

## Breaking Barriers: *Niqab*-Wearing Female Students Challenging Stigma in Academia

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the experiences of *niqab*-wearing female students at the State Islamic Institute of Kendari (Institut Agama Islam Negeri – IAIN Kendari), the sole public Islamic higher education institution in Southeast Sulawesi, as they navigate academic life amid prevailing social stigma and the absence of institutional policies regarding *niqab* usage. The *niqab* is frequently associated with stereotypes of exclusivity and extremism, and is often perceived as a barrier to social interaction and academic participation. Utilising a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions involving 15 female students who wear the *niqab*. The findings indicate that the lack of formal regulations concerning the use of the *niqab* generates ambiguity regarding institutional standards and student behavior. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrate resilience through adaptive strategies, such as using social media platforms for self-expression and solidarity. They also display emotional maturity in managing stigma while remaining active in academic and extracurricular activities. Drawing on Self-Presentation Theory and Social Adjustment Theory, the study reveals that *niqab*-wearing students employ friendliness, openness, humour, and academic achievement to counter negative perceptions. Social media further serves as a vital space for articulating perspectives and fostering community. This research highlights the need for inclusive policies in Islamic higher education and contributes to broader discussions on religious diversity, gender, and inclusivity within multicultural academic settings in Eastern Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Islamic higher education; *niqab*; religious identity; social adaptation.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa yang menggunakan *niqab* di Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kendari, satu-satunya lembaga pendidikan tinggi Islam negeri di Sulawesi Tenggara, dalam menjalani kehidupan akademik di tengah stigma sosial yang ada dan ketiadaan kebijakan institusional terkait penggunaan *niqab*. Penggunaan *niqab* sering dikaitkan dengan stereotip eksklusivitas dan ekstremisme dan dianggap sebagai penghalang interaksi sosial dan partisipasi akademik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan diskusi kelompok terarah yang melibatkan 15 mahasiswa yang menggunakan *niqab*. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tidak adanya peraturan formal mengenai penggunaan *niqab* menyebabkan ambiguitas mengenai sikap institusi dan perilaku mahasiswa. Para mahasiswa ini menunjukkan ketangguhan melalui strategi adaptasi yang kreatif, termasuk menggunakan media sosial sebagai platform untuk mengekspresikan diri. Mereka juga menunjukkan kedewasaan emosional dalam

menghadapi stigma dengan tetap aktif dalam kegiatan akademik dan ekstrakurikuler. Berdasarkan Teori Presentasi Diri dan Teori Penyesuaian Sosial, penelitian ini menggambarkan bagaimana mahasiswa yang mengenakan *niqab* menggunakan keramahan, keterbukaan, humor, dan keunggulan akademis untuk melawan persepsi negatif. Selain itu, media sosial berfungsi sebagai ruang untuk mengekspresikan perspektif mereka dan membangun solidaritas. Penelitian ini menggarisbawahi perlunya kebijakan inklusif dalam pendidikan tinggi Islam dan berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas tentang keragaman agama, gender, dan inklusivitas dalam lingkungan akademis multikultural di Indonesia Timur.

**Kata kunci:** Pendidikan tinggi Islam; *Niqab*; Identitas agama; Adaptasi sosial.

## 1. Introduction

The *niqab*, or face covering veil, has evolved from a personal attire choice into a “symbolic battleground” igniting debates on identity, religion, and freedom in Indonesia. Its use by Muslim women, particularly in Indonesia, remains controversial due to differing Islamic interpretations and societal views. Some regard the *niqab* as a religious obligation, while others consider it a reflection of “Middle Eastern culture” irrelevant to Indonesia’s dress traditions (Ahmad, Muniroh, & Nurani, 2021; Dzuhayatin, 2020). Women wearing the *niqab* are frequently subjected to stigmas, such as association with extremism, exclusivity, and literalist ideologies, making societal acceptance more challenging (Ratri, 2011). These stigmas extend into the academic sphere, where *niqab*-wearing students often face institutional barriers and discriminatory attitudes, such as institutional bans (Juliani, 2018), raising concerns about how they manage their academic responsibilities while navigating complex social environments. Despite the increasing prevalence of *niqab* use, particularly in Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia, research remains limited regarding the nuanced social dynamics surrounding this practice.

The use of the *niqab* in higher education has become a contentious issue. For many Muslim female students, it represents not only religious expression but also personal identity (Garcia Yeste, El Miri Zeguari, Álvarez, & Morlà Folch, 2020). Still, it is often stigmatised as a symbol of extremism and terrorism (Kistoro et al., 2020). Some universities responded with outright bans, frequently citing security or academic integration concerns (A. A. Alim & Azani, 2024), leading to institutional discrimination (Chaudry, 2021; Qibtiyah, Dzuhayatin, Bouras, & Noorkamilah, 2023). These tensions highlight the continuous struggle to balance religious expression with inclusive educational policies. In Indonesia, despite the controversy, the number of *niqab*-wearing students continues to grow on many Islamic campuses, driven by both spiritual and personal motivations (Burhanuddin & Khairuddin, 2022). Many of these students uphold Pancasila but oppose leaders with differing religious identities (Pirol & Aswan, 2021). While some campuses strive to balance anti-radicalism policies with student freedoms, others enforce bans for security reasons (Hanafiah et al., 2019), reflecting the complex negotiation of identity within the intersection of religious values, individual freedom, and institutional policies in Indonesia.

Previous studies on the use of the *niqab* within the context of higher education globally across various countries have demonstrated that the *niqab* possesses multidimensional meanings that reflect Muslim women’s religious identity, agency, and resistance. In Western countries, *niqab*-wearing female students frequently encounter discrimination and negative stereotypes, as observed in the United Kingdom and the United States, where the *niqab* is often perceived as a symbol of threat to secular values (Allen, 2015; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Albrecht et.al. (2014) notes that Muslim female students at the University of Pretoria in South Africa adapt to the culture by integrating traditional Islamic attire with Western styles, reflecting a bicultural identity. In the context of liberal higher education institutions such as the American University of Beirut (AUB), *niqab*-wearing female students strive to balance conservative values with the liberal campus culture, illustrating a complex negotiation of

identity (Itani, 2016; Oba, 2009). In Pakistan, research indicates that the motivations for wearing the *niqab* include familial pressure, personal preference, as well as religious and cultural factors. (M. M. Khan, Azhar, Abiden, Ullah, & Rana, 2023). In Iran, the *niqab* is a tool for women to negotiate familial support in accessing education. However, this access is often restricted to certain fields of study due to gender segregation (Shavarini, 2006). Similarly, in the context of higher education in Indonesia, *niqab*-wearing women are often associated with Salafi movements and face stereotypes of extremism, despite viewing the *niqab* as an expression of piety (Nisa, 2012, 2013, 2022). Overall, this study demonstrates that the use of the *niqab* in higher education not only reflects religious adherence but also serves as a battleground for the interplay between individual freedom, social integration, and cultural dynamics.

Despite various previous studies addressing the use of the *niqab* within the context of higher education, both globally and locally in Indonesia, these studies appear to have inadequately explored how *niqab*-wearing women develop strategies to confront negative stigma while achieving academic success, particularly as members of minority groups. This research gap includes a lack of focus on their social adaptation in academic environments often fraught with challenges. This study aims to fill this void by examining the social adaptation processes, strategies for confronting stigma, and academic achievements of *niqab*-wearing women within the context of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, particularly in Southeast Sulawesi, part of Eastern Indonesia. The prevalence of *niqab* wearers in this region is significant and continues growing each year. Thus, this research not only enriches the discourse surrounding the *niqab* in higher education but also offers new perspectives on the academic experiences of *niqab*-wearing female students, especially regarding their ability to overcome social barriers and attain success in academic settings despite social pressures.

While numerous studies have examined public perceptions of women wearing the *niqab* and its legal implications, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding how these women navigate and adapt within academic environments. Existing research often portrays *niqab*-wearing women as passive participants in social narratives, neglecting their active roles in overcoming social and academic challenges. This study addresses that gap by exploring the daily experiences of *niqab*-wearing female students, particularly at the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. This research focuses on students at IAIN Kendari due to its unique social, cultural, and institutional context in Southeast Sulawesi, where IAIN Kendari is the region's sole public Islamic higher education institution. Specific dynamics, such as the increasing number of *niqab*-wearing female students and the predominance of graduates from public schools over *pesantren*, create a distinct environment compared to other institutions. This study fills a gap by exploring how *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari actively develop adaptation strategies and achieve academic success despite the absence of regulation. The focus on IAIN Kendari offers specific insights into how these students navigate their identities in circumstances that are not always found elsewhere. It focuses on their self-presentation and social participation in an environment that may not always be welcoming. Despite facing negative stigma and perceptions of exclusivity, many *niqab*-wearing students at IAIN Kendari have been able to adapt successfully and excel academically. The research poses three main questions: what are the dynamics of *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari, how do they persist despite the stigma, and what are the social implications of wearing the *niqab* within this academic context, from the perspectives of both the students and the broader academic community?

To address the identified research questions, this study adopts two relevant theories. First, self-presentation theory is used to understand how *niqab*-wearing female students manage their self-image while adapting socially and interacting academically at IAIN Kendari. Second, This research employs social adjustment theory to analyse why *niqab*-wearing students at IAIN Kendari adjust to a social environment that may not always support their identity. Self-presentation theory, developed by Erving Goffman, is used to explore how *niqab*-wearing female students manage their self-image in social and academic interactions at IAIN Kendari, often employing "masks" to navigate both conscious and unconscious responses to their environment (Goffman, 2002, 2023). It becomes essential for managing a vulnerable identity in the face of negative stigma (S. Khan, 2020), requiring constant adaptation to societal norms while maintaining personal integrity (Do & Lee, 2013). Social adjustment theory, on the

other hand, analyzes how these students adapt to a social environment that may not fully support their identity, despite critiques of the theory's middle-class bias (Clare & Cairns, 1978; Platt, Weyman, Hirsch, & Hewett, 1980). These theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding *niqab*-wearing students' adaptive strategies and resilience as they balance societal expectations with personal beliefs in both social and academic contexts at IAIN Kendari.

This study utilises a qualitative approach, incorporating sociological and phenomenological research designs to explore the experiences of *niqab*-wearing female students at Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Through purposive sampling, 15 *niqab*-wearing students were selected as primary participants, with additional insights gained from 2 lecturers, two administrative staff, and five non-*niqab*-wearing students. As of 2022, 235 female students at IAIN Kendari have worn the *niqab* since 2015, reflecting a growing trend of *niqab* adoption within the institution. The recruitment of 15 participants was anchored on data saturation, wherein additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights (Etikan, 2016). In qualitative phenomenological research, the emphasis is placed on depth of understanding rather than sample size, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of participants' lived experiences (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Given the specificity of the research focus, this number was deemed sufficient to capture a wide range of perspectives while maintaining methodological rigour. Data collection methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, with thematic analysis applied to interpret the findings. The research is guided by self-presentation and social adjustment theories, analysing how *niqab*-wearing students manage social interactions and adapt to the academic environment. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were rigorously upheld. This comprehensive approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the adaptation strategies and identity negotiations of *niqab*-wearing students in higher Islamic education in Indonesia.

This study is expected to have several important academic and social implications. Academically, it contributes to the literature on social interaction and self-adjustment in higher education environments, particularly concerning minority groups that may face negative social stigma. The findings from this research can serve as a basis for designing more inclusive policies, especially in higher education institutions that may be exclusive of diverse religious expressions. Socially, this study aims to alter the negative perceptions often associated with *niqab*-wearing women by demonstrating that they are also integral members of the academic community, actively contributing to various aspects of campus life. Thus, this research can help promote more constructive dialogue on diversity, tolerance, and inclusivity within Indonesia's higher education context.

## 2. *Niqab*-Wearing Muslim Women in Higher Education Environments: Finding identity

The use of the *niqab* in higher education reflects a complex interplay of social, cultural, and religious dynamics. In various contexts, the *niqab* serves not only as a symbol of religious identity but also as a means of expressing spiritual obedience despite frequently encountering stigma and discrimination. Nisa (2013), through her research in Indonesia, indicates that a significant number of *niqab*-wearing women are often labelled as members of Salafi movements, leading to the perception of the *niqab* as an expression of piety and part of a return to "pure" Islamic teachings. Similarly, in a global context, *niqab* users frequently encounter negative stereotypes associated with symbols of extremism, particularly in more secular academic environments. However, *niqab*-wearing students at the University of Sargodha in Pakistan report that their choice to wear the *niqab* is influenced by familial pressure, personal preference, religious and cultural factors, as well as an effort to protect themselves from harassment (M. M. Khan et al., 2023). A similar situation occurs in the United States, where *niqab*-wearing female students often feel marginalised on campus and face discrimination that leads them to consider removing the *niqab* to continue their education (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Shavarani (2006) revealed that although women in Iran have broad access to higher education, they face social pressure to adhere to traditional rules regarding the wearing of the *niqab*. In this context, the *niqab* becomes a symbol of obedience that helps them gain familial support for pursuing education,

even though their opportunities are limited to certain fields due to gender segregation within educational institutions. In contrast, in West and Southern Africa, implementing the *niqab* faces challenges due to dress codes restricting its use on campus. This situation has sparked controversy among students, as they view these regulations as violating their human rights to practice their religious beliefs (Albrecht et al., 2014; Oba, 2009). A similar situation occurs at the American University of Beirut (AUB), where *niqab*-wearing female students struggle to balance conservative values with the liberal campus culture, even as the number of *niqab*-wearing students continues to rise (Itani, 2016).

Globally, the *niqab* is often viewed as a symbol of resistance against cultural colonialism and negative stereotypes about Islam. For instance, the Muslim Women Against Femen (MWAFF) movement illustrates how Muslim women use the *niqab* to reject colonial narratives of gender subordination and assert the hijab as a symbol of freedom and agency (Satiti, 2021). It aligns with Jamal's perspective (2008), which indicates that the hijab and *niqab* can empower religious female subjects through spiritual commitment. However, the hijab is also frequently politicised, as seen in cases of Islamophobia in the UK, where *niqab*-wearing women are often perceived as a threat to Western values (Allen, 2015). On the other hand, Chapman's research (2016) in the UK and Denmark highlights how *niqab*-wearing female students negotiate their social identities amidst conflicting cultural values. This negotiation process is crucial for their integration into academic environments while maintaining their religious and cultural beliefs.

As a garment with multidimensional meanings, the *niqab* reflects Muslim women's identity, agency, and resistance. In the context of higher education, the *niqab* becomes a battleground between religious expression and the demands of social integration. In Indonesia, the *niqab* is often understood as a strong expression of religious commitment, yet it frequently faces resistance as it is perceived as a symbol of extremism (Nisa, 2012). In Iran, types of veils such as the burqa and *niqab* have distinct connotations, reflecting the social and ethnic identities of women (Mohammadi & Hazeri, 2021). In the context of Western countries, the debate over the ban on the *niqab*, as seen in Germany, highlights the tension between individual freedom and state policies that prioritise cultural integration (Braun, 2017). Thus, the status of the *niqab* in higher education reflects not only issues of clothing but also broader conflicts regarding freedom, identity, and inclusion in an evolving global society. Therefore, this article aims to demonstrate how the attitudes and strategies of *niqab*-wearing students in Eastern Indonesia, specifically at IAIN Kendari in Southeast Sulawesi, confront negative identity stigma by enhancing academic achievement.

### 3. *Niqab*-Wearing Female Students at Eastern Indonesia: The case in IAIN Kendari

The State Islamic Institute of Kendari (IAIN Kendari), the sole public Islamic higher education institution in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, is key in promoting Islamic education in the region. Admission data from 2019–2023 reveals that IAIN Kendari consistently enrolls over 1,000 new students annually from diverse social and educational backgrounds across Indonesia. Notably, the data highlights a predominance of public school graduates among new students, with a relatively low proportion of pesantren alumni, showing a ratio of one pesantren graduate for every ten public school alumni.

The nature of the pesantren curriculum in Southeast Sulawesi explains why so few pesantren graduates register in IAIN Kendari. Many pesantren place a greater emphasis on *tahfizh* programs (Qur'anic memorisation) than on teaching *kitab kuning* (ancient Islamic texts) and classical Islamic literature, as did previous pesantren. Because of their emphasis on *tahfizh*, pesantren graduates in this region lack a broad comprehension of religious knowledge and organisational abilities. The majority of *tahfizh* pesantren alumni are not active in formal religious organisational structures, which could help to develop their collective identity in higher education settings. As a result, many people lack the necessary religious foundation to adjust to the greater levels of religious literacy found in academic settings like IAIN Kendari.

Additionally, many *tahfizh* pesantren in the region are grounded in Salafi ideology, which diverges from traditional pesantren that teach *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *tasawuf* (Sufism). This narrow

curriculum and rigid ideology limit the graduates' religious knowledge, contributing to increased *niqab* usage among female students at IAIN Kendari. Studies highlight the role of two major Salafi organisations—Wahdah Islamiyah (WI) and the Islamic Centre Muadz Bin Jabal (ICM)—in disseminating Salafi teachings in Kendari (N. Alim et. al., 2018). These groups promote strict monotheism, reject shirk, and advocate for Islamic sharia practices, including specific dress codes, such as the *niqab* for women and the rejection of *isbal* (garments hanging below the ankles) for men. Their influence extends to female student enrollment at IAIN Kendari, reflecting the intersection of Salafi ideology with academic life in the region (Danial, 2019). To comprehensively understand this phenomenon, the following is an outline of data related to the growth, motivations, regulations, and academic challenges faced by *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari.

### 3.1. The dynamics of the *niqab* trend among female students

Based on statistical data from interviews with academic staff at IAIN Kendari, the number of *niqab*-wearing female students grew by 3-5% annually from 2019 to 2023, with a noticeable surge during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, which necessitated mask usage, created a favourable context for *niqab* adoption, shifting its perception from a purely religious symbol to a form of health protection. The Faculty of Education and Teacher Training recorded the highest increase, with 7% of its female students adopting the *niqab*. It indicates stronger social and religious influences within the faculty, where Sharia values are more prevalent.

The pandemic acted as a catalyst for the normalisation of *niqab* use. Ricca (2022) highlights that health crises often shift social norms, enabling the acceptance of behaviours previously seen as unusual. Similarly, Syed (2021) found that new health-related norms, such as mask-wearing, facilitated social adaptation, reducing the ideological stigma surrounding practices like the *niqab*. Thus, the pandemic provided a crucial moment for the increased acceptance and usage of the *niqab* among female students at IAIN Kendari.

### 3.2. Motivations for wearing the *niqab* among female students

Research on the use of the *niqab* by female students at IAIN Kendari reveals motivations that extend beyond religious ideology, encompassing social, familial, and institutional factors. Some informants mentioned that the use of the *niqab* began due to institutional rules at their previous educational institutions. One student expressed:

"I started wearing the *niqab* while at the pesantren because it was the rule there. Now, I find it hard to take it off because I am already known this way among my family and friends. I fear that if I remove it, I will be accused of being worse than what I am facing now" (AS, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 16, 2021).

This finding aligns with Hoodfar's view (2001) that the motivation to wear the hijab or *niqab* is often influenced more by social pressures and institutional policies than by pure religious doctrine. Family influence is also significant, as expressed by another informant: "I wear the *niqab* because it is my parents' wish, who often attend Salafi studies" (AS, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 16, 2021). It supported the view of Ahmed-Ghosh (2008) and Rinaldo (2014), who note that social pressures within religious communities often compel individuals to adhere to specific dress codes.

In addition to social pressures, the *niqab* is worn for pragmatic reasons, such as covering physical imperfections or as protection against harassment. One informant mentioned, "I intentionally wear the *niqab* because I had an accident and feel embarrassed to show my face" (SM, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 19, 2021). Another informant added, "I feel safe wearing the *niqab* because since I started wearing it, no man has bothered me" (SM, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 19, 2021). This perspective reflects the findings of Albrecht et al. (2014) at the University of Pretoria, which indicate that Islamic clothing can be a tool for navigating social pressures and constructing dual identities within a multicultural context. Gökarıksel & Secor (2012) note that

religious clothing, including the *niqab*, often serves to protect women's bodies from social control in public spaces.

This research also reveals that the motivation for wearing the *niqab* at IAIN Kendari goes beyond theological needs. As found by Franks (2000), in Europe, Muslim women wear the *niqab* to protect their privacy and avoid social pressures. These findings are supported by Gökarıksel & Secor (2012), Baulch & Pramianti (2018), and Amir (2019), who note that religious clothing often reflects responses to social and institutional challenges, including harassment and stigma. Additionally, Nisa (2022) concludes that the *niqab* is not solely rooted in religious commitment but reflects efforts to protect privacy and maintain dignity.

However, these findings indicate the complexity of *niqab* usage, reflecting a negotiation between beliefs, practices, and doctrinal understanding. Many female students view the *niqab* as a religious obligation, even though they struggle to explain its theological basis (FGD, August 16, 2021). It is consistent with research in South Africa, which shows that while some Muslim female students strive to maintain Islamic culture, they also adapt to local norms through integration strategies (Albrecht et al., 2014). Therefore, this research suggests that institutional dress policies should be more flexible, as recommended by previous studies. A balanced policy that considers religious norms and social needs can assist students, particularly *niqab*-wearing women, in navigating their identities more comfortably within the academic environment (Albrecht et al., 2014; Hoodfar, 2001). By considering social and personal dynamics, colleges like IAIN Kendari can create a more inclusive environment that supports female students' choices in expressing their religious identities.

### 3.3. *There are no formal regulations regarding the use of the niqab for female students Female Student*

#### *Female Student's Dress Code Regulations*

This research reveals that IAIN Kendari does not have formal regulations prohibiting the wearing of the *niqab* in the academic environment. In-depth interviews with academic staff and document analysis indicate that *niqab*-wearing female students are officially allowed to participate in academic activities, student organisations, and social interactions. This institutional attitude reflects inclusivity towards expressions of religiosity (RM, 40 years old, Staff, Personal Communication, August 15, 2021). However, the absence of explicit regulations allows for diverse interpretations, leading to tensions in daily practices. For instance, some lecturers request *niqab*-wearing female students to remove their *niqab* during exams or in class, citing the need for identity verification and reading facial expressions. One lecturer stated, "I need to verify the face of each student, especially during exams, to ensure their identity matches the official data" (AM, 39 years old, Lecturer, Personal Communication, September 22, 2021).

A similar phenomenon is found in the research by Abu-Ras & Laird (2011), which indicates that conflicts between religious beliefs and institutional needs often arise without formal regulations. In South Africa, Albrecht et al., (2014) documented similar challenges, where Muslim female students face pressure to align their religious identities with the demands of multicultural institutions. At IAIN Kendari, some *niqab*-wearing female students accepted the lecturers' requests as a reasonable step, while others prioritised their theological principles (FGD, August 16, 2021). It reflects a profound gap between the institution's inclusive policies and individual practices influenced by religious beliefs. Gökarıksel & Secor (2012) also noted that religious clothing often becomes a complex negotiation between personal identity and social needs.

In addition to the classroom, dilemmas related to the *niqab* also arise in the context of *niqab*-wearing female students' participation in competitions. Many event organisers request participants to remove their *niqab* for identity verification, which often leads to conflicts. One student affairs staff member explained, "We face difficulties when competition candidates wear the *niqab*. Sometimes, organisers recommend that participants not wear the *niqab* to verify their identities, so we are asked to select participants from the group that does not wear the *niqab*" (RMH, 41 years old, Staff, Personal

Communication, July 25, 2021). This situation illustrates how *niqab*-wearing female students are often placed in a disadvantaged position, a problem that has also been noted by Ninsiana & Dacholfany (2017), which highlights the tension between freedom of expression and administrative norms. These findings are similar to Rinaldo's research (2014) in Indonesia, which notes that Muslim women often face social pressure to adhere to rules that dictate their dress code in public and academic spaces.

Several pragmatic cases also emerge, as found in research at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, where Muslim female students often seek compromise ways to integrate their religious principles with institutional demands (Albrecht et al., 2014). Franks' research (2000) in Europe shows that the *niqab* is often used as a protective tool, both against harassment and social pressure. In the context of IAIN Kendari, *niqab*-wearing female students express that the *niqab* provides a sense of security and protection against disturbances. Still, on the other hand, they must face stigma or social exclusion from certain campus activities (FGD, August 16, 2021). Nisa (2022) also emphasises that wearing the *niqab* often relates not only to religious commitment but also serves to protect privacy and navigate social pressures in public spaces.

In the effort to find solutions, in-depth discussions between campus authorities, event organisers, and *niqab*-wearing female students have become an important step. Research by Gökarıksel & Secor (2012) shows that technology can accommodate religious freedom without compromising administrative needs. For example, biometric technology or third-party surveillance can verify identity without violating religious principles. Additionally, a more inclusive approach can be adopted to respect freedom of expression while meeting institutional regulatory needs. It is relevant for IAIN Kendari and other educational institutions facing similar challenges in multicultural environments. Thus, this approach can create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for all parties involved.

#### 4. Social Adaptation and Academic Interaction of *Niqab*-Wearing Female Students

Despite facing various challenges, *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari have not only successfully adapted to the academic environment but have also demonstrated outstanding academic achievements and active involvement in various social activities. This finding shows that a strong religious identity does not necessarily hinder active participation in the academic world but serves as a solid foundation for navigating their challenges. This discussion will explore how *niqab*-wearing students at IAIN Kendari negotiate their identities and how they socially and academically adapt within a multicultural campus context.

##### 4.1. Identity negotiation

In the context of the diverse academic environment at IAIN Kendari, *niqab*-wearing female students emerge as a minority and marginalised group that challenges prevailing perceptions within the discourse of social and academic interaction. They must demonstrate that a strong religious identity does not necessarily impede pursuing higher education and active participation in the academic world. Female students identified as NH (23 years old), AS (22 years old), SN (22 years old), RN (20 years old), NAY (22 years old), and MRW (20 years old) recount their adaptation experiences starting from their initial enrollment at IAIN Kendari. With their faces covered by the *niqab*, they encountered curious and sometimes suspicious glances from their peers. However, they chose to integrate into mainstream campus life rather than withdrawing. They opted to mingle with peers who do not wear the *niqab* to avoid negative stigma.

In the context of Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory, the social adaptation and academic interactions of *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari can be analysed as a complex and dynamic form of impression management. This theory posits that individuals actively manage and control the impressions they make on others during social interactions, akin to actors on a stage (Goffman, 2009). The *niqab*-wearing students at IAIN Kendari exhibit unique and diverse self-presentation strategies to navigate the stigma and marginalisation associated with their dress choices.



They employ these strategies to mitigate negative perceptions and integrate effectively into the academic and social environment of the campus.

These *niqab*-wearing female students often face the dual challenge of maintaining their religious identity while seeking acceptance within a broader academic community. This situation reflects what Goffman terms “front stage performance,” where they must carefully balance the expression of their identity with social expectations in the campus environment. For instance, when one student states, “I don’t like to be alone, so I choose to join friends who dress differently from me” (MRW, 20 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 19, 2021), it demonstrates a strategy of “ingratiation” as described in self-presentation theory. Despite their different appearance, they aim to be liked and accepted by displaying friendliness and openness. It aligns with the findings of the research of Jones (2014), which revealed how higher education institutions in the UK have also faced dilemmas in accommodating religious needs without compromising the secular status of the institution. As seen in the campaign to establish a mosque at a secular university in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s, there was tension between maintaining secularism and addressing the spiritual needs of the Muslim minority. It mirrors the challenges faced by *niqab*-wearing female students as they strive to maintain their religious identity in an environment that may have different social expectations.

#### 4.2. Identity integration

Similarly, from the perspective of social adjustment theory, *niqab*-wearing students who base their choice on theological dogma appear to have successfully negotiated a balance between their identity and the demands of the campus social environment. Religious motivation serves as a strong foundation for their existence. As expressed by one student, “Wearing the *niqab* is an effort to become a Muslimah who can fully maintain herself” (SN, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 19, 2021). This statement reflects what social adjustment theory calls “successful identity integration.” They manage to harmonise their religious identity with their role as students, achieving a balanced coexistence between personal beliefs and academic demands (S. Khan, 2020). It is also consistent with the findings of the research by Gao (2018), which explores the identity negotiation process among Muslim female students through the lens of identity theory. The findings reveal that Muslim students in Hong Kong utilise identity capital to construct a hybrid self-image, blending their original culture with the target culture in an additive and empowering way. This process enables individuals to negotiate their identity within the context of higher education, maintaining their religious beliefs while adapting to academic and social demands.

#### 4.3. Academic adaptation

Similarly, in classroom interactions, these *niqab*-wearing female students often become the centre of attention, not because of their appearance, but due to their exceptional academic achievements. With a GPA of 3.9, they demonstrate that wearing the *niqab* does not impede academic excellence. Additionally, many are selected as top competition participants, even though they sometimes face elimination due to their choice to wear the *niqab*. These accomplishments are not only personal achievements but also serve as a strong statement challenging the common prejudice that *niqab*-wearing women are less capable academically and lack competitive talent. Although they may sometimes be overlooked due to their minority status, they have succeeded in breaking the negative stigma associated with their appearance, embodying the principle of “don’t judge a book by its cover”. This is consistent with the findings of Gao (2018), who also noted that Muslim female students who excel academically in multicultural environments demonstrate the ability to balance their religious identity with their academic roles, affirming that academic achievement can be used as an impression management strategy to counteract stigma.

Emotional maturity is one of their strategies for handling the negative stigma often associated with their chosen appearance. One of them said, “I prefer to remain silent and not respond to prevent the controversy from escalating” (NAY, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 23, 2021). This statement reflects the development of an effective “coping strategy,” which is a key element in

social adjustment theory (Goffman, 2023). This strategy emphasises the importance of managing stress and conflict during adaptation. They employ this approach to maintain a strong focus on their educational goals, crucial for sustaining their potential and existence. One of them firmly stated;

"I strive to excel as much as possible because I do not want others to say that the *niqab* is a barrier preventing me from seeking knowledge and achieving success" (NH, 23 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 23, 2021).

This emphatic statement illustrates their ability to manage "social pressure" effectively and wisely. They can leverage external pressure as motivation for achievement, rather than as a barrier that exacerbates their public identity. Bahiss (2008), in the dissertation, also emphasised the importance of their ability to maintain their religious identity without sacrificing their social or academic participation. The research demonstrates that a strong religious identity can be successfully integrated with effective social engagement on campus.

An intriguing aspect of this phenomenon is that *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari have demonstrated that piety and academic achievement are not mutually exclusive. With an academic GPA reaching 3.9, they have challenged the notion that the *niqab* is an obstacle to pursuing knowledge. From the perspective of social adjustment theory, this can be viewed as an effective strategy of "impression management" (Do & Lee, 2013). They actively shape a positive perception of themselves through their academic achievements, challenging negative stereotypes. In this case, *niqab*-wearing students use their accomplishments to project an image of competence and intelligence, countering stereotypes that question their intellectual capabilities.

In the face of negative stigmas, *niqab*-wearing female students exhibit remarkable emotional maturity, responding with humour and positivity. One student shared, "I often dismiss those views because I once held negative opinions about *niqab*-wearers before I wore one myself" (AS, 22 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 16, 2021). This approach showcases their resilience and empathy, reflecting a "defensive self-presentation" strategy—preserving self-image by not overreacting to criticism while demonstrating emotional strength. Research by Čopková (2023) affirms that individuals facing stigma often use such strategies, influenced by social status and personality traits, including those linked to the "Dark Triad." Similarly, these students avoid emotional responses, relying instead on humour and positivity.

Flett et al., (2016) highlight that "defensive self-presentation" protects individuals from revealing perceived imperfections. In this context, *niqab*-wearing students demonstrate emotional mastery, showing little concern for others' opinions. Gillespie (2020) adds that using intelligent defensive tactics helps maintain dignity, aligning with these students' ability to preserve self-image through empathy and understanding. However, their adaptation has challenges, including communication barriers and social prejudice. One student remarked, "Some lecturers and students have said that my voice is too soft" (RN, 20 years old, Student, Personal Communication, July 25, 2021), illustrating how the *niqab*, beyond its religious significance, can complicate communication. Rather than being discouraged, these students use such difficulties to develop adaptive self-presentation strategies, finding new ways to communicate effectively without compromising their principles.

#### 4.4. Negotiating Niqab Identity Beyond Campus Boundaries

While IAIN Kendari provides a relatively tolerant academic space for *niqab*-wearing students, their identity negotiations extend beyond campus life. Several participants revealed that wearing the *niqab* in public spaces such as markets, government offices, or public transportation often attracts suspicion or unsolicited attention. One student stated, "Outside the campus, I get more stares, and people sometimes avoid me as if I am a radical" (Rn, 20 years old, Student, Personal Communication, August 16, 2021). This sentiment reflects a larger societal stigma that associates the *niqab* with extremism or cultural alienation.

In navigating these external contexts, students adopt various strategies such as modifying their appearance in certain public spaces, limiting movement to religious communities, or using social media

to express their identities more freely. The tension between public acceptance and personal conviction illustrates a duality of presentation—what (Goffman, 2002, 2023) describes as the “backstage” of identity performance.

This section highlights that the resilience of *niqab*-wearing students is not only tested within academic spaces but also in broader societal interactions. Their ability to maintain composure, assert their rights, and reinterpret public narratives around the *niqab* adds further complexity to their identity negotiation. Therefore, any institutional discussion about inclusivity must also consider the social realities students face beyond academic boundaries.

## 5. Social Implications of *Niqab* Marginalisation in Higher Education

This study explores the complexities of the *niqab* phenomenon in higher education, particularly at IAIN Kendari, highlighting its multidimensional social implications. Offering a more contextual and comprehensive perspective than previous research, it presents diverse experiences and adaptation strategies. The findings carry significant implications for institutional policies, and educational practices, and fostering broader social understanding of diversity. The discussion continues with five key social implications.

### 5.1. Psychosocial impact of marginalisation

The marginalisation of *niqab*-wearing students not only disrupts their education but also threatens their psychosocial well-being. Research by Chowdhury et al., (2017) and Mohammadi & Hazeri (2021) reveals diverse motivations for wearing the *niqab*, including religious devotion, personal protection, and cultural expression. However, Sabrina et al., (2020) note that it is often stigmatised, and misinterpreted by some as a symbol of extremism, which exacerbates the challenges these students face academically and socially.

The psychosocial impact appears in various ways, with students reporting feelings of alienation, stress, and anxiety, especially during interactions in academic or social settings. Marginalisation can also diminish self-confidence and academic self-efficacy. Syed (2021) warns that such impacts may lead to long-term mental health issues. This marginalisation often triggers ‘stereotype threat,’ where individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group, impairing both academic and social performance, even among capable students. Do & Lee (2013) further highlight that stereotype threat can undermine academic outcomes and hinder career aspirations for marginalised individuals.

### 5.2. Adaptation and resilience strategies

This study highlights the adaptation strategies employed by *niqab*-wearing students to navigate marginalisation, demonstrating resilience and creativity in managing their identities within academic settings. Their efforts align with Goffman’s self-presentation theory (2023), which emphasises how individuals actively shape the impressions they convey in social interactions. These strategies span academic and social dimensions, with some students proactively engaging in conversations and extracurricular activities to challenge stereotypes. Others use humour or academic success to counter negative perceptions.

In academic contexts, these students develop communication techniques, such as expressive body language and adjusting their tone to mitigate challenges posed by wearing the *niqab*. According to Khan (2020), these actions exemplify ‘identity negotiation,’ as individuals reshape their identities in response to societal pressures. Social media and digital platforms also serve as outlets for self-expression and support-building, reflecting Goffman’s concept of ‘impression management’ (2002) in the digital era, where online interactions allow individuals to project facets of their identity that may remain hidden in person.

### 5.3. Potential for academic isolation vs. academic achievement

The potential for academic isolation is a significant social implication for *niqab*-wearing students. While there are no formal rules against wearing the *niqab*, some faculty members privately request its removal during lectures or exams, limiting students' participation and academic performance. This isolation manifests in various ways, including discomfort in laboratories or presentations, peer rejection, and marginalisation in group discussions or collaborative projects (Hanafiah et al., 2019). Such experiences can hinder students' learning and professional development.

Despite these challenges, some *niqab*-wearing students achieve high academic success, countering assumptions that the *niqab* obstructs education. Kistoro et al. (2020) highlight their strong spiritual motivations, with many viewing the *niqab* as a positive influence. This success is a form of resistance and empowerment, with students driven to excel and challenge stereotypes about *niqab*-wearing women. Their achievements align with the psychological concept of 'reactance,' a response to perceived threats to personal freedom, which fosters motivation to succeed.

### 5.4. Complexity of identity and social negotiation

The results of this study reveal the complexity of the relationship between beliefs, practices, and doctrinal understanding in the context of *niqab* usage in the academic environment. Dzuhayatin (2020) identifies that the use of the *niqab* by female students in Indonesia has dimensions of Islamism and nationalism, where many *niqab* wearers support the caliphate system while still being proud to be Indonesian citizens. This phenomenon reflects the concept of "hybrid identity," where individuals negotiate and integrate various aspects of their identity that may sometimes appear contradictory. *Niqab*-wearing female students in higher education often have to balance their identities as devout Muslims, high-achieving students, and active citizens.

This complexity aligns with the findings of Albrecht et al. (2014) in South Africa, which show that Muslim female students in multicultural campuses often adopt acculturation strategies, such as integrating traditional Islamic clothing with Western fashion, to adapt to campus social norms while maintaining their religious identity. At IAIN Kendari, the challenges faced by *niqab*-wearing female students include marginalisation and stereotypes, but they demonstrate remarkable resilience in navigating the academic environment. It is also relevant to Franks' perspective (2000) that religious clothing is often used as a form of social protection and a tool to negotiate cultural pressures.

Furthermore, this research expands the understanding by demonstrating how *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari use creativity and adaptability to confront obstacles. They not only maintain their religious practices but also utilise the *niqab* as a protective strategy against social harassment and to build a stronger identity within the campus environment. Nisa (2022) also notes that the *niqab* often reflects more than just religious commitment; it also serves as a tool to protect privacy and avoid social stigma.

This research not only confirms the importance of the local context but also provides insights into the need for inclusive institutional policies. As Albrecht et al. (2014) suggested, more flexible campus policies, cultural sensitivity training, and constructive dialogue spaces in higher education institutions can help create a more inclusive environment. These findings have global relevance, indicating that colleges in various countries need to recognise and support the diversity of their student identities without overlooking the complex social and cultural pressures they face.

## 6. Negotiating Identity and Institutional Inclusion: The Niqab in Higher Education Across Cultural and Policy Contexts

The research findings demonstrate that *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari have successfully integrated into academic life, despite prevailing stigma and the absence of formal institutional policies. These students maintain high academic achievement, some with GPAs as high as 3.9, and actively participate in classroom and extracurricular settings. The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed increased acceptance of *niqab* usage, as mask-wearing temporarily blurred distinctions

between religious attire and public health measures. Notably, students employ impression management and social adjustment strategies to negotiate their identities and gain social acceptance in a plural academic environment.

The students' resilience stems from their strategic engagement with academic and social structures. They consistently adopt Goffman's self-presentation techniques (2002, 2023)—projecting friendliness, academic competence, and humour—to mitigate stigma. These strategies enhance their acceptance in class discussions and group work, even when their attire sparks suspicion. Concurrently, social adjustment theory (Clare & Cairns, 1978; Platt et al., 1980) provides a lens for understanding how these students adapt behaviourally and emotionally to an environment that often marginalises them. Familial expectations and peer perceptions also shape their motivations. Several students report adopting the niqab initially due to family influence or pesantren policies and continuing out of loyalty to those early commitments (Shahzad & Fatima, 2024).

These findings resonate with earlier studies while also revealing important distinctions. Albrecht et al. (2014) explored how Muslim students in South Africa adapt Islamic dress to Western contexts, using bicultural presentation strategies. Similarly, Khan et al. (2023) identified diverse motivations among Pakistani students, including protection from harassment and familial expectation, echoing the narratives at IAIN Kendari. However, the Kendari students report additional constraints due to the influence of Salafi ideologies in their prior education and limited public understanding of the niqab, which intensifies the challenge of navigating identity within the academic space.

In Spain, Garcia Yeste et al. (2020) found that niqab-wearing women respond to discrimination through affiliation with faith-based organisations. This mirrors strategies employed by students at IAIN Kendari, who form supportive peer communities and use social media to share their experiences and advocate for inclusion. While European contexts often focus on legal bans and Islamophobia, the Indonesian experience reflects institutional ambiguity, wherein tolerance exists in policy but not uniformly in practice (Hanafiah et al., 2019).

Studies by Hassan (2025) and Fattali and Smith (2023) suggest that niqab-wearing students in Western institutions encounter identity negotiation dilemmas, balancing authenticity with academic expectations. The students in this study experience similar negotiations, though in a culturally Islamic context. They avoid withdrawal by mingling with non-niqab-wearing peers and exhibiting high levels of academic performance. Such engagement enables them to reframe their visibility from suspicion to competence. These strategies align with those observed among Arab international students in Western universities, who navigate religious identity through hybrid self-representation.

Notably, in Indonesia, niqab-wearing women face unique tensions between nationalism and religious conservatism. Dzuhayatin (2020) argued that many support the caliphate concept while simultaneously expressing national pride. This dualism contributes to the niqab's polarising nature within academic institutions. The students at IAIN Kendari embody this complexity. They affirm Pancasila values while maintaining theological conservatism. Their experiences suggest the need to view the niqab not only through theological or cultural lenses, but also as a political and ideological expression embedded in Indonesian socio-academic discourse.

The niqab represents more than a religious symbol; it functions as a site for identity construction, resistance, and negotiation. Contrary to stereotypes associating it with extremism or patriarchal repression (Garcia Yeste et al., 2020; Toriquuddin, Faizin, Hamidah, Hamdan, & Muhammad, 2024), these students assert that the niqab offers protection, dignity, and empowerment. Their academic success and emotional maturity challenge dominant narratives that depict them as submissive or socially disengaged. Their adoption of humour and strategic silence in the face of prejudice, as reported in this study, echoes Čopková's findings (2023) on defensive self-presentation. They consciously modulate their reactions, using humour to disarm criticism and preserve dignity.

Moreover, these students harness academic excellence as a means of impression management. Their success enables them to counter stereotypes and claim legitimacy within the academic community. Gao (2018) similarly observed that Muslim women in Hong Kong use "identity capital" to

blend religious values with academic and professional aspirations. The Kendari students represent this duality—leveraging religiosity as a foundation for intellectual and civic engagement.

The niqab provides both protection and constraint. It enables students to maintain religious integrity while also exposing them to administrative scrutiny and peer exclusion. Some lecturers demand they unveil during exams (Hanafiah et al., 2019), citing identification concerns, while others accommodate their needs. This discrepancy fosters unequal access to academic spaces. Additionally, participation in competitions becomes limited due to organiser preferences for visible identity confirmation. These obstacles reveal how formal neutrality toward religious attire can still result in de facto discrimination when procedural clarity is lacking.

Despite such dysfunctions, niqab-wearing students demonstrate remarkable agency. They create internal support systems and rely on emotional maturity to sustain their academic momentum. Their strategies reflect the findings of Syed (2021), who warned of the long-term mental health effects of marginalisation. However, the Kendari students appear to transform these pressures into motivators, using academic performance and group affiliation as buffers against exclusion.

This study underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms to support religious inclusivity in higher education, particularly concerning the niqab. Although IAIN Kendari shows general tolerance, inconsistent practices—such as requiring students to unveil during exams—reveal regulatory gaps. These inconsistencies reflect broader patterns observed globally, where niqab-wearing individuals often face marginalisation due to the absence of formal protections (Fattali & Smith, 2023; Robson, 2024).

Educational institutions must adopt clear, inclusive policies that affirm the right to wear the niqab while ensuring procedural clarity, particularly in identity verification. Biometric systems offer a viable, non-discriminatory solution (Chambers & Roth, 2014). Furthermore, staff training in cultural competence is essential to reduce bias and support respectful engagement with religious diversity. As shown in contexts like Germany and Central Asia, legal justifications for niqab bans often prioritise security at the expense of inclusivity (Braun, 2017; Bykov, Ashurov, & Khutuashvili, 2024).

Universities should also advocate for legal reforms that align with international human rights norms and promote platforms for dialogue and peer support. These efforts are vital not only for protecting religious freedoms but also for fostering a campus culture that values diversity as a strength rather than a challenge. By embedding these measures, institutions can ensure that niqab-wearing students participate fully and equally in academic life, without compromising their religious identity (Ferrari & Pastorelli, 2016; Toriquuddin et al., 2024).

## 7. Conclusions

Although the *niqab* is often stigmatised as a symbol of exclusivity and a barrier to social interaction, frequently associated with stereotypes of extremism, this research represents counter-narratives. It reveals that *niqab*-wearing female students at IAIN Kendari achieve significant academic success, despite facing multiple layers of social stigma. This reality challenges dominant assumptions and demonstrates that religious appearance, often misunderstood in public discourse, does not hinder achievement. On the contrary, it can serve as a strong moral and spiritual foundation for pursuing academic excellence. In the context of Islamic higher education in the multicultural region of Eastern Indonesia, particularly in Kendari, these students exemplify how faith and intellectuality are not conflicting forces but mutually reinforcing components in constructing a holistic identity.

This study offers an in-depth exploration of how *niqab*-wearing female students navigate their identities in an academic setting that lacks formal regulations on *niqab* usage. The absence of such institutional policies creates an interpretive space marked by ambiguity and ambivalence. Nevertheless, these students fill that space through creative, thoughtful, and intelligent adaptation strategies. Drawing on Self-Presentation Theory and Social Adjustment Theory, the findings show that these students engage in deliberate and strategic self-presentation, marked by friendliness, openness, and humour in social interactions. Their academic achievements are a powerful tool to challenge negative perceptions, showing that the *niqab* is not an obstacle to intellectual engagement but an

integral part of their religious identity that harmonizes with their academic roles. Additionally, social media emerges as a crucial platform for expression, advocacy, and solidarity, allowing them to articulate their experiences, expand their networks, and assert their presence in broader public discourses.

The implications of these findings are substantial, both academically and socially. From an academic standpoint, the study underscores the need for more inclusive institutional policies in higher education. For instance, adopting biometric technologies for identity verification could reconcile administrative requirements with respect for religious principles, fostering a more accommodating and equitable environment for diverse religious expressions. Socially, the success of *niqab*-wearing students at IAIN Kendari confronts and deconstructs negative stereotypes, illustrating that these women are intellectually capable and contribute meaningfully to the academic and social spheres.

Beyond filling a critical gap in the literature on the experiences of *niqab*-wearing female students in Indonesian higher education, this study offers a novel perspective on the importance of fostering inclusive environments that support diversity, particularly in culturally and religiously pluralistic regions such as Eastern Indonesia. The phenomenon documented here reflects broader tensions between tradition and modernity in Indonesia's diverse society. It also highlights the potential for religious identity to coexist with academic excellence and civic engagement.

Future research should investigate the long-term impacts of *niqab* use on career trajectories and social integration, conduct comparative analyses across different regional and institutional contexts, and examine how digital technologies shape the self-representation and identity formation of *niqab*-wearing women. By contributing to ongoing conversations on religion, gender, and education, this study advances a more inclusive understanding of diversity. It provides a foundation for future work promoting equity and tolerance within higher education.

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