



"A SPACE OF FRICTION": INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS, AGENCY AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM AMONG ARAB STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

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Abstract:

In recent decades, the Israeli higher education system has undergone a process of massification, which has been presented in institutional discourse as a promise of the democratization of knowledge and social mobility for the Arab-Palestinian minority. However, the academic encounter emerges as a Space of Friction, saturated with power relations, in which structural and institutional barriers function as "gatekeepers" that exclude minorities. This study seeks to deconstruct students' experiences by examining how institutional, structural, and socio-cultural barriers shape their agency, educational activism, and experiences of identity and belonging. Methodology: The study was conducted within a qualitative-interpretive paradigm using an extended case study approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 Arab male and female students from diverse higher education institutions and academic disciplines. The data were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach and triangulated against nine critical theoretical frameworks, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), Structuration Theory, and Intersectionality. The findings reveal a complex dialectic between institutional betrayal and the reproduction of inferiority, on the one hand, and the emergence of subversive agency, on the other. Students confront a language wall that produces professional muteness, as well as a campus transformed into a fortified space characterized by processes of escalating silencing and surveillance (a digital panopticon), particularly following the war events. In response, students enact "Authorial Agency", employing artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) as a form of linguistic body armor to circumvent power hierarchies, while establishing an "academy within the academy"-alternative knowledge infrastructures grounded in solidarity and academic "Sumud" steadfastness. The intersectional analysis further revealed that, for mothers, family status is transformed from a barrier into a pedagogy of demonstration and a driver of intergenerational excellence. The study challenges the deficit paradigm, which attributes inferiority to minority populations, and demonstrates the existence of "Resistant Capital" among Arab students. The findings underscore the need for a paradigmatic shift- from a

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model centered on fixing the student and cultural assimilation toward transformative leadership that advances epistemic justice and cultural humility in institutional governance. Students' successful navigation of the matrix of domination testifies to a form of collective resilience that transforms enforced transparency into sovereign political and intellectual visibility.

Keywords: student agency, educational activism, transformative leadership, Arab sector in Israel, chilly climate, habitus, epistemic justice, intersectionality, academic sumud, digital panopticon, authorial agency, epistemic attack

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, higher education systems worldwide have undergone a profound structural transformation known as massification, a concept introduced by Trow (1973/2000) to describe the transition from an elite system to a mass system that promises the democratization of knowledge and social mobility. Within institutional discourse, this process has been portrayed as a mechanism for generating the Slipstream Effect, a concept proposed by Wainwright and Watts (2021) describing how the success of the first student in a family stimulates the mobility of the entire family unit by reshaping aspirations and reducing institutional uncertainty, particularly as higher education is regarded as one of the principal mechanisms for promoting social mobility and expanding economic and civic opportunities (Leng, 2025; OECD, 2022).

However, for the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel, academia does not function as a neutral space but rather as a complex arena embedded in historical power relations within the reality of an ethnic democracy (Smootha, 2002). The literature indicates that the growing participation of Arab students in higher education has not eliminated the persistence of multidimensional barriers, including institutional, social, and personal barriers that operate simultaneously and shape students' integration into higher education (Arar & Mustafa, 2011; Elias Haneen *et al.*, 2023; Dallasheh & Zubeidat, 2023). The academic encounter emerges as a Space of Friction (Binhas, 2019), in which aspirations for social mobility collide with hegemonic power structures, producing a Chilly Climate and a profound sense of alienation. Within this space, belonging is not merely a psychological need but also a political claim for recognition in the face of mechanisms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1986) and epistemic assault (Shinar, 2026) that marginalize the minority's narrative. This tension intensified dramatically during the Swords of Iron War, which transformed the campus into a fortified space marked by escalating forms of silencing (Totry-Jubran, 2026).

Despite the richness of existing scholarship in mapping objective structural barriers, an integrative knowledge gap remains regarding how students themselves interpret these barriers. A deeper understanding is lacking of the process through which the student is transformed from a passive subject into a Knowledgeable Agent who employs discursive consciousness, as conceptualized in Structuration Theory (Giddens,

1984), to challenge the normalization of inequality. In addition, insufficient attention has been devoted to the role of technological tools such as artificial intelligence in shaping Authorial Agency, as discussed by Nieminen *et al.* (2022), building on Matusov *et al.* (2016), as a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the student as an active producer of knowledge rather than merely a passive consumer, particularly among minority students navigating a threatening academic environment.

This study seeks to deconstruct the experiences of 30 Arab male and female students by uncovering how encounters with structural barriers shape the development of subversive agency and educational activism. Its objective is to trace the dialectical praxis through which students establish an academy within the academy and alternative knowledge infrastructures to transform academia from a field of social reproduction into a field of pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1970/2021). The study contributes to the field of educational management and leadership by proposing a shift from a model centered on fixing the student toward transformative leadership (Elmalak-Watad, 2025) that advances epistemic justice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Neoliberal Managerialism and Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI): The Paradox of Academic Massification

Over the past decades, higher education systems worldwide have undergone a profound structural transformation known as massification, a concept introduced by Trow (1973/2000) to describe the transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education (Trow, 1973/2000, as cited in Nyagope, 2024). Although this transition significantly widened access to higher education, it also generated new institutional and pedagogical challenges. This institutional promise has been framed as a form of the democratization of knowledge, intended to generate the Slipstream Effect, whereby the success of the first student in a family stimulates the social mobility of the entire household (Wainwright & Watts, 2021).

However, this process is accompanied by a paradox explained by the theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI), which argues that even as access to higher education expands, privileged social groups preserve their advantages through differential access to higher-status institutions and more prestigious fields of study. At the same time, minority populations are disproportionately channeled into less rewarding academic pathways with lower returns. Consequently, inequality is not eliminated but rather reproduced through changing mechanisms and forms (Choi & Lee, 2025; Phyo & Ilie, 2025).

From the perspective of Critical Theory, the expansion of higher education has therefore been accompanied by the consolidation of neoliberal governance, under which universities increasingly function according to the principles of Academic Capitalism, where knowledge production, research, and education are governed by market imperatives and performance indicators (Wieczorek & Muench, 2023). Within this

framework, knowledge becomes embedded in mechanisms of power, surveillance, and normalization that regulate students' behavior through regimes of truth (Foucault, 1975). This process reflects what Habermas (1987) termed the colonization of the lifeworld by the system (System Colonization), a concept applied by Morley (2024) to the analysis of the contemporary university, where the values of critical inquiry, dialogue, academic autonomy, reflexivity, and collaborative knowledge production are increasingly displaced by cultures of measurement, control, and performance evaluation. Within this reality, such processes may also reshape the professional identities of academic staff, thereby transforming both the character of teaching and students' learning experiences, with an increasing emphasis on performance and assessment (Marques *et al.*, 2024; Roshid & Le Ha, 2023).

2.2 Critical Race Theory (CRT): Between Interest Convergence and the Diversity of Inclusion

In recent years, higher education institutions have increasingly embraced the rhetoric of Diversity and Inclusion, presenting the university campus as a pluralistic environment grounded in meritocracy and equal opportunity. From the perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT), however, racism is understood not as an anomaly within the social order but as a structural phenomenon embedded in institutional policies, practices, and power relations (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Accordingly, Bell's (1980) principle of Interest Convergence argues that initiatives promoting racial equality tend to advance primarily when they also serve the interests of institutions or dominant social groups. Building on this argument, Ahmed (2012) demonstrates that diversity discourse can become a symbolic institutional resource that enhances the university's public legitimacy while leaving intact the Brick Walls and hidden mechanisms of exclusion that continue to structure institutional life.

Within this context, diversity may ultimately be reduced to Tokenism, whereby the visibility of students from minority groups is not accompanied by meaningful influence over institutional policy, organizational culture, or academic decision-making. Symbolic representation thus substitutes for substantive participation, leaving minority students visible yet largely excluded from institutional governance and power processes (Thomas, 2018; Robertson, 2023).

2.3 Habitus, Cultural Capital, and Linguistic Symbolic Violence

Language in academia is not merely a neutral medium for transmitting information but also a form of symbolic capital through which the legitimacy of knowledge, identity, and belonging is established within the academic field (Bourdieu, 1986). When students from minority groups bring linguistic capital that does not align with the dominant norms and values of the field, a tension may emerge between their home habitus and the academic habitus, giving rise to a language wall, in which academic Hebrew functions as a gatekeeper restricting access to resources, recognition, and full participation (Amara *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, recent studies, including those of Manor and Watad (2024, 2025),

emphasize that the loss of the ability to think, write, and express oneself professionally in one's native language may lead to professional muteness and undermine students' sense of self-efficacy (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Bandura, 1997).

At the same time, the era of digital networks and technological advancement has created new opportunities for students to navigate these barriers. Within this context, students can exercise Authorial Agency (Nieminen *et al.*, 2022; Lund & Vestøl, 2020), acting as active producers of knowledge and authors of their own academic voices. In this sense, artificial intelligence is understood as a tool that supports and expands students' agency rather than replacing it, enabling them to challenge and circumvent linguistic and epistemic hierarchies while fostering new forms of counter-power within the academic space (Castells, 2012; Alyasin & Shah, 2026).

2.4 Structuration Theory and the Digital Panopticon

According to Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984), students do not function as passive subjects but rather as Knowledgeable Agents who exercise reflexivity and agency within institutional structures that simultaneously constrain and enable their actions- a dynamic conceptualized as the duality of structure. Within this context, the preservation of ontological security- the need for stability, continuity, and trust in the social world- becomes a central challenge for students studying in institutional environments characterized by political tension and uncertainty.

Within the Israeli context, recent studies indicate that periods of armed conflict are accompanied by processes of epistemic assault (Shinar, 2026) and escalating silencing (Totry-Jubran, 2026), both of which intensify Arab students' sense of vulnerability within the academic environment and transform the campus into a fortified space populated by pervasive symbols of sovereignty. Under these conditions, formal and informal mechanisms of surveillance- including concerns about exposure through social media, the circulation of screenshots, and the fear of being reported- create conditions that resemble Foucault's (1975) concept of the panopticon, in which the mere possibility of surveillance shapes individual behavior. Consistent with Scott's (1990) analysis, such silence does not necessarily signify passivity but may instead constitute a Hidden Transcript- a strategy of survival and resistance that enables individuals to protect their identities while preserving their agency within spaces of friction under conditions of surveillance and uncertainty. Consequently, students are compelled to adopt strategies of identity management, self-censorship, and silence in order to navigate risk rationally, as documented by Sabbah-Karkabi and Abu-Rabia-Queder (2025).

2.5 Critical Pedagogy, Intersectionality, and Academic Sumud

Academic marginality need not function solely as a site of exclusion; it may also become a site of resistance, where experiences of oppression are transformed into resistant capital (hooks, 1990; Yosso, 2005). The transition from banking education to emancipatory praxis (Freire, 1970) unfolds within the matrix of domination, where intersecting relations of nationality, gender, and religion shape individuals' experiences and opportunities

(Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). For Arab women students, motherhood may be transformed from an obstacle into a source of agency and motivation for academic excellence (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Weiner-Levy, 2013). Within this reality, the process of conscientization may be expressed through academic Sumud- steadfastness that transforms sites of marginality into spaces of resistance, belonging, and epistemic justice (Diab, 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design Paradigm and Research Strategy

The current research is anchored in the Interpretive-Qualitative Research paradigm and a broad case study method, which enable an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena within their natural context (Creswell, 2011; Yin, 2012). This methodological choice stems from the need to decipher the tangled web of barriers, agency, and identity among Arab students, while emphasizing the subjective meanings they give to their experiences within "academia as an arena of struggle" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study aims to produce a "full description" of student navigation processes, while exposing the "discursive consciousness" and "hidden discourse" of agents operating within exclusionary power structures as noted by the researchers (Giddens, 1984; Scott, 1990).

3.2 Research Population and Sample

The research sample consisted of 30 students from Arab society, who were selected using the "snowball" method and a convenience sample to reach theoretical saturation (Creswell, 2012; Emerson, 2015). The sample is characterized by broad institutional diversity, including research universities and academic colleges, as well as disciplinary diversity among students from various faculties. Special emphasis was placed on gender and generational diversity, including young students alongside adult students and mothers navigating between the requirements of the academic track and the demands and expectations of the community

3.3 Research Tools and Data Collection Process

The main research tool was the semi-structured interview, which is characterized by flexibility, allowing interviewees to reveal their worldview (Brinkmann, 2014; Creswell, 2012). The outline of the interview included 16 core questions, developed based on the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, Giddens, and Collins, and addressed personal background, identity navigation, linguistic barriers, and the impact of digital space (Bourdieu, 1986; Collins, 1990). Due to wartime accessibility and security constraints, the interviews were conducted mostly through the Zoom app, recorded in video and audio calls, and fully transcribed, while allowing participants to choose the language of the interview to ensure a "safe space" for self-expression (Brinkmann, 2014; Elias Haneen *et al.*, 2023).

3.4 Adjustments in the Research System in the Shadow of the "Iron Sword" War

According to the original plan, the study was supposed to include focus groups as a data-collection tool. However, the events of the war and the formation of an institutional climate characterized by "silencing and escalation" and fear of digital transformation led to the decision to forgo them for ethical and methodological reasons. The students reported a deep fear of expressing their views in public; therefore, the personal interview became the only tool that allowed for honest exposure without fear of sanctions. The sample was expanded to 30 interviewees in order to compensate for the lack of group interaction.

3.5 Data Analysis and Thematic Coding

The data analysis was carried out using inductive thematic analysis in two stages (Shkedi, 2003). In the first stage, open coding was carried out to identify significant concepts such as "brick wall", "strategic transparency", and "agent of change". In the second stage, eight main themes were formulated that intersect experiences of exclusion with expressions of agency and activism, as well as with the theoretical foundations of critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

3.6 Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Research Ethics

To ensure the quality and rigor of the study, the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied: credibility was established through source triangulation across the 30 participants (interviewees); transferability was enhanced by providing a rich description of the political and social context; dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of the research process; and confirmability was supported by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Participation was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent, and participants' anonymity was fully protected through the use of pseudonyms.

4. Results

An analysis of 30 in-depth interviews with students from Arab society reveals a complex reality of "academia as an arena of struggle," in which a constant dialectical tension between institutional barriers and the growth of transformative agency shapes student navigation. The findings show that students do not act as passive consumers of knowledge but rather as agents of knowledge who interpret the academic space through experiences of exclusion and silencing, and by building collective resilience.

Table 1: Thematic Mapping of the Research Findings and Characteristics of the Interviewee Sample and Diversity of Institutions/Faculties (N=30)

Main theme	Number of interviewees (N)	Notable Faculties	Notable Academic Institutions
1. The Experiences of Transition and the Shock of the Encounter	30 (100%)	Law, Communications, Engineering	Hebrew, Haifa, Afeka
2. The "Language Wall" and Epistemic Violence	30 (100%)	Nursing, Engineering, Law	Hebrew, Afeka, Bar Ilan
3. The Physical Space as a Security Arena	26 (87%)	Political Science, Law, Architecture	Haifa, Hebrew, Tel Aviv
4. Identity Management and "Strategic Transparency"	22 (73%)	Psychology, Political Science, A.S.	The Open House, Haifa, Tel Aviv
5. Student Agency and Resistance Through Excellence	20 (67%)	Engineering, Economics, Law	Technion, Bar Ilan, Hebrew
6. The Digital Space: Panopticon vs. Solidarity	18 (60%)	Engineering, Social Work, Education	Afeka, Tel Aviv, Kibbutzim College
7. Educational Activism and Transformational Leadership	15 (50%)	Social Work, Law, Nursing	Tel Aviv, Bar Ilan, Hebrew
8. Intersectionality and Gender (Motherhood as Power)	12 (40%)	Education, Social Work, PhD	Achva, Jezreel Valley, Haifa

Table 2: Integrative Mapping of Barriers, Agency, and Academic Praxis (N=30)

A central theme in the research	Dominant institutional/structural barrier	The Expression of Agency and Praxis	Key Theoretical Concept (Example)
1. Transition Experiences	High School as a "Zionist Enterprise" and Lack of Navigational Capital	Strategic Decision on Delaying Entry for the Purpose of Maturity (40:21)	Habitus (Bourdieu)
2. The Language Wall	"Professional mute" and epistemic disinheritance through Hebrew	Using ChatGPT as a "linguistic stump" to bypass hierarchies	Symbolic Violence (Bourdieu)
3. The Physical Space	Militarization of the campus and policing of the gates	"Planting Identity": Giving Arab Names to Projects (M. 19)	Ontological Security (Giddens)
4. Identity Management	"Chilly climate" and fear of burnouts	Strategic Transparency: Silence as Rational Risk Management	Hidden Shrub (Scott)+ Social Identity Theory (SIT): Creating Positive Uniqueness in Majority-Minority Situations
5. Student Agency	The "deprivation paradigm" that attributes inferiority to the minority	Establishment of "academia within academia" and independent knowledge infrastructures	Resilience Capital + Critical Race Theory (CRT): Using "Counter-Narratives" to Challenge the Majority Narrative
6. The Digital Space	Digital Panopticon: Monitoring and Screenshots	Creating "counter-publics" for solidarity	Counterpower (Castells) + Architecture of Power (Foucault): "Regimes of

			Truth" and Oversight in the Digital Panopticon.
7. Educational Activism	Institutional Blindness to the Needs of the Arab Community	The Perception of the Degree as a "Strategic Weapon" (Selah) for Social Reform	Liberating Praxis (Ferreira) + Critical Pedagogy (Ferreira and Hawkes): Realization of "Praxis" and the Pedagogy of Hope
8. Intersectionality	"Double suspicion": Exclusion on the basis of nationality, gender and religion	Motherhood as a "Demonstration Pedagogy" and an Engine for Excellence	The Control Matrix (Collins) + The Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw & Collins): Navigating the "Control Matrix"

The following are the characteristics of the sample (Table 3) and the eight main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Table 3: Distribution of Participants by Institution, Faculty, and Central Agency Expressions (N=30).

Table 3: Study Participant Profile and Agency/Key Barrier Expressions (N=30)

Pseudonym / ID	Academic Institution	Faculty / Field of Study	Dominant barrier	Activism and Agency
Interviewee No. 1	Bar Ilan	Law	Selective Policing at the Gate (Hijab)	Student Representative, Demand for Reinforcement
Interviewee No. 7	Hebrew	Nursing	"Professional mute" and the conception of thought	Accessibility of medical knowledge in Arabic
Interviewee No. 20	Afeka	Engineering	Lack of linguistic mediation in high school	Setting up a teaching website in Arabic
Interviewee No. 23	Tel Aviv	Social Work	Urban Alienation and Symbolic Transparency	Manage a collaborative drive for translation
Interviewee No. 6	Bar Ilan	Economy	Bureaucracy as a tool of economic attrition	Using ChatGPT as a "gutter"
Interviewee No. 24	Open	Psychology	Epistemic exclusion in the syllabus	Strategic Silence as Risk Management
Interviewee No. 16	Haifa	Media / Sci-Fi	Digital Panopticon and Modifiers	Education as a "strategic weapon"
Interviewee No. 3	Haifa	Political Science	Loss of Belonging and Ontological Security	Activism in the student "Harak"

Table 4: Demographic and Academic Profile of the Research Sample (N=30)

Feature	Category	Number of participants (N)	Percentage of the sample
Gender	Women (including mothers and graduate students)	18	60%
	Men	12	40%
Educational Institution	Research Universities (Tel Aviv, Haifa, Hebrew, Bar Ilan)	22	73%
	Academic colleges (Afeka, Kibbutzim College, Achva, etc.)	8	27%
Field of Study	Humanities and Social Professions (Law, Civil Society, Political Science)	16	53%
	STEM and Nursing Professions (Engineering, Nursing, Sci-Fi)	14	47%
Academic Status	Bachelor's degree	20	67%
	Graduate Degrees (Master's and Ph.D.)	10	33%
Place of residence	Periphery (North/South/Triangle)	24	80%
	Central and Mixed Cities	6	20%

The following are the eight main themes that emerged from the analysis:

4.1 Transition Experiences: High School as a "Zionist Enterprise" and the Shock of the Encounter

The interviewees describe a deep rift in the transition from Arab high school to academia. The high school system is perceived as a "matriculation enterprise" that prioritizes technical achievement while neglecting the development of academic identity and navigation skills. Student Interviewee No. 2 (Law) explains: *"We are so focused on succeeding academically... How much will I have in my matriculation, but we leave the whole other side – who am I in academia? We treat the university at the school as a 'factory.'"*

This experience is defined as a "fake product" provided by the high school, as interviewee No. 8 (media) claims: *"We learned material from three years in high school in 30 minutes in the first lecture. Why does this gap exist? Because the Arab product and the Jewish product are not the same."* The age gap and maturity is perceived as a structural inferiority vis-a-vis the Jewish student who arrives after military service. Interviewee No. 6 (Economics) notes: *"We arrive at the age of 18 or 19, 'children,' inexperienced... When the Jews arrive at the age of 24, they are already mature, they know what they want."*

4.2 The Walls of Language" and Epistemic Violence: The Loss of the Language of Thought

The Hebrew language is revealed to be a structural "gatekeeper" that creates exclusion already at the screening stage (psychometric and Yael) and continues throughout the degree. Interviewee No. 28 (Engineering) describes: *"The conditions may be the same on paper, but in practice they are structured in a way that suits the Jews... They raise the psychometric threshold as much as they want because they know that this is our barrier."*

Students experience a "professional silence" and a fragmentation of thought, in which the academic language erases the mother tongue from the cognitive process. Interviewee No. 7 (Nursing) testifies: *"How do I say 'pulmonary edema' in Arabic? Our community does not receive an accurate explanation because our knowledge is transmitted. The simple words don't come out to me in Arabic when it comes to my profession."* Interviewee No. 12 (Ph.D.) adds: *"My thoughts are in Hebrew... The academic language has made my mother tongue disappear from the cognitive process."*

4.3 Space as a Security Arena: Harm to Ontological Security

The events of October 2023 have turned the campus into a "fortified space." The students describe a deep alienation in the face of a load of national symbols and an armed presence. Interviewee No. 27 (Laws) notes: *"We went back to university... Suddenly you see a scary amount of guns. Israeli flags in every corner... You realize that you are the clear 'other' and the place is signaling to you that you are not from here."*

The physical space creates selective policing at the gates, especially towards women wearing bandages. Interviewee No. 1 (Sentences) describes: *"The app at the gate gets stuck... And everyone is brought in except me because I wear a hijab. This place doesn't see me as a student, but rather as a threat that needs to be monitored."* Interviewee No. 26 (physical education) adds: *"She was asked to take off her hijab from her ears to see if she had headphones... It's a degrading attitude in which the Mossad is simply devouring your honor."* In addition, Interviewee No. 18 (Engineering) adds that the discriminatory treatment is sometimes based on geographical labeling: *"When they say I'm from um al-Fahm, they look at me strangely... 'Oh, you're from um al-Fahm? Then stay away from me.'"*

4.4 Identity Management and "Strategic Transparency": Silence as an Agency

Students develop practices of self-censorship and risk management as a path to survival. Interviewee No. 24 (Psychology) explains her choice in silence: *"I choose to remain silent not out of fear, but because there is no point... Silence is the only place where I can maintain my dignity."* Student Interviewee No. 17 (Political Science) adds about the need for a linguistic "chameleon": *"I will not speak with the same transparency as I do in the Arabic language department. I will keep my speech objective and free of emotions."* The need for "transparency" also leads to the concealment of physical identity symbols. Interviewee No. 13 (Political Science) shares: *"Every time I get to the security gate, I turn my phone over so that they don't see Hanzaleh's sticker... This transparency is my way of surviving the day."*

4.5 Student Agency: Excellence as a "Symbolic Gauntlet"

Contrary to the passive view, students use academic excellence as a political tool to force the system to recognize their value. Interviewee No. 6 (Economics, Bar-Ilan) notes: *"When I get a 95, the lecturers can no longer look at me as the 'weak Arab student.' Excellence is the weapon."*

A striking testament to collective agency is the establishment of "Academia within Academia." Interviewee No. 20 (Engineering) set up an independent website for teaching

mathematics in Arabic: *"If the institution doesn't provide reinforcements in our language, I'll be the one creating the knowledge for my community."* Interviewee No. 23 (Social Work) set up a collaborative drive to translate concepts: *"We're creating a virtual community... It's our way of helping each other within the structure that excludes us."*

4.6 The Digital Space: Between Solidarity and the "Panopticon"

The digital space serves as an ambivalent arena of power and supervision. On the one hand, it allows circumvention of barriers; on the other hand, it creates a fear of being silenced. Interviewee No. 2 (Sentences) describes: *"The Jewish students are looking for us on WhatsApp, taking screenshots, and waiting for us to stumble... Digital has become a tool of political persecution."* Interviewee No. 3 (Political Science, Haifa) emphasizes the fear of future consequences: *"I think twice before every 'like'... Today I don't like anything... Because everything is documented and becomes a goal."*

4.7 Educational Activism and Transformational Leadership for Social High School

Students perceive the degree as a mission to repair the community. Interviewee No. 16 (Media) declares: *"Education is the only salah (weapon) we have... My responsibility is to get off campus and build leadership that will affect the reality of all of us."* Interviewee No. 23 (social work) uses her role at the association as a tool to be present: *"I translate messages into Arabic not only so that they can read, but so that they feel that they are part of this place, that they also have a voice."* Interviewee No. 1 (law) also uses her official position in the association as an act of sovereignty: *"My activism in the student council is a precedent at Bar-Ilan. The goal is to make the management understand that our needs are a privilege and not a favor."*

4.8 Intersectionality and Gender: Motherhood as a "Pedagogy of Imitation and Demonstration"

For female students who are mothers, the degree is an act of family leadership aimed at the next generation. Interviewee No. 29 (a 51-year-old mother of six) explains: *"My insistence is to show my children the importance of education as well... I want them to see me as a pillar of defense and do the same."* Similarly, Interviewee No. 5 (Education) describes the combination as a strength: *"The baby cries in my hand on one side, and I learn on the other. It's hard, but this future belongs to me and to the generations I'll grow up."*

Moreover, Interviewee No. 20 (Engineering) recognizes the power of these women as role models for the entire community: *"I see the girls with us, studying with a baby in their hands and succeeding in the most difficult exams. It gives us men a push to understand that if they succeed... We also have to excel."*

4.9 Summary of the Findings

An analysis of the findings reveals that Arab student navigation is a dialectical process of "becoming" within and through power systems. Students are not only responding to barriers but also giving them new meaning, converting marginalization into resilience capital and transformational leadership.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal Israeli academia not as a neutral space of higher education but as a Space of Friction saturated with power relations, in which students' navigation constitutes a dialectical process of becoming within and through systems of silencing. Within this environment, the excellence of Arab students is measured not solely by academic achievement but also by their ability to transform experiences of exclusion and epistemic assault into intellectual sovereignty and collective resilience that challenge institutional dominance.

5.1 Structural Rupture at the Starting Point: Institutional Betrayal and the Illusion of Massification

The findings indicate a profound rupture in the habitus of Arab students beginning at the transition from secondary school to higher education. Participants described their schools as "*matriculation factories*" producing a "*counterfeit product*." While institutional discourse presents massification (Trow, 1973/2000) as a promise of generating the Slipstream Effect (Wainwright & Watts, 2021), students reported experiencing a structurally produced disadvantage already embedded at the point of entry. These findings are consistent with those of Choi and Lee (2025) and Phyo and Ilie (2025), who argue that expanded access to higher education has merely displaced inequality into horizontal stratification, whereby minority students are disproportionately channeled into less rewarding educational pathways without adequate navigational capital.

The analysis further suggests that the disorientation described by participants should not be interpreted as an individual deficiency but rather as a consequence of system colonization (Morley, 2024), which displaces essential academic practices in favor of neoliberal managerialism, privileging technical performance and measurable achievement. This finding reveals a significant theoretical tension. Contrary to perspectives that attribute these difficulties to students' lack of maturity, the evidence supports interpreting them as a manifestation of banking education (Freire, 1970), which inhibits the development of critical consciousness and compels students to adopt strategies of huddling in order to reconstruct the ontological security that had already been disrupted upon entering the institution.

5.2 Epistemic Agency and Linguistic Body Armor: Dismantling Power Hierarchies through AI

One of the most innovative findings of this study is the use of artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) as linguistic body armor. The findings demonstrate that students perceived Hebrew not merely as a technical obstacle but as a site of symbolic violence, as Bourdieu (1986) noted, which generated professional muteness and cognitive fragmentation. At the same time, students developed a renewed sense of competence by mobilizing technology to circumvent the institution's dismissive gaze. This finding is consistent with the work of Alyasin and Shah (2026) and Lund and Vestøl (2020), who argue that collaboration

with AI enables students to enact Authorial Agency, thereby helping to bridge structural inequalities.

From my perspective as the researcher, this practice constitutes counter-power (Castells, 2012), thereby restoring students' sovereignty over knowledge production. This finding extends the conclusions of Amara *et al.* (2016) and Manor and Watad (2024, 2025), who conceptualized linguistic muteness as a relatively static barrier. The present findings demonstrate that, within the digital era, technology can function as an emancipatory praxis, transforming linguistic barriers into sites of active resistance and epistemic sovereignty.

5.3 The Fortified Space and the Digital Panopticon: Silence as Rational Risk Management

The transformation of the university campus into a fortified space during the war profoundly destabilized students' ontological security (Giddens, 1984). The findings indicate that experiences of alienation, selective security practices at campus entrances, and fear of being reported by peers collectively produced a climate of escalating silencing (Totry-Jubran, 2026). These findings align with those of Sabbah-Karkabi and Abu-Rabia-Queder (2025), who argue that silence should not be understood as passivity but rather as a form of rational risk management that protects individuals within a digital panopticon.

My analysis further suggests that silence becomes a "Hidden Transcript," as Scott (1990) notes, protecting identity within an environment characterized by a superficial discourse of diversity and inclusion (Ahmed, 2012) that conceals institutional Brick Walls of exclusion. In this respect, the present study challenges Contact Theory (Allport, 1954). Rather than fostering intergroup understanding, the findings indicate that under conditions of war, the campus becomes a site of epistemic assault, aligning with the argument of Shinar (2026), compelling minority students to withdraw socially as an expression of academic Sumud- steadfastness in the face of institutional adversity.

5.4 Intersectionality Beyond Motherhood: Double Suspicion and Agency Within the Matrix of Domination

One of the central contributions of the present discussion is the extension of the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) beyond the lens of motherhood. The findings demonstrate that experiences of exclusion are shaped through the intersection of nationality, gender, and religion, producing a matrix of domination (Collins, 1990) that positions Arab students as subjects of double suspicion. Participants described distinct patterns of differential treatment, whereby a female student wearing a hijab was perceived as a security threat at campus entrances. In contrast, a student from the geographic periphery was viewed as academically less prepared. These findings resonate with those reported by Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy (2013); however, the present data further demonstrate that, by 2026, intersecting identities also function as a form of resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Although motherhood operates as a pedagogy of

demonstration, the findings reveal that students more broadly draw upon their positionality as outsiders within to establish an academy within the academy- alternative knowledge infrastructures that challenge institutional dominance.

5.5 An Academy Within the Academy: Praxis of Resistance and Epistemic Justice

The establishment of independent knowledge infrastructures and the persistent pursuit of academic excellence represent the clearest manifestation of Freire's (1970) emancipatory praxis. Participants described developmental processes through which they transformed themselves from consumers of knowledge into agents of change, employing their academic degrees as a strategic instrument for social transformation. This finding is consistent with hooks' (1990) argument that marginality constitutes a site of resistance, where students create spaces of hope and sovereignty within structures of exclusion.

This analysis underscores that achieving genuine equality requires a shift from a model centered on fixing the student toward an academy committed to epistemic justice, one that recognizes the Arabic language and Arab identity as legitimate academic resources. Students' successful navigation of the institutional matrix of domination stands as evidence of collective resilience that transforms enforced transparency into sovereign political and intellectual visibility, thereby redefining the boundaries of what is possible.

6. Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

This study sought to unravel the complex fabric of Arab students' experiences within Israeli higher education by conceptualizing the university not as a neutral educational environment but as a Space of Friction. In that, knowledge, language, and space function as arenas of struggle over power, identity, and belonging.

6.1 Synthesis of the Main Conclusions: The Dialectic Between Barriers and Agency

The principal conclusion emerging from this study is that, despite the promises of massification to democratize knowledge, Israeli higher education continues to reproduce exclusionary power structures that are concealed beneath ostensibly objective standards of academic excellence. The findings demonstrate that experiences of professional muteness and the loss of one's cognitive mother tongue are not individual shortcomings but rather manifestations of epistemic violence that erase Palestinian narratives and signal to minority students that their home-based cultural capital lacks legitimacy within the academic field.

Furthermore, the study concludes that periods of political and military tension, particularly during the Swords of Iron War, accelerated the transformation of the university campus into a fortified space, thereby undermining students' ontological security. Within the resulting digital panopticon, silence and self-censorship should not be interpreted as signs of passivity but rather as expressions of strategic transparency and

rational risk management employed for academic survival. Contrary to the deficit paradigm, the findings demonstrate that students cultivate Resistant Capital, transforming marginality into a source of strength by establishing an academy within the academy and alternative knowledge infrastructures grounded in solidarity and academic Sumud.

6.2 Contribution of the Study: Toward Transformative Leadership and Epistemic Justice

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its deconstruction of the concept of agency in the digital era. It introduces the concept of linguistic body armor to describe how students employ artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) to circumvent linguistic hierarchies of power and assert epistemic sovereignty. In addition, the intersectional analysis advances understanding of the experiences of Arab women students by demonstrating that motherhood is transformed from a perceived barrier into a pedagogy of demonstration, functioning as a catalyst for academic excellence aimed at breaking intergenerational cycles of fear.

6.3 Practical Recommendations for Academic Leadership

Based on these conclusions, the study calls for a paradigmatic transformation in institutional governance:

- **Adopting cultural humility:** Institutional leaders should recognize Arabic language and knowledge as legitimate academic resources rather than forms of difference to be managed or minimized.
- **Institutionalizing a multilingual academy:** Universities should provide syllabi, campus signage, and academic support in Arabic while acknowledging the importance of enabling students to translate professional knowledge back to their communities, thereby preventing professional muteness.
- **Protecting freedom of expression during periods of crisis:** Institutions should dismantle surveillance and reporting mechanisms that create a digital panopticon and establish Safe Spaces for critical dialogue that foster students' sense of mattering as sovereign subjects.

6.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The primary limitation of this study stems from its unique security context during the Swords of Iron War, which necessitated replacing focus groups with remote interviews conducted via Zoom because of a pervasive climate of fear. Future research should examine the long-term implications of artificial intelligence for the intellectual sovereignty of minority students and undertake generational comparisons between students educated in the era of digital networks and earlier generations regarding their perceptions of educational activism.

In conclusion, the successful navigation of students through the institutional matrix of domination constitutes compelling evidence of profound collective resilience.

Achieving social justice requires higher education institutions to transform enforced transparency into sovereign political and intellectual visibility, thereby redefining the boundaries of what is possible within Israeli society as a whole.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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