviews, analysis of artifacts, fieldnotes, and a breadth of literature to corroborate assertions and findings. Lastly, an expert in the field of qualitative and women's studies engaged in a

process of feedback in the conception and analysis of the study, offering critical advice which was incorporated.

Reflexivity Statement

There will always be biases in research, and researchers should acknowledge that from the beginning of the study and name their subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988). A reflexivity statement is created to acknowledge the experiences and potential biases of the researcher, allowing others to make judgments about the study's credibility (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011). Reflexivity engages in answering ethical questions along with being a means to increase the rigor of qualitative research (Hertz, 1997; Guillemin & Gilam, 2004). Specifically when interacting with marginalized peoples, Bhopal (2010) posited that though demographics and personal factors (gender, race, ethnicity, education) are important in the positioning of the researcher during interviews, mitigation of power and expectations can occur through a continual process of self-reflection and appreciation for differences, creating a beneficial environment where for both women researchers and participants.

I, myself, am a Pakistani Muslim American woman and have multiple ties to the community which will be included in this study. I am an active Muslim who participates in community events and engages directly with Black Muslim American women. I am an insider along with being an outsider in this situation; I am Muslim, American, a woman and person of color but I am not Black and that is important to consider. We may have shared identities and themes in our experiences, however there are differences in our narratives at the intersect.

Though I always found a sense of community with my Black friends and colleagues, I developed even closer ties with the Black community after 9/11 attacks on the U.S.. The attacks

were tied to Middle Eastern countries, and in turn attached to the idea of a "fundamentalist Islam", which in ways translated into an aesthetic of anyone who looked like they were Muslim according to the media. Hate crimes against Muslims and a hazardous rhetoric developed quickly, impacting many Muslims across the country. Alienated due to the tragic events of one day, I found that there were only few who could relate to what I was experiencing. Growing up in the South during the late 90s, there were not many Muslims or Pakistanis – in fact I was the only Muslim or Pakistani female in a school of 3000 students. Through all levels of education and environments, I found support and a sense of home in the Black community.

When 9/11 occurred I was in the 7th grade and lived in a small South Carolina city. I remember the day all too well, along with the time that came after. I have personally faced multiple counts of prejudice and discrimination along with my family and community members, though I will not recount these at this time. Nevertheless, I have processed these experiences and have made meaning of events; this allowed for better overall understanding of the problems the Muslim community is facing. I have had a passion for psychology and social justice for quite some time, but it is when I realized that research was lacking on the mental health and experiences of one of the most marginalized communities, I decided to focus on the present research topic. It is true that this topic is close to my being, but my intention is not necessarily to prove anything, but to gain knowledge and wisdom through story. I will endeavor to keep all biases and outside influences at a distance to ensure a complete effort at keeping the information as impartial as possible, while still honoring the insight of my experience.

Through the research process, I embodied a feminist and caring researcher stance (Kim, 2016) by constantly examining the ethical factors of my study in order to best respect the dignity of the women in my study while upholding my own integrity. Keeping in mind my

insider/outsider status and levels of perceived power due to my researcher and South Asian American Muslim status I constantly interrogated my positionality throughout the interview process and while creating the study. Processing interviews, events, and personal identity in the analysis journal assisted in keeping myself accountable as to my reasons for conducting this study, and reflecting on my interactions with the participants. During the interviews, I remained fully engaged while listening and responding thoughtfully, expressing respect for each woman through appropriate verbal/non-verbal cues, such as nodding my head, making eye-contact, and being able to summarize what they mentioned to indicated deep listening. Most importantly, and since the topic of this study is a personal one, I endeavored to create a comfortable space by answering sharing some relevant personal information along with giving participants the autonomy direct the conversation to topics that they wished to speak about as well. With humility, my aim was that this study would be mutually beneficial to the field, the *Ummah*, and to the women who are contributing their experiences and voices to support multiple communities.

Chapter Summary

Included in this chapter is my detailed outline capturing the methodological processes which I engaged in for this qualitative inquiry about the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the U.S. I provided a description of the qualitative research methods, which includes narrative inquiry components, then detailed the theoretical framework, data collection, and method of analysis. Also imperative to qualitative research are validity and reliability, which I discussed in detail how I engaged in a reflective and intentional process to protect the integrity of the study. In conclusion, the chapter closes with a discussion of my subjectivity, reflexivity,

insider/outsider status in order to communicate openness and examine my own positionality in relation to the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the United States. Black Muslim Women are an overlooked subgroup within the Muslim community. To create a foundation for present and future research, it is important to gain knowledge of the unique experiences of Black Muslim women. The research questions for this study were:

1) What are the common gendered experiences of Black Muslim women specific to the Black Muslim Diasporic community?
2) What are the common experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion of Black Muslim women in the larger Muslim community in the U.S.?
3) What are the common experiences of Black Muslim women within the larger Non-Muslim U.S. society?

This chapter presents the findings from the current research study through a lens using Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 1990). The data were analyzed using the constant comparative analysis framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I will begin the chapter with an exploration of themes constructed across the data: interviews, fieldnotes, and artifacts. The data used to support the themes will be taken from the interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

This study included twelve participants, who resided in various regions all over the U.S. Iman, currently serving as a liaison in a different country, converted to Islam at the age of 17 due to dreams and visions. She was born in New York to parents from the Caribbean. Also from New

York, Sam whose family migrated from the South and includes Creole and Gullah Geechee cultures. She is both the only holder of a doctorate degree and only Sufi Muslim in this study. Next, Amara's family's migration was in the opposite direction of Sam's in that they moved from the north to the south though she is currently living abroad with her husband and children. Amara, 44, was born to parents who converted in the 70s after studying Islam who decided to move to the rural south with other Muslims where they raised their children together. Although she was raised in a Christian household, Amani, 34, converted a year ago with her husband during Eid. Along with working as a nurse, Amani is a proud mother to one with another baby on the way. Similarly, Latifah is also a mother to five children and Sunni Muslim who converted twenty-nine years ago, at the age of 17. The majority of Latifah's family was brought to the southern states through the Atlantic Slave trade from West Africa after which most migrated North. She currently works as a teacher and is a grandmother to her oldest daughter's two children. Khadijah, a 32-year-old, second-generation Muslim was born to parents who converted in the 70s and 80s and identify as Sunni. Khadijah and her family reside in a northern metropolitan city as she pursues her graduate degree. One of the eldest women, Wajeedah, 68, grew up in a predominantly White, German community in a midwestern state and converted to Sunni Islam at the age of 24 during her undergraduate years at an HBCU institution. Though her mother was Christian, Wajeedah describes her as the source of inspiration in her spirituality. Presently she lives in the south and is a retired reading therapist and mother of ten children. One of the youngest participants at age 23, Muna, was born in The Gambia in a Muslim family and immigrated to the states at a young age. Completing her studies as a full-time student, Muna also works as a research assistant. Adopted at birth by her parents who are Black and multi-ethnic, Aqeela was born in a northern metropolitan city to her biological parents who are second-

generation Jamaican immigrants. Aqeela's parents were Muslim and moved them to a middle eastern country for eight years to learn Arabic and more about the Muslim faith. Aqeela, 23, returned to the states for high school and is currently living in a Mid-Atlantic city where she works on projects with international clients. Nima, the oldest woman, converted at the age of 30 on her way to Europe where Islam came to her for a third time, this last time being a more orthodox version that resonated with her. Born and raised primarily in the South, Nima still resides there with her husband, retired. Princess, 30, lives in the Midwest where her daughter will come to visit when it is her turn to have custody. Originally, Princess was born and raised in the south, she decided to move in order to pursue her doctorate. Although Princess was born into a family that was Muslim for generations, she became less religious when she moved away from her extended family with her mom, who also was not practicing. Although she has always identified as Muslim, Princess reconnected with religious practice during her time in undergrad where she began fasting for Ramadan. Last, the other youngest participant, aged 23, Marian was born to a Muslim father and Christian mother, who later got divorced after which Marian's mother took over her spiritual and religious education. Marian converted to Islam at the age of 22 when she began fasting and connecting spiritually with the religion. She was born and raised in a southern state, where she currently resides and works as a research coordinator. The chart that follows is a demographic display of the participants.

Participant demographic profiles.

Participant	Age	Sect	Born into Muslim Family	Age of Conversion	Children	Marital Status
Iman	-	Sunni	No	17	-	Single
Sam	43	Sufi	No	20	-	Single
Amara	44	-	Yes	-	10	Married
Amani	34	-	No	33	2	Married
Latifah	47	Sunni	No	17	5	Divorced
Khadijah	32	Sunni	Yes	-	-	Single
Wajeedah	68	Sunni	No	24	10	Divorced
Muna	23	Sunni	Yes	-	-	Single
Aqeela	29	Sunni	Yes	-	-	Single
Nima	-	-	No	30	-	Married
Princess	30	Sunni	Yes	-	1	Single
Marian	23	Sunni	No	22	-	Single

Table 1

There were seven themes that emerged through the analysis of the twelve interviews. The first of these, *Islam as a Unifying Culture* was the most robust finding and occurred across all interviews. Second, *Understanding the Strength of Muslim Sisterhood*, was easily detected as the women recounted their interactions with Muslim sisters in their lives and communities. Similarly, *Finding My Place as a Woman in Islam* was present in the most of the women's

stories and was not limited to one context. While *Experiencing Otherness* was found in the majority of narratives, it was not as present as *Incorporating Black History and Culture into Muslim Identity.* Prominent in all of the narratives, *Conceptualizing Islam as a Positive Force* became evident as the women described their affirmative relationship with Islam. Lastly, *Claiming Agency and Authenticity as a Black Muslim Woman* was communicated throughout the narratives, although ever-present, capturing the essence of the theme was relatively complex when compared to the others.

Thematic Data Display

I. Islam as a Unifying Culture

II. Understanding the Strength of Muslim Sisterhood

III. Finding My Place as a Woman in Islam

IV. Experiencing Otherness

V. Incorporating Black History and Culture into Muslim Identity

VI. Conceptualizing Islam as a Positive Force

VII. Claiming Agency and Authenticity as a Black Muslim Woman

Artifacts: In Her Words

By way of understanding the participants, the women were asked to offer artifacts that were meaningful and that symbolized their experience as Black Muslim women. Most of the women showed their artifacts during the interview while describing what it meant while others sent a digital copy later. Artifacts ranged from pictures, religious prayers, jewelry and one participant even shared a poem that she had written. Each person spoke to the significance of the artifact in their life and how it was representative of their experience.

Sam

Logo Sticker for Comic-Con Group

I focus on Muslims in fandom. And it's comics artists, it's cosplayers, game developers, gamers, authors, illustrators. I try to get a good mix. And find out fandom is everywhere. So we have really good conversations on my panels that focus on different ways that Muslims engage with pop culture, are creating content, and are consuming content. And that has been very intersectional, being able to have different Muslims from different backgrounds, different orientations, gender identities, all of that on the panel of Muslims. That's huge.

I gave a talk in Algiers for their comic con in October, September, late September. The first week in October, and the U.S. Embassy invited me out to give a talk on Muslim and fandom, and fandom, Comicon is huge in Algeria. This is my pride and joy because they're the Algerian flag colors, and I wanted a sticker for when I was going to Algiers. Then I said I'm going to keep this across the board. These are the colors. And here's the subversion. Red, black, green, and yellow are the black color. See. It's still Black, even when you don't know it's Black. But red, black and green, those are the Black national colors in a flag. So I said, *"Look at that. This is my little subversion right here."*

Bismillah Art

It's from Istanbul. I haven't been, but the artist, we became friends on Instagram, and it's a pottery shop, and so they made them. I said, I wanted a Bismillah. And so they shipped it all the way from Istanbul. He is such a lovely person. I think his name is Fahad. He knew that I'm the club advisor for the XX Student Association. And even just recently, he messaged me saying, "If your students need anything, I will ship it them.

They can pay me later." I've gotten all kinds of gifts, but they do vases and tiles, jars, beautiful stuff. But this Bismillah, is actually, like that's my pride and joy.

Amani

T-shirt with Black Muslim Woman in turban-styled hijab

I have this pink shirt and it's of a Black lady and she's wearing a turban hijab... Not turban, it's turban style, but she's covered up so it's like hijab, and it just says Black. I got told very quickly that turban is not hijab, because I wore it and then I didn't have anything on my neck, which I didn't know, new Muslim, chill out. I was just trying to find something that works for me. I think this fall, because turtlenecks will be comfortable to wear in the fall, I probably will be wearing more of a turban and then having the turtle neck, so that's technically hijab. During the regular months, I usually do... Just call it wrapping, but I have noticed I've gotten really into YouTube tutorials, so I've wrapping it in all these funny, fancy, chic ways. I'm a pretty chic hijabi. I'm kind of sticking to my own identity. That's what I want, to shine as a Black Muslim. I still want my identity to shine and I'm just so against politically, cultural peripheries that I'll wear an abaya if it's convenient for me, if I don't have anything to wear and don't want to think about my clothes.

Latifah

Picture of Muslim Sister

The picture is me with some of those early sisters that I talked about, they really embraced me. My daughter had printed it out and given it to me in a frame as a gift. The more recent picture of myself and some sister-friends at an Eid prayer a couple of years

ago. The sisters in that photo befriended and helped me to learn more about the religion when I first entered Islam

Poem: Kentucky was…

Kentucky was ...a thief, snatching me from the warm bosom of my grandmother, the familiarity of my cousins, and friends

("You didn't tell me we were leaving!").

Kentucky's miles were saturated with my tears.

Kentucky was ... grass so green it almost looked blue.

Kentucky was ... rolling hills that hid multi-colored minerals, black gold, and secrets.

Kentucky lulled me to sleep with the sound of crickets and night sounds

(I couldn't fall asleep at first without the sound of cars).

Kentucky was... southern drawls that had me wondering what people meant when they asked, "How much do you lack?"

Kentucky was so country, Indianapolis felt like big city Chicago.

Kentucky didn't have a public bus or taxi cabs (bootlegged or Yellow).

Kentucky was... finally having my own room.

Kentucky was extremely lonely ("I hate stupid, country-old Kentucky!).

Kentucky roads invited me to ride my ten-speed bike for miles.

Kentucky springs made me wonder why we lived in a trailer during a tornado.

Kentucky was... the first time I became aware of the angels in constant watch over me.

Kentucky was...Cool Breeze, garden picked vegetables, canned pickles, Kentucky Derby, and Hopkinsville (aka Hoptown).

Kentucky was... huntin', fishin', and cannin'

(Have you ever tried deer barbecued in a steel drum?).

Kentucky was... Uncle Pete, Aint Louella, Cousins Jo Jo, and Shirley Ann.

Kentucky was... seeing my cousin beaten by her stepdad until her nose bled and feeling afraid. Kentucky was... more white people than I'd ever seen in my life.

Kentucky was... the first time I was called, "N-----".

Kentucky was... people who rode down the street on horses (just because).

Kentucky was... my cousin scaring the living daylights out of me with stories of the KKK.

Kentucky was... school, games, sleepovers, and roller skating.

Kentucky was... managing the girl's basketball team, but having to quit because my mother didn't have a car (Cool Breeze didn't have time for that.).

Kentucky was...wanting to play the flute, but not being able to because it was too expensive.

Kentucky was...limited opportunities (if you were poor).

Kentucky was...new friends, Reeboks, braces, and the most popular girl at school named Beth Ann Billingsly.

Kentucky was...being too shy to try out for cheer squad,

(Beth Ann was a braces-wearing, Reebok- sporting, head cheerleader).

Kentucky was...falling in love with books by Edgar Allen Poe and actually going to the skating rink to skate.

Kentucky was...the all white church with my friend Melissa, and the all black church with Tanya.

Kentucky was...twins Ralph and Rafe asking me, "How does it feel being the only black girl on the bus?"

Kentucky was...a boyfriend much too old for me.

Kentucky saw me arrive as a little girl and leave as a young woman, (I cried when I left, but didn't go back).

Biography of Malcolm X

It's the book that introduced me to Islam.

Khadijah

Picture of Warith Deen Mohammed

Okay, a little picture and Warith Deen Mohammed, and I think for me, it's just very symbolic of where my parents' journey started and just learning Islam and just how impactful he was to our community. And I guess just him, too, he was present, he was here, he did a lot of work. The concept of interfaith came from him in a lot of ways, especially in Chicago meeting with the Jewish communities, meeting with Catholic community, all different communities, Sufi, Seikh - community all together. So when I look at it, I'm like, that's part of why I had a well-rounded experience and saw how he carried himself and being humble. So that's the start of the journey. Just one quick thing, there's a really, really good interview he had on 60 Minutes years ago. And that's another thing, he's been erased. He's been erased from a lot of things and I guess that kind of hurts me, too, because he's done so, so much. Meeting with the Pope, a lot of people don't know that. That happened. He's a black Muslim, you only think of Farrakhan and that's not... Yeah. It's not that way, it's this way. You don't see him in the history books and he should be, he should be there. Yes.

Wajeedah

Story of Ibrahim's Sacrifice

When Allah looked at prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him, he was very righteous, but there was something he could see in his heart and in his heart was Ishmael. And then he asked

him to sacrifice. Now, when prophet Ibrahim went to sacrifice, he was able to do it because in order for him to do it, Ibrahim came out of the heart. And the lesson is that our heart is only for Allah. It's not created for us to house anything from this duniya (world). That includes Allah's creation. So I always remember that. I always remember that because what's in your heart, this society distracts through the heart. This society misguides you through the heart. And if you only have Allah there, you'll stay on point. So that is what I remember. And that's what, to me has been one of the most inspirational lessons I've learned.

Muna

Picture of Research Recognition

I did research for my school and my school had a research wall, because you said like an artifact or something like that. So it's just me on the research wall, which is big because it's a Catholic Vincentian university that I went to, and the research is actually on racism in the Muslim community. Yeah. I can send you a picture of that, but it's not a quote, but it's just about my research. I think it was really meaningful because I got to check the religion almost, and it's not checking the religion, sorry, not checking the religion, but I got to actually critique the people that are a part of the religion. And it was research that was done right after the Muslim ban came out and we had had marches on campus and X, Y, and Z. And everyone was very like, "Oh my gosh, MSA, are you okay?" And then I get to write this really cool paper that people actually really enjoyed to the point where they put me on best undergraduate critical research on that wall, still at a Catholic university talking about racism when the university is very like, "Ooh." It was talking about biases in the inner Muslim community. And so it's pretty grounded in history talking about ... So I started off talking about how like, I think when you search a black

Muslim family or Muslim man, what images come up, you know? And then it's talking about Mansa Musa and all of that.

Aqeela

Hamsa Necklace

I brought this up because my mom used to wear this when I was super-young, and I ... Not stole, but, "Hey, I'm going to wear this," and she was like, "Fine." I've been wearing this for a couple years, and it's funny, because whenever people see it, I've had so many people from different backgrounds and different walks of life recognize what it is, and they'll be like, "Oh, in my culture, it's this. And in my culture, this is what it means. "They're like, "Oh, that's really cool. I've seen this symbol around," and blah-blah-blah. It just reminds me of how we all have shared experiences, and there's a common thread through all of us. And I just like that it's a lot of times been a conversation starter, and people notice it, and I can go on my backstory about it. It's something I hold dear and talk to myself.

Nima

Surah (49:13) The Dwellings

Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted

The biggest thing, and I don't know what Surah, in the Qur'an, because it's probably all of the Qur'an and, the Surah that would ... But the biggest thing for me, was getting to know Allah on the level, that he didn't hate me because of my color, because of my nose, because of my economic status. That is the biggest thing for me because that is true direction. When you grew up in a society where people think that because you are

minority, you're unattractive or ugly, or because of your skin color, because of the size of your nose, all because. You know, economically they are more empowered than you are. All these different kinds of things. It can be very debilitating. Very, very, very, very debilitating. Even though my family's makeup and complexion was of varying colors, very dark to very, very light. I've got people on my mother's side that have blue and green eyes. On my father's side, their skin is very dark, so my father was very dark. So that was a blessing from Allah to let me see all of this. Even though I didn't have the understanding about it, but to see all of this, but it's just good to know that Allah doesn't hate you, which is what society tries to make you think, coming up.

Princess

Quran

I think, because it's always been like my go to and this time around I put book markers in it because it's such a Holy thing for me. I didn't know I could do stuff. My mother has written in her Quran. I was like you write in your Quran? She's like yeah, I mean I still don't feel like you can. I have four Qurans, I know my mom gave me two. So my mom gave me two and then my grand uncle gave me one. That was my grandmother's I think. But this is my Qur'an. So I've had it since I was in kindergarten. So it says, like my name right here, year 1995. I usually travel with my Quran everywhere. I think I might've through a lot, I taped it. I recently glued that because like the binding was falling out. It's just really helped me with a lot of everything that I've gone through. I remember I had a dream when I was a kid and I just went downstairs and I opened up the Quran. I don't open it as much as I should I think now because you know how you have apps and stuff, so that kind of thing. My favorite Surah in the Quran is Yusuf, that's my favorite story in

the Quran. Because it does get me through adversity with my daughter right now, I've got less than two years. I feel like I'm doing time, this is the longest I've been separated from her. So like I've had her since May. So I have had a whole summer and it's like, she's going back Friday. And so I was like here we go, round two type thing. But this has definitely been what has gotten me through a lot and I did leave it when I moved. So after hurricane Katrina, I think I had left it at my grandma's house for a while. My grandma is like the keeper of everything, if I need something she has it. So I took my Quran around back, when I travel I would put this on like my dash and I would drive. Last year my car was broken into and I have another Quran. I left the doors unlocked, so like they took all my stuff. I had bags in the car and they left my card again. They left the important stuff. They just like took them to shopping day. I was so heartbroken. And so my mom was saying how my Quran in my car, she was saying how maybe that stopped them from doing further damage. She said, maybe they saw that and got scared what have you? Yeah. This is the Quran that I use. I get very rigid because I know they have other versions of the Quran. So I'm like, God, this is the only version that I know. I really do love my Quran, I really do. It's gotten me through a lot and just knowing that, trying to just, do the right thing.

Marian

Evil-Eye Bracelet

It's this bracelet that my friend gave me. So, the friend that I'm really close to from last year, I think it has... I don't know if it's an evil eye. I'm not really sure. She got it when she went to Jordan. Last year she got it for me. I just thought that it was kind of a nice little friendship bracelet. And I think that friendship and that sense of sisterhood between

me and her, would, I guess, represent my experience as a Muslim woman. I think that's probably my favorite part, is just all of the really incredible Muslim women I've gotten to meet and become friends within the last year, and hope to kind of continue that journey. And it's been the best part for me. I was actually wondering more about it [Evil-Eye]. I was like, "I think this is what this is", but I appreciate that she gave it to me.

Islam as a Unifying Culture

The first of these seven themes was the most robust of the findings: *Islam as a Unifying Culture*. Across all cases, the theme of unity was present as participants described a perspective of Islam that forms a context for community. Although the women presented with different backgrounds and paths to Islam, they voiced their beliefs about the togetherness that Islam stands for. Further, the women discussed how these messages apply not only to Muslims but other people who do not identify as Muslim.

All of the participants described how the principles of Islam connect Muslims regardless of race, gender, and ethnicity. For instance, Amara who currently lives abroad with her husband and children spoke about her experiences of practicing Islam amongst individuals with whom she did not share a common language or ethnic background with. She explained:

You know, it's interesting. I've traveled to a lot of countries. And the one thing that I think is the most beautiful thing is no matter what color we are, no matter what language we speak, we all pray the same. Beautiful. You go into the masjid, you don't know. Anyway, I remember the first time I was in Kosovo. In Kosovo, everybody's basically White. Okay. It's Eastern European blonde hair, blue eyes type situation here. Here I am, this little Black woman with this little nappy head baby. I go into the masjid, fly in the buttermilk

as they call it. And we're all praying the same exact way. We all pray. We all face the same direction. We all know the same exact moves, the same exact duas. We all pray the same. In terms of that, of the bigger ummah itself, that right there is, that's so beautiful. That's so beautiful.

Muslim prayers and scripture are required to be recited in Arabic, regardless of ethnicity or first language, Muslims memorize the prayers in Arabic through learning the alphabet or transliteration (Wekke, 2015). This creates a shared experience for all, especially when going to a mosque. Going further in describing how Islam has been a unifying force, Marian, one of the youngest participants, explicitly mentioned various dimensions of intersectionality that are included within the Muslim *ummah*. Marian is in the process of developing her faith, having converted within the past year; she has had positive and negative interactions with other Muslims on her journey. Ultimately though, Marian comments on the sense of faith shared by Muslims; she seemed to suggest that depth in shared aspects of faith contributes to oneness. Marian stated:

Every possible dimension of class race, gender, culture, region, language [is present]. It's cool because you're unified with people because of this really deep shared belief and these things that we supposedly all do together, separately. That's really cool.

Aqeela, a twenty-nine-year-old working in international development, has a professional connection to people of various ethnicities and backgrounds. Personally, Aqeela described how having Muslim friends from diverse backgrounds has shaped her hopes for the future of Muslim children. She explained that interacting with people from other cultures is not a threat, speaking to some people's fears of losing their identity amongst a community beholden of many backgrounds. Aqeela noted:

I really hope that looking at the fact that I have such a diverse set of friends, and I hope one day if we're still friends, our kids will interact with each other, and it's not like, "Oh, Ahmed, you can't play with so-and-so because he's Arab. You need to stay here with just your Black friends." ... really, just building those communities of inclusivity, but also, recognizing that you won't lose part of your heritage and culture and things that you hold on to, just because you sit down and share bread with someone that's different than you.

Aqeela's hope for shared understanding was also expressed in her experiences within the current sociopolitical climate under President Trump, which she described as divisive in addition to encountering related racist vitriol. Even in light of these negative instances, Aqeela highlighted that she has been appreciative of the non-Black Muslim and non-Muslim response to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been proactive and illuminates shared values regardless of different backgrounds.

Similarly, Amani expressed expectations for Muslims in the form of increased levels of community and inclusivity for people from different backgrounds. Amani converted to Islam a year ago and has felt separation that is not in line with Islam as she understands it. She conveyed:

As far as the Muslim community, I'd like to see more unity. It's sad that we segregate ourselves. It's human nature. It'd be nice if we just fought human nature and then made everybody feel welcomed to the table.

Amani was happy to report that her mosque started a welcome committee due to her personal experiences, to help those who have converted acclimate to the new community they are joining. She reported that she will be on the committee and create a more positive introduction for others joining the Muslim faith.

The message of unity was not confined to Muslims only, in fact, the women relayed that the message is for engagement with non-Muslims as well. Iman spoke to an Islamic verse that indicates an appreciation for all humans is important, especially when Muslims interact with others.

> *It doesn't matter if they're Muslim, they are people. There are so many verses that's like, "if you kill one person it's as if you kill all of humanity," humanity is important, not just the ummah.*

Likewise, Marian shared this view of people as more than just their background or identity, but as humans who are experiencing their own unique life events. During the interview, Marian spoke to pieces of her journey discussing moments of difficulty, sadness, and happiness in relation to religion and other aspects of her life. Perhaps these experiences have shaded her understanding and respect of what others may be facing, stating that individuals be seen with all their intricacies, regardless of being Muslim or not.

> *I think that we kind of all forget that every person that we interact with, every human, is having this really profound, deep journey with so many highs and lows and so much nuance and tragedies and chimes, it's really complex and beautiful. And we don't, especially when we don't know, someone comes from a different background from us, we see this very kind of shallow, view of those things.*

Speaking directly to her experience growing up in a culturally, religiously, and racially diverse city in the U.S., Sam discussed the multitude of multicultural people that she would encounter simply walking down the street ever since she was a child. She highlighted that even if people were not from the same religion, they would know and use the salutations that were applicable, for example non-Muslims saying Assalamualaikum.

I think the more in proximity you live with other people, the more likely it is that there is this culture of acceptance, tolerance, friendship, or camaraderie, as opposed to being like, we don't live near or associate with these other groups.

Wajeedah, an older Muslim woman from the South, dedicated to the tenants of her faith which includes believing that there is only one God described how she grew from interfaith experiences.

We don't have to like seeing Jesus as God, but knowing that these individuals share this and what the community does, it's a training ground for me to be more tolerant, to be more patient and to be more loving, and not judgmental, not thinking that people are doing things on purpose, people are doing the best they can.

Wajeedah is a member of an interfaith women's group, which she joined to develop more of an understanding and acceptance of other's beliefs. Although she is adamant in not compromising her religious values and viewpoints, she does believe in shared understanding amongst people with dissimilar views. Moreover, she states that difficult conversations about varied viewpoints are essential to bringing down systems of oppression.

Overall, the theme of *Islam as a Unifying Culture* featured acceptance and fellowship as important to the women's determination of what it means to be Muslim, in a cultural landscape in which there are many diverse identities. Living amongst such multicultural communities, these women were able to find in their religion messages in support of accepting various ideologies, even if they did not perceive the world in the same ways.

Understanding the Strength of Muslim Sisterhood

The second theme, Sisterhood, appeared as a theme across majority of the data. When the women were discussing their stories, it did not take long for it to become evident the role that

sisterhood has played in their lives. Although the women came to Islam at different ages with various upbringings, it was found that they were able to connect with other Muslims women. From navigating motherhood to managing daily stressors, these women spoke of the dependability of their Muslim sisters.

A strong example of the strength of Muslim sisterhood theme is Latifah, a mother of five, described how Muslim sisterhood was especially crucial at the crux of multiple transitions, that into motherhood and the start of her Muslim journey. Her experiences with the Muslim sisters she mentioned describe a level of mentorship as well. Latifah recalled:

> *May Allah reward her, she knocked at my door just to visit me, and she had a dish of food and she had The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding, this book, in her hand. And she got next to me on my couch and she showed me how. And I ended up breastfeeding five children just from that. But there were just those older, that crew of sisters, really like my aunties. They let me borrow books and they showed me how to do this or that. They just embraced me. They made me feel at home when I had lost friends for this religion. I couldn't really hang out with my cousins because they were going to the party and they were going to the club and I didn't have a friend group anymore. And so they became that for me.*

When Latifah discussed her relationship with these women in her voice and the words she chose it was clear that she was speaking about a support system that is more on the level of family than friends. The artifact that Latifah brought with her to the interview was a picture of the women, "who really embraced" her – it was gifted to her by her daughter who framed it, knowing how much they meant to Latifah. Latifah stated that in the future she would like to provide this same

level of mentorship for others, in hopes that she is able to help others in times of need. She characterized:

> *I found from my experience, that the women are quick to gather and quick to rally around and quick to support, especially from the African American Muslim community. The women are the ones who rally, who gather around…and that group is just a small group of Muslim women who really embraced me when I was new to Islam, who really made me feel like family, who invited me to their homes in Ramadan, who would go, when they were all going with their families camping, invited me camping, and things like this. Who made sure that I wasn't alone by myself, especially when I was a new Muslim, just got divorced, had a little baby, had to go back home to my mother, that kind of thing.*

Amara discussed similar levels of support growing up, from both family and friends. Amara grew up in a rural, southern town within a small Muslim community, about which she expressed that the girls had limitations put on them such as what activities they could partake in. In describing her childhood, Amara highlighted her mother's influence, who she noted was a force to reckon with in the community. She recalled:

> *When you live in a Muslim community, it's a lot different than just living by yourself in the city. So with the community saying, no, the girls can't do this and they shouldn't do this. My mother made sure that we had a lot of yeses in our life.*

She went on to describe her mother's role as not only supportive but protective as well. Amara stated that her mother took over the role of disciplinarian from their father, for her and her sisters, saying, "I do not want my daughters to grow up every feeling like it's okay to have a man put their hands on them,". When Amara described her determination to raise her girls with more freedoms, her mother's supportive and protective impact was clear. Another mother, Wajeedah,

was reminiscent of the way that she raised her daughters as well ensuring that they got an education so that they could support themselves and walk away from any situation that was not good for them.

Aqeela described the support that she receives from Muslim sisters as a source of validation. After moving to a large city and transitioning to a new job, Aqeela found it helpful to discuss challenges that she faced while attempting to build community. She disclosed about her transition:

> *I've also been introduced to an entire network of Black Muslim women. So, I'm actually part of this WhatsApp group, and it's supposed to be Black Women's Group. I don't use it regularly, but sometimes people will post questions, or be like, "Hey, we should do a meet-up." During Ramadan, we have a couple of Iftar sessions over Zoom. So, that was really great, because again, it's just more women who have had the same experiences that I've had, even though a majority of my life so far, I wasn't raised here in the States, but I feel like there's a lot of shared experiences, and it's really helpful, especially working in the workplace, and checking with other people, "Hey. How do you manage when people ask you XYZ? And how do you manage having all male colleagues? And how do you know ... "*

Though Aqeela does mention friendships with Muslim sisters who are not Black in a positive light, it became clear in her interview that having the added shared identity of being Black created an extra layer of nuanced perspective.

In addition to Muslim sisterhood being important, Marian's reflection on her artifact captures the essence of the friendships that were mentioned by the other women as well. She recalled:

I just thought that it was kind of a nice little friendship bracelet. And I think that friendship and that sense of sisterhood between me and her, would represent my experience as a Muslim woman. I think that's probably my favorite part, is just all of the really incredible Muslim women I've gotten to meet and become friends within the last year and hope to kind of continue that journey. And it's been the best part for me.

Marian, in addition to seven other participants, explained that the aforementioned friendships are something she wishes to continue to keep in her life as a positive force. Further, when defining their relationships, participants portrayed these inspirational women in such an empowered light which can be noted above when Marian uses the word "incredible." Sam echoed the impact of friends she had made at a women's leadership conference, saying that it "made a tremendous difference, in terms of being able to engage, interact with people and to build friendships that we didn't have." Sam has continued to keep in touch with some of these women, and not only spoke about the wonderful things they are doing but how critical it is to have such levels of support and allyship when dealing with anti-Black, Anti-Muslim, and Anti-Black Muslim rhetoric.

Generally, the second theme was represented by data from eight participants. It was shown that through key moments in life and daily challenges, these women were influenced and supported by other Muslim sisters. Across various topics of conversation, there was a connecting thread of comradery and community that comes with being a Muslim woman. Further, it was noted by some that having Black Muslim friends brought a more degreed understanding with the added identity of being Black.

Another point of interest was the way in which the women spoke about their Muslim sisters. The first aspect that came forward in the conversations, was the level of appreciation for the women who had supported them; this could be heard in the tone and words used when they

were speaking of them. Similarly, a level of respect and awe for the women who are in their lives or who have been there for them in times of difficulty came to the forefront.

Finding My Place as a Woman in Islam

The third theme described in eleven women's narratives was *Finding My Place as a Woman in Islam*. Close consideration of the participants' stories as Black Muslim women revealed gendered events contributed to their overall experiences. Being a woman in spaces where there are various rules founded either through culture or religion for each gender, created a certain environment that called for balance and negotiation of what it means to be a Muslim woman.

Iman, a young working woman, who converted to Islam when she was seventeen, discussed how even at the beginning of her path to Islam she had to respond to familial concerns of the religion being oppressive, which Iman labeled as an "American understating of Islam," in addition to thinking she was converting because of a guy. As Iman began to engage with the Muslim community, Iman recalled her experience with misogyny, a notion familiar to many of the women:

> *But it's the fact that I am constantly bumping against the wall and being like, "What is wrong?" And then I'm like, "Oh, it's misogyny." Like, "How do I get out of here?" A lot of my joys and pains of dealing with the Ummah come from my understanding as a woman.*

Though Iman primarily prefers to practice Islam in Black masjids, when it comes to women's issues she stated they are present in both Black Muslim and other Muslim communities.

Amara reported the same critique in her experience, bringing to the forefront the contrast between Islamic literature and the influence of culture:

And I think that the issue of misogyny that we're having, or this issue is that a lot of Muslims, we don't necessarily know Islam the way we should know Islam. So, if we studied Islam, we wouldn't have those issues. My husband, I mean, he knows I think this. I feel like he has a very strong opinion, but so do I…if I need to combat you, I'll just pick up the Quran and use Islam. Or he'll combat me, but we should never feel like, I think we should never feel in a lower position of a man based on what Allah has given us.

Amani, who was raised in a southern Christian household, described her experience in Islam as different than the one she grew up with, highlighting her identity as a woman:

I mean, I've been a woman in my whole life. I grew up in a very Christian household where you submit to your husband and things like that. Maybe as far as learning about the Prophet and really Islam is really like ahead of their time as far as women's rights. I went to see that really change because I think we allow culture to come before that as far as gender rights and really the basis of Islam is it's not bad. I mean, women had a right to property, they got divorced and things like that, which once again is centuries ahead of time.

Amani, a mother to one child with another on the way, described her relationship with her husband as one that is supportive. Amani and her husband both converted together during Eid; he was not initially as interested in Islam as Amani, but as his knowledge grew so did his interest.

Khadijah, who is working diligently on her master's degree, explained the importance of a holistic perspective of Islam when considering gender roles:

I think for me and my experiences, I think just the fact of the woman's place. What I mean by that, it comes off like you supposed to just be at home barefoot and pregnant, and that's not me. And I never felt lesser than. I get that in Islam there are roles in that way,

and I respect those roles, but I think that sometimes when it comes to Muslim men, they also forget that education for women is very important. That was very important for prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, right? That women get educated, educate women, and that's that support. They forget that line. They read everything and skip over it, right?

Aqeela went even further in describing various gender roles and the weight that is placed on women versus men. She described how a woman's appearance was valued by others:

Yeah. I think sometimes it's the beauty standards, "You need to be at this level for your faith. You need to be ... " Yeah, we all should be praying, but it's like, "You need to be this pious, and really soft-spoken, and all about Islam." The picture that's painted for us of the perfect, ideal Muslim woman. But for the Muslim man, it's like, "Oh, you're just alive and breathing, and he can sign on the marriage certificate, that's fine. And then just like, "Yeah, you're educated, but don't be too educated. It's great you have a job, but make sure it's a job you can quit, in case you need to take care of your kids." It's like, no, no, no, we can have stay-at-home dads. That's fine. That works, and I don't think that's un-Islamic. So, just those expectations, just making it an equal playing field, and I know equality doesn't necessarily mean we have the same things, but I just don't feel there's a level playing ground, when it comes to the expectations of Muslim women."

Wajeedah, one of the older women who is very engaged with the Muslim community, described the impact of culture on religious practice and women:

I know so many, right. I'm telling you, I know so many depressed Muslim sisters right here. Of course, I've reached and tried, but they didn't get an education. They can't walk away from their husbands. Their self-esteem is low. It's that old way, that is not Islamic.

For Wajeedah, the abusive situations that her Muslim sisters continue to stay in are both distressing and not in line with the values of the faith. She considers it important that women arm themselves with education and independence to be able to walk away from mistreatment.

Overall, the women in this discourse have gendered perspectives which have contributed to their experiences as Black Muslim women. For a majority of the women, it is their prescription that misogyny is not a facet of Islam but more related to the cultural impositions on Islamic scripture. Ultimately, the participants mentioned that not only was it a disservice to women but actually blasphemous to the practice of the religion. Though the women had dealt with misogynistic ideals through various interactions, they had determined for themselves how it entered their lives. Not only did they choose how it impacted their understanding of Islam, but how they wanted to balance and renegotiate gendered expectations that fit their own ideals on what it means to be a Muslim woman.

Experiencing Otherness

The fourth of the seven themes, Experiencing *Otherness*, was relevant to nine of the twelve narratives. In their engagement with various communities which encompasses religious prayers, religious holidays, work, and school the women were impacted by the treatment they received. Most participants' recollection of these experiences pertained to being Black and assumptions made at their expense about knowledge and when they came to know Islam. As they encountered various individuals throughout their daily lives, it is evident that these women must develop a way in which to counteract the messages that they receive.

Iman captures a view that is in ways unique to those who have converted and the emotions that are associated when in spaces where others have been Muslim for longer. In this

specific case of feeling othered, Iman describes the burdens of acquiring knowledge after converting and relevant feelings:

> *So I think I'm never really feeling, not never, but at times not really Muslim enough because people are more studied, people went to school their entire lives for this. That has been difficult at times. At times, it's paralyzing. At times, it's like, "I will never catch up. I will never know as much as someone who was born into this life knows because their parents randomly just drop gems while they're in the kitchen or just ..." There are things that people know that I had to read like two books to find out one sentence for what they're referencing. It's a lot of work and you can constantly feel invalidated in your study if you don't really know what people are talking about because they use all these Arabic words. I don't even know what you're talking about. Do you mean this word? I'm just like, "I don't know the Arabic word,".*

Here, Iman takes the position of rising to the occasion of learning and furthering her knowledge of Islam and yet sometimes it can seem discounted considering that those who have been born into the religion have learned the vast amount of information to give context to religious statements and understanding. Since Arabic is the original language of Islam, even non-Arab individuals (whether born into the religion or converted) learn many terms and prayers in Arabic. Muna, born into an immigrant family who has been Muslim for generations, had similar experiences to the rest of the women. Speaking about a childhood experience where her level of knowledge was questioned, Muna described:

> *I feel like that was probably the first experience where I felt I had to prove my Muslimness always. And it was kind of like a, Oh my Muna, do you understand? And it's like, yeah, actually I've been doing this for a few years. I actually really, really*

understand. And so that was actually funny because we had an award ceremony at the end and I ended up winning first place.

Muna also mentioned a joke between her and her friends, that captures her experience in many contexts, “My friends have this joke, and it's Black until proven Muslim”. This statement signals the level of impact that perceived Blackness can have on others interpretation of levels of religiosity and spirituality. While Muna brings an immigrant Muslim perspective, Latifah adds to the narrative about her non-immigrant status.

Latifah, a non-immigrant Muslim, spoke about a memory that she had entering a majority immigrant Muslim space:

Well, I remember my first time going to the really big Islamic Center, it's located in the suburbs, this is when I was married the first time. We were going out there for a wedding, it was almost an hour's drive from where we lived, but we were invited to a wedding. It was mostly immigrants there, and I remember a girl asking me, "Why are you here?" I'm like, "There's a wedding. We were invited."

Latifah also described being invited into spaces when she was married to her husband who was Moroccan. She acknowledged that she would be the only Black person at various events that they were invited to, and that she had attributed access due to her husband’s ethnicity.

In addition to race, in her reflection Princess acknowledged how gender played a role in others not seeing her as Muslim. As Princess is navigating converting back to Islam, this adds to other times her route back to Islam has been questioned. In this specific instance she’s talking about her experiences with non-Muslims perceiving her as not Muslim due to the fact that she does not practice and wear hijab. She justified her position:

I would say, but definitely having to just tell them just... I think a lot of education of just because I don't wear hijab or I'm not covered from head to toe doesn't mean that I'm not Muslim so to speak.

For Princess, her journey has included transitioning to more "modest" clothes, and her previous experiences have influenced her decision to not wear hijab, to avoid "being ostracized" and "being bullied".

Within this fourth theme, *Experiencing Otherness*, it was noted across participant recollections, there was identification of instances where they were alienated due to either race/ethnicity, gender, or religious identity by various individuals. When the women described events where they were othered, a shift in tone could be detected indicating a heavier topic. Latifah described her experience at the wedding as difficult to forget, and at the forefront of her mind when she would visit the Islamic center. Though participants mentioned specific events, they also acknowledged that these were not the only times that they had to encounter being othered. These incidences makeup a part of these women's holistic understanding of what it is to be a Black Muslim woman, building on other important aspects, such as Black history, as described next.

Incorporating Black History and Culture into Muslim Identity

The fifth theme, *Incorporating Black History and Culture into Muslim Identity* materialized in eleven of the twelve women's interviews. Throughout the conversations, Black history would manifest in response to different subject matter through the mention of prominent figures and historic events. Regardless of how and when it was mentioned, the women attributed the importance of Black history as part of their experience.

For example, Latifah mentions how she grew up with Black history being an important component of her childhood. However, the significance of Black history does not stop there; in fact, it is what introduced her to Islam. She recalled her childhood memories:

> *So I listened to a song. I'd hear something that made me curious and in the late eighties, early nineties, a lot of the music centered the black experience history. I'd hear something that talked about the African empire. I'd read Alex Haley's Roots. I might read a book by Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, just I would go and read a lot of books that centered black history and black experience. It became a hobby of mine at that time when I was in about 11th and 12th grade, in high school. And I bumped into Islam accidentally after reading the autobiography of Malcolm X.*

Sam noted that she was influenced by Black art along with significant historic pieces of the Black American experience that were integrated into her family and pertained to multiple facets of her identity development. She stated that:

> *So, my family is Black and I was the first generation born after Jim Crow. So, my family grew up with water fountains, they grew up with the signs saying where you could sit and where you could go to the bathroom. All of that. Even though they knew that they were multiethnic, they were like, "We're black, and so this was the deal."*

Sam's rich familial history is one which included a prominent Black Muslim figure, her voice beaming with pride and excitement as she recounted her family link to the Black Muslim movement. Sam continued:

> *Malcolm X used to preach outside my grandmother's store on Pseudonym Road. Really, it's just interesting seeing how much a lot of the ideology, is still embedded and woven into the way that my family associated, practiced.*

She went on to explain one of the ways that her multiethnic, multifaith family was influenced by Malcolm X is that they treat each other with love and respect, no matter their background.

It was significant that Malcolm X was brought up in many other conversations, in particular by Iman. She explained that acknowledgement of Black Muslims and their role in the development of Islam in the U.S. is lacking. Additionally, Iman makes a point that their prominence is not limited to the U.S.:

> *I think the recognition of black American Muslims and just black Muslims in general and how they have contributed to the understanding of Islam in the US, it's really important. People talk about Muhammad Ali all over the world, people talk about Malcolm X all over the world.*

Iman mentioned that not only are they not recognized, but others assume that Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X converted in jail. Though converting in jail is not in itself an insult, the assumption that all Black Muslims converted through the prison system is harmful and underscores the multitude of ways Black Americans come to Islam, which includes being born into the religion.

Adding to the list of Black Muslims who are important to the fabric of Islam, Khadijah mentioned Warith Deen Mohammed who was the leader of the mass exodus from Nation of Islam into a more orthodox practice of the religion. Participant chose to discuss a picture of Warith Deen Mohammed as an artifact that captures her experience as a Black Muslim woman.

Okay, a little picture of Warith Deen Mohammed, and I think for me, it's just very symbolic of where my parents' journey started and just learning Islam and just how impactful he

was to our community. And I guess just him, too, he was present, he was here, he did a lot of work.

Similar to Iman, Khadijah mentioned both how vital historic Black leaders are along with underscoring that how their contributions should be acknowledged more. The way in which Khadijah states, "he was present, he was here…" speaks to the invisibility of these figures as experienced by the women. Earlier in the discussion, Khadijah stated Warith Deen Mohammed played a big role in interfaith dialogue, bridging communities together to bring about more understanding and community.

Marian echoes Iman and Khadijah 's sentiments and adds to the discourse of the enslaved peoples who were Muslim. She stated:

> *I want to learn more about that history of Black Muslims throughout history. Because the majority of people were coming from West Africa and I think that's not something that people really talk about. It's like Islam has been in the U S for centuries and I think that also maybe something that could be changed. It's just talking about like American Muslim history. And because people don't really know that history and even, what I was saying, even me, had this perception that the majority of Muslims were Arab, which is not true. And I think a lot of people have these warped perceptions of what "Our" history is or what it means to be American Muslim. And I think having those dialogues of people really reflecting on those things and learning that history, I think would help people to move forward in a good way.*

Marian brings forward an idea of "Our" history and how it needs to be expanded, perhaps stating that a focus on only immigrant Muslim history in the Middle East is not adequate. In a similar voice, Aqeela spoke about her experiences with Black, majority Christian individuals who

questioned her Blackness, which she describes as a source of frustration. She describes further that some have not been able to reconcile her Muslim identity with her Black identity, surprised when she mentions listening to rap music and other pieces related to Black culture. She clarified this position,

> *And I think also, because a lot of times when I meet people who are not Muslim, but are Black, but won't recognize me as Black because I am Muslim, it's just really ... It's a trigger point for me, because I feel like my experiences as a Black person have been negated because they think that Islam trumps that, and I don't think that's true. They're intertwined with each other… Or me knowing about Black history. Knowing about the Civil Rights Movement. They're like, "Oh, you're really woke on things, especially being part of my history."*

Just as the other women voiced, Aqeela speaks to how integral knowledge about Black history is to her identity, adamant that being Black and Muslim both equally make up her experiences. She specifies that especially during the time of Black Lives Matter movement, there is no reason to create further divide by implying that people are more or less Black than others.

In summarizing this theme across participants' data, there was a consensus on the inclusion of Black history as an important aspect of heritage in these women's lives. It was further implied that Black historical figures and their relevant contributions to the development of Islam in America should be included in everyone's framework of the religion. Whether it was the mention of the Black Power movement, Civil Rights Movement, or the centuries old presence of Black Muslims in America – the point was raised that the women's lives were informed by these stories, events, and symbols.

Conceptualizing Islam as a Positive Force

The sixth theme that emerged, *Conceptualizing Islam as a Positive Force* emerged as the participants described their experiences as Black Muslim women, and that was the central role that Islam had in their lives. All of the women described explicitly the vital presence of their faith in the positive development of their identity.

Having non-Muslim friends that did not quite understand the place that Islam held in her life, Iman responded to their questioning by expressing her level of dedication, “Dang, you're ready to throw our friendship away over that." I was like, "Absolutely. I'll throw anyone away over it [Islam]. Keep trying me, I'll throw all y'all out,”. Iman ascribed a holistic and affirmative impact to Islam in molding her into who she is today, stating:

Islam is everything and anything that has improved my life. I would not be a diplomat if I were not Muslim. I would not have graduated if I wasn't Muslim. I wouldn't be the person where I am even to my mom or my friends or to myself. There's been a lot of self-love that has come from it. So it's all positive.

Also describing it as a positive force in her life, Khadijah speaks to the manner in which Islam has been helpful in multiple facets of her life, including attaining her educational goals. She enumerated the ways in which Islam has been impactful:

> *The first thing that comes to mind is the discipline. And I would have to say, not just from Ramadan, because of course, that's a lot of discipline. But in terms of praying five times a day, having that structure. That structure is why I feel like I've been so successful in school and my career because I know what it takes, the hard work, the discipline, everything. But also on the brighter side of things, not that that wasn't bright. But on the lighter... I guess my confidence too. I was always proud to say I'm Black and Muslim too.*

I always felt this sense of pride. Yes, I'm Black and Muslim. I think that that's been very important just knowing what comes with reading the Quran, everything in learning and understanding. It's been everything. It's a positive. I love it.

Not only does Khadijah express how Islam framed her habits, but inspired a self-assured view of herself with which she can confidently claim both her Muslim and Black identity. Amara echoed similar sentiments in Islam fostering confidence and stated, "I never really felt like I had to compromise," describing it as the other women had, as a source of affirmation.

Other participants mentioned their faith's supportive function in making meaning of difficult situations. Princess explains that her relationship with Allah is one where he accepts the plethora of emotions that she experiences, especially as someone who is navigating a divorce. Princess described her processing of the event:

Like I said, moving to spiritual, higher power, that kind of thing. I don't think Allah would be ... I don't think He would want me to be angry with Him. That thing, like, "He can take it if I yell, or scream, or shout. That's what He's there for." I think, for me, I don't want Him to think I'm not doing my due diligence, and also that He has helped me through everything I don't understand. Because, like I say, "Allah is the best of planners. For example, when my daughter, last year, when she went with her father, I couldn't do Ramadan because it was too much for me. I stopped. I was angry, because I'm just like, "Why would you allow this to happen?" Then I went through the stages of grief, or what have you. I like that model. Then it was finding acceptance of, "I don't understand what you're doing. I know you have bigger plans for me."

During the time of the interview, Princess mentioned that her daughter would be going to her father in a couple of days since it was summer's end. This was a difficult time and transition for

her, and in the navigation of her choices and emotions Princess turns to her faith for strength and understanding.

For example, Nima described her relationship with Allah as the barometer by which she can process events, information, and even daily issues that come up. She defined the manner in which she utilizes her relationship with Allah:

> *So, if you hold onto Allah, and this deen, because I don't believe that there's anything that this deen doesn't address. And when I look at situations that occur in the world, Islam is my yardstick. I try to bring it back to Islam and see, okay, what happened, how is this, what is this related to in Islam, what did the Prophet say about it, sallallahu alaihi wasallam, what does Allah say about it? And this is where I try to keep my ultimate focus. I know there's no problem that Allah can't solve, because he has means that we can't even think of. I don't know how many times I've gone to him trying to figure out something and he's answered it for me, and I'm like, "I didn't think of that, boy." And of course you didn't think of it because you're not Allah. You see, you see.*

Nima's devotion to fostering her relationship with Allah was evident as she described how Islam reaches each and every part of her life. Nima goes on to describe a level of radical acceptance that she found in her relationship with Allah that could not have been found elsewhere, saying:

> *The biggest thing, and I don't know what Surah, in the Qur'an, because it's probably all of the Qur'an but the biggest thing for me was getting to know Allah on the level, that he didn't hate me because of my color, because of my nose, because of my economic status. That is the biggest thing for me.*

Nima focused on the aspects which U.S. society places value such as Whiteness, Eurocentric concepts of beauty along with wealth. Additionally, Nima pointed out that she did not support versions of Islam where any nationalistic or racial group was deemed higher, "Well, this is just the opposite of how they think, except instead of the face being Caucasian or White, it's Black,". It was not until she was exposed to a more orthodox practice of Islam that she felt compelled to bring it into her life. Nima's affinity to Islamic principles of being judged on good deeds and level of humanity is affirming to her self-concept in the presence of unsupportive messages she received, which was reminiscent in Wajeedah's statement, "The relationship with Allah I have to make sure that I maintain. Allah doesn't expect me to be perfect,".

Marian applied the same principles of merit that Nima holds to the deep and painful history of Black Americans, along with present day trials. She reasoned:

> *I think it's not complete resolve, but I think... Like not an acceptance, defeatist attitude, but I think in some ways, this is the nature of the world. It feels really painful because this is happening to me and to us and to like us. We're experiencing this thing. But these kinds of stories have been happening since ever. And I think that maybe these are the kinds of spaces where we are supposed to deepen our higher qualities. Because when I think about, especially just about Black Americans and the history of just the courage and the dignity and just the bravery of so many people that have literally sacrificed their lives for me to be here. They may have been very low in their worldly ranks, but I think in terms of who they were inside and who they were on a spiritual level it's something to really admire and look up to and when to honor.*

Although Marian made sure to state that she is not accepting of grievances against the Black community it does help her conceptualize past and current state of affairs. Marian

dedicates time to volunteering with incarcerated individuals and challenging herself to examine how she can do more to fight systemic issues. Like Nima, Marian finds comfort in the religious texts and principles which again are affirming to who she is as a human being and has been especially helpful, "being the core of my overall wellness,". Marian detailed her perspective:

> *I think the legacy, what I'm inheriting, I think is something that's very beautiful and something to be proud of. And I think a lot of what they're (White people) inheriting is something that they're ashamed of or if they're not ashamed of that they are perpetuating. I think I have less to lose in this situation than people. If you, in this world, were given status and authority or whatever, what did you do? You were complicit in causing harm and violence to other people versus...that's just my burden. I don't have to worry about that kind of thing. I don't know if I'm just mentally saying that to make me feel better? Reading the Quran has helped a lot. Because I think they talk a lot about these struggles between these Pharaoh kinds of figures and people who.... I don't know. Just reading it sometimes gives me a lot of comfort. And thinking about what side of history you're on or what side of the fence.*

Marian calls attention to the pain that is felt when confronting the atrocities the Black community has faced and is facing and how Islam has helped to make some meaning that has been reassuring.

From race-related issues to personal difficulties, the women in this study stand on their relationship with Islam and Allah to gain understanding. Their faith has been a shield with the women effectively using the Quran and Islamic teachings to combat oppressive forces. When society or people they knew were telling them that they were 'less than' they resisted and chose to focus on the certainty that they were worthy of love, pride, and acceptance. Framing

negatives through an Islamic lens, these women developed their resiliency in part on an Islamic foundation allowing them to make sense of the trials and tribulations they have faced personally and as a community.

Claiming Agency and Authenticity as a Black Muslim Woman

This final of the seven themes, *Claiming Agency as a Black Muslim Woma*n was seen across all interviews. This theme was identified as the majority of women noted the way in which they develop their identity and choose to express themselves on their own terms. As Black Muslim Women, participants came up against instances where they had to negotiate how they felt about incorporating certain practices or ways of being. Participants deemed that agency and free-thinking were vital to the process of choosing how to be, whether that is in relation to practicing Islam or how one is perceived by the world.

For Sam it was important to cultivate her own understanding of Islam and ensuring that she was practicing in a way that felt right to her. She described taking a lead in her own journey by looking into knowledge of Islam herself rather than letting others tell her how and what to practice. In her opinion:

> *A lot of people also were affiliating with Five Percenters, with the Nation of Gods and Earths, and so getting the information about what it is that the contexts pertain to and then doing my own research, because my family is very big on you have to know for yourself. "You have to do the work for yourself, do not let anyone spoon feed you information and you just take it. Once you are no longer a baby, no one should be spoon-feeding you." And so you have to know how to get that information, so do your research.*

Additionally Sam brought up how she confronted different messages about how she should dress and the level of importance that attributed to her faith. She explained her thinking:

> *Then the philosophical aspect of me is like, "Will God love me less because my ankle is visible? Is this where we are?" I had to really unpack a lot of the messages that we get from people, whether they're religious leaders or our friends. I can see it's very easy to fall into it like that. You think there's a way to look Muslim, and to look like a good Muslim, and your heart be full of all the wrong things. I say, I got to really do the work, because I really believe, if I'm not wearing a jilbab, and I'm not wearing ... That I'm not a good Muslim. I was like, "No, I don't know if that's really ... " It was a process of trying to figure out, where is the message and what is the message?*

Sam further described a situation in which a Black Muslim woman at the mosque who threw her a scarf when it came time to pray, implying that the turban she was wearing was not proper for prayer. She explained the negative and positive that came from these experiences, highlighting how she came to form important facets of herself.

Amani also described encountering similar messages to Sam. She recalled a specific instance in relation to her ethnicity and hobbies:

> *So it's just kind of interesting, we have Black people call you an Oreo. I remember my husband's family, his cousin, I was going to Justin Timberlake concert, which I never thought there was something wrong with Justin Timberlake, but she was like, you're such an Oreo.... I'm like "Okay". It is invalidating, because the way I talk or because I'm a Justin Timberlake fan. It's funny, because the same rap artists she listens to, I listen to. I have Webby on my phone. I'm just not just category. I don't put myself in a box.*

In addition, Amani spoke about the pressures she faced in regard to what clothing she should wear after she converted to Islam. Akin to the above experience, Amani defines for herself how she chooses to express herself:

> *There was such a push for me to go from my Western clothing, to wearing an abaya, and I'm an '80s baby. Being an American, and being a Black American, where you have your culture emulated by other people all the time, it's called cultural appropriation. I just won't participate in another form of cultural appropriation. If I want to wear an abaya, it's because I want to, not because I'm Muslim now and I need to wear an abaya.*

Amani recently started wearing the turban as her hijab as opposed to the more traditional Arab style that many wear.

Princess added to this narrative by recounting how people made jokes and comments at her expense, though ultimately she disregarded how others saw her and harnessed her agency in her self-expression. Like the other women, what it means to be Muslim is something that she chooses for herself. She set forth her standpoint:

So yeah, it really did open my eyes and changed the way I see people and how people see me. Yeah. And then just feeling okay, moving from a place of, I guess fear in terms of I'm afraid of what people will say, to kind of owning my voice, my Muslim identity. And like I said, wanting to just a little bit at a time, just integrate it more into my daily life in terms of just little things. Like perhaps the way I dress or the way I speak, things that... Well, not so much speak, but just praying in Arabic and things of that nature. At first I used to kind of shy away from those things, but now it's like, "Okay, I can pray in Arabic. I can read the Koran out loud. I don't have to hide myself."

Unlike Amara and Khadijah, Marian has a different perspective. Marian grew up in a mixed-faith household, and after her parents' divorce she was primarily surrounded by the Christian and Buddhist faiths. In college, as she was entering a new chapter in her life she decided to connect with Islam which she described as a private and internal process. As Marian describes her experiences with balancing different expectations, she brings up multiple meanings and symbols that overlap where *hijab* is concerned:

> *I feel like it's kind of a level of intimacy to cover my head and to wear a bonnet. It's something I actually enjoy, if I'm FaceTiming my friend and we're just in our bonnets or whatever. Because it's such a reverse, it makes me question that utility. What is the purpose of this scarf? Which could have really profound meaning or not. You know? It makes me feel good that I don't have to do because I don't think I want to do it, but I want it to be something from like my* own *intentions and what I've read and learned and not from someone. I have to or feeling ashamed or uncomfortable if I don't. Which I think I'm trying to just kind of take more ownership of. Also, Black women have a lot of internalizations about their hair. I thought about hijab in terms of vanity. Even if it's insecurity about your hair, there is some egoism or some vainness about constantly being concerned about how your hair looks as a Black woman. Some people will say, you shouldn't be ashamed. I'm not ashamed to be Muslim, but I feel like I don't want to wear it as some kind of, I don't know what the word is, like as a costume.*

For Marian it is essential to understand and have meaningful reason guide her engagement with the practice of Islam. Even in her transition to more Islamic values, she wanted to make sure that it was not assumed that she was doing it to seek approval of her Muslim father, or any other reason aside from "a higher spiritual journey".

Like Marian, Aqeela faced difficulties when she chose to practice Islam that she felt was best for her. Aqeela discussed receiving criticism from family and friends when she decided to no longer wear the *hijab*. She clarified how she came to this decision:

> *I think I had come to a point in my life where I felt like I was doing a lot of things within the religion because it was, this was a custom or a culture, but not really understanding. And I just wanted to get at a point that I was doing things because I truly believed in it. And I think that's the only way I could best practice those practices, instead of just going through the motions.*

She further noted that it is important to have a connection to the practice of Islam, regardless of societal expectations. Despite familial and community criticism, Aqeela has continued to stand by her decision to no longer wear the hijab, as she continues to develop her faith and spirituality. She continued:

> *But the people that treated me the same regardless of what I was wearing, I really appreciated that, because I've only seen spirituality in the practice of the religion, even though it's so community-based, you do need to work on that individual connection, and you can't do that when you're following the expectations of society, and not the expectations of what you believe in as well.*

In general, this theme elucidated the women's shared challenges and navigation of expectations projected on them. The women spoke of encountering various messages on how to be or how to incorporate Islam into their lives, and this was not limited to society but included family and friends. With this, the women conveyed that they had to address what these messages meant and if they were in line with what they valued. Through unpacking these messages, the women reasoned through what was personally important to them in a process that was deep and

impactful. Arriving at the decision to choose to live by what they deemed valuable in the face of shame-induced emotions, the women ultimately described having a more authentic experience through their self-expression. Even more so, many of the women described an enhanced level of spirituality while connecting with practices that are personally meaningful (e.g., determining the level of modest dress or type of cultural dress). Whether it was through personal research or an internal examination, the participants determined for themselves how they wished to be in the face of other's expectations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the findings of a qualitative study on the lived experiences of Black Muslim women. Seven major themes were presented and were developed using a Black Feminist lens to examine the relevant aspects across participant interviews. Centered on the women's discussions related to interacting with others, the first theme identified was "Islam as a Unifying Culture." Among the majority of the women it was found that they viewed the context that Islam provided as one that brings about togetherness across diverse backgrounds, including non-Muslims as well. The women discussed Islamic literature and religious practices that supported the experience of unification.

In exploring participants' experiences, a second theme "Understanding the Strength of Muslim Sisterhood" linked the women's stories. Whether they converted or were born into a Muslim family, the women discussed the respect, support and mentorship that they received from other Muslim sisters. Overall, they discussed the milestones and hardships that they faced in which other women came to their aid, providing various types of care. In relation to the participants' positionality as women, a third theme, "Finding My Place as a Woman in Islam," was identified. Narratives of the women included gendered events and expectations placed on

them by society, family, and friends. The women shed light on the specific experiences and their philosophical conceptualizations of gender, including principles in Islam that are supportive of women and their rights. Misogyny was a prevalent aspect of the conversation which women stated was not Islamic or related to cultural expressions.

Examination of participants' accounts brought forward two more themes "Experiencing Otherness" and "Incorporating Black History and Culture". In their past the women have encountered messaging and events that contribute to feelings of being othered. Converting to the religion and being born in the religion did not mitigate the women's experiences of an almost outsider status. The women mentioned that their levels of knowledge were questioned which led to a perception of being seen as "not Muslim enough". On their journey as Black Muslim women, it was determined that the majority of them found Black History and culture integral to their identities. For some, prominent Black Muslim figures led them to Islam or symbolized their experience and understanding of Islam. For others, it was essential that Black Muslims receive more acknowledgement for their contributions for Muslims through the Civil Rights movement suggesting an expansion of Muslim history.

Lastly, "Conceptualizing Islam as a Positive Force" and "Claiming Agency and Authenticity as a Black Muslim Woman" were themes that emerged as the women described their lives.

Conceptualizing Islam as affirmative surfaced in many of the women's discussions surrounding various topics such as confidence, habits, daily stressors, and even great injustices. Regardless of the subject matter Islam provided context and meaning that was experienced as accepting and positive aspect of their lives. Finally, Claiming Agency and Authenticity emphasizes the women's commitment to exercising their autonomy in choosing how to express themselves in a

manner that feels genuine. The empowerment detected in these women's narratives is not only compelling but provides a defense against various barriers they have to overcome. As Black Muslim women negotiating and navigating various environments it is apparent that they have the last say in how they choose to practice their religion and live their lives.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim women in the United States. Black Muslim Women are an overlooked subgroup within the Muslim community. To create a foundation for present and future research, it is important to gain knowledge of the unique experiences of Black Muslim women. The research questions for this study were:

1) What are the common gendered experiences of Black Muslim women specific to the Black Muslim Diasporic community?
2) What are the common experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion of Black Muslim women in the larger Muslim community in the U.S.?
3) What are the common experiences of Black Muslim women within the larger Non-Muslim U.S. society?

Findings of the study suggest several conclusions. First, Black Muslim women within their Diasporic community share experiences of occupying a socialized place that affords them less than equal positions in their homes and communities which engenders a sisterhood and acquisition of knowledge which, in turn, empowers them. The second conclusion is that the women share the common experiences of isolation, otherness, and sexism within the larger Muslim community, while carrying an understanding of their marginality that affords them this tangential acceptance, mediated by unity in a shared faith and self-determination. The third conclusion is that Black Muslim women share the common experiences of isolation, hostility,

and racism in their U.S. existence as Muslim women and find that these common experiences create a consciousness that cultivates an intersectional and humanitarian advocacy as an act of resistance. This final chapter will begin by addressing the major conclusions to the research questions, which will include discussing them in light of relevant literature. Next, the chapter will elucidate the implications of findings followed by recommendations for future research and concluding remarks.

Experiences Within the Black Muslim Community

This conclusion addresses the first research question: What are the common gendered experiences of Black Muslim women within the Black Muslim Diasporic community? The second conclusion is that Black Muslim women within their Diasporic Muslim community share experiences of occupying a socialized place that affords them less than equal positions in their homes and communities which engenders a sisterhood and acquisition of knowledge to empower them.

Participants recognized a heightened awareness of gendered understandings and expectations within the Black Muslim community. Muslim women incur expectations set forth not only by the religion, but society and culture as well (Weiss, 1994). The women in this study described processing these expectations and messages they had received, for some since childhood. The women highlighted gender roles and expectations in relation to clothing, education, career, ways of behaving around the other sex and in public. They noted that these were often influenced by misogynic ideals that departed from true Islamic practice. This finding adds to the literature that Black Muslim women are partial to the feminist way of thinking that patriarchy is to blame for inequality, as opposed to the camp which believes religion is irredeemable in its current state (Joy & Neumaier-Dargyay, 1995). It was otherwise found that

Islam was reported to be uplifting and supportive for women. The women discussed how a holistic, conscientious reading and practice of Islam will create equal spaces for women as is already determined in the Quran. Some research on Muslim women indicates gender-based discrimination such as male dominance, early marriage, restrictive codes (Weiss, 2014) and although there was some mention of these to a lesser degree, overall the women did not speak to related personal experiences. One reason for this seemed the women utilized protective measures such as arming themselves with knowledge, attaining an education, and engaging in autonomous valuation in deciding how they were going to live their lives as Black Muslim women. One example of this is being able to cite scripture from the Quran to support their rights such as getting an education, working or choosing to focus on raising their children. Numerous times the women emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge to ensure that they have an accurate and deep understanding of the religion. Although the women described various sources of information, highlighted most was the use of Islamic scripture and also social media. Social media became not only a way to connect with other Muslims in the U.S. and around the world, but a source for conversation and exposure to important topics concerning Muslim women.

Expanding on self-definition through knowledge, it was found that Black Muslim women's relationships have an inherent utility in fostering community for advocacy and self-determination, ultimately challenging intersecting oppressive forces by empowering one another (Collins 1990; King, 1988). This was found in the protection the participants discovered in their relationships with other Muslim women which included mothers, friends, and other community members. As the women navigated various life events, daily stressors along with misogynistic and prejudice messaging that they received, social support from their Muslim sisters buffered the impact, creating moments of being uplifted in one another. The women discussed a multitude of

experiences, in relation to race, gender and religion and how they were inspired, protected, influenced and educated by other women, reducing feelings of isolation, sadness, frustration and confusion. While the women may not experience the exact same encounter as their sisters, as a collective they are facing similar themes which, in turn, influences their "group knowledge" (Collins, 1990, p. 25).

Experiences Within the Muslim Community

One of the aims of this study was to better understand the experiences that Black Muslim women have in their larger Muslim communities, which includes immigrant Muslims. The first conclusion addressed the second research question which asked: What are the common experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion of Black Muslim women in the larger Muslim community? The second conclusion is that the women share the common experiences of isolation, otherness and sexism within the larger Muslim community, while carrying an understanding of their marginality that affords them this tangential acceptance, mediated by unity in a shared faith and self-determination.

Participants discussed how being Black has impacted their acceptance into some Muslim communities, othering their status as a Muslim, specifically around immigrant communities. The women described that being a Black Muslim influenced the way some Muslim communities viewed them. Both converts and non-converts discussed perceived assumptions that they encountered which included an inadequate level of Islamic knowledge and the fact that they converted. Often, this alienating messaging was delivered in a subtle form through innocent and naive questions. These encounters can be described as microaggressions, defined as elusive, disparaging comments directed towards a minority group, which result in feelings of isolation (Sue et al., 2007) and left the women feeling that they have to prove their Muslimness. In

conjunction with critical messages, participants described the lack of inclusivity evidenced in multiple contexts. It was found that the contributions of Black Muslims are not acknowledged by the larger Muslim community leading to feelings of confusion and exclusion. In contrast to the larger Muslim community, Black history and culture are integral to Black Muslim women's identities. The women mentioned historical Black Muslim figures who contributed to the Civil Rights Movement, Nation of Islam (NOI), and knowledge of the history of Black people beginning with those who were enslaved. Most importantly, the concept of a 'Black legacy' emerged in which Black history was not only vital to their identity, but something to be protected, respected and upheld. With the materialization of 'Black legacy' came the understanding that this was not always mirrored within parts of the Muslim community. This legacy includes how the Civil Rights Movement directly paved the way for minorities, Muslims included, to possess their current liberties. Acknowledgement of Black Muslims' significance to Muslim presence and acceptance in the U.S. is lacking in the larger Muslim community, which further denigrates Black Muslim women,

Similar to their experiences within the Black Muslim community, the women described their positions as women influenced by patriarchal sentiment which they resisted through being knowledgeable and the bond of sisterhood. The degree of conservatism and some gendered practices depended on the type of mosques the women attended, and each mosque regardless of being international or Black has a personality. For example, a Black mosque in Atlanta was deemed to be more liberal by multiple participants, whereas some in Philadelphia were talked about as more conservative than some international mosques. Location and constituents of the mosque seem to influence the level of conservatism, which in turn impacts the location the women pray in, whether the women pray in the back or front, along with the amount of contact

with the opposite sex. Through conversations with other Muslim women, they are able to find support as they negotiate these gendered spaces. Further they determine what is right, wrong, and acceptable through conversations based on their holistic interpretation of the Quran and *hadith*.

As these women negotiated their place in the U.S. Muslim *ummah*, they asserted rightful and equal inheritance of their Muslim identity through self-determination. Within a context that ascribed perceptions of an othered status the women defined for themselves how they would practice and their relationship with the religion. For example, when facing perceived pressure to conform to more traditional Arabic ways of dressing, some women chose to wear a turban style scarf which is more authentic to their cultural background. The women in this study not only chose whether they were going to practice hijab and naming it a personal journey of faith, but how they were going to practice it (i.e., turban style). The women are living in accordance with BFT declaration that self-determination is necessary to both themselves and other Black women and should not be yielded to others, no matter their intentions, in order to avoid perpetuation of hierarchical power structures (Collins, 1990). The women confidently determined for themselves how they choose to practice in a way that is both empowering and in accordance with Islam, signifying that they do not need the approval of others to be Muslim.

Interestingly, in contrast to the feelings of isolation, the women described a deep kinship with the larger Muslim community due to a strong sense of shared faith and marginalized existence in the U.S. The concept of the *ummah* is prominent within the Muslim religion and with being or becoming a Muslim, one gains a whole community, as was highlighted by the women in the study. Despite differences in ethnicity, the women described the dependability and diversity of the *ummah* as important parts of their experiences. Communing together in religious traditions and holidays such as Ramadan and Jummah prayers contributes to developing a

compassionate bond. Even as the participants described their challenges in the larger Muslim community, there was always an added recommendation for unification and collaboration, reflecting the true communitarian nature of the religion and personal values. Further, they are unified in the U.S. through their beliefs and traditions, creating a common experience of being misunderstood and discriminated against the majority culture. In light of recent events which included the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matters Movement, and the Trump era they described appreciation for the support they received from their Muslim communities through fellowship processing negative events and trauma with those who understand and moving forward together.

The marginalization of the Black Muslim women in this study expressed itself through perceived judgement and scrutinous experiences. In addition, the lack of acknowledgement of Black Muslims and their contributory legacy to the presence of Muslims in America were experienced as disheartening. In navigating difficult contexts and messaging, the women utilized their autonomy in defining their own relationship with the religion. Overwhelming the negative experiences is the connection that the women feel to the Muslim *ummah* due to their collective belief, traditions, and dependability. Their experiences were characterized by the connection to the communitarian aspect of the *ummah*.

Experiences Within U.S. Society

The last conclusion addresses the third research question: What are the common experiences of Black Muslim women the within larger Non-Muslim U.S. society? The third conclusion is that Black Muslim women share the common experiences of isolation, hostility, and racism in their U.S. existence as Muslim women and find that these common experiences

create a consciousness that cultivates an intersectional and humanitarian advocacy as an act of resistance.

Race and religious identity impacted their lived experiences in the U.S. in several ways, many of which have been influenced by sociopolitical and historical events. Beginning with the Atlantic Slave Trade, through the Civil Rights Movement to 9/11, recent focus on police brutality and election of Donald J. Trump have provided a context for racial and Islamophobic discrimination, prejudice and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Many participants explained concern for their safety, being a Black female living in a racialized country while sharing vicarious trauma through the experiences of violence against Black people at the hands of White people and police. Although they focused more on race, many of the women discussed that their apprehension increased after 9/11, the resulting hate crimes and Islamophobic rhetoric, amplified levels of personal and communal distress due to harassment, bullying and profiling. As Muslim women who practice hijab, a visual marker of their identity and faith, fear of backlash caused some participants to change the way that they practiced and lived their lives whether it was abandoning the *hijab* or having to move their *hijabi* daughters to safer schools, these instances spoke to unjust forces.

The women's recounting of their intersectional experiences yielded the manifestation of the matrix of oppression, which are interrelated dominations rather than mutually exclusive (Collins, 1991) including gender, race and religious identity. While not all women experienced the same exact situations of oppression, they developed in various ways in response to similar themes which contributed to a collective knowledge as posited by Black Feminist Thought, that all Black women do not have to go through negative experiences that others have to understand that they are functioning as an other (Collins, 1991). Many participants described their

experiences in relation to their race, gender, and religious identity and shifting positionality of those identities within any fixed moment.

Given the women's marginalized experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and religion the concept of "double consciousness" as described by Du Bois resonates with their narratives. Du Bois (1903, pg. 23) explains:

> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"

And further describes:

> "One ever feels his two-ness. An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder"

These women recognize the existence of the "veil", a barrier dividing Black from White America, a concept that is elusive to White counterparts whose experiences are not centered in a society which has formed a legacy of violence, subjugation and degradation against them. This study builds on the Du Boisian double consciousness and finds that the women hold a quadruple consciousness at the crux of their identities as Black, Muslim, female and American. The women spoke of navigating internalized messages related to white supremacist, misogynistic, and colonial ideals. Many of the women expressed that their faith was a buffer against these since Allah does not judge them by their skin color or physical appearance, rather their deeds. While many have processed what they have experienced in the past, it is a continued and present reality for the participants in which they shift through lenses to perceive the accurate meaning of adverse interactions. Questioning which identity is related to which oppressive encounter, all

while attempting to keep a cohesive sense-of-self which incorporates multiple marginalized positions within the context of historical oppressions were deemed to negatively impact well-being.

Directly related to the quadruple consciousness the women hold, an intersectional and humanitarian dedication to social justice advocacy served as an act of resistance to the historical and contemporary oppressive forces in the U.S. It is through the unique perspectives the women have developed due to multiple facets of their identity, that they choose to advocate not only for Muslims, but any group who is experiencing subjugation including women, LGBQT, immigrant communities, refugees, other minority groups regardless of whether they are directly impacted by these issues. Consistent with their quadruple consciousness influence, Du Bois poses the act of "striving" by which the Black community asserts their rights to an equal, just treatment and existence in America through political and social action. The women emphasized shared humanity that supersedes any personal identities or beliefs, placing collective value in the idea of an American or even Global *ummah*.

Response to the Literature

Muslim Women in a Global Sphere

The narratives of the participants in this study continue to inform the growing literature on the lives of women in organized religion. Considering that the global Muslim population at 1.9 billion people is second only to the Christian population at 2.2 billion people, there exists many experiences that have not been captured. Further, there are half a billion Muslim women in the world, some in Muslim majority countries while others live as minorities. These data frame the global existence of Muslim women to be one of plurality, living in a multitude of environments, for which there is limited documented information.

General trends across the world indicate that Muslim women are continuing to enter higher education and the workforce. The women in this study have all attained a high level of education, eleven of the twelve women have at least a bachelor's degree and a majority of them have their master's degree. One woman is working on her doctorate and another has acquired her PhD. Further all of the women are working towards entering the workforce, have entered the workforce, or are retired. Fields of employment included academia, teaching, medicine, humanities, and research. All of the women identified their socioeconomic status as middle class, aside from one who indicated upper-class. For those who were not students, single incomes were reported to be around or above the median household income for Black people across the U.S., which could also indicate that their combined household income could be higher than the median. The majority of the women live in or near major cities across the U.S. Out of the twelve women, three were married, two were divorced, and the rest identified as single although the majority of these women are younger. In reference to dating, some of the women indicated that it was difficult to find a partner due to the limited dating pool of Black Muslims and immigrant Muslim preference for marrying within their own culture. Four of the women had children. Although this study is not statistical or generalizable, the context of their lives adds to the picture of Muslim women in the U.S. and the world.

Feminist Critique of Organized Religions

Feminist critique of organized religions includes those who believe that the religion is irredeemable, that it cannot be modified, while others attempt to consider it outside of misogynistic lens. The women in this study found that Islamic texts are often interpreted or adjusted to fit a patriarchal lens, consistent with feminist critique found in the literature (Joy & Neumaier-Dargyay, 1995). While the women discussed that they are in various social contexts

which have different expectations for men, ultimately they are living their lives according to their choice. Moreover they denounced the idea of orientalist sensationalism which focuses on the oppressive nature of Islam, along with being viewed as barbaric and exotic. Some of the women indicated wanting to see more women in leadership roles and called for improvement of the women's section of the mosque. Islam was found to be a source of empowerment for the women, many describing how it was well before its time in the rights of women, substantiating majority of the literature on this matter.

Muslim Women Concerns

The majority of the limited research on the concerns of Muslim women was specific to Muslim-majority cultures, which indicated gender-based discrimination and inequalities due to patriarchal cultures including marriage at an early age, restrictive codes of female behavior, polygamous family structure, and family honor linked to female virtue. Departing from the literature, none of the women indicated that they are or were brought up in a polygamous family, experienced early marriage, or directly indicated that family honor was linked to their virtue. Although there was no one thing that the women mentioned as unequal outside of the women's section in the mosque there was general consensus that there are many expectations placed on women and that this experience transcends to multiple contexts (e.g., work and school). The women's narratives supported the idea that the gendered issues they face are not Islamic in nature, rather that they face the same issues that non-Muslim women face in the U.S.

In response to the literature on veiling, it was found that they viewed it as a choice and did not support the directives of fundamentalist groups as has been depicted in stereotyped media. The women who have chosen to wear the hijab, shared their pride in the symbol of their faith although this comes with judgment from U.S. communities, which is different from the

experiences of women who live in Muslim-majority countries. Hijab, a visible indication of Muslim status, which the women deemed a safety hazard due to the anti-Islamic rhetoric that prevails in the U.S., specifically after 9/11 and the election of President Donald. J. Trump. In addition to safety concerns, social concerns were noted as well such as bullying, negative perceptions in the workplace and social settings, and the burden of being stereotyped. Overall, the women described the decision to wear hijab as one that they do not take lightly, deeming it a personal journey.

Experiences of Black Muslim Women

The women's recounting of their intersectional experiences yielded the manifestation of matrices of oppressions, by which they recognize their functioning as an other, contributing as Black intellectuals to a collective group knowledge. This study supports the limited literature on Black Muslim women's experiences which speak to the discrimination they face as minorities in the U.S. As Byng (1998) found discriminatory experiences lead to confusion and frustration in Black Muslim women's lives. Participants discussed how discriminatory experiences led to questioning which part of their identity the experience related to. Findings support the concept of a "triple consciousness" (Mohamed, 2017, pg. 3), building upon Du Bois's work, that Black Muslim women experience this multi-faceted stance in relation to negotiating their multiple identities. In this study, a quadruple consciousness was identified as their race, gender, and religious identity was juxtaposed upon their American identity. Although, there was only one participant that was raised abroad, she spoke to entering the U.S. and encountering for the first time what it meant to be Black, pointing to the racialized society that she had not experienced before (Mohamed, 2017).

Muslim and Black Women's Mental Health

Studies examining Muslim and Black women's health did not specifically consider Black Muslim women. This study begins to add nuance to the heterogenous make up of these communities. Literature cites racial discrimination being linked to negative health outcomes and depression, due to internalized messages from racial oppression which lead to low levels of self-esteem and even self-hatred (Jones et al., 2007). Although, the women discussed having to navigate and process negative messages the findings did not indicate issues regarding self-esteem and self-hatred. Alternatively, it was found that the women ascribed to self-love, pride, and confidence when relating to themselves. They referenced Islam and sisterhood as protective factors. In support of previous literature, participants described Islam as a way to conceptualize difficulties and provide a stable foundation through which to view the world and daily experiences (Wyche, 2004). Moreover, having people to commune and process negative events with was found to be a source of support, and even more so with Muslim women. While the women found their relationships with Muslim women to be supportive overall, it was also helpful to commiserate with other Black Muslim women who could connect on Black experiences. Previous literature has indicated that Black communities find resilience through familial support (Black & Lobo, 2008), which in this study was highlighted in the mentorship and warmth the women felt with their mothers and grandmothers.

For those who converted, reassessing their identity in relation to their new identity as Muslims did occur. This supports the literature indigenous Muslims in general (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007). Participants did not themselves articulate that they identify with the culture of those who introduced them to Islam (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007), although some discussed practicing in a way that is authentic to oneself including wearing clothes and practicing hijab that

emulates their culture of origin. Family tension (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007) did arise as a topic although not necessarily linked to mental health but framed as challenges such as familial negative reaction to conversion and attempts to convert them back to Christianity, along with more general experiences such as divorce, parental divorce, and parental expectations.

Resiliency and Resistance

This study adds nuance to the well-documented strengths and resistance of the Black community in the face of adversity and systemic oppression, which has been noted to be applicable to Black Muslim women as well (Wyche, 2004; Byng, 1998). This contextualizes how the participants in this study exemplify resistance and resiliency which was found to be through an intersectional and humanitarian advocacy, self-determination, faith, and knowledge shielding themselves from attacks on their Blackness, Muslimness and womanhood. Communal connection and engagement were found to be a support for the women in this study, consistent with previous literature examining participation in religious groups (Robinson-Brown & Gary, 1985).

In addition, engagement with Black nationalistic narratives was found to be empowering and a proactive stance against discrimination in the U.S. (Karim, 2008). The narratives of these twelve Black Muslim women uphold the Black legacy with its historical beginnings aligned with the arrival of enslaved Black Muslims (Smithsonian, 2017) and carried on by countless Black people who have dedicated their lives to attaining an equal and just existence in the U.S. The women in this study mirror the enslaved Black Muslims in that not only are they educated and skilled, they are utilizing their faith as a force of resistance within White dominated spaces. Like their forefathers and foremothers, the women and larger Black community continue to navigate

racist environments which have resulted in deleterious sociopoltical events causing the women to have significant concern for the safety of their family, themselves, and communities.

Although the women mentioned and distanced themselves from the stereotype that all Black Muslims converted through the Nation of Islam (NOI), they spoke about prominent figures who did convert through the NOI: Malcolm X, Muhummad Ali and Warith Deen Muhammed, who eventually converted to *Sunni* Islam. The women mentioned these individuals and their direct contributions to the Civil Rights Movement through which minorities are able to enjoy their current liberties. The women honor Black legacy through their advocacy which is defined not only by its commitment to empowering black communities but a dedication to intersectional and humanitarian social justice, serving all those who are oppressed regardless of personal connection to the issue. Like their forefathers and foremothers they continue to experience a racialized environment with institutionalized systemic issues, while continuing to strive for the betterment not only for their communities, but for all.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several implications which are informed by the findings, interpretative analysis, and existing literature on Black Muslim women in the U.S. Theoretical and practical implications, in addition to recommendations for future research, can be utilized to inform responses to the concerns assessed in this study.

Implications for Theory

Theoretical implications are indicated by this study for Black Feminist Theory and its applicability to the lives of Black Muslim women. This study set forth to examine the experience of Black Muslim women in the U.S., in attempts to better understand the complex contexts of multiple marginalized identities for which BFT provided a relevant and empowered framework.

This theoretical framework was efficacious in contextualizing the women's experiences in a way that was both respectful and appropriate, especially considering the marginalized identities of the women. As indicated by Collins (1990), the applicability of Black Feminist Thought should continue to be assessed with other oppressed communities, studies considering non-Black Muslim women could conceivably benefit from the use of BFT.

Although BFT was a beneficial approach in this study, further research should continue to evaluate BFT in relation to Muslim studies since it is inherently a western philosophy; since Islam originates in the East this may indicate some differences in ideals. Lastly, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990) focused on many marginalized identities and specifically emphasized Christians, sexual orientation, gender, and race which denotes a need to include Black Muslims women in the narrative as the dynamic theory continues to evolve.

Implications for Practice

Psychologists occupy a unique position in the U.S where they exist across disciplines including academia, research, healthcare, prison systems, law, college systems through which they come into contact with Black Muslim women. As Black Muslim women continue to face injustices related to gender, religion, and race it is imperative to emphasize the current deficits. Representations of Muslims in the U.S. have not brought forth a depiction centered in plurality or even accuracy. Continuing to move away from western depictions of Muslims as brown, terrorists, and women who need to be saved whilst promoting representative portrayals allow for the humanization of Muslims and the *ummah* to be understood beyond their stereotypes. This can be implemented in all facets (e.g., including Black Muslim women in images and discussions when referencing both the Black community or the Muslim community whether this is through media, teaching a course, creating a panel).

Clinical implications include considering bolstering protective measures for Black Muslim women such as faith, spirituality, engagement with advocacy, and social support of Muslim sisters. Findings suggest utilization of therapies which specifically consider marginalized identities such as Multicultural Therapy (Sue et al., 1998). Narrative therapy (White et al., 1990) is also indicated for this community, which applies interventions that deconstruct internalized messages from the dominant cultural narrative, externalizes issues, and reconstructs the narrative while having close individuals witness the new story. Each part of this process aligns with findings from this study, for example reconstruction of story to encompass liberation and Black legacy in a way that is inclusive of one's identity and incorporates Muslims both in the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and resistance of enslaved peoples. This is further supported by the idea that incorporation of Black nationalistic narratives can empower Black Muslims (Karim, 2008).

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the limited research on Black Muslim women there is an essential need to continue building on their intersectional lived experiences. This includes incorporating other characteristics as well, such as those who identify with a lower socioeconomic status, which has specifically been linked to the impact on well-being in the Black community (Kohn & Hudson, 2002). The current study along with previous research provides vital information that would be best served by utilizing quantitative and mixed methods research to capture more generalizable data and nuances. The majority of the participants in this study were non-immigrants and *Sunni*; further research would benefit from exploring the experiences of other sects such as *Sufi*, *Shia*, Nation of Islam and immigrant Muslims, potentially as separate studies to expand the intricacies of their experiences.

Concluding in Solidarity

I was in the first grade, a new student, when the girl sitting next to me said something about a boy named Paul. "Who's Paul?" I asked. She simply said, the Black boy. I looked around, at the time not knowing, that this would be my introduction to race. Indeed there was a boy who looked different from everyone else, I then peered down at the back of my hands. I was the girl who looked different from everyone else. Growing up in the South as a Pakistani American Muslim girl, the daughter of immigrants, a token in a pre and post 9/11 world did not come without its challenges. I wish I knew from the beginning what I learned from the Black community later, not realizing the extent to which damage was occurring, while my parents continued to sacrifice in order to build a place for us in this unknown world.

The women in this study, my Muslim sisters, continue to inform me on the ways in which our community can grow. Their overwhelming emphasis on unity is a future I hope that Muslims continue to work towards, upholding Islamic and humanitarian imperatives. Black Muslim women's experiences, along with the Black Legacy that they carry and honor commands respect. Just as Black Muslim sisters are working towards the betterment of all communities through resistance, other Muslims and marginalized communities can learn how to navigate multiple oppressions, from the examples they set with their collective knowledge in hand. Muslims would benefit from looking inward for *kibr* (arrogance), a state of mind that is known to cause disunity, as well as being a major sin. Humility and openness are required as Muslims continue to work on building a unified and resilient U.S. Muslim *ummah.* The women's stories are central to this study, amplifying the strength of the Muslim community and adding their unique intersectional perspectives. In closing I asked the women "What would you want the world to know most?" They replied:

Iman: That my experience with Islam has been nothing but enriching, empowering, very beautiful, emotional, spiritual journey, but at times Muslims make it difficult for me to practice Islam wholly. I think in general Muslims can make practicing Islam difficult for anyone, not just me as a black Muslim woman, but literally anyone. But Islam is very easy.

Sam: All the good stuff, all of the people coming together and sharing and collectively appreciating and understanding. That's the black thing. If you're not good to other people, just because they're not your mirror image, then you're not really being a good person. And that, to me, is critical. With all that's going on right now, we need a lot more compassion and empathy than anything else.

Khadijah: That we're here, we're present. I feel like we're invisible in a lot of ways, we're not acknowledged, but we're here, we're present, we're active. I think it's good for social media to see that we're willing to connect with others and willing to fellowship in any way. I see so much and it's so beautiful in our community, but also different has to mean different interests, right? And just understanding we're still here, talk to us.

Latifah: I would say, just know that Muslim people are just people, just regular people. As a Muslim, as an African American, as a Black woman, we have more in common than we have not in common, to be honest. And it behooves us to seek out those ways that we're similar and alike. And it's so important for us to get along in the world. And those ways in which we are different, we should really seek to understand.

Amani: Oh, in the Muslim community, let's respect everybody's culture. I think that has just been my biggest thing. Respect everybody's culture. We're all different and it's okay. That's been my biggest thing. Yeah, respect and accept. There's a space for everybody, especially in Masjids, and I would just like everybody to just be more integrated. That would be nice to see.

Amara: The resiliency. Probably I would like them to see the resiliency. African American, Muslim women, African American women period, have been ignored as a force within the world. African American Muslim women have been ignored within the Muslim community as a force.

Wajeedah: I've lived my life to be very low profile. Purposely and being low profile was a way of tempering the ego. I guess I have to always think that I continue to cherish the love that my mother gave me of the creator. And I'm just trying to be a good mother and tried to be a good person, not always the best person, “If there's anybody out If there's anybody out there that I have rubbed the wrong way, hurt in any way, may you forgive me? And may God forgive me?"

Muna: I think that God made me like this because it allows me to have so many different perspectives. Okay. Well, God gave me a few different identities. What am I going to make with it? What am I going to do with it?" I'm going to serve.

Aqeela: the best thing that you could possibly do is just ask, just learn more and educate yourself. I feel like I've always had to learn about what it is to be an American, and learning about other cultures, but yet people are so apprehensive to learning about my own. So, just being more welcoming, being more open, and it will benefit you in the long run.

Nima: That Allah is in full control of everything that happens, but He is one, He's not many. And the prophet Muhammad *Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam* is the last messenger, and he's true. And the truth will win out against falsehood, and that he is in full control of everything that happens.

Princess: I'm just trying to figure out life like everybody else, I don't have the right answers. I'm still trying to just live this thing called life I guess. There are just different paths and journeys and ways that we go about it. Allah is the best knower and things of that nature. I'm just like any other human being like normal, whatever normal is,. I don't think I'm any better than anybody else I deserve the best, just like everybody else deserves the best.

Marian: just being kind of amazed and having a feeling of wonder when you come across someone who, as a person but also if they're Muslim, and that's just such a beautiful thing that we should all be working to celebrate and uplift, and never minimize, or exclude, or shame, or diminish.. I would want people to continuing to examine themselves and to do that within themselves.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

The following protocol was used in the study of the lived experiences of Black Muslim Women. Individual questions are based on the categories below and participant responses.

Leading Question: Please tell me about your lived experience as a Black Muslim Woman in the U.S.?

Please tell me about early life experiences?

- How about any memorable experiences?
- What was life in school like?
- Did 9/11 have an impact? If so, how?
- Do you wear a hijab? How has the impacted you?

What have your experiences been like since becoming an adult?

- Have there been any significant relationships that have influenced you?
- Describe an event or experience that changed the way you looked at things.

Please describe your well-being.

- What has you experience with mental health been?
- How about physical health?
- Do you feel that you have good support systems? Can you tell me more about that?

What role has religion played in your life?

- Do you feel that it has been more positive or negative?
- Has it been unhelpful in ways?

What has your experience been in the Muslim community?

- How do you think we can improve as a community?

What has your experience been in the overall U.S. culture/community?

- How do you think we can improve as a community?
- Have certain people or parts of the community caused issues?

Final Question: "If there was one thing about your experience that you would want the world to know most – what would that be?"

Exploration points for semi-structured approach:

Early Life Experiences (memorable experiences; life in school; 9/11; hijab; othering)

Well-being (Mental health, physical health, support systems)

Adult Experiences (Relationships, paradigm shifts)

Role of Religion (Positive, negative, useful or unhelpful)

Experiences within Muslim communities (Black & Mixed)

Experiences in the larger U.S. Culture (work, school, friends, Family (Spouse, Children) Other Information)

Appendix B

IRB Participant Consent Form

Consent

I am a graduate student under the direction of professor Rosemary Phelps in the Department of Counseling and Human Development at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Diversifying Narratives of the Ummah. The purpose of this study is to understand Black Muslim Womens' experiences living in the U.S. Participation in this study is voluntary.

You're eligible to be in this study if you are 18 years or older and identify as a Black Muslim Woman and live in the U.S. Your participation will involve completing an interview through an online platform that will last about 60 mins. This study will collect demographic information such as age, education, income, marital status, etc. Additionally, questions will be related to life experiences, and experiences within the Muslim and U.S. communities. Furthermore questions around the role of religion and well-being will also be a part of the interview. We ask that you bring a picture, document, or item that expresses or symbolizes your experience as a Black Muslim woman. Pictures will not be used in publication, and other identifying information from the requested artifact will be removed.

Researchers are asking that participants review a transcript of their interview that will be emailed to them. Participants are asked to inform of any discrepancies between what participants meant to relay and the researchers understanding of that event or concept. Additionally, researchers may follow-up with questions for clarification topics discussed during the interview. The review of the transcript and any additional questions should not take more than an hour.

The interview will be audio and video recorded, though only audio will be used for transcription purposes and analysis. Participant data will be safeguarded through the use of a password protected computer and encrypted file. After the audio files are transcribed and pseudonyms are created, audio and video files will be deleted. Though direct quotes may be used in this study they will not use any identifying information.

All effort will be made to keep any identifying information will be kept confidential by the researchers. There is minimal risk associated with this study. Participants are allowed to skip any questions they do not want to answer. If at any point you feel that you do not wish to continue, then you may freely leave the study. This research involves the transmission of data over the internet. Ever reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

In reference to long-term use of data, the information collected in this study may be used for future publications and presentations without additional consent. Again, identifiers will be removed from the data.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call Dr. Rosemary Phelps at (706) 542-4221 or send an e-mail to humama.khan25@uga.edu or rephelps@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at (706) 542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

Sincerely,
Humama Khan

Do you consent to participate in this research project?

I agree to participate in the study as described above.

I do not agree to participate in the study.

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire

Q1 Name _____

Q2 Age _____

Q3 Ethnicity/Country of Origin_____

Q4 Religious Sect

- ○ Sunni
- ○ Shia
- ○ NOI
- ○ Sufi
- ○ Do not identify with a sect
- ○ Other _____

Q5 Marital Status

- ○ single
- ○ married
- ○ in a relationship
- ○ divorced
- ○ widowed

Q6 Children

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Q7 How many children do you have? _____

Q8 Do you have any siblings?

- ○ yes
- ○ no

Q9 How many siblings do you have? _____

Q10 Current job _____

Q11 Current location _____

Q12 Born in _____

Q13 Raised in _____

Q14 Level of education

- ○ GED
- ○ B.S./B.A.
- ○ M.S./M.A.
- ○ Doctorate
- ○ Other _____

Q15 Average yearly income_____

Q16 Which socioeconomic status do you identify with:

- ○ Lower Class
- ○ Middle Class
- ○ Upper Class
- ○ Other _____

Q17 How many generations has your family identified as Muslim? (if applicable)_____

Q18 Were you born into a family that identifies as Muslim?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Q19 If not, at what age did you start identifying as Muslim? _____