

## Perceptions and Experiences of Non-Muslim Minority Students on the Muslim Image

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The purpose of this study is to explore non-Muslim minority students attending a minority-serving university in a rural community on their knowledge and experiences of the Muslim image. Research is dominated by majority-minority interactions and perspectives regarding subjective reports of controversial issues, especially the heightened awareness of Muslim image in the United States over the past two decades. This trend has perpetuated a growing gap in knowledge of understanding the unique minority-minority perceptions and the development of minority cultural awareness; therein, generating the motivation for this study. The researchers applied a qualitative assessment exploring non-Muslim understanding of foundational components associated with the Muslim image, such as basic Islamic vocabulary competencies and additional open-ended questions regarding experienced social interactions. From the responses of the participants stemmed five emerging themes: enculturation, geographic association, stigmatization, influencers, and empathy. These results demonstrate a general openness toward the Muslim identity but also include consistent misconceptions that may be easily rectified by interactive-educational interventions. The findings acknowledge the propensity of non-Muslim minority students' willingness to learn from authentic Muslim image, despite the influence of disingenuous Muslim images depicted by current media outlets.

*Keywords:* Muslim image, minority-minority perspective, American non-Muslim minority students, horizontal hostility.

### Introduction

Edward Wadie Said (2000), renowned cultural critic and founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies, openly addressed the continual degradation of the *Muslim image* stemming from recent world events that have brought Muslim culture to the forefront of Western awareness. He described the perpetuation of this social phenomena on mainstream media, such that the “collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning” (Said, 2000, p. 185).

For the U.S. and western mainstream media, the reformulation of the negative Muslim image started with 9/11 and, apart from the Arab Spring, has been modified and maintained via news on Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Boko Haram, the Taliban, Iran, and Al-Qaeda (Khosravi, Aghapouri, & Homehmorad, 2016; Morgan, 2015; Pappas, 2012). Since then, “the American media has accepted the side effects of a stigmatization of Islam, Islamic states, and the Muslims and paved the way for prejudices and offensive statements appearing regularly in televised interviews with leading politicians” (Altwaiji, 2014, p. 315). Despite the high visibility of the perpetuated pillarization against the Muslim image, media's influence on non-Muslim minority groups has only been sparsely explored (Ahmed, 2016; Mähönen, Ihalainen, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013).

The necessity for further empirical research on minority-based perspective on the Muslim image is emphasized by Barlow, Hornsey, Thai, Sengupta, and Sibley's (2013) findings stating that intergroup contact experiences are different for minority groups than they are for majority group members (p. 2). Therein, previous studies on majority group perceptions may have been erroneously extended to minority groups. Another signifying difference between minority and majority group identification is that “minority group members need to relate their attitudes to the attitudes of their ingroup members to a higher extent than majority group members in order to cope with negative contact experiences” (Barlow et al., 2013, p. 224; Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; see also Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). Mähönen, Ihalainen, & Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013) emphasize the timing of conjointly exploring the existing pillarization of minority groups and the development of *minority-minority* contact, which supports the advancement of theoretical development, as well as “prevent *horizontal hostility* among the increasingly diverse immigrant populations” (p. 223).

Aside from eliminating the continued degradation of the Muslim image, the understanding of the unique inter-minority perceptions and the development of cross-cultural awareness has an equally powerful contribution to society. The motivation for this study is to begin exploring areas within the Muslim image that are commonly misunderstood and to begin capturing inter-minority engagement through empirical research.

## Literature Review

The component integrated into ingroup and outgroup association is the underlying prejudice that prevents harmonious interaction. The determination of prejudice is through exploring the existence of ingroup members' biased perceptions that are proportionally more negative toward outgroup members (Goldberg & Rosenfeld, 2014, p. 575; see also Allport, 1958; Reicher, 2012; Tarman, 2017). Prejudicial thinking is the developed mindset that may lead to potential discrimination of bigotry as displayed through action. Identifying the roots of prejudice has the potential to allow researchers and educators to develop more active interventions to prevent horizontal hostility.

Due to the macrolevel generalizability of this study, the application of *metaprejudice* is more aptly applied by looking at a combined group perspective, rather than individual. There are two categorizations of metaprejudice: *ingroup metaprejudice* and *outgroup metaprejudice*. Goldberg and Rosenfeld (2014) define the delineation between these two classifications as ingroup metaprejudice being the perception of how group members believe their own group is perceived by an outgroup, whereas an outgroup metaprejudice is the perception of how outgroup members perceive members of the ingroup (p. 575). Both mindsets are founded on group norms based on a collective assumption that dehumanizes intergroup relationships and interaction. This line of thought is propagated by the influence of group members to align their thinking and actions with that of the group (2014). Due to this norm synchronization, Putra (2014) propositioned that ingroup metaprejudice is a stronger contributor to ongoing prejudice (Raba' & Harzallah, 2018; see also Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000) and is also more influential than the effect of outgroup metaprejudice (p 575).

The influential pressure of upholding ingroup norms and interacting with outgroup members often generates a level of stress; therein, causing what has been classified as *intergroup anxiety* (Mähönen et al., 2013). Research on this phenomenon has found a relationship between outgroup attitudes and the development of intergroup anxiety more influential on individuals who have a weaker identification with their ingroup than those with a stronger association (Bizman & Yinon, 2010; Mähönen et al., 2013; Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns, & Christ, 2006; Tausch, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2007). Understanding ingroup members' negatively skewed perceptions of outgroup attitudes toward them has the propensity to generate negative feelings and perceptions, even if the perceptions are incorrect (Goldberg & Rosenfeld, 2014; see, e.g., Saroglou, Yzebyt, & Kaschten, 2011; Vorauer et al., 2000).

Grounded by self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), experienced intergroup anxiety is a stronger predictor to the identification of attitudes toward outgroup members by weakly identified individuals, as described previously, than the presence of group-level threats, i.e., threats to well-being, culture, and material possessions of an ingroup (Gaston, Martinez & Martin, 2016; Mähönen et al., 2013; see also Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Tausch et al., 2007).

The influence of a persons' normative attitudes is dependent on the intensity in which individuals identify with their ingroup (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996). The strength of this association of ingroup identity is indicative of the likelihood of an individual's compliance with the norms of the group (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). The concurrent exploration of both the strength of ingroup identification and existing social norms is even more critical when specifically assessing normative attitudes in adolescents and emerging adults due to "both identity maturation and increasing accountability to perceived social norms" (Mähönen et al., 2013, p.224; e.g., Schiefer, Mçllering, Daniel, Benish-Weisman, & Boehnke, 2012).

The further assessment of the early stages of adulthood and their ingroup identification, due to their increased openness and aptitude to learn, may lead to a potential avenue to mitigate horizontal hostility. This social exploration between intergroup engagements lends to this study's theoretical framework: intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport, 1958; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Yigit, 2018). This theory proposes that intergroup attitudes will improve if the joint interaction places equal status amongst groups and group members, bilateral support and cooperation, and a commonality of goals. The basis of this study is to both span the gap in knowledge on non-Muslim minority students' perceptions of the Muslim image and identify opportunities to improve intergroup relationships, therein minimizing horizontal hostility.

Research Question: How do the experiences of non-Muslim minority university students demonstrate a propensity to rectify/broaden the perspective and understanding of the Muslim image?

## Method

Through the application of both a phenomenological and qualitative inquiry approach (Merriam & Associates, 2002), the potential trends of American non-Muslim minority students' perceptions of the Muslim image were explored in this study. Students from a minority-serving private university in the northwest United States completed an anonymous online questionnaire. Included on this survey were open-ended questions regarding students' knowledge of *basic Islamic vocabulary* (see Table 1), geographical associated locations with Muslim culture, and students' reflection of previous positive and/or negative interactions with individuals who are Muslim. All results were assessed for identifiable codes and developed into encompassing themes and sub-themes.

## Research Design

A phenomenological and qualitative inquiry approach of coding and thematic exploration analysis was applied to students' responses to uncover potential influencers and common misperceptions non-Muslim minority students held regarding the Muslim image. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of the students' personal experiences through the application of open-ended questions (Flick, 2014). This study's research approach of exploring associated responses as relevant codes that were then cross-referenced to discover emerging themes was applied to uncover significant commonalities between participants knowledge, as well as identify any significant outlier responses. It was necessary to apply this approach due to the existing gap in knowledge created by the lack of minority-minority research on the topic of minority-American perspective on Muslim image, which affords researchers the foundation of empirical data gathering to span the void of understanding.

Reliability of the findings was obtained through the initial bracketing of the researchers' personal experiences and knowledge of the Muslim image and then through the application of single-blind triangulation (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Afterward, all developing codes and emerging themes were then matched with existing research and social theoretical constructs to determine the supporting validity needed to establish the foundation for this revolutionary direction of cultural research.

For a larger sample of students at a minority-serving private university target population, the use of an online survey disseminated via electronic mail resulted in 145 respondents. Their ages ranged from 18 to 54 years, of which 56.6% were female. Participants' self-designation of degree programs were from Education (43.4%) and Arts & Science (56.6%). The participant-indicated ethnicity diversity was Hispanic, Latino/a (51.0%); American (15.2%); and Other (14.5%). As the final collected demographic information, the self-reported open-ended question of religious following was 71.1% Christian; none reported being of Islamic faith.

A student-specific distribution list was utilized to send the electronic message inviting all students to participate in the online survey. After acknowledging consent to participate, students answered both the demographic and research specific questions. The researchers maintained the anonymity of all participants using an alpha numeric pseudonym to replace any identifiable information. The collection of data was continued well beyond informational saturation (Merriam & Associates, 2002) and then assessed for emerging themes related to the research question of this study.

## Results

Analysis of non-Muslim minority students' perceptions and experiences of the Muslim image shows that the participants have a more neutral to positive association; however, there is a proportionally large lack or limited understanding of basic Islamic vocabulary and the religious basis (see Table 1). The associated codes resulted in five main themes emerging from the analysis of the participant's responses: *enculturation, geographic association, stigmatization, influencers, and empathy.*

## Enculturation

The participants' collective responses unveiled a focus of the Muslim image as an umbrellaing culture indicated by a line of thought or a form of action representative of a select group of people (Macionis & Gerber, 2011). The self-reported distinctions made by non-Muslim minority students with limited knowledge and exposure to the Muslim image could be a result of an inaccurate understanding of basic Islamic vocabulary and their experiences with Muslim interaction. This combination compared to their own social background separates Islamic beliefs from the fundamental foundation from its inception

as a religious belief, which developed into three sub-themes: *culture*, *movement/activism*, and *people-centric*.

**Culture.** The direct association of Muslim image to culture was directly identified in the participants' responses. For instance, analysis of participants' thoughts toward the word Islam resulted in the following statements: "another culture" (P18), "different culture" (P27), "a culture" (P45), and "another culture of this world" (P112). These direct identifiable statements may be the theoretical context for how non-Muslim minority students understand other associated terminology and practices of Islam. Although this is not entirely incorrect, taken out of context, it may skew students' understanding of the Islamic religion.

**Movement/Activism.** A significantly telling sub-theme pulled from the responses of the minority students not familiar with the presented terminology is the imagery depicting political activism or social movement. When asked the meaning of the word Taliban, participants (P) responded with the following statements: "a Muslim movement taking over Afghanistan" (P8), "group activist" (P16), "Islamic political party" (P20), "a group of people who are radicalized" (P21), "a radical group of Muslims that use force", "political movement" (P44), "radical organization" (P60), "a group of radicals" (P65), "a political group" (P69), "a group of radical individuals" (P104), "group of people who rebel against the government" (P108), "a rebel group causing problems in Afghanistan" (P116), and "rebels" (P118). This politicization of terminology shows a slanted understanding that may potentially contort non-Muslim minority students' perceptions of any associated context and therein overgeneralize the activism to all followers of Islam.

**People-Centric.** A more distinguishable misconception of Islam is the term's use to describe a type of person instead of religion. Another response when asked about thoughts toward the term Islam, participants responded in a more neutral manner: "I picture people from Iraq" (P2), "I think of people from the Middle East. Women who don't show their face or hair" (P3), "nothing, it's just another person" (P19), "a group of people" (P21), "religious people" (P77), and "people who are mistreated" (P140). Another misinterpretation to the term Jihad is its use as a description of a group of people, which is notable in the following response: "A sect of middle eastern people that may or may not be of Islam but are of a radical belief system that has been passed down for centuries" (P25).

The contextual application of the specific vocabulary used in this study to a people-centric focus demonstrates the application of terminology to the creation of a schema depicting the enculturation of individuals to the Muslim image. Although the cognitive processing may not be entirely incorrect, this skewed perception has the potential of creating the misunderstanding of the Islamic religion and therein create a stereotyping heuristic that non-Muslim minority students may be applying to others around them.

### Geographic Association

The more placid sub-theme emerging from the participants responses is the segmentation of the Muslim image to a distinct geographic location. The cross identification of Muslim image as it relates to a specific area discredits the global access or traditional roots that Islam is grounded in. Through the inquiry of what participants thought when cued with the term Islam, they responded with the following: "I picture people from Iraq" (P2), "middle west country" (P5), "a place" (P14), "Iraq" (P41, P90), "a town" (P43), "Jerusalem" (P49), "that they are from another place, and not here" (P61), "I think if the Middle East" (P65, P123), "from Islam, Middle East, desert" (P94), "I think about the country of Islam and about the condition of the country now" (P108), and "the desert" (P138). Although benign in appearance, the specific geographic association segregates the non-Muslim minority students from recognizing the current global footprint of the Muslim image.

### Stigmatization

The above-mentioned perceptions of the participants of this study are telling of the developing stigmatization toward the Muslim image and therein developing into two sub-themes: *indifference* and *antagonistic perspective*. With the limited experience or understanding of Islamic religion, non-Muslim minority students revealed through their responses the numbing effect of external influencers using neutral terminology in a perpetually negative context. Another revelation in the participants' responses is the developing prejudicial focus toward the Muslim image. The potential of continued aggravation may develop from an existing distancing to a discriminatory precedence of horizontal hostility between minority-minority groups.

**Indifference.** The aforementioned numbing effect is indicative of participants' responses that demonstrate an indifference toward Muslim image vocabulary. This is seen sparsely through the collected response to the word Islam, as seen in the following statements: "I don't really think anything of it" (P9)

and “nothing, it’s a belief” (131). The importance of drawing attention to this relatively small coding is to recognize the ramifications of what it may represent. Therein, the potential of having a disassociated response has the propensity to lend itself to dehumanized approach toward a religion. If left unaddressed, the resulting influence can have a more derogatory impact on how the Muslim image is perceived.

**Antagonistic Perspective.** The detectable influence of external influences demonstrating an inflammatory bias based on inaccurate interpretations is evident in the collected responses of this study. Several of the participants showed a shared antagonistic perspective when asked what their thoughts to the prompt term Islam, “war” (P13), “refugees, terrorists” (P15, P56, P83), “...brown people, Persian, oil, terrorism, fascist, angry, misunderstood, hate-mongrels, religion stepped in violence, oppressive, abusive” (P25), “mistreatment” (P33), “I have negative thoughts” (P46), “a violent religion” (P53), “A religion who’s Bible (the Quran) tells them that whoever does not believe in Allah must be put to death. However, there are some who do not abide by this rule” (P70), “terrorism, radical views, no respect for life” (P81), “fear” (P115), “conflict” (P125), “I see them as a group of people who are trying to corrupt the mind of generation into thinking that Islam oppresses women inflicts terror and uses name of Islam for their actions” (P130), “war” (P144).

In continuation of the antagonistic attitude evident in the responses, participants responded to the term Taliban, meaning student, to primarily be interpreted as “terrorist” (P5, P6, P26, P32, P43, P57, P66, P68, P79, P85, P96, P105, P135, P139, P141, P145). Other inaccurate meaning in the responses also resulted in the following: “extremist” (P11, P76, P89); “a sect of Middle Eastern people that are largely identified as terrorist for their violence and uneducated nature” (P25); “women repression” (P27); “terrorist group started by Osama Bin Laden” (P46); “a small country with a terrorist group” (P47); “someone we are at war with” (P61); “bad people” (P62, P86, P90); “a fundamentalist group that has caused war and strife in Afghanistan” (P63); “local militia and terrorist group in Afghanistan” (P73); “organized group of believers that perpetrate destruction on other cultures” (P74); “religious group that has taken over countries” (P81); “hate” (P82); “an organization that is at war with the more secular government of Afghanistan” (P93); “a group or organization with a leader that leads followers to carry out crimes/warfare against other nations/countries” (P95); “militant gangster insurgents mostly removed from power in Afghanistan who now mostly operate from Pakistan” (121); “I see them as a group of people who trying to corrupt the mind of generation into thinking that Islam oppresses women, inflicts terror, and uses name of Islam for their actions” (P130); and “evil” (P132). Additional negatively slanted responses of participants were identified when participants were asked the meaning of Jihad, which translates as the word struggle. The resulting misperceived interpretations were the following: “terrorist” (P13, P96); “war”, “religious war”, or “fight” (P21, P27, P28, P41, P46, P66, P69, P71, P73, P74, P75, P78, P81, P89, P104, P105, P114, P125, P127); “a declaration of war against free people” (P53); “extremist” (P68); “hate” (P82); “a racial slur” (P120); “sin” (P123); and “Holy war as listed in Quran. Resemble the genocides/attacks that Muhammad had been involved in, a decade before his own death” (P136).

The continual association of inflammatory misperceptions with the presented basic Islamic vocabulary may be contributing to the negative stigmatization of the Muslim image. Through the acknowledgment and correction of the inaccuracies of how the terminology of this study was applied, this effort may stem more positive minority-minority interaction. However, before pursuing this endeavor, it is important to explore the possible influential factors non-Muslim minority students are currently experiencing to develop their existing understanding of the Muslim image.

## Influencers

There is a distinguishable lack of reference of how the participants directly developed their understanding of the Muslim image; however, what was self-reported by the participants were grouped into two sub-themes: *exposure* and *media*.

**Exposure.** When prompted by the researchers for the participants to discuss their experiences of interacting with others who were Muslim, a proportional number reported having neither positive nor negative personal interactions. Of the smaller number of participants who described social exchanges, descriptions were vastly more positive. Of those who reported negative interchanges, they also had positive. None of the participants in this study reported only having negative experiences. Examples of positive interactions are as follows: “Yes. I have friends that are Muslim. They are as passionate as us when it comes to helping our community and others. They have feelings. They love. They are loyal. They are extremely smart” (P1); “Countless. I spend two years learning Arabic and have lived in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Jordan as well as visited several other Muslim countries” (P28); “I have only had positive experiences with the people I’ve met who are Muslim. My interactions were no different than if they weren’t Muslim, so

I don't really have any specific details" (P67); "I've Never encountered a Muslim that I didn't like" (P128); and "Yes. I have quite a few Muslim friends, I have met their families as well" (P144);

I have a quite a few friends who are Muslim, and they are wonderful people. They aren't terrorists, and they don't hate Americans. They came to America from Bosnia to get escape the civil wars that were destroying their country. Getting to know them has been awesome for me because otherwise I might never know that Muslim doesn't equate to terrorist like a lot of people believe. (P63);

Yes. I was at an international airport and took up conversation with a Muslim. We talked about Islam and how being atheist doesn't necessarily mean not believing in anything. He was very nice and I learned a lot about Islam and Muslim culture. When we parted ways, he told me he was very touched that I wished to learn more about the culture and that I hope life brings what I hope it will bring for me. It was a very positive experience. (P104); and

Yes, a foreign exchange student at my high school and I became very close friends. She is from Yemen and we are still in touch through social media. She explained her culture to me and I find it fascinating how diverse our world really is. (P108)

Examples of negative reported interactions are as follows: "Yes, my ex-husband" (P4);

Yes, my friend and I were discussing Islam histories, and more, to which a Muslim person (who I would take as a practicing Islam) yelled at us and said we did not know what we were talking about and that white people should mind their own business (P25);

"Yes. I was attacked and beaten by three men on the street while living in Jordan" (P28); "Yes, they bomb Manchester, Las Vegas, New York and oppress women. Islam is terrorism, they hate America and we need to protect our Americans" (P46); "Overseas I have had a lot of negative interactions with Muslims. When they weren't trying to kill me they were raping little boys, beating their wives or throwing acid on their faces" (P53); "Only one but he was psychotic so the negative experience had little to do with his religion" (P68); "Yes, they bomb Manchester, Las Vegas, New York and oppress women. Islam is terrorism, they hate America and we need to protect our Americans" (P112);

Yes. I was in Turkey, and I tried to get a taxi, but because I was a woman, the taxi driver refused to take me, and he required triple to amount of regular fare for me to go to where I wanted to go. (P115);

"Yes. Multiple deployments in combat zones post 9-11. They were trying to kill us, but to be fair they could say the same thing about me" (P119); and "Yes. I served a mission for my church in France and was slapped and head butted by a Muslim who didn't agree with my religion" (P127).

Of the responses given an overwhelming majority speak to direct interactions that the participants shared with individuals who were Muslim. Only a minute number of the negative responses were a generalized perception based on indirect contact with someone who was Muslim. This leads to the need to explore how non-Muslim minority students' perceptions of the Muslim image are influenced. If not based entirely on personal contact and experiences, what other potential social factors may be contributing to this social pillarization?

**Media.** Four participants identified media as the specific influence for the basis of their gained knowledge. These four given responses were, "No, never. Only ones presented by media" (P87);

I think of the religion. I don't think it is bad, but from what I have seen portrayed in movies and such, I always tend to feel bad for Muslim women. I think that they are not treated very well, but I'm not sure if that is true (P96); and

"The issues that have been brought up, could have been associated from the news as a negative image" (P101); "I don't know enough about Islam. Most of what I know is what the media says. I would like to know more about the people" (P116). Although the proportionate number of responses indicated that the participants did not know or were unfamiliar with the basic Islamic vocabulary, there was a recognizable willingness, as seen in the previously noted responses, a recognition that there is more to learn and a desire to seek a deeper understanding.

## Empathy

A significant interpersonal component evident in the participants' responses is the internalized self-reported appreciation for others who are Muslim. This extension of compassion developed from both the phenomenological and qualitative inquiry portions of this study and resulted in two sub-themes capturing this overarching concept of empathy toward others: *recognized persecution* and *engagement*. Both are a combination of emotional and analytical perceptions to understanding others and, therein, reveal a stronger sentiment shared within a proportionate number of responses.

**Recognized Persecution.** The non-Muslim minority students who participated in this study only had a rudimentary understanding of the Muslim image; however, they are aware of the oppressive

maltreatment directed against those who are Muslim. When participants were asked about their thoughts on Islam, they responded with the following: “misunderstood (P25, P78, P93); “religion that is recognized by uneducated people as terrorist” (P75); “love and ignorance by others” (P88); “they’re human just like everyone else...people try to make them seem like they’re all bad but I see them as genuine people, the ones I’ve met so far of course” (P110); “peacefully people who are categorized as all being terrorists because some people’s choices” (P141); “even though I wish I wouldn’t and I don’t have anything against Muslims, I resort to thinking about ISIS” (P142). The participants’ awareness signifies an empathetic response, which is a necessary antecedent toward taking the initiative to rectify the negative stigmatization caused by discrimination.

**Engagement.** Throughout the participants’ responses, there were both cognitive and action-based interest of either interacting or learning more about the Muslim image. Shared within the students’ responses to the prompt Islam were the following cognitive reactions: “interesting” (P7); “not much...interest, intriguing” (P12); “different and beautiful” (P51); and as shared before, “I don’t know enough about Islam. Most of what I know is what the media says. I would like to know more about the people” (P116). When describing the positive interactions participants experienced with Muslims, they shared the following action-based responses: “Countless. I spent two years learning Arabic and have lived in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Jordan, as well as visited several other Muslim countries” (P28) and,

I have quite a few friends who are Muslim, and they are wonderful people. They aren't terrorists, and they don't hate Americans. They came to America from Bosnia to escape the civil wars that were destroying their country. Getting to know them has been awesome for me because otherwise I might never know that Muslim doesn't equate to terrorist like a lot of people believe” (P63)

The noteworthiness of these emerging themes revealed significant components to both social interaction and general understanding of this unique minority-minority interface. Although the responses were indicative of existing prejudicial influence, such as that of the mainstream media, participants also recognized that their perceptions were biasedly influenced and desire to seek a clearer and more meaningful understanding of the Muslim image. It is through this willingness to learn that the foundation to destigmatize of the Muslim image may be possible through potential encouraged interaction and educational efforts.

## Discussion

Non-Muslim minority students report a fractured understanding of the Muslim image; however, they indicate a willingness and interest in learning more. Directly stemming the ongoing stigmatization is not the only approach to remedying this negative social trend; efforts may also be directed through interaction-based interventions as proposed in Allport’s (1958) theory on intergroup contact. The strengthening of minority-minority collaboration has the potential of having a longer reaching impact on the minimization of horizontal hostility due to “increased levels of education (being) associated with decreased levels of xenophobia and nationalist sentiment...indicating that an enhanced level of education is something worth striving for” (Hjerm, 2001, p. 56).

To address the limited knowledge identified in the findings of this study, an educational curriculum can be created to address two essential directions of heightening cultural awareness: increased social integration and media-directed critical thinking. Each area targets a specific shortcoming and, therein, creates a multifaceted awareness incorporating individualized experiences. This cultivation of personalized awareness is what anchors the significance of meaning for those open to learn more about the Muslim image warding off the emerging indifference found in this study’s findings.

Due to the minimal representation of the Muslim image within some communities, as exemplified by the location of this study, the prospect to encourage intergroup contact and discussion creates an opening for strengthened intergroup appreciation (Putra, 2014) before the onset of horizontal hostility takes root. As cited by Putra (2014), “One way toward intergroup conflict resolution is through building perceptions that other groups’ values may bolster group values and status. In contrast, intergroup conflict may be maintained when each group identifies that the other group’s values can undermine ingroup values” (p. 576). Open dialogue can be established on the foundational information of religion and culture as a means of intergroup communal sharing of knowledge between minority-minority groups. This can also help to dispel the inaccuracies between what has been previously assumed to be correct to the actual basic vocabulary, practices, and beliefs of all cultures, Muslim and non-Muslim.

The quintessential component to enhance intergroup collaboration and nullify ingroup-outgroup conflict is to generate opportunities for integrated contact between groups. Although educational interventions may be conducted separately, there is a potentially stronger outcome if groups were

intermixed while learning about each other's religions and cultural practices. This not only creates the possibility for intergroup dialogue of shared experiences, it also allows for proximity of association that potentially may be the first contact for some members between groups.

The simultaneous effort to make group members more aware of the influence of mainstream media and foster an awareness to the presentation of biased information is also critical in the stemming of horizontal hostility. Group members can be shown how to determine the validity (accuracy of how information is presented) and reliability (consistency of reporting using multiple sources) of media reporting, not limited to just standard media but can be extended to social media, as well. Through repeated efforts of information seeking, individuals may be able to develop the necessary awareness of biased reporting, which is all too often seen in mainstream media (Altwaiji, 2014; Mähönen et al., 2013; Morgan, 2015; Pappas, 2012; Said, 2000). This empowers individuals to take ownership of how their learned understanding is influenced by external sources that will stem any existing antagonistic perspective or indifference.

Nonetheless, this study is not without some limitations. Although the sample population was expansive for the qualitative research design, the findings cannot be extended to other non-Muslim minority groups due to the geographical separation of the data collection location used for this study. Future research navigated by the findings of this study lead to the potential of replication studies that vary in location, sampled minority-groups, and educational curriculum practices. As the reliability of the findings of these suggested studies align with the findings of the current study, a specific analysis into existing fixed-mindsets (Dweck, 2006) may be explored to identify specific groups where pre-post surveys can be conducted using a culturally enriched educational interventions to thwart cross-cultural ignorance and prejudices.

## Conclusion

Through understanding the foundational impact of how social influencers have on non-Muslim minority students, educators and learned members of society can directly address the awareness of stigmatized reporting through mainstream media. A concerted effort to correct the preexisting inaccuracies paired with fostering an awareness of biased reporting and increasing opportunities to encourage minority-minority interaction, learners transform into social ambassadors within their communities. This tactic has the potential of exponentially extending cultural sharing of learned knowledge and experiences to combat horizontal hostility across minority-minority groups and foster positive intergroup engagement.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

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Table 1.

*Basic Islamic Vocabulary - Survey Questionnaire Assessment*

Vocabulary	Translation	% Correct or Partially Correct	Most Common Interpretation(s) <sup>a</sup>
Taliban student	1.38	terrorist	
Sharia	Islamic law	21.37	religious group
Jihad	struggle	5.52	war
Shawarma	pita sandwich with lamb	18.62	a person
Sheikh	tribal leader	13.10	money <sup>b</sup> /temple <sup>b</sup>
Hijab	head covering	51.72	hat <sup>b</sup> /dress <sup>b</sup>
Haram	forbidden, prohibited	5.52	group of women
Hadji	someone who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca	11.72	something worn
Xenophobia	religion-based discrimination	36.55	a television show <sup>b</sup>

Note. *N* = 145. "I do not know" was the most common response to all prompts.

<sup>a</sup>The response "I do not know" was omitted from consideration.

<sup>b</sup>Only one participant provided the indicated response.