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Balancing Grit and Ground: Cultural Sustainability and Resilience among Marginalized Scholars in Academia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the interplay between grit (individual perseverance) and ground (cultural grounding) in the academic experiences of marginalized scholars, emphasizing the role of cultural sustainability in fostering resilience and success. The research highlights the structural barriers scholars face through qualitative narratives, including underrepresentation, institutional neglect, microaggressions, and cultural taxation. While grit enables scholars to navigate these challenges, the study argues that true academic inclusion requires systemic change that values cultural identity and community-based support. The findings suggest that cultural grounding strengthens individual resilience and enriches academic discourse by integrating diverse perspectives. Moreover, the study underscores the need for universities to move beyond symbolic diversity initiatives and implement policies that foster genuine inclusion, such as mentorship programs, equitable promotion criteria, and institutional recognition of diversity work. The research concludes that balancing grit with ground, and individual effort with structural support, is essential for creating sustainable and equitable academic environments where marginalized scholars can thrive.

Keywords: cultural grounding, cultural sustainability, cultural taxation, grit, institutional barriers, intercultural discourse, marginalized scholars

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made education both a driver and beneficiary of transnational dynamics, facilitating the global exchange of students, teachers, ideas, and institutional collaboration (Paul et al., 2023). By nature, knowledge transcends borders, and universities have historically played a central role in this exchange (Freire, 2021). Higher education has always been international, with the cross-border movement of scholars enriching academic knowledge (Gultekin, 2025). In an increasingly interconnected world, the concept of cultural sustainability has emerged as a crucial area of study among scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As globalization intensifies, academic institutions face the challenge of promoting inclusive practices that accommodate a wide range of cultural perspectives and experiences (Xue & Singh, 2025). The academic journeys of marginalized scholars are shaped by a delicate interplay of personal resilience and cultural grounding (Goncalves et al., 2025). While resilience, often encapsulated in the concept of grit, is celebrated as a cornerstone of academic success, it is insufficient when considered in isolation (Bhola, 1987). For scholars from marginalized backgrounds, the ability to sustain and thrive in academia often depends equally, if not more, on their connection to cultural roots, communal values, and collective identity, referred to here as ground (Morris, 2024). The tension between grit and ground raises critical questions about how academia supports or stifles cultural sustainability, particularly for those operating within structures that were not designed to accommodate their identities or experiences (England, 2021).

Cultural sustainability, the preservation and integration of cultural identity within institutional spaces, has emerged as a vital consideration in addressing the challenges faced by underrepresented groups in academia. For marginalized scholars, who must maneuver systemic inequities such as exclusionary curricula, microaggressions, and underrepresentation, maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage serves as a source of strength and resistance. However, dominant narratives that prioritize individual effort often obscure the importance of these cultural connections, placing an undue burden on marginalized individuals to overcome structural barriers without institutional support.

This article sheds light on the relationship between grit and ground, examining how cultural sustainability may be used to both balance and enhance personal tenacity. While perseverance is essential for overcoming academic obstacles, maintaining cultural identity and tearing down structural barriers are more important for achieving true equity and inclusion. Through a survey of the relevant literature, this paper highlights the experiences of minority scholars, analyzes grit-centric theories, and calls for institutional policies that promote cultural sustainability.

Purpose of the Study

The current study sought to address these gaps by exploring the interplay of grit and ground in the academic journeys of underrepresented scholars, with a particular focus on the role of cultural sustainability in fostering resilience and inclusivity. It also addresses the gap in understanding how grit and ground interact to influence success among underrepresented groups. Moreover, the study investigated how cultural sustainability contributes to resilience and success in navigating structural barriers in academia. The study focused on the lack of emphasis on systemic factors and their impact on marginalized scholars' experiences, complementing resilience research with a focus on institutional responsibility. To address these gaps, the researcher sought to explore the following research questions:

1. How do underrepresented scholars perceive the role of personal perseverance (grit) in navigating academic challenges?
2. What role does cultural intuition play in shaping underrepresented scholars' research interests and contributions?
3. What systemic barriers have underrepresented scholars, and how have these barriers impacted their academic experience?
4. How do underrepresented scholars balance the need for personal perseverance with maintaining their cultural identity and well-being in academia?
5. What changes would underrepresented scholars suggest to better support cultural sustainability and inclusivity?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grit vs. Ground in Academic Contexts

Angela Duckworth's concept of grit, popularized in her 2016 book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, defines grit as a combination of passion and perseverance that drives long-term success. It involves four key components: hope, practice, interest, and purpose. Gritty individuals set clear goals, practice deliberately, learn from failures, and feel that their efforts contribute to something larger. While grit helps people overcome challenges, Duckworth emphasized that broader systemic support is also essential to ensure fair opportunities for success (Payano-Frias, 2024).

Delgado Bernal's concept of cultural intuition highlights how marginalized scholars use their cultural knowledge, experiences, and community ties to gain strength and insight in academia. It helps them connect their personal, cultural, and academic identities, fostering authenticity and resilience. Grounding, as a research method, emphasizes honoring the voices and knowledge of marginalized communities, helping scholars resist exclusion and critique dominant structures in academia.

The debate between grit and ground in academic contexts highlights the tension between individual perseverance and cultural sustainability. Grit has been championed for its focus on resilience and long-term goal achievement, particularly in education (Gulcicegi, 2025). However, critics argue that grit-centered approaches often place the burden of success entirely on the individual, ignoring the systemic inequities that disproportionately affect marginalized scholars (Stokas, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). By emphasizing the need to push through adversity, grit-based frameworks risk immortalizing a meritocratic narrative that ignores the structural barriers present in academic institutions.

For marginalized scholars, the emphasis on grit can be both empowering and limiting. While resilience is undeniably a vital skill for handling hostile or exclusionary environments, the overreliance on grit fails to account for the importance of cultural and communal grounding in sustaining scholars' identities and well-being (Lee, 2025). Grounding means remaining connected to cultural roots and community values for strength and identity. Unlike grit, which centers on individual success, grounding focuses on preserving cultural integrity and community bonds.

Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2012) critiqued the settler-colonial logic of higher education, advocating for approaches that prioritize decolonization and the affirmation of indigenous and marginalized identities. These studies suggest that grounding is not only a source of resilience but also a means of resisting assimilationist pressures within academia.

The grit-versus-ground dichotomy contrasts two institutional approaches to diversity and inclusion. Programs focusing on grit emphasize individual effort and perseverance but often overlook systemic barriers such as discriminatory hiring, biased curricula, and lack of representation, risking the masking of institutional failures. In contrast, ground-centered strategies prioritize cultural sustainability, fostering belonging and affirmation for marginalized scholars through community ties and inclusive policies. For example, the University of Chicago's GRIT program supports underrepresented STEM students by combining personal resilience with systemic change. Integrating both grit and ground enables institutions to balance individual perseverance with structural reforms, promoting a more equitable and inclusive environment.

The way that grit and cultural grounding work together to support minority academics' success and resilience is not taken into account in the material that is currently available. Furthermore, academic success is often narrowly defined by traditional metrics, which fail to account for culturally grounded contributions and diverse epistemologies. There is also a dearth of narrow-driven research amplifying the lived experiences of marginalized scholars, leaving a significant gap in understanding how they handle the tension between grit and ground while recommending systemic change.

The concepts of grit and ground offer two distinct yet interrelated perspectives on the experiences of marginalized scholars in directing academia. Duckworth's theory of grit, which emphasizes perseverance and passion in the pursuit of long-term goals, has gained widespread recognition in education research for its perceived impact on academic and professional success. While

grit emphasizes the importance of resilience and individual agency, critics argue that the framework often fails to notice structural inequities and systemic barriers, particularly those faced by marginalized communities (Duckworth et al., 2007, as cited in Stokas, 2015).

Conversely, the concept of ground can be understood as the cultural and communal foundation that sustains individuals within their identities. Grounding refers to the preservation of cultural heritage, traditions, and a sense of belonging that counters the alienation often experienced in academic spaces dominated by dominant cultural norms (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Theories of cultural sustainability highlight the importance of maintaining cultural identity while participating in predominantly Westernized institutions (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Balancing grit with ground suggests a dual necessity: while marginalized scholars may require resilience to cross exclusionary structures, their ability to remain connected to their cultural roots often serves as a source of strength. For example, Yosso's community cultural wealth framework (2005) underlines the importance of familial, linguistic, and resistance capital in empowering marginalized groups within educational settings. This approach critiques deficit-based narratives, emphasizing the assets that scholars bring from their communities.

Ultimately, a theoretical lens that bridges grit and ground allows for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of marginalized scholars. It situates individual perseverance within broader sociocultural and institutional contexts, acknowledging both personal agency and the need for structural transformation in academia.

Marginalized Scholars in Academia

Marginalized scholars face a unique and multifaceted set of challenges, as they navigate academic spaces that often fail to fully recognize or accommodate their diverse identities and experiences. The term marginalized encompasses a broad range of identities and groups, including those racialized, gendered, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and linguistically diverse. These scholars contend with systemic barriers that are deeply embedded within the academic landscape, including underrepresentation, implicit bias, and exclusionary practices (Harper, 2012; Ahmed, 2012).

One of the most pervasive issues for marginalized scholars is navigating institutions rooted in predominantly Eurocentric and patriarchal traditions. Such institutions often secure a narrow standard of success, which can alienate scholars whose perspectives and contributions do not align with dominant paradigms (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). For example, the hidden curriculum in academia—unspoken norms, behaviors, and expectations—disproportionately disadvantages scholars from underrepresented backgrounds, who may lack access to the informal networks and resources needed to succeed (Posselt, 2016).

The psychological toll of exclusion and underrepresentation is another significant challenge. Marginalized scholars frequently encounter microaggressions, tokenism, and a lack of mentorship, all of which contribute to

a phenomenon known as cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994). Microaggressions are recognized as a form of institutionalized racism that can be pervasive in environments such as schools and workplaces, reinforcing systemic inequities and the dehumanization of marginalized groups (Daftary et al., 2024). Cultural taxation refers to the expectation that scholars from underrepresented backgrounds will shoulder additional responsibilities, such as mentoring students of color or serving on diversity committees, often without institutional recognition or reward.

Despite these challenges, marginalized scholars often draw on rich reserves of resilience, cultural capital, and community support to navigate academia. Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth (2005) provides a framework for understanding the ways in which marginalized groups leverage their experiential knowledge, family networks, and linguistic dexterity to thrive in spaces not designed for their success. Similarly, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989) highlights the compound effects of overlapping identities, which shape the specific challenges and opportunities faced by scholars at the intersection of race, gender, and other factors.

To create an inclusive academic environment, it is crucial to acknowledge the systemic nature of these barriers and to prioritize structural change over reliance on individual grit. Highlighting cultural sustainability through institutional policies, mentorship programs, and curricular reforms can provide marginalized scholars with both the support and recognition necessary for meaningful participation and success in academia.

Sustainability and Inclusion in Scholarship

Cultural sustainability and inclusion are critical for creating academic spaces where marginalized scholars can thrive. Whereas much of the conversation around diversity in higher education focuses on access and representation, sustainability emphasizes the need for systems and practices that nurture the long-term success and well-being of underrepresented groups (Malone et al., 2024). This involves both creating opportunities and ensuring that scholars' cultural identities, traditions, and worldviews are respected and integrated into the academic fabric.

Cultural sustainability in academia requires a rethinking of institutional norms and values. Traditional academic structures often privilege Eurocentric knowledge systems, marginalizing diverse ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2021). For example, curricula that exclude the contributions of non-Western scholars, or pedagogies that favor individualistic approaches over communal learning can alienate marginalized students and faculty. To counteract this, institutions must adopt decolonial practices that center marginalized perspectives and validate their epistemologies (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Inclusion also requires tangible changes in institutional policies and practices. Mentorship programs that pair marginalized scholars with mentors who share similar backgrounds or who understand their experiences can provide critical support networks. Faculty development initiatives that address implicit bias and

promote inclusive teaching practices are also essential. Moreover, policies that address cultural taxation, such as workload adjustments and equitable compensation, are vital for ensuring that scholars are not disproportionately burdened.

Equally important is the recognition of intersectionality, as marginalized scholars often face compounded challenges due to overlapping identities related to race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability (Crenshaw, 1989). By employing an intersectional perspective, scholars can uncover the nuanced experiences of marginalized communities and their historical contexts, which are vital for developing effective strategies for resilience. Inclusive scholars must address these intersecting oppressions and move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions. This means not only diversifying the faculty pipeline but also creating environments where scholars feel a sense of belonging and empowerment to bring their full identities into their work.

Sustainability and inclusion also extend to research practices and outputs. Scholars from marginalized backgrounds often engage in work that challenges dominant paradigms or addresses issues relevant to their communities. Supporting such scholarship requires rethinking traditional metrics of success, such as publication counts in prestigious journals, to value diverse contributions. Community-based participatory research, for example, aligns with principles of cultural sustainability by fostering reciprocal relationships between scholars and the communities they study (Israel et al., 1998).

By addressing the interplay of grit and ground, the current study not only challenges the traditional grit-based framework but also offers insights for creating equitable academic environments that prioritize cultural sustainability.

For true inclusion and equity, academia must move beyond frameworks that valorize individual effort while ignoring structural barriers. Instead, institutions can adopt holistic approaches that balance grit with ground, fostering environments where scholars are empowered to succeed without compromising their cultural identities. This requires reimagining academic policies, practices, and values to center the experiences of underrepresented communities, promoting both personal success and collective well-being.

Institutions should establish academic environments where minority academics can not only survive but also flourish as their true selves by placing a high priority on cultural sustainability (Lu et al., 2025). As a successful program, the STAR Scholars Network offers mentorship programs that support emerging scholars from marginalized and multilingual backgrounds. The Millennium Scholars Program pairs early career researchers with experienced mentors for virtual guidance on research projects and professional development. The STAR Certified Research Scholar training provides self-paced modules to build leadership and academic skills. Additionally, the STAR Mentoring Program helps sanctuary-seeking students in the UK train university mentors to assist with applications and scholarships. Overall, STAR's programs focus on transnational collaboration, community, and social impact.

In the long run, achieving sustainability and inclusion in scholarship demands a shift from surface-level diversity initiatives to systemic transformation. It

requires institutions to commit to policies and practices that prioritize the well-being and success of marginalized scholars while affirming the importance of cultural grounding (Padilla, 1994). Only by embedding these principles into the core of academia can we create spaces where all scholars can thrive, contributing to a more equitable and culturally rich academic landscape.

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the interplay between grit and ground in the academic experiences of marginalized scholars. Thematic analysis is chosen for its flexibility and ability to uncover deep patterns in qualitative data without strict theoretical constraints. It provides rich, nuanced insights, suits diverse research questions, and is accessible to researchers at all levels, ensuring clear and trustworthy results.

The study was grounded in a critical framework, utilizing concepts such as Yosso's community cultural wealth (2002) and Delgado Bernal's cultural intuition to analyze the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 15 underrepresented scholars who are teaching or conducting research at institutions outside their countries of origin. The study was conducted from September to December 2024. The researcher, a former international student who immigrated to Türkiye, began building a global network among researchers worldwide. The researcher purposefully selected the participants from the network to ensure their diversity and relevance to the study's objectives (Goncalves et al., 2025). They were scholars who identified as underrepresented or marginalized in academia on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, or other intersecting identities. Individuals actively engaged in academia, including graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and early-to-mid-career faculty. They were selected on the basis of their ability to provide rich detailed accounts relevant to the study's focus. Efforts were made to include individuals from various disciplines, institutions, and cultural backgrounds to capture a broad spectrum of experiences. A target of 15 participants was chosen to achieve data saturation to focus on the themes. Recruitment occurred through professional networks, academic associations, and online platforms. A call for participants was distributed via email and social media, inviting eligible individuals to participate. As shown in Table 1, the participants were diverse.

Data saturation was reached after 15 purposively selected underrepresented scholars were interviewed, as no new themes emerged. This sample size aligns with research suggesting that 9–17 interviews are sufficient for saturation in well-defined groups (Goncalves et al., 2025). Ongoing analysis during data collection confirmed that thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring the rigor of the study.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants at a Glance

Pseudonyms	Origin Country	Residency	Years in Academia	Gender
Matthew	Canada	Turkiye	35	Male
Jack	Iran	UK	10	Male
Hanna	Nigeria	Turkiye	35	Female
Maxim	Russia	Turkiye	20	Male
Javad	Iran	USA	15	Male
Mary	Iran	USA	25	Female
Sude	Iran	Germany	25	Female
Simon	Syria	Germany	20	Male
Habiba	Algeria	Turkiye	10	Female
Tala	Palestine	Turkiye	15	Female
Rezvan	Iran	Turkiye	15	Female
Huseyin	Syria	Egypt	20	Male
Mehdi	Iran	Turkiye	15	Male
Saadan	Pakistan	UK	20	Male
Kerime	Georgia	Azerbaijan	15	Female

Instruments

A semistructured interview was conducted to gather in-depth insights into participants' experiences with grit, ground, systemic barriers, and cultural sustainability. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted virtually or in-person on the basis of participants' preferences. With their consent, the interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy. Transcriptions were created verbatim and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and the participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. The data were stored securely and anonymized to protect the participants' identities.

Design

Through thematic analysis, the researcher analyzed the interviews' transcriptions in MAXQDA20 after each interview ended. Thematic analysis is a widely used and robust systematic qualitative data analysis method focused on identifying patterns across data (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke's (2006) model informed the construction and application of thematic analysis. The six-phase approach (familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report) was used to identify, analyze, and report themes in the data.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the study, the data from multiple participants was compared to identify consistent themes. The participants reviewed summaries of their transcripts to ensure accuracy. The researcher also engaged academic peers from prestigious universities such as Texas A&M

University in the USA, and the University of Durham in the UK to conduct peer debriefing on the research techniques. Their independent and critical feedback helped identify potential biases, clarify methodological decisions, and strengthen the overall rigor of the study. This collaborative process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the research by ensuring that interpretations were thoroughly examined and validated from multiple perspectives.

RESULTS

Yosso’s community cultural wealth and Delgado Bernal’s cultural intuition guided the interpretation of themes, emphasizing the strength and knowledge systems of marginalized scholars. Based on the data-driven inductive thematic analysis, some authentic examples from the interviews were provided.

Table 2: Themes emerged from the interviews

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Frequencies
Grit in Academia	Individual Perseverance	5%
	Overcoming Adversity	6%
	Long-Term Goals	4%
Ground and Cultural Sustainability	Cultural Identity	4%
	Community Support	3%
	Cultural Intuition	3%
	Preserving Tradition	5%
	Underrepresentation	7%
Structural Barriers and Systematic Change	Institutional Neglect	7%
	Microaggressions	6%
	Cultural Taxation	5%
	Conflict Between Grit and Ground	5%
Balancing Grit and Ground	Emotional Toll	5%
	Preference for Structural Change	5%
	Effective Policies	8%
Inclusivity and Institutional Policies	Policy Gap	8%
	Suggestions for Improvement	7%
	Decolonizing Academia	7%

Moreover, the frequencies of the associated subthemes can be seen in the following table. Grit in academia (15%), ground and cultural sustainability (15%), structural barriers and systematic change (25%), balancing grit and ground (15%),

and inclusivity and institutional policies (30%) were the introduced sub themes of the participants.

Grit in Academia

The participants spoke handily (15%) about their personal resilience in academia. The following codes emerged from within the overarching umbrella of grit in academia.

Individual Perseverance

I often felt marginalized at work because I was labeled a foreigner. Being a foreigner meant I faced discrimination in areas such as pay, privileges, and being included in the team. Even though I had a Ph.D., I was paid less than colleagues with only master's degrees. When I asked why, they simply said, "That is the way it is." They also told me I needed certain documents to prove my qualifications to get paid the same as others. Since they knew I depended on my work permit, I had no choice but to accept the unfair treatment. They were abusing their privileges, and I had to cope with their policies (Hanna, a Nigerian academician in Türkiye).

Hanna's experience illustrates systemic marginalization as a foreigner, facing pay and treatment inequities tied to her work permit. Her perseverance and resilience enabled her to endure and adapt despite these injustices, reflecting both the strength and the harsh reality of tolerating inequality for stability.

Overcoming adversity

Matthew, a Canadian linguistics scholar in Türkiye, encountered exclusion and language barriers despite the university's global vision. Rather than giving up, he fostered inclusivity by organizing meetings, advocating for policy changes, learning Turkish, and starting research collaborations. As a result, his efforts increased respect and influenced university policies, revealing how proactive engagement and resilience can overcome systemic challenges for foreign academics.

Long-term Goals

Jack, an aspiring intercultural education expert from Iran, overcame funding, mentorship, and skepticism challenges by creating a 10-year career plan focused on perseverance. After earning his Ph.D. and moving to the UK, he faced cultural adjustment and rejections but used setbacks to learn and improve. Through consistent effort, international collaboration, and self-improvement, he published, secured grants, built networks, and became a full professor within ten years.

Ground and Cultural Sustainability

The following narratives highlight the powerful intersection of cultural identity, academic resilience, and the preservation of traditions, illustrating how individuals can actively contribute to cultural sustainability by embracing their heritage and bridging diverse cultural perspectives within academic environments. The interview extracts included authentic examples (15%).

Cultural Identity

Habiba, an Algerian scholar at a Turkish university, overcame initial marginalization by embracing her Algerian heritage to bridge cultural gaps. She focused on the historical and linguistic ties between Algeria and Türkiye, launched research on Maghrebi and Turkish postcolonial narratives, and integrated North African storytelling into her teaching. Her efforts enriched academic discourse, promoted multicultural education, and earned her respect, showing how embracing cultural identity fosters innovation and inclusivity.

Community Support

Inclusion in the U.S. is part of their culture. For many years, social activists have been working so hard to highlight the importance of social diversity. From what I observed, people have immigrated to the US from different parts of the world. They speak different languages. Inclusion is part of their culture and they have invested heavily in equity and equality. I don't want to say that there aren't examples of racism as you can find that everywhere. They separate colored Americans and white Americans. You can hear terminologies such as this, but in regards to policies of employment, they never ask about your race, ethnicity, or even age (Mary, an Iranian academician in the USA).

Mary highlighted that the U.S. approach to inclusion is deeply rooted in cultural commitment and decades of social activism. By investing in equity and equality, systems have been established to reduce discrimination in areas such as hiring, education, and governance. While racism and social stratification persist, the overall framework aims to promote fairness and equal opportunity.

Cultural Intuition

Tala, a Palestinian scholar in Turkish academia, overcame cultural and systemic challenges by using her cultural insight to bridge gaps. She launched a research project on oral displacement narratives comparing Palestinian and Turkish experiences and integrated these perspectives into her teaching. Her work fostered inclusivity and cultural dialog, earning her respect and demonstrating how embracing heritage enriched academia and promoted inclusivity.

Preserving Traditions

Kerime, a Georgian-born Muslim Ph.D. student in Azerbaijan, faced challenges living in a predominantly Christian community but chose to preserve her faith and cultural identity. Specializing in minority rights and religious freedom, she promoted interfaith dialog, organized cultural events, and advocated for young Muslim women in higher education. Her academic and community efforts contributed to a better understanding of religious groups and informed policy discussions on minority rights, highlighting how cultural preservation enriches academia and society.

Structural Barriers and Systemic Changes

The following narratives (25% of the interviewees' words) revealed the pervasive structural barriers faced by minority academics, highlighting how underrepresentation, institutional neglect, microaggressions, and cultural taxation could hinder their professional growth, while demonstrating the importance of resilience, advocacy, and systemic change in overcoming these challenges.

Underrepresentation

Mary highlighted the experience of underrepresentation and inequity in professional assignments. She explained the unfair allocation of responsibilities. She pointed to systemic or interpersonal bias in the workplace. The decision-making process seemed to favor certain teachers over others, reflecting an unequal power dynamic. She expressed frustration over inequities and favoritism in their professional environment, emphasizing how they were treated unfairly compared with their colleagues. Her narrative reflected broader themes of underrepresentation and bias in workplace or academic settings.

Institutional Neglect

Mehdi, an Iranian scholar in international law, faced significant challenges at a university in Türkiye, including bureaucratic neglect, exclusion from academic discussions, and language barriers. Despite his work being published in top journals, it was undervalued in performance evaluations compared with local colleagues. Rather than accepting these obstacles, Mehdi built international networks, advocated for better support for foreign academics, and pushed for the creation of an office dedicated to their needs. His efforts led to the formation of a committee addressing foreign scholars' concerns, initiating systemic change. His story highlights the impact of advocacy and resilience in overcoming institutional neglect.

Microaggressions

Maxim experienced microaggressions as a foreigner, being treated like a student despite his Ph.D., was disregarded when sharing his U.S. teaching experience, and was marginalized due to his limited Turkish. His interest in intercultural discourse and hybrid identities further excluded him from full participation, reflecting subtle but harmful biases that reinforced stereotypes and exclusion in his professional environment.

Cultural Taxation

Saadan, a Pakistani scholar at a British university, experienced cultural taxation by being expected to take on extra duties related to his ethnic background, such as representing South Asian perspectives and mentoring minority students—tasks not expected of his white colleagues. This limited his research time and subjected his ideas to greater scrutiny. By focusing on his work and advocating for structural changes to recognize diverse efforts in tenure and promotion, Saadan gained recognition, and leadership roles, and helped advance support for minority academics. His story illustrates overcoming cultural taxation through boundary-setting, strategic advocacy, and persistence.

Balancing Grit and Ground

The following narratives (15% of the elicited interviews) explored the delicate balance between grit and ground, where personal resilience and hard work (grit) often clashed with the foundational principles of fairness, equity, and institutional support (ground), illustrating the emotional toll, systemic challenges, and the need for structural change in academic and professional environments.

Conflict between Grit and Ground

Javad's situation highlighted a disparity in treatment and expectations. His grit represented his persistence and hard work, such as substituting for a colleague and staying late without financial compensation. In contrast, ground symbolizes fairness and basic workplace rights, such as being paid for extra hours. Conflict between grit and ground occurred when his dedication was exploited because the foundational principles of fairness and reciprocity were not upheld, leading to feelings of frustration and injustice, especially when the system appeared more accommodating to others.

Emotional Toll

Maxim faced stereotypes and exclusions due to his appearance, language barriers, and hybrid cultural identity, which affected his sense of belonging and self-worth. To protect his child from similar prejudices, he chose a Turkish name, reflecting his struggle between heritage and assimilation. Despite these

challenges, his education, global experience, and commitment to fairness motivated him to persevere. His story highlights the resilience needed to navigate societal biases and complex hybrid identities.

Preference for Structural Change

Rezvan, an Iranian sociologist in Türkiye, overcame professional isolation and bureaucratic barriers through academic excellence, interdisciplinary collaboration, and local engagement. Once established, she advocated for mentorship programs, fair promotion criteria, and support for foreign faculty, leading to lasting institutional improvements. Her story highlights that success in academia requires both persistence and strategic efforts to drive systemic change from within.

Inclusivity and Institutional Policies

The following narratives emphasized the critical role of inclusivity and effective institutional policies in shaping academic environments, highlighting the importance of fostering belonging, addressing policy gaps, and advocating for systemic change to create equitable and supportive spaces for diverse scholars. Moreover, the frequency of the mentioned examples from the participants (30%) highlights the significance of the issue.

Effective Policies

In Germany, they have given me a safe identity. They welcome me as a member of the team. Academic staff should work out of interest, not out of necessity, I think. Academic work is far different from manual work. A researcher's job can be functional even out of the office. Thinking does not necessarily happen in the office (Sude, an Iranian academician in Germany).

Sude's experience in Germany was completely different from her previous marginalization, highlighting the effectiveness of workplace policies that foster belonging, trust, and autonomy. These policies made her feel included and valued as part of the team, enhancing collaboration and recognizing each individual's unique contributions. They also acknowledged the distinct nature of academic work, emphasizing intellectual freedom and creativity over rigid structures. By offering flexibility, these policies allowed staff to work driven by passion and interest, not just obligation, making them both practical and deeply motivating for researchers and educators.

Policy Gap

Simon's example stands in stark contrast to Sude's experience in Germany, where she felt welcomed and given a safe identity. In the unfriendly HR

experiences that Simon described, the lack of empathy and support created an environment of alienation and devaluation. Instead of fostering a sense of belonging, the HR personnel made him feel like a disposable tool, used for convenience and discarded when no longer needed.

The contrast lies in the fundamental approach to people's management:

- In Germany, policies emphasize inclusion, trust, and recognition of one's individuality and contributions. This fostered belonging and professional growth.
- In the negative experiences, HR's dismissiveness and lack of support perpetuated a culture of detachment, where you were seen more as a replaceable resource than a valued individual.

This difference underscores the critical role that HR can play in shaping workplace culture. While empathetic and supportive HR policies can increase morale and loyalty, cold and transactional behavior erodes trust and damages team dynamics.

Hanna also highlighted a policy gap between the university's vision for attracting international professionals and how this vision is implemented at the departmental level. While the institution invests in promoting diversity and inclusion, this often does not translate to action by deans or department heads. As a result, international staff may feel unsupported, excluded, or undervalued once integrated into their departments. The disconnection creates a sense of being invited but not welcomed, undermining the promise of inclusion. Hanna emphasized the need for alignment between institutional goals and departmental practices, with training, ongoing dialog, and accountability measures to ensure a truly inclusive environment.

Suggestions for improvement

Hanna proposed policy improvements to enhance inclusivity and dialog among international staff and university decision-makers. She suggested organizing a round table where international staff could share experiences and challenges in a safe, welcoming space. To encourage open discussions, she emphasized creating a casual atmosphere with coffee talks, making interactions more approachable. She insisted that key decision-makers should attend, ensuring that staff concerns are heard at the highest level. Beyond conversations, she stressed the need for actionable policy changes, such as language support, mentorship programs, and inclusive departmental practices. Her proposal highlights how small, thoughtful initiatives can foster a sense of belonging and drive meaningful institutional change.

Decolonizing Academia

Hüseyin, a Syrian historian, joined an Egyptian university and quickly noticed how colonial legacies shaped academia, marginalizing Arab intellectual traditions. Western theories dominated the curricula, Arabic sources were underestimated, and publishing in English or French was prioritized. Faculty

hierarchies and research funding favor Western models, and limited regional scholars' independence.

To decolonize academia, Hüseyin revised the syllabi to include Arab, African, and Islamic scholars, advocated for Arabic-language publications in tenure criteria, and organized Arabic academic conferences. He established a research center for regional epistemologies and promoted local institutional partnerships. Despite resistance, his efforts led to curricular reforms, recognition of Arabic scholarship, and greater support for regional research. Hüseyin's story underlines the need for structural and intellectual change to reclaim indigenous knowledge in academia.

The participants' accounts revealed a critical tension between institutional demands for individual resilience and the need for cultural grounding to maintain well-being and authenticity in academia. Through these multifaceted strategies, stakeholders can create a supportive environment that enhances cultural sustainability among marginalized scholars, fostering resilience and promoting equity within academic and community settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, which were based on a data-driven inductive thematic analysis, illuminated critical issues. This article sheds light on the complex interplay between grit and ground in shaping the academic experiences of marginalized scholars. While resilience and perseverance remain essential for navigating institutional challenges, the narratives presented in this research underscore the limitations of grit when structural barriers persist. Marginalized scholars frequently encounter systemic inequities such as underrepresentation, microaggressions, cultural taxation, and institutional neglect. These barriers not only hinder professional growth but also create an emotional and psychological toll that grit alone cannot mitigate.

A key insight from this study is the critical role of cultural grounding in fostering resilience. The participants demonstrated that maintaining connections with cultural identity, communal support systems, and heritage served as sources of strength and academic innovation. Through cultural intuition, marginalized scholars were able to integrate their backgrounds into research and pedagogy, enriching academic discourse and challenging dominant paradigms. The experiences of scholars such as Habiba, Tala, and Hüseyin illustrated how cultural sustainability could act as both a form of resistance and a means of institutional transformation.

Moreover, this study highlights the pressing need for structural change in academia. Institutions that emphasize resilience without addressing systemic inequities risk perpetuating a meritocratic illusion that places the burden of success solely on individuals. The accounts of participants who faced institutional neglect, policy gaps, and microaggressions suggested that inclusion efforts must move beyond symbolic diversity initiatives. Instead, universities should implement targeted policies that support marginalized scholars, such as equitable

hiring and promotion practices, mentorship programs, and institutional recognition of diversity work.

The study also emphasized the importance of policy alignment at all levels of academia. While some institutions market themselves as globally inclusive, discrepancies between university-wide policies and departmental practices create an environment where international and minority scholars are invited but not welcomed. Addressing these inconsistencies requires proactive leadership, accountability mechanisms, and open dialogue between decision-makers and faculty.

This study revealed that true academic inclusion cannot be achieved through grit alone. While perseverance remains a valuable trait, the sustainability of marginalized scholars in academia depends on institutions' ability to foster cultural grounding, dismantle structural barriers, and promote systemic equity. The experiences shared in this study demonstrated that cultural sustainability enriches academic spaces, enhances knowledge production, and creates a more inclusive intellectual landscape.

Implications

While this article provides valuable insights into the interplay between grit and cultural grounding in the experiences of marginalized scholars, several limitations should be acknowledged. The interviews were conducted with a relatively small sample of 15 participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among marginalized scholars in different academic settings. While efforts have been made to ensure a diverse participant pool, the findings may not be generalizable to all disciplines, institutional contexts, or geographical regions.

Participants were recruited through professional networks and online platforms, meaning that those who chose to participate may already be engaged in discussions about cultural sustainability and resilience. Scholars who have left academia due to systemic barriers or who may not identify with the concepts of grit and ground were not included, potentially limiting the scope of their perspectives. Moreover, the researcher used qualitative interviews on the basis of participants' memories and subjective views. While these narratives offered valuable insights, they may reflect personal biases or inconsistencies in recall. Additionally, the article focused on scholars working in specific academic environments, including Türkiye, the UK, Germany, Canada, the US, and Egypt. Institutional cultures, policies, and systemic barriers vary across countries and universities, meaning that findings may not be directly transferable to other contexts with different sociopolitical or academic structures.

The current research captured participants' experiences at one point in time and focused on marginalized scholars but excluded university administrators and policymakers, whose perspectives could clarify policy implementation and institutional challenges; it also highlighted personal experiences but lacked quantitative data to reveal broader trends in policies, retention, or career

disparities. A longitudinal design including diverse viewpoints could better reveal how grit, cultural sustainability, and policies impact long-term academic success.

Future studies can address these limitations by increasing the sample size, incorporating perspectives from university administrators, conducting longitudinal research, and integrating mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative narratives with quantitative data. Expanding the study to different geographic and institutional contexts can also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural sustainability and resilience operate in diverse academic environments.

CONCLUSION

To move toward meaningful change, universities must recognize and reward the cultural contributions of marginalized scholars, implement policies that bridge institutional gaps, and create an environment where diverse perspectives are valued rather than marginalized. A holistic approach that balances grit with ground, and individual perseverance with institutional support, ensures that scholars from diverse backgrounds not only survive but also thrive in academia.

By shifting the focus from individual effort to collective transformation, academic institutions can become more inclusive, fostering an environment where all scholars, regardless of background, can contribute meaningfully and feel a sense of belonging.

This article calls for a redefinition of success in academia, one that values cultural identity, community engagement, and systemic change as essential components of scholarly excellence.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The sections where AI tools were employed are [literature review]. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards. I specifically used AI for language corrections (spelling or better wording), as I am not a native English language user.

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