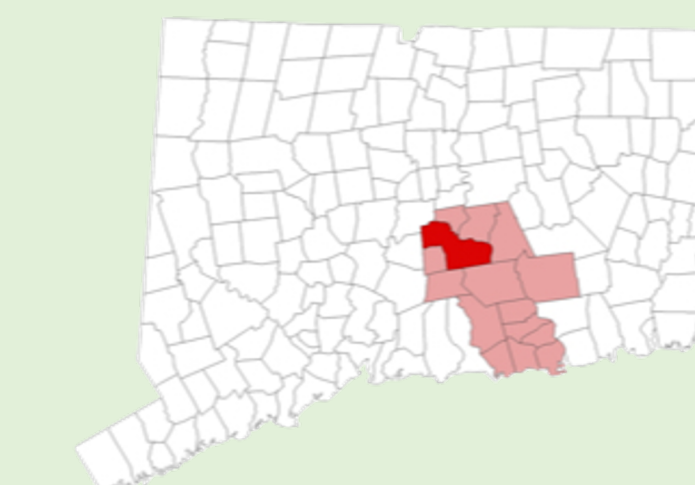




How Religious Practices Support & Empower Muslims Despite Experiences of Islamophobia Towards Their Religious Identities



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Introduction

Past research and literature on the topic of Muslims and their experiences in the United States have often focused only on the negative interactions and their impacts on the lives of Muslims, instead of recognizing the positive experiences that may have positive consequences such as feeling supported and empowered.

I conducted two research studies on experiences with Islamophobia and empowerment among Muslims living in the United States. These studies contribute to the research in Psychology because they were able to portray a fuller, more accurate picture of Muslim individuals' experiences with their religious identity and religious practices by showcasing their humanity, strengths, and resilience in the way they seek and find support and empowerment.

The studies presented underline the importance of recognizing Muslim communities in the United States as a group that is usually stereotyped and marginalized. While it was crucial to represent the participants' experiences with discrimination and Islamophobia in both Study 1 and Study 2, it was also necessary to bring into light the supporting and empowering aspects of this religious identity.

Methods

Study 1:

- Study 1 included 190 self-identified Muslims (96 women, 94 men) living in the United States.
- The majority of participants (153) were born in the U.S.
- Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 71 years old and averaged 33.67 years old with a standard deviation of 12.080.
- The sample reflected the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of U.S. Muslims.
- With regards to being Muslim presenting, 82 participants reported observing Islamic dress (i.e., wearing a hijab/headscarf/turban, niqab, burqa, jilbab, abaya, thawb, or kufi cap) whereas 108 participants reported not observing Islamic dress.

Study 2:

- Study 2 included 102 self-identified Muslims (58 women, 44 men) living in the United States.
- The majority of participants (89) were born in the U.S.
- Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 52 years old and averaged 32.64 years old with a standard deviation of 8.903.
- The sample reflected the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of U.S. Muslims.
- 62 participants reported observing Islamic dress (i.e., wearing modest clothing, a hijab/headscarf/turban, niqab, burqa, jilbab, abaya, thawb, or kufi cap), 33 participants reported not observing Islamic dress, and 5 participants preferred not to answer this question.

Procedure:

- Participants completed both Study 1 and Study 2 through Cloud Research Panels and received compensation according to the platform through which they entered the study. All participants received an informed consent and a debriefing form. In order for participants to be included in the study, they had to self-identify as Muslim. The survey was launched via Qualtrics.

Measures:

- Study 1 used mixed methods methodology.
- Quantitative measures were used to assess participants' emotional feelings about being Muslim, their level of religiosity through Rodríguez Mosquera and colleagues' adaptation of Abu Raija's Religious Coping scale, Muslim ingroup identification through Leach and colleagues' centrality subscale.
- Qualitative measures were used to assess the challenges participants experience as Muslim identifying, how other peoples' perceptions of the participants as Muslims have an effect on their lives, and how participants' practices as Muslims support them in their lives.
- These qualitative measures were presented to the participants through an open-ended question and the responses were analyzed using content analysis.
- Study 2 used quantitative measures to assess emotional feelings about challenges experienced due to being Muslim, religious coping, Muslim ingroup identification, racial ingroup identification, and cultural ingroup identification.
- Additionally, I developed quantitative measures based on the participants' responses to Study 1 qualitative questions and the responses that emerged from the content analysis. One scale measured the negative and positive effects of others' perceptions of self. A second scale measured three ways in which Muslim identity and religious/spiritual practice offer support.
- In this poster, I will be discussing the findings of one of the qualitative questions about support and empowerment from Study 1.
- More specifically, I present the content analysis results of responses to the open-ended question "How does your practice as a Muslim support you in your life?"

Results

The participants' responses were divided into statements and each one was allocated to one response category. In total, 226 statements were differentiated in the participants' answers to this question, and each was allocated to only one response category.

The participants mainly reported their practice guiding their morals and values, disciplining them, and making them better people as a form of support in their lives as Muslims.

Of the 226 statements, 18.58% belonged to the category *Positive Comments about Islam & Being Muslim*. The statements generated from this category represented participants' need to share positive aspects about Islam and their identities as Muslims. In other words, this question became a chance for participants to share how much being a Muslim is an important and positive aspect of their lives, as opposed to speaking directly about how their specific practices provided them with support.

14.16% of statements belonged to the response category *Makes me a Better Person* where participants shared that their religious and spiritual practices as Muslims support them by growing on a personal level and improving themselves as individuals.

Provides Courage & Empowerment, Short Superlative Positive Words, Community Support, Spiritually Grounded, and Peace & Comfort included between 11.5% and 7.08% of the statements in participants' answers.

The response category *Provides Courage & Empowerment* referred to statements where participants shared that their practice supported them by making them feel strong, brave, resilient, courageous, or other emotions that resemble empowerment.

The table below presents the response categories that emerged from the content analysis results of the 'support' qualitative question of Study 1

Table 1
Supporting Practices as Muslim Identifying: Frequency and Percentage of Statements Coded into Response Categories

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Positive Comments about Islam & Being Muslim	42	18.58%
Makes me a Better Person	32	14.16%
Provides Courage & Empowerment	26	11.5%
Short Superlative Positive Words	25	11.06%
Community Support	21	9.29%
Spiritually Grounded	16	7.08%
Peace & Comfort	16	7.08%
Hope	8	3.54%
Happy	6	2.65%
Helps Physical & Mental Health	6	2.65%
Not Sure How It Supports	5	2.21%
Proud	4	1.77%
Grateful	4	1.77%
Unique	15	6.64%
Unclear*	29	

*Unclear responses were not included in the calculations of percentages of statements as they refer to answers that were not related to the question.

Participants' Statements

'Positive Comments about Islam & Being Muslim' response category verbatim statements:

"Me practicing my religion is a very important part of my daily life. It's the reason I pray 5 times a day, dress the way I do, and strive to be a better person."

"I'm so much grateful and thankful for being a Muslim and I have never regret it"

"I love my religion"

"I love my islam"

'Makes me a Better Person' response category verbatim statements:

"It's makes me treat people more fairly and kindly. ..."

"It helps my grow to being a better person ..."

"It helps me improve myself every day"

'Provides Courage & Empowerment' response category verbatim statements:

"It gives me the strenght to make it thru everyday,no matter what."

"-it helps me get through each & everyday"

"Practicing my religion helps to keep me strong and focused on what really matters."

Discussion

- Muslim participants shared how being Muslim provided them with various types of support in their lives and emphasized how much that identity helped them in their lives.
- For many participants, support and empowerment took form in their religious and spiritual practice as Muslims. For others, it was the family, the culture, and the community that provided that. Some Muslims even experienced a combination of forms of support in their lives from that identity. For example, the content analysis showed that the most frequent types of support reported by participants were making the participants better people, providing them with courage and empowerment, finding support through their community, and finding support through being spiritually grounded.
- This poster did not discuss the second study, however, Study 2 served as a follow-up study where we asked the participants to rate how true it is that religious identity or practice supports them in three different forms (i.e., emotional/spiritual support, support for physical and mental health, and support to improve self) to further ensure the recognition of sources of empowerment for Muslims. This scale was developed based on the response categories that emerged from the content analysis results of this qualitative question from Study 1.

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