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Rethinking Multiculturalism in a Homogeneous Society: A Qualitative Inquiry into Muslim Integration in South Korea

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Abstract

South Korea's transition from a historically homogeneous society to an increasingly diverse nation has generated new debates over the meaning and limits of multiculturalism. While state initiatives such as the Support for Multicultural Families Act signify formal recognition of diversity, they also expose the selective and assimilationist tendencies embedded within South Korea's policy framework. This study employs a qualitative document analysis of policy texts, academic scholarship, and media discourse produced between 2010 and 2025 to critically examine how multiculturalism is constructed, represented, and experienced particularly through the lens of Muslim minority integration. Findings reveal that South Korea's multiculturalism remains state-managed and conditional, privileging "acceptable" forms of diversity such as marriage migrants and multicultural families while marginalizing others, including Muslim laborers, refugees, and converts. Media representations further reinforce this exclusion by securitizing Muslim identity and framing religious difference as a threat to national cohesion. Educational curricula, meanwhile, reproduce cultural homogeneity by avoiding critical engagement with religion and pluralism. Despite these constraints, Muslim communities demonstrate agency through faith-based organizations, social networks, and everyday negotiations of belonging. The study argues that South Korea's current multicultural paradigm sustains inclusion without equality and recognition without acceptance. To achieve genuine pluralism, the nation must move beyond symbolic diversity toward intercultural citizenship grounded in equality, dialogue, and mutual respect.

1. Introduction

South Korea's transformation over the past three decades represents one of the most striking social shifts in contemporary East Asia. Long celebrated as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation, the Republic of Korea has witnessed rapid diversification due to globalization, labor migration, and international marriages (Thompson, 2019; Bakker, 2023). This demographic transition has not only altered the country's social composition but has also challenged deeply ingrained notions of *danil minjok* the ideology of a "single-blood" national identity that underpinned modern Korean state-building (Kwon, 2011).

The emergence of multicultural families, migrant labor communities, and visible religious minorities has compelled both the government and society to reconsider what it means to be "Korean" in the twenty-first century. In response, a series of state initiatives, most notably the Support for Multicultural Families Act and the establishment of Multicultural Family Support Centers under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) have been introduced to promote social integration and intercultural understanding (Park, 2016). While these measures signify institutional recognition of diversity, they remain narrowly defined and primarily serve families connected to Korean nationals, excluding many migrant workers, refugees, and foreign residents (Olneck, 2011; Kim, N.-K., 2014). Consequently, multiculturalism in South Korea functions less as a universal social policy and more as a selective inclusion framework aimed at maintaining social harmony within ethnonational boundaries (Lim, 2020).

This study guided by the theoretical concept of selective multiculturalism, which posits that state recognition of diversity often occurs within constrained and hierarchical boundaries. Drawing on Lim's (2020) interpretation, selective multiculturalism refers to the state's strategic use of multicultural discourse to manage rather than transform existing power relations. It operates as a mechanism of conditional inclusion recognizing some minority groups while marginalizing others thus preserving the symbolic unity of the nation-state. This lens provides the analytical foundation for examining how SOUTH Korea's policies,, media narratives and educational practices regulate diversity particularly in relation to the Muslim minority.

Among the diverse minority groups navigating this evolving landscape, the Muslim community occupies a particularly complex position. Islam has been present in Korea since the 1950s, yet Muslims remain a numerically small and socially marginalized population (Jang & Choi, 2012; Yi & Yang, 2024). In recent years, public debates surrounding Muslim visibility ranging from mosque construction conflicts to the 2018 Yemeni refugee controversy on Jeju Island have exposed persistent anxieties over religious difference and cultural "compatibility" (Seo, 2023; Ryu, 2025). Such incidents underscore the uneasy coexistence between official narratives of multicultural inclusion and grassroots resistance to diversity.

The interaction between state policy, public perception, and media discourse reveals the multidimensional nature of South Korea's multicultural challenge. Media portrayals frequently oscillate between celebratory multicultural imagery and securitized depictions of migrants, contributing to what scholars describe as a "moral hierarchy of migrants" (Bakker, 2023; Asor, 2020). Meanwhile, education and civic curricula continue to emphasize national cohesion and global competitiveness rather than intercultural empathy or religious literacy (Moon, 2013; Mo & Lim, 2025). The result is a social environment in which diversity is acknowledged but seldom normalized.

This article rethinks multiculturalism in South Korea by examining how Muslim communities experience and negotiate inclusion within a system built upon selective multiculturalism. Employing a qualitative document analysis of policy frameworks, scholarly literature, and media representations, the study explores three interrelated questions:

1. How do South Korea's multicultural policies define and operationalize diversity?
2. In what ways does media discourse influence public perceptions of Muslims and multiculturalism?
3. What structural and social factors shape Muslim integration in a predominantly homogeneous society?

By focusing on Muslim experiences, this study offers insights into the broader limits of South Korean multiculturalism and contributes to regional debates on post-homogeneous nationhood in East Asia. Ultimately, it argues that genuine multicultural inclusion requires a paradigm shift from cultural tolerance and symbolic recognition toward civic equality and intercultural dialogue.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Roots of Multiculturalism in South Korea

For much of its modern history, South Korea has defined itself as an ethnically homogeneous nation. The concept of *danil minjok*, a single-blood national community has long structured its collective consciousness and state-building ideology. As Kwon notes, this ethnonational narrative was critical to post-war reconstruction, as the emphasis on homogeneity bolstered social cohesion during rapid industrialization and authoritarian modernization. Ethnic unity became synonymous with patriotism, embedding the idea that national progress depended on preserving cultural purity (Kwon, 2011). However, globalization and demographic shifts beginning

in the late 1980s gradually disrupted this monoethnic paradigm. The influx of labor migrants, foreign students, and marriage immigrants introduced new cultural forms and social realities. Thompson (2019) observes that this demographic diversification compelled policymakers to coin the concept of *damunhwa sahoe* (multicultural society), marking a rhetorical departure from ethnocentrism. Yet, as Park (2016) highlights, the resulting policy frameworks were reactive rather than transformative crafted to manage social difference while maintaining national cohesion.

Olneck (2011) argues that South Korea's multicultural transition has been conceptually narrow, primarily targeting marriage-based families rather than systemic diversity. Similarly, Kim (2014) stresses that multiculturalism has been framed as an administrative tool for integration rather than a civic ideology for inclusion. Together, these perspectives reveal that while policy discourse acknowledges diversity, it continues to function within the boundaries of ethnonational identity.

2.2 Policy Evolution and Institutional Challenges

The institutionalization of multiculturalism began with the Support for Multicultural Families Act (2008), which established a network of Multicultural Family Support Centers under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF, 2024). These centers offer language education, counseling, and family support services, reflecting the state's attempt to formalize integration. However, the policy's scope is limited to family units that include Korean nationals, excluding other migrant populations such as refugees and single laborers.

In the other hand, Lim (2020) critiques this approach as discursive multiculturalism as a form of inclusion that rhetorically embraces diversity but practically reproduces exclusionary boundaries. Under this model, multiculturalism serves to manage social heterogeneity without challenging the ethnocultural hierarchy embedded in citizenship. As a result, policy implementation often reproduces structural inequality by legitimizing only "acceptable" forms of difference tied to familial integration. Meanwhile, Ryu (2025) adds that the uneven implementation of multicultural policies across local governments further complicates integration. Urban centers such as Seoul and Ansan demonstrate relatively inclusive initiatives, whereas conservative regions like Daegu often resist religious visibility, as seen in the mosque construction controversy. These regional disparities underscore how state multiculturalism functions unevenly across sociopolitical contexts, revealing both institutional limitations and localized resistance.

2.3 Education and the Construction of Cultural Citizenship

Education has historically served as a mechanism for reproducing national identity in South Korea. Moon (2013) identifies that civic and moral education continue to emphasize unity, loyalty, and Confucian ethics values that marginalize discussions of ethnic and religious diversity. Although the Ministry of Education has introduced multicultural and global citizenship content, these themes often remain peripheral rather than foundational to civic learning. Thus, Hong and Min (2013) argue that South Korean multicultural education operates as an extension of national ideology, aiming to produce socially harmonious yet culturally conforming citizens. The inclusion of global themes is often instrumentalized to enhance national competitiveness rather than cultivate genuine pluralism. Consequently, diversity is presented as an external phenomenon to be managed, rather than as a lively domestic reality that shapes collective identity.

Moreover, Mo and Lim (2025) observe that while educational reforms increasingly stress complexity and adaptability, they seldom confront the structural inequalities embedded in the system. Their study highlights the absence of religious literacy and intercultural dialogue within curricula, resulting in the invisibility of Muslim and other minority students. This reflects a pattern of "cosmetic multiculturalism" (Moon, 2013), in which global values are celebrated symbolically but resisted substantively within national education.

2.4 Media Representation and Public Discourse

The media has emerged as a decisive force in shaping public understanding of diversity and Islam in South Korea. Bakker (2023) finds that national media outlets tend to depict migrants in dualistic terms as either contributors to economic growth or threats to cultural purity. This binary framing reinforces public ambivalence, normalizing hierarchy while obscuring systemic discrimination. Asor (2020) examines urban religious spaces and observes that mosques and Muslim enclaves are often portrayed as zones of tension between "locals" and "outsiders." Such representations construct symbolic boundaries of belonging, situating Muslims outside the moral geography of the nation. The media's tendency to frame difference as spatially and socially disruptive contributes to the marginalization of Muslim communities.

The 2018 Yemeni refugee incident on Jeju Island represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of Korean public discourse on Islam. Seo (2023) and Choi and Park (2020) reveal how sensationalist coverage and misinformation transformed a humanitarian crisis into a perceived cultural threat. This episode catalyzed Islamophobic sentiment, highlighting how the securitization of religion operates through media narratives. Ryu

(2025) similarly notes that local resistance to mosque construction in Daegu reflects the same dynamic, where Islam becomes a symbol through which national anxiety about diversity is expressed.

2.5 The Muslim Minority in Context

The Muslim population in South Korea, though small, is both heterogeneous and historically significant. Jang and Choi (2012) document the emergence of migrant Muslim communities since the 1970s, alongside a modest but growing number of Korean converts. Their research demonstrates how Muslims construct hybrid identities that balance faith adherence with adaptation to Korea's secular and homogenous social environment. Shahzad and Lee (2016) highlight the role of Islamic organizations such as the Korean Muslim Federation, *Dawat-e-Islami*, and *Minhaj-ul-Quran* in facilitating religious education, community solidarity, and welfare support. These networks not only provide spiritual guidance but also function as social infrastructure that sustains Muslim life amid limited institutional support.

Yi and Yang (2024) trace the historical discontinuities in Muslim migration, noting that community development has been shaped by fluctuating immigration policies and inconsistent public tolerance. They argue that Muslims remain symbolically excluded from the national narrative, even as they contribute to Korea's socio-economic life. This marginalization, intensified by global Islamophobic discourses, situates Muslims as a crucial lens for understanding the contradictions of Korean multiculturalism.

Existing scholarship offers valuable insights into the development of multicultural policy, education, and migration in South Korea. Yet few studies integrate these dimensions to examine how institutional frameworks and public discourse intersect to shape the experience of a specific religious minority. The Muslim case remains underexplored, despite its capacity to illuminate the tensions between policy inclusion and social exclusion.

This study fills that gap by combining policy document analysis and media text interpretation within a qualitative framework. By focusing on Muslim integration as both a policy outcome and a social negotiation, it contributes to a more holistic understanding of how multiculturalism operates in practice revealing that inclusion in South Korea remains conditional, selective, and discursively constructed. To clarify the analytical focus of this research. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that illustrates how policy, media and education intersect in shaping Muslim integration within South Korea's selective multicultural paradigm.

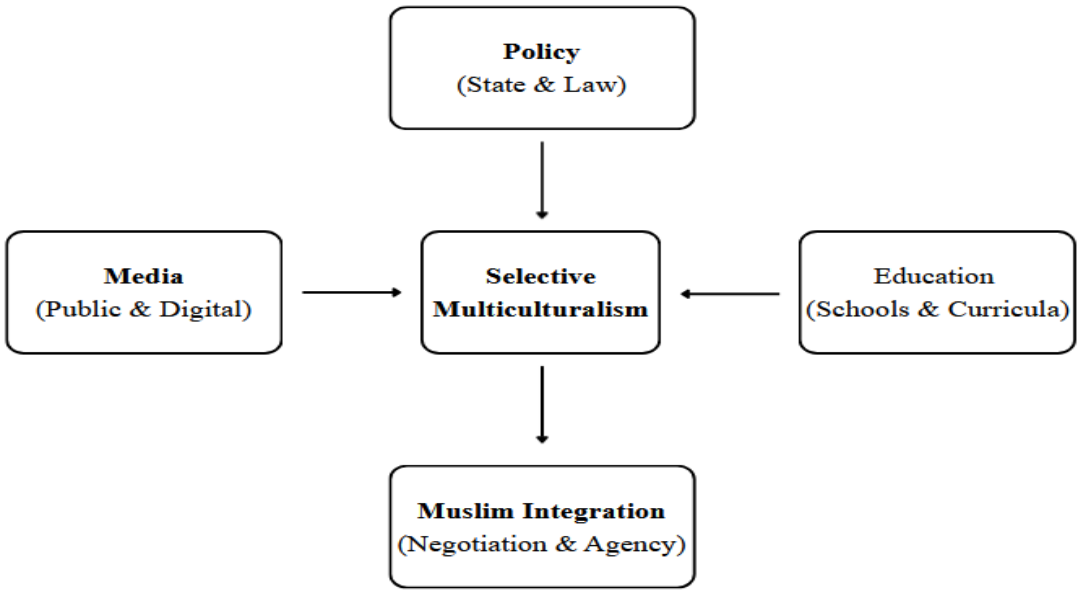

Figure. 1 *Conceptual Framework of Selective Multiculturalism and Muslim Integration in South Korea*

This conceptual model illustrates the dynamic interaction between three key institutional and discursive domains pertaining to policy, media and education in shaping Muslim minority experiences within South Korea's selective multicultural framework, the policy defines the boundaries of inclusion through legislative and administrative mechanisms (e.g. Support for multicultural framework) while media mediates public perceptions often securitizing or moralizing religious differences and media reproduces national homogeneity through curriculum design and civic instruction. The intersection of these three spheres produces conditional inclusion where Muslim communities negotiate belonging through agency, adaptation and informal networks.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach to examine how multiculturalism and Muslim integration are represented within South Korean policy frameworks, academic literature, and media discourse. Qualitative document analysis is well suited to contexts where social meanings are embedded in texts, policies, and representations rather than numerical data (Bowen, 2009). By interpreting written materials as cultural and institutional artifacts, this method allows for a critical exploration of how narratives of inclusion and exclusion are constructed and legitimized within a given society.

The study's analytical lens draws on interpretivist epistemology, emphasizing meaning, context, and discourse rather than causal generalization. It seeks to identify the ideological and structural underpinnings of South Korea's multicultural transition; particularly how Muslim communities are positioned within this transformation. The analysis is further informed by Lim's (2020) concept of "selective multiculturalism," which frames diversity governance in Korea as inclusion conditioned by ethnonationalist boundaries. This theoretical lens guided document selection, coding, and interpretation.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Data were collected from three primary categories, each serving a distinct analytical purpose and enabling triangulation between institutional intent, scholarly interpretation, and public discourse. In total, forty-two documents were analyzed: ten policy and administrative texts, eighteen scholarly and institutional publications, and fourteen media items. Table 1 below summarizes the data scope, purpose and reliability measures:

Table 1 *Overview of Data Sources, Selection Criteria and Reliability Procedures*

Category	Examples of Sources / Key References	Purpose of Analysis	Scope	Reliability & Validation
Government and Policy Documents	*Support for Multicultural Families Act* (2008, amended 2018); *MOGEF Annual Reports* (MOGEF, 2024); *Social Integration Program Guidelines*; *Ministry of Justice Migration Framework*; secondary analyses (Park, 2016; Kang, 2016; Lim, 2020; Ryu, 2022)	Examine state conceptualization of diversity, definitions of "multicultural families," and eligibility criteria within institutional design.	10 policy texts (2008 – 2024) retrieved from KLRI and MOGEF databases.	Dual-review coding of core themes; peer verification of inclusion categories; audit trail of coding memos.
Academic Literature and Institutional Reports	Studies on multicultural policy (Olneck, 2011; Kim, N. K., 2014; Lim, 2020; Ryu, 2022); education (Moon, 2013; Hong & Min, 2013; Mo & Lim, 2025); minority and Muslim experiences (Jang & Choi, 2012; Shahzad & Lee, 2016; Seo, 2023; Yi & Yang, 2024; Sheikh, 2021; Mohd Ghazi et al., 2023)	Identify theoretical and discursive patterns concerning national identity, cultural citizenship, and Islamophobia.	18 peer-reviewed publications (2010 – 2025) drawn from Scopus and institutional repositories.	Quality control through source indexing check, second-reviewer cross-validation, and consistency matrix for thematic overlap.
Media Articles and Scholarly Media Analyses	Key events: *2018 Jeju Yemeni refugee issue* (Choi & Park, 2020; Seo, 2023; Sheikh, 2021) and *Daegu Mosque conflict* (Ryu, 2025; Asor, 2020; Jung, 2025); mainstream coverage (Kim, 2024; Kim, 2025; Woo, 2025; Minhaj-ul-Quran International, 2024); framing studies (Bakker, 2023; Kim, S. W., 2013).	Analyse media framing of Islam and multiculturalism; assess interaction between press narratives and policy discourse.	14 media texts + 2 peer-reviewed media analyses (2013 – 2025).	20 % sample double-coded for intercoder reliability; triangulated with peer-reviewed media-framing studies; peer debriefing for interpretive accuracy.

Complementary coverage from *The Korea Times* and *Korea JoongAng Daily* captured community engagement events such as Ramadan celebrations and the 70-year commemoration of Islam in Korea (Kim, 2024; Kim, 2025;

Woo, 2025; Minhaj-ul-Quran International, 2024). Analytical attention followed Bakker (2023) and Kim S. W. (2013) in identifying linguistic binaries "good" versus "bad" migrants within mainstream narratives. While Media sources were selected based on prominence, relevance, and framing orientation. Dependability was strengthened through intercoder reliability checks (20 percent sample double-coded) and comparison with peer-reviewed media analyses (Bakker, 2023; Asor, 2020).

Following Bowen (2009), triangulation across policy, academic, and media sources enhanced the confirmability of findings. Peer debriefing and double coding of selected documents minimized researcher bias. As all materials were publicly accessible, no ethical clearance was required. Analytical memos documented coding decisions, ensuring transparency and reproducibility throughout the research process.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

Following Bowen's (2009) model, the analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Preparation and Selection – All documents were compiled and categorized into three datasets: policy, academic, and media. Sources were selected for their conceptual relevance and credibility, ensuring a balance between governmental and independent perspectives.
2. Thematic Coding – A manual coding process was used to identify recurrent themes such as selective inclusion, ethnonationalism, Islamophobia, educational representation, and policy gaps. Codes were iteratively refined into axial categories representing relationships between state policy, media portrayal, and Muslim experience.
3. Interpretation and Triangulation – Findings from each dataset were compared to reveal points of convergence and divergence. Triangulation enhanced the reliability of interpretations, allowing for a more holistic understanding of how multiculturalism operates discursively and institutionally in South Korea.

The analysis adopted a critical-constructivist orientation, examining how power relations and cultural hierarchies are embedded in language, law, and media narratives. This interpretive framework enabled the study to reveal not only what policies state, but also how they implicitly define belonging and difference.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Findings

The qualitative document analysis highlights a persistent paradox: although the state of South Korea formally recognizes diversity through multicultural policies, the actual structure of inclusion remains highly conditional and institutionalized. The primary pieces of legislation and administrative programs position "multicultural families" in a framed category, while Muslim communities and other religious minorities continue to be treated as incidental or marginal within the official inclusion logic. These findings underscore what might be described as a managed multiculturalism one that tolerates diversity to an extent, but safeguards core ethnonational norms.

4.2 Policy Framework: Conditional Inclusion and Institutional Hierarchies

The analysis of the Support for Multicultural Families Act (2008) and its implementation via the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) reveals that multicultural policy in South Korea is explicitly designed around a familial model: one Korean spouse and one foreign spouse (or naturalized citizen) and their children. As Ryu (2022) demonstrates, this legislative architecture reflects a deeper governmental logic that redefines diversity within the boundaries of state control. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of governmentality and genealogy, Ryu argues that the Act functions not simply as social welfare legislation but as a discursive strategy that allows MOGEF to expand its bureaucratic jurisdiction while maintaining ideological continuity with Korea's ethnonational legacy.

In this framework, the policy shifts emphasis from ethnic purity and "mixed blood" anxieties toward the regulation of female marriage migration. Female migrants are discursively constructed as apolitical, family-oriented, and maternal subjects whose value is tied to domestic harmony and reproduction rather than civic participation. This framing effectively depoliticizes migrant women, transforming them into instruments of social integration rather than agents of multicultural change. As a result, multiculturalism becomes a mode of governing diversity rather than embracing it is a process that legitimizes inclusion only insofar as it reinforces state-defined norms of family, morality, and social order.

Such an approach, as Kang (2016) further observes, displaces the discourse of ethnicity with that of familial assimilation, maintaining the boundaries of national identity under a veneer of inclusion. Consequently, South Korea's policy framework institutionalizes a hierarchy of belonging one that celebrates diversity rhetorically while regulating it through gendered and bureaucratic control. This model institutionalizes a hierarchy of belonging: those in the "multicultural family" category receive state recognition and support, while other groups

migrants without Korean kinship ties, asylum seekers, Muslims who are non-marriage immigrants are excluded from many supports. The governmental statistics reinforce this: over 70 % of households classified under the Act are marriage migrants to Korean nationals (Jung, 2025).

Thus, this pattern can be conceptualized as selective multiculturalism where inclusion is granted only under tightly defined conditions, preserving the primacy of Korean national membership. The state thereby advances an integration agenda ("language training", "family harmony", "cultural adaptation") that privileges assimilation rather than genuine transformation of national identity. The recurrent use of language in policy documents emphasising adaptation rather than mutual accommodation supports this interpretation.

Local implementation further complicates the picture. The case of the Daegu Mosque conflict (Ryu, 2025) illustrates how regional governance and community reactions can override national policy intent, revealing the uneven geography of multiculturalism. When local actors view cultural or religious differences as a threat to social order, the state's inclusive rhetoric is rendered hollow.

4.3 Media Representation: Securitization, Moral Panic and Islamophobia

Media practices and public discourse provide the second conjugate dimension through which exclusion is reproduced. The 2018 Jeju Island Yemeni refugee episode functions as a case study of how Muslim presence becomes framed as a threat: news reports emphasized "refugees as security risk," "illegal immigration," and "cultural incompatibility" (Seo, 2023; Choi & Park, 2020). Kim (2013) found that Korean newspapers frequently link Arab-Muslim identity with "war", "terror", or "dangerous region," thereby amplifying negative affect even if public perceptions remain more nuanced. More recent work (Mohd Ghazi et al., 2023) tracks how mainstream media and Christian organizations in Korea contributed historically to constructing the Muslim "other" as a religious and cultural outsider.

These media framings serve two critical functions: first, they validate public anxiety and cultural resistance, and second, they provide cultural justification for state policy that limits inclusion. In other words, the media and the state become co-constitutive in producing the boundary of acceptable multiculturalism. Muslims thus often find themselves subject to "securitized visibility" which visible as religious others but invisible as full civic participants. Thus, one must emphasize how this dynamic disrupts the promise of multicultural policy. A policy that invites immigrants yet permits media portrayal of those same immigrants as security risks is inherently contradictory. The result is a double bind; Muslims in Korea are expected to integrate and contribute economically or socially, while the dominant discourse continues to cast them as potential threats or culturally incompatible.

4.4 Education and Socio-Cultural Preproduction of Homogeneity

Education functions as a third axis of analysis. The curriculum reforms that nominally adopt multicultural or global citizenship themes nonetheless remain embedded within a national homogeneity paradigm. Moon (2013) found that civic education emphasizes shared heritage and language over religious pluralism. Similarly, Mo & Lim (2025) observed that while new teaching methodologies were introduced, engagement with religion or structural inequality remained marginal.

From the lens of this study, this matters because education constitutes the ideational reproduction of national identity. If schools fail to meaningfully address religious diversity or cultural difference, then Muslims and other minorities are not just institutionally excluded but conceptually rendered invisible within the nation's civic imagination. This invisibility becomes part of the structural limitation of multicultural policy: compatibility with national identity depends not only on policy recognition, but on the normative discourses that define what "being Korean" means.

Critically, this invites the question: can multiculturalism proceed in a society whose educational foundations remain committed to homogeneity? Possible answer is only partially until educational reform engages deeply with religious pluralism and structural inequality, the shift from assimilationist multiculturalism to genuine intercultural citizenship remains incomplete.

4.5 Muslim Community Agency and Everyday Negotiation

Despite structural constraints, the Muslim community in Korea is neither passive nor monolithic. Institutions such as the Korea Muslim Federation (KMF), *Dawat-e-Islami*, and community centres play active roles in negotiating belonging, creating support networks, and engaging in religious–cultural translation (Shahzad & Lee, 2016). For example, in 2025 the KMF celebrated "70 Years of Islam in Korea" with an international halal seminar and outreach event in Seoul, highlighting domestic and global links and offering a public platform for Muslim presence and visibility (Kim, 2025).

Community agency also extends into service-delivery and public diplomacy where in 2025, the Seoul Metropolitan Government worked with Muslim organisations to certify halal restaurants, coordinate the "Salam Seoul" festival, and activate Muslim-friendly branding showcasing how Muslim-led initiatives influence

institutional agendas (Woo, 2025). During Ramadan in 2024, the annual Iftar dinner in Seoul brought together government officials, business leaders and Muslim community representatives in a gesture of intercultural solidarity and visibility (Kim, 2024). Furthermore, the *Minhaj-ul-Quran* International hosted a keynote lecture on inter-faith harmony at Sejong University in August 2024, an event that demonstrates Muslim organisational outreach in academic and public discourse (Minhaj-ul-Quran International, 2024).

Thus, integration cannot be measured solely by state policy or media portrayal; one must also account for grassroots and strategic self-representation. However, these bottom-up efforts face the cap of selective multiculturalism: they operate within a system that does not fully recognise them as civic equals and continues to police the boundaries of belonging. Muslim agency thus often becomes a form of adaptive resilience rather than a transformation of the national framework.

4.6 Intersectional Dynamics and Structural Limitations

The convergence of policy, media, and education reveals an intersectional matrix of exclusion that defines the limits of multicultural inclusion in South Korea. Policy frameworks determine who qualifies as "multicultural," thereby deciding which groups receive recognition and institutional support. Media representations play a parallel role by shaping public perceptions, often amplifying cultural anxieties and indirectly influencing policy interpretation and enforcement. Meanwhile, educational narratives continue to construct national identity through ethnocentric frameworks, marginalizing religious and cultural difference rather than embracing pluralism. Although community organizations and advocacy networks strive to bridge these divides through informal support and interfaith initiatives, their efforts remain constrained by systemic barriers and limited policy acknowledgment. Collectively, these intersecting forces demonstrate that multicultural inclusion in South Korea remains conditional managed within boundaries set by state, media, and educational institutions.

Collectively, these dynamics reveal the structural limitations of South Korea's multicultural project. Although the state acknowledges diversity, it has yet to embed it meaningfully into the institutional fabric of citizenship and belonging. Instead, the system contains differences within predefined and socially acceptable boundaries. As Park (2016) observes, despite rising indicators of inclusion among multicultural families, patterns of discrimination and labour-market marginalisation persist. Moreover, recent findings on mental health among multicultural families (Kim & Park, 2024) indicate that social vulnerability extends beyond economic or cultural dimensions to psychological well-being, suggesting that policy gaps produce deep and long-term human costs.

These structural constraints become especially visible in the case of Muslim integration. Muslims comprising migrant workers, students, and a small number of Korean converts occupy an ambivalent position within South Korea's social hierarchy. They are legally present yet symbolically peripheral, tolerated as temporary economic participants but rarely imagined as long-term members of the nation. The Support for Multicultural Families Act's limited scope excludes most Muslims from institutional support networks, while public discourse, fuelled by Islamophobic narratives, frames their religious visibility as culturally incompatible. As Ryu (2025) shows in the Daegu Mosque controversy, local resistance to Muslim spaces reflects how state and society jointly regulate the boundaries of "acceptable" multiculturalism.

In this sense, Muslim experiences illuminate how policy, media, and education interlock to sustain what Lim (2020) terms selective multiculturalism. Policy establishes the administrative limits of inclusion; media reinforces social fears of cultural deviation; and education reproduces national homogeneity through curricular silence on religious pluralism. Together, these dimensions constitute a regime of conditional inclusion a mode of governance that permits difference only when it remains non-disruptive to dominant ethnonational norms.

At the community level, Muslims respond through adaptive strategies that combine faith practice with pragmatic negotiation. They establish halal restaurants, prayer rooms, and informal learning circles that both accommodate daily religious needs and foster cross-cultural engagement. Yet these micro-acts of resilience remain precarious without structural reinforcement from law and policy. The persistence of selective multiculturalism thus reveals a deeper contradiction: South Korea promotes global openness economically yet retains cultural and institutional frameworks anchored in monoethnic nationalism.

Ultimately, this intersectional analysis suggests that South Korea's multicultural project is less a story of linear progress than one of negotiated coexistence. The Muslim case demonstrates that inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated reforms in policy or education alone; it requires a re-conceptualisation of citizenship that recognises diversity as constitutive of, rather than peripheral to, Korean modernity. This understanding provides the foundation for the concluding discussion on the pathways toward intercultural citizenship and sustainable pluralism in South Korea.

These intersectional dynamics not only reveal the embedded asymmetries of inclusion but also demonstrate how selective multiculturalism operates as both a policy framework and a social condition. The tensions between state regulation, media discourse, and educational narratives highlight that diversity in South Korea is managed rather than embraced, negotiated rather than institutionalized. Yet, within these constraints, Muslim communities continue to articulate belonging through everyday resilience and faith-based solidarity.

These empirical insights set the stage for a broader theoretical reflection on how multiculturalism itself must be re-conceptualized in post-homogeneous societies a discussion undertaken in the following section.

4.7 Theoretical Implications and the Future of Multiculturalism in South Korea

Building upon the intersectional analysis above, this section situates the findings within broader theoretical debates on multiculturalism in post-homogeneous societies. The empirical evidence reveals that South Korea's multicultural project operates through a logic of selective multiculturalism a form of state-managed diversity that legitimizes inclusion while maintaining existing hierarchies of belonging. Lim (2020) characterizes this condition as a transitional phase between ethnonational exclusivity and civic pluralism, yet the Muslim case demonstrates that this transition remains partial, asymmetrical and contested. Religious difference exposes the limits of multicultural discourse by challenging the boundaries of who can be seen as a legitimate member of the Korean polity.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that multiculturalism in South Korea cannot be understood solely through demographic or policy change. It must also be approached as a discursive and relational process one produced through the interaction of institutional governance, public communication, and everyday negotiation. This expands existing models of multiculturalism by integrating not only the administrative and legal dimensions of diversity management but also the symbolic and cultural mechanisms through which inclusion and exclusion are constructed.

Thus, a key limitation of South Korean multicultural policy lies in its persistent mismatch between rhetoric and structure. The state speaks of inclusion but operates categories that limit who can belong. The media speaks of diversity but often frames difference as threat. Education speaks of global citizenship but continues to teach homogeneity. This triadic dissonance produces what can be described as a "halfway house" of multiculturalism visible diversity without full acceptance, measurable integration without equal citizenship.

For Muslims and other religious minorities, this means that everyday integration extends beyond access to social services; it also involves the struggle for symbolic recognition and civic legitimacy. Recognition in this context means being seen as part of the Korean polity not merely as cultural guests, but as equal participants in its civic life. Building that recognition requires policy reform beyond the family-based model, media responsibility beyond securitized framing, and educational redesign beyond tokenistic multicultural activities.

On the pathway forward, this study identifies three key areas for transformative change. First, policy expansion and recalibration should redefine multiculturalism beyond the narrow scope of family-based inclusion by extending recognition to labor migrants, refugees, and religious minorities, supported through comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. Second, media literacy and representational reform are crucial for encouraging balanced portrayals of diversity media institutions must incorporate minority perspectives, challenge securitized narratives, and promote more empathetic depictions of Muslim and migrant lives. Third, educational curriculum reform should move beyond symbolic multicultural lessons toward embedding religious literacy, intercultural dialogue, and critical citizenship as integral components of education. Together, these efforts can shift South Korea's multiculturalism from a policy of managed inclusion toward a framework of genuine civic equality and shared belonging.

Ultimately, these implications point toward a necessary paradigm shift from symbolic multiculturalism to intercultural citizenship. In societies once defined by homogeneity, the path to pluralism is neither straightforward nor passive; it demands structural transformation, discursive reorientation, and relational change. The Muslim experience in Korea thus serves as a critical lens for assessing how far the nation has travelled in its journey toward genuine inclusivity and how far it still must go.

5. Conclusion

South Korea's journey toward multiculturalism reflects a complex negotiation between demographic reality, state policy, and national identity. As the findings of this qualitative document analysis reveal, the country's approach to diversity is neither fully exclusionary nor genuinely inclusive, it exists within an uneasy middle ground that can best be described as selective multiculturalism. While the Support for Multicultural Families Act and related initiatives symbolize institutional recognition of diversity, their implementation remains narrowly bounded by ethnonationalist logics that privilege familial ties to Korean nationals.

The analysis of media and educational discourses underscores how multiculturalism is not only a matter of legal inclusion but also of cultural perception and representation. Media portrayals of Muslims particularly in the aftermath of the 2018 Jeju refugee episode and the Daegu Mosque controversy have reinforced narratives of otherness and insecurity, contributing to the social marginalization of Muslim communities. Meanwhile, educational curricula continue to emphasize cultural harmony and economic competitiveness rather than critical engagement with religious and ethnic diversity. Collectively, these findings illustrate how multiculturalism in South Korea has been institutionalized as a management strategy rather than embraced as a transformative vision for civic equality.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study affirms that South Korea is undergoing a transitional phase from a monoethnic national identity toward a more pluralist civic framework (Lim, 2020). Yet this transition remains constrained by structural and ideological factors that limit the scope of inclusion. The Muslim community's experiences marked by both agency and marginalization demonstrate the contradictions of this process. Their everyday negotiations of belonging, visibility, and faith within the boundaries of selective multiculturalism expose the limits of policy-driven inclusion when it lacks corresponding shifts in societal consciousness.

This study addressed three key research questions. First, in examining how South Korea's multicultural policies define and operationalize diversity, it found that inclusion remains conditional and largely confined to marriage-based families. Second, in exploring how media discourse influences public perceptions, it revealed that securitized and moralizing framings sustain Islamophobic and exclusionary narratives. Third, in analyzing the structural and social factors shaping Muslim integration, it demonstrated that educational silence on religion and limited institutional recognition jointly reproduce marginality while prompting community-led adaptation. Together, these answers show that South Korean multiculturalism remains state-managed and hierarchically selective.

Theoretically, this study contributes to multiculturalism research by conceptualizing South Korea's approach as a model of selective inclusion, a hybrid system that recognizes diversity symbolically but regulates it through administrative, cultural, and discursive hierarchies. This conceptualization extends existing debates beyond Western liberal frameworks by foregrounding how post-homogeneous Asian societies manage pluralism under the pressure of national identity preservation. It also introduces an analytical synthesis that links policy frameworks, media discourse, and education as mutually reinforcing domains in shaping minority experience.

To move beyond symbolic multiculturalism, South Korea must embrace an intercultural model that promotes dialogue, mutual recognition, and civic participation for all residents, regardless of origin or religion. Policy reform should broaden the definition of "multicultural family" to encompass diverse migrant groups, including refugees and religious minorities. Educational curricula must integrate religious literacy, ethical pluralism, and global citizenship as core competencies rather than peripheral topics. The media, as a key mediator of public discourse, should be encouraged through professional ethics and public oversight to represent minorities with balance and respect, avoiding sensationalist or securitized narratives.

Such transformations are not only moral imperatives but strategic necessities for an aging and globally connected nation. As South Korea faces labor shortages, declining birth rates, and rising international migration, cultivating an inclusive and interculturally literate society will be vital to its social cohesion and long-term sustainability.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources academic publications, policy documents, and media analyses without direct ethnographic engagement or first-hand interviews. Consequently, while the analysis captures the discursive and structural dimensions of Muslim integration, it cannot fully represent the lived experiences and emotional realities of Muslim individuals in South Korea. Furthermore, document analysis depends on the availability and accessibility of public records; some internal government or media decision-making processes remain opaque and beyond the scope of this research.

Another limitation lies in temporal scope: while the corpus includes materials from 2010 to 2025, attitudes and policy directions in South Korea continue to evolve rapidly in response to political changes, demographic trends, and global migration dynamics. Future developments such as new anti-discrimination legislation or shifts in media ethics may significantly alter the landscape described here.

Building upon these limitations, future research should adopt multi-method and field-based approaches to capture the lived realities of Muslims and other minorities in South Korea. Ethnographic studies involving participant observation and interviews could reveal how individuals negotiate belonging beyond policy narratives. Comparative research with other East Asian societies such as Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore would contextualize South Korea's selective multiculturalism within broader regional trends. Longitudinal analyses of media discourse could trace how portrayals of Muslims evolve in response to social and political change, while empirical assessments of programs under the Support for Multicultural Families Act and Social Integration Program could measure the real impact of inclusion policies. Finally, studies on youth attitudes and multicultural education may expose generational shifts toward greater intercultural understanding. Together, these directions can bridge the gap between institutional frameworks and everyday experiences, advancing a more grounded understanding of multiculturalism in South Korea.

In conclusion, South Korea stands at a crossroads: its economic globalization and demographic diversification have made multiculturalism an irreversible reality, yet its institutions and collective imagination remain anchored in a legacy of homogeneity. The challenge is therefore not one of managing diversity but of reimagining the nation itself transforming multiculturalism from a policy category into a shared civic ethos. The Muslim community's experiences serve as both a mirror and a measure of South Korea's readiness to embrace genuine pluralism. Their struggles and contributions illustrate that multiculturalism cannot thrive under selective inclusion it demands recognition, equality, and dialogue. Only when diversity is embedded as a

normative value within law, education, and media will South Korea's multicultural future move from rhetoric to reality.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

All authors were directly involved in the writing of this journal.

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