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SAUDI WOMEN STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES:
UNDERSTANDING THEIR EXPERIENCES

by

TRINIDAD MACIAS

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Lastly, to my friends that have become an extension of my family, thank you for supporting my ambitions, and bringing joy and laughter to my life.

With Thanks,

Trinidad Macias

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mom and dad. Thank you for all the sacrifices, support, and encouragement you have provided my entire life.

With love,

Trinidad

SAUDI WOMEN STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES: UNDERSTANDING THEIR EXPERIENCES

Trinidad Macias

University of the Incarnate Word, 2016

The number of students from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States is increasing; this study focused on understanding Saudi women studying in the United States. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to address the main research question: What are the perceptions of Saudi women on their experiences as international college students in the United States?

In an attempt to understand their experiences, eleven Saudi Arabian women were interviewed. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview format. Analysis of the data was conducted via a four-step process that consisted of transcribing the interviews, reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation (Merriam, 2002).

Analysis of the data revealed four main themes: religion, family, academics, and transformation.

1. Religion: Each participant had a high regard for Islam and how it shaped their experiences in the United States. Islam remained at the core of their daily lives and affected everything from scheduling for prayer time to wearing the hijab.
2. Family: A high regard for the family emerged as an important cultural aspect. Family is an essential component of the collectivist culture and had an impact on the experiences of the Saudi women, ranging from being a mother to the family that accompanies them.

3. Academics: All participants in this study confronted challenges and experiences similar to other international students, such as language barriers and adapting to a new and different system of education.

4. Transformation: Lastly, the women indicated some sort of transformation that emerged because of their experience studying in the United States. For example, they gained self-confidence in their abilities and expressed the desire to be change agents in their communities.

The Saudi female student experience is multi-layered and their experiences are often, if not always, tied into their religion. Although each participant told a different story, all participants shared common experiences as Saudi female international students.

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Chapter 1: Saudi Arabia

“Education is very important,” stated Farah, a female Saudi graduate student. In the Quran, education is highly promoted to create Godly citizens (Saleh, 1986). With a high regard for education in Islam and the establishment of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, more Saudi women have been able to access education abroad. As an increase in international students from Saudi Arabia, particularly women, is seen throughout the university environment in the United States, understanding of the academic and social experiences of female Saudi students is important. Currently there is limited research on the Saudi female student experiences, therefore, this research will address their experience as an international student in the United States.

Islam is one of the largest religions in the world and is “one of the three faiths that worship the same Divine Being, the other two being Christianity and Judaism” (Maqsood, 2010, p. vi). According to Prophet Muhammad in the Islamic faith “seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim” (Faryab, 2012, p. 76). Since seeking knowledge is highly regarded in the Islamic faith, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia established a scholarship program for Saudi students to study abroad. This scholarship was established in 2005 as an agreement between Saudi Arabia and the United States to increase the number of Saudi students studying abroad (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). Further, the scholarship is part of an initiative for Saudi Arabia to transition into a knowledge-based economy. Since the scholarship’s inception, the United States has seen an increase in the number of Saudi students attending institutions of higher education. In addition, Saudi Arabia’s transition to a knowledge-based economy calls for economic change by encouraging Saudi nationals, both men and women, to participate in all sectors of the economy. This process, known as Saudization (Baki,

2004), aims at using both genders to access jobs currently filled by foreign workers. Since both genders are needed to fill the gaps in employment, there has been an increase in the amount of female Saudi students studying in the United States, thus understanding of their experiences can aid in creating a globally competitive female Saudi population.

Additionally, the increase in Saudi students, and foreign students in general, helps the US economy grow. According to a 2014-2015 National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA) report on foreign students in the United States, international students contributed about \$30 billion to the American economy (NAFSA, 2016). In the State of Texas, foreign students contributed \$1,734.5 million dollars (NAFSA, 2016). Among the different nationalities of international students, one of the leading places of origins is Saudi Arabia. The Institute of International Education stated that Saudi Arabia was ranked number four out of the top twenty-five leading places of origins for international students in the United States in 2012-2013 (Institute of International Education, 2015). Further, the 2014 data indicated that from the 2012-2013 school year to the 2013-2014 school year there was an increase of 21% in Saudi student enrollment. The 2014-2015 academic year total of Saudi students studying in the United States was 59,945 (Institute of International Education, 2015).

The Saudi economy is primarily reliant on oil reserves and the government has since invested over 100 billion US dollars in its citizens. Women have now been allowed to attend King Abdullah University and the King Abdullah Scholarship Program sends many Saudi students to study in the United States and other western countries. A March 2013 article in the *US News World Report* discussed this scholarship program that exists between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Out of the number of Saudi students studying in the United States, 24% are women (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). The scholarship program is part of

an incentive to help Saudi Arabia become more globally competitive. The idea is to send Saudi students to other countries to gain exposure, learn another language, and bring knowledge learned back to the Kingdom (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014).

Context of the Study

The context sets the stage for understanding the basis of the study and its participants. The study focuses on female Saudi students; thus it is important to comprehend not only the history and geography of Saudi Arabia, but also other aspects such as religion, culture, and the role of women in Islam. Background information on geography, religion, culture, and the role of women in Islam will be addressed. The geographic location of Saudi Arabia is extremely important because it is the birthplace of Islam. Islam is the main religion in Saudi Arabia and its cultural and political atmosphere revolve around it. Further, since the study addresses the female experience, the role of women in Islam will also be addressed.

Geography. Saudi Arabia is located in the Middle East along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. It shares borders with seven neighboring countries of Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan. It has a dry desert climate and is the largest country without a river. Saudi Arabia's economy is mainly based on petroleum exports that accounts for 90% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016) of the countries' export earnings. Further, and probably one of the most important aspect is that Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam. The two important religious cities of Islam, Makkah and Madinah are both located in the western part of the country. Madinah is an important city for Muslims because the prophet Muhammad lived there during his time as the leader of Islam and found refuge in the city to continue his worship and religious duties. Makkah is home to the Ka'bah, a place of worship built on what has been

considered the sanctuary site of Adam, the first human created by God (Maqsood, 2010).

Makkah and the Ka'bah play a crucial role within Islam's Five Pillars of Islam.

Religion. A heavy focus on Islam must be considered in order to comprehend the morals and values of this population. Saudi Arabia is a Muslim nation in which laws and policies are based on the Islamic religion. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and any faith other than Islam is prohibited (Gannon & Pillai, 2013). Politics and gender roles are based on religious law. Religion is the binding factor of the entire country (Pharaon, 2004). The King is both the political and religious leader and all aspects of daily life revolves around the Islamic religion. This is important to understand when working with Saudi students; religion is the very essence of their culture and how they approach their life.

Culture. Another aspect that needs to be grasped is culture. There are several definitions of culture, but for the purpose of this study culture will be defined as “*networks of knowledge*, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world” (Hong, 2009, p. 4). This definition focuses on “the causal potential of culture which does not reside in the racial, ethnic, or national groups (Hong, 2009, p. 4). It relates to the culture of Saudi Arabia because its collectivist nature can be seen as a network in which the common value of Islam is shared and all knowledge stems from religion. Within the Islamic faith, knowledge is an extremely important concept that includes four elements: observer, object, observing capability, and objectivity (Tahir-ul-Qadri, 2007). Knowledge is a gift from *Allah* (God) that leads the human to humility and peacefulness, while ignorance leads to extremism. The observer of knowledge is known as the student who is eager to learn, once the student knows a bit he or she becomes a scholar. The object of knowledge is whatever is being explored. It can be either concrete or abstract as long as

it triggers the intellect. The next element of knowledge is having the capability, both physically and mentally, to understand the reality of the object in observation. The last element of knowledge is complete understanding of the object as perceived by the student or scholar (Tahir-ul-Qadri, 2007). Understanding the culture of Saudi Arabia and the concept of knowledge is essential especially since the study focuses on the experience of female Saudi students.

Women in Islam. Further, the role of women in Saudi Arabia is also reflected and dictated by the religion. To foreigners it may seem that Saudi women are oppressed because they cannot drive, must be fully covered in public, and are separated from male counterparts; however, according to Gannon and Pillai (2013), Saudi females do not see their role in society as negative but as an effort toward their security. By having male chaperons, being covered, and separated from men, it limits any physical harm and harassment and it maintains their piety. On the other hand, there are some changes occurring and women are pushing for greater freedoms. The gap of women in certain jobs is starting to lessen, and since 2009 there has been a female voice in the King's cabinet (Gannon & Pillai, 2013).

The role of women in Islam has been misinterpreted throughout the years. Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, actually created areas of women's rights. In fact "the Quran gave women rights of inheritance and divorce centuries before Western women," but it was the influence of Christianity that three to four generations later women began to wear the veil and were segregated (Spencer, 2002, p. 73). The argument on the treatment of women in Islam has been based on interpretation. Some interpret the Quran in a literal fashion that marginalized women, but that may not have been the initial intent. For example, the issue of polygamy has been seen as immoral, yet in the Quran and in the Christian bible there is no mention of its immoral nature; it has been subject to interpretation (Spencer, 2002). In the context of women in Islam, it is a

political debate that emphasizes “Islamic regulations, segregation, and the veiling of women” (Kandiyoti, 1995, pp. 20-21).

Additionally, Afary (2004) depicts the various human rights issues in Middle Eastern countries. One of the countries depicted is Saudi Arabia. She notes that women “face pervasive discrimination” (Afary, 2004, p. 111) through strict segregation in public places and because they lack political voice. She concludes that there is a movement to create a women’s studies program in the capital city of Riyadh in order to empower women.

Ahmed Younis (2013) describes the state of women in Arab countries in regards to employment. In two-thirds of Arab countries there are more women than men enrolled in universities. For example, in Saudi Arabia women that have a tertiary education make up 60% of the unemployed population because women continue their education while they wait for marriage or a job. Men, on the other hand, do not struggle with this because they are able to find employment without advanced degrees. The main argument that the author makes is that since women have access to education and improved health, the focus is on gaining economic integration that can in turn integrate them into the political world. Younis (2013) recommends that policy changes must occur, but it takes a visionary leader that has religious maturity to present different options that can accommodate old traditions and new ones that focus on incorporating women into the workforce.

In regards to Saudi Arabia, as King Abdullah tries to decrease the amount of foreign workers and transition to a knowledge based economy (King Abdullah Scholarship Program, 2013), the role of women in the public sphere and work force is slowly changing. Jobs that were once reserved for only men are now opening up. Millions of dollars have been invested into educating both men and women, both in Saudi Arabia and abroad, to encourage a new generation

of workers to be competitive. The scholarship program that King Abdullah has created is what has led many Saudi females to study in the United States. With this increased education outside of Saudi Arabia, the role of women may change in the upcoming years. This is important to note when understanding the experiences of Saudi women studying in the United States.

King Abdullah Scholarship Program. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program is a program created by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education to provide the means for students to study abroad with the goal that once the students return to the country they will be competitive in the global job market, academic research, and bring prestige to public and private sectors (King Abdullah Scholarship Program, 2013).

Since Saudi Arabia is focusing on transitioning into a knowledge based economy, the scholarship program was established in 2005 as an agreement between King Abdullah and President George W. Bush to increase the number of Saudi students studying in the United States (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). The King Abdullah Scholarship Program is the largest scholarship program in the history of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia spends 25% of their GDP on education (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014) in order to provide students with experience to become globally competitive within Saudi universities, the government and the private sector. Students participating in the program receive a monthly stipend for themselves and their family, full academic tuition, medical and dental coverage, annual round trip tickets for students and family, and academic supervision (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014).

Saudi students that want to receive the scholarship must go through an application process to gain acceptance. Further, the field of study that a Saudi student wants to apply for is limited to the needs of the government and economy. For example, undergraduates are allowed to study

health sciences and medicine, while graduate students have more flexibility (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). The duration of the scholarship is four years to receive an undergraduate degree, two years for a Master's degree, and three years for a doctoral degree (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

Currently the United States hosts the majority of students on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. The top two states hosting Saudi students are California and Texas (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2014.) The largest percentage of Saudi students uses the scholarship to study English as a second language, followed by pursuing a bachelor's degree. The scholarship program has been approved to continue till 2020 (Increasing Momentum, 2014). About 76% of all Saudi students abroad are on the scholarship. About 25% are here through other resources such as an employer-sponsored scholarship (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). The employer-sponsored scholarship is provided via the employer whom covers all costs in return for their employment in Saudi Arabia (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of research on female Saudi student experiences of studying in the United States. Much of the literature on Saudi women and education or studying is based on their experiences in Saudi Arabia or is in the form of dissertations. Existing research either takes place in Saudi Arabia or focuses on areas related to this study's main research question, but does not specifically look at female Saudi students experiences of studying in the United States. Since there is currently 53,919 Saudi students studying in the United States and 24% are female, (LeBaron & Hausheer, 2013), it is critical to understand their experience in the United States.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the experience of female Saudi Arabian students in higher education in the United States. Specific objectives of the study include: 1) to comprehend

the academic and social experiences of Saudi female students, 2) identify challenges they may or may not face during their higher education studies in the United States, and 3) provide recommendations to university personnel for improving relations with this particular student population group.

Research Question

The central research question is: What are the perceptions of Saudi women on their experiences as international college students in the US?

Theoretical Framework

Martha C. Nussbaum (2000, p. 4) states that “international political and economic thought should be feminist” in order to understand issues women face due to gender. According to Mary Wollstonecraft (1792/1996), gender equality is important for social well-being and progress because in order to move forward, there needs to be an advancement of education. Wollstonecraft’s main argument rests on equal education for men and women. Women are taught to be submissive and dependent on men. Her role is to bear children and be a domestic servant to a man. She argues that if women are provided an education in which they can foster thought, they can become independent. Amartya Sen (1999, p. 189) describes the power women have when they fight for a change stating that “women are increasingly seen as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of both men and women.” Sen also means that women are agents of change in both social and economic terms in which, they as a group can make political reform that might not otherwise occur. The proposed study of Saudi women experiences will be based on an Islamic feminist theoretical framework. Although feminism connotes a western perspective, Islamic feminism focuses on improving Muslim women’s rights within the confines of their religion (Moghissi, 1999). A feminist

framework (see Figure 1) allows for an inductive research process in which themes from the data lead to the development of a model or theory (Creswell, 2014).

Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2008) address the issue of feminism from a religious-oriented view and a secular-oriented view in the country of Iran. Religious-oriented feminists focus on only challenging laws or policies that go against Islam. Secular-oriented feminists on the other hand, view the interconnection of Islam and politics as the root problem when it comes to gender issues. The authors conclude that religious feminists have not had much sustainable success on making policy changes and the divide between the religious feminists and secular feminists may be one of the issues hindering progress. Although this study is particularly focused on Iran it provides insight on two types of feminist perspectives that may exist in other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia.

In Golley's (2004) article, feminism from the perspective of Arab women is depicted. The author makes a case that feminism in the Arab world is not the same as the feminism depicted in the Western world. Feminism does exist but is fashioned in a different manner. For example, Golley states that Arab women segregated themselves from men and chose to wear the veil to limit harassment by men. By separating themselves both physically and metaphorically through the veil, it allows for women to have freedom and are able to interact more with females and do not have to worry about constantly entertaining men. Further, feminism in the Arab world is interconnected with religion, social economics, and politics. From a Western perspective the treatment of Arab women may have a negative perspective because the west does not understand the environment and inter-section of the Arab world.

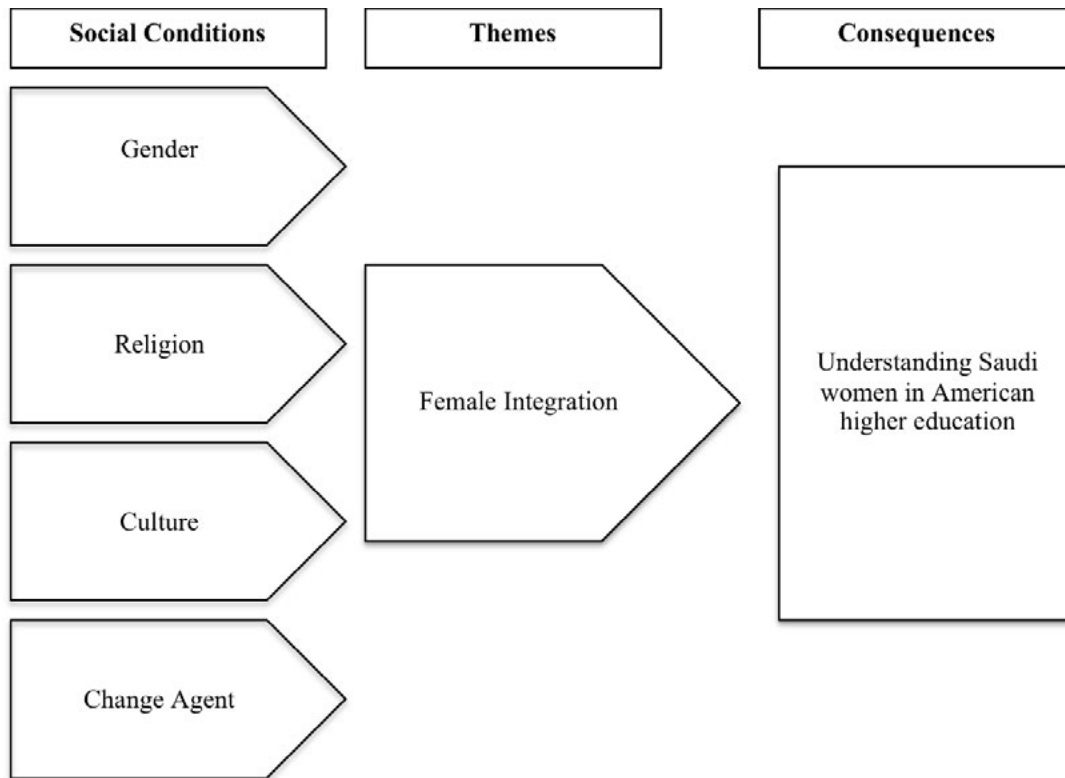


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework. Islamic feminism as a theoretical framework depicted by social conditions, themes, and consequences.

Significance of the Study

The number of students from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States is increasing therefore, the proposed study focuses on understanding Saudi women. The study aims to fulfill the following: fill the gaps in literature, provide a foundation for effective communication, and encourage the formation of academic and social support services for this particular group.

Currently there is a lack of published research on female Saudi experiences of studying in the United States. Much of the literature on Saudi women and education is based on their experiences in Saudi Arabia or are in the form of dissertations. A 2013 *US News World Report* noted that there are 71,000 Saudi students studying in the United States, 24% are female (LeBaron & Hausheer, 2013). The amount of Saudi females studying in the United States continues to increase, thus it is critical to understand their perceptions.

A qualitative approach using interviews will be beneficial in understanding any underlining themes on the experience of a Saudi woman in the United States. Further, it will provide to the body of knowledge on a minority group that is now becoming a large international student population. The study is intended to appeal to the academic community of scholars, universities that have female Saudi populations, and to fill the gap in literature. Since there is limited research on the experience of Saudi women in the United States, this study will help academic scholars understand a new phenomenon, and universities will be able to benefit from the research to comprehend any concerns or needs that this population has in order to make their experience beneficial. Particularly it can provide information toward creating orientation programs, recruitment, retention, integration, and bring awareness to faculty and administrators that interact with Saudi students.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are presented in order to understand and identify how certain terms are being used in the study.

Abaya- A cloak, coat, or dress that covers the entire body except the hands, feet, and face. In Saudi Arabia women wear black abayas, however, they come in other colors, and Saudi women studying in the United States may wear an abaya in a color other than black.

Allah- The Muslim name for God that translates to “the Almighty” (Maqsood, 2010). The term Allah has over 99 meanings and this is just one of them.

Coed- This is short for coeducational in which institutions have both male and female students (Coed, n.d.).

Constructivist worldview- According to Creswell (2014, p. 8) constructivists “believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals then develop subjective meanings of their experiences.”

Culture- Culture is defined as “networks of shared knowledge” in which thoughts, emotions, and interactions are learned behaviors (Hong, 2009, p. 4).

Face Veil- this covers the face exposing only the eyes.

Higher education- Education beyond the secondary level, particularly education from a college or university (Higher education, n.d.).

Hijab- a head scarf

Islam- The literal meaning of Islam is “submission to the will of God” (Maqsood, 2010, p. 4). For the purpose of this paper it is identified as the religious faith of the country of Saudi Arabia.

King Abdullah Scholarship Program- a program created by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education to provide the means for their students to study abroad with the goal that once the students return to the country they will be competitive in the global job market, academic research, and bring a prestige to public and private sectors (King Abdullah Scholarship Program, 2013).

Muhammad- the prophet or messenger of Islam (Maqsood, 2010).

Muslim- Muslim is defined as the followers of Islam or “those who submit” (Maqsood, 2010, p. 4).

Saudi- this term will be used to indicate the participants are from Saudi Arabia. The other term used to identify the nationality is Saudi Arabian.

Saudization- This is a labor policy that requires Saudi companies to hire a certain percentage of Saudi nationals (Alsheik, 2015). This policy is in an attempt to limit the amount of foreign workers currently in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In order to understand the essence or background of Saudi Arabia, the religion of Islam must be understood. Islam is at the core of every aspect of life in Saudi Arabia such as laws, education, and culture (see Figure 2). Values and morals stem from Islamic teachings and when focusing on Saudi women it is important to understand how Islam ties into their views of gender roles and education.

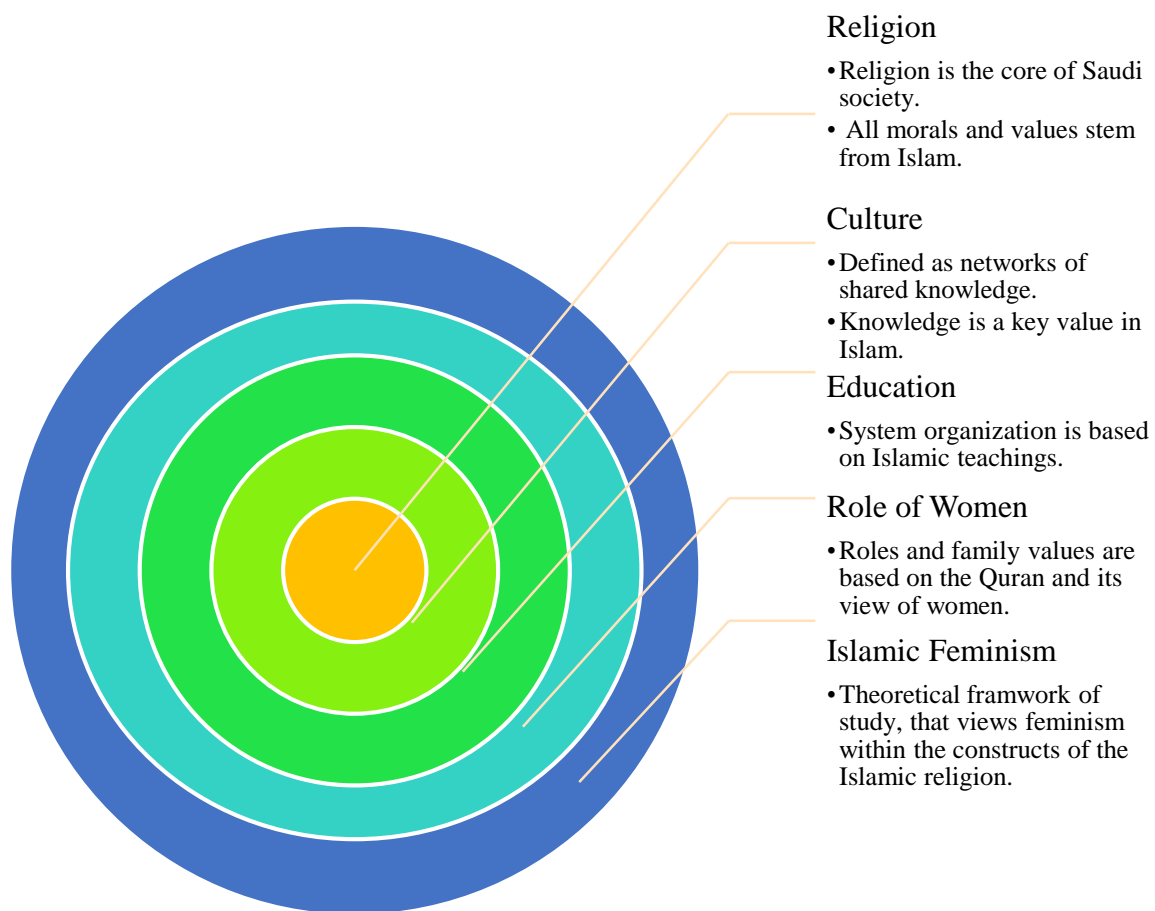


Figure 2. Literature Review Map. This figure represents the categories of literature and positions religion at the center. Religion is the core of Saudi society in which all morals and values are based on Islam.

Saudi Arabia: Background

Country description. The history of Saudi Arabia is based on the origins of Islam. Saudi Arabia became an important country for the Islamic religion. It is considered the birthplace of Islam because the Angel Gabriel, which becomes the reading of the Quran, spoke to the messenger Mohammad (Maqsood, 2010). The country is home to two religiously important cities, Madinah and Makkah. Madinah was the home of Mohammad, and Makkah is considered holy land in which pilgrimage during Ramadan is one of the pillars of Islam. The country itself did not become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia till 1932 (Alkhazim, 2003). Saudi Arabia is a monarchy in which the King is the head of the government and other royals fill the political ministries and cabinets. Saudi Arabia follows Islamic law in which all rules derive from the Quran and religious teachings. It is an oil-based economy in which 90% of exports are oil. The largest exporting partner is the United States. Currently it has a population of over 27 million people (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). About six million foreigners live and work in the country. This is an important number because now Saudi Arabia is focusing on developing a knowledge-based economy in which the goal is to limit the amount of foreign dependence. Most of private industry upper management consists of westerners and this becomes a threat to Saudi sovereignty (Stracke, 2007). However, many of the foreign workers also have employment within Saudi households doing domestic labor. Saudi Arabia wants to maintain its Islamic identity and sovereignty, and investing in their citizens is the key to this future.

Saudi relations with the United States. Relations with the United States date back to the 1920s when Standard Oil of California was contracted to find oil in the area. In 1938, when large amounts of oil reserves were found various American owned oil companies were in Saudi Arabia. It was not until 1988 when Saudis took full ownership (Stracke, 2007). Since Saudi

Arabia is the largest oil exporter in the world, they have used oil as a political weapon in the past to pressure the United States into aligning with their political agenda. An example of this political agenda is the oil embargo during the Arab-Israeli war (Stracke, 2007). Further, the country has been an American ally since the Cold War era. However, the two main foreign policy issues of the country are security and Islamic solidarity. The late King Abdullah has emphasized Saudization (Alsheikh, 2015), a Saudi nationalization labor policy that promotes modernization in the context of maintaining Islamic solidarity. Part of the Saudization plan has been an increase in funds for study abroad, reforms in the education system to make Saudis more internationally competitive in STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and math), and provide women with access to employment that was always reserved for only men. This brings the research to the current issue of the increase in Saudi women studying in the United States. This is part of the initiative by King Abdullah to provide women with international education experience so that they can contribute to the economy.

Religion and Culture

Islam is central to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and is a major cultural aspect. In order to understand the culture of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic religion must be understood. Religion is at the heart of everything Saudi and influences its political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the country; therefore this section combines both religion and culture.

Religion. Islam in Arabic translates to “submission or surrender” to the will of God (Toorawa, 2011, p. 3). The Islamic religion has Five Pillars: 1) acceptance of one God through faith, 2) prayer five times a day facing Makkah, 3) almsgiving, 4) fasting during the month of Ramadan, and finally 5) a pilgrimage to Makkah (Maqsood, 2010). The first pillar is accepting that there is one God and Muhammad is his messenger (Pharaon, 2004). Second, Muslims must

pray five times a day facing Makkah. Third, as part of the religion and based on the lifestyle of Muhammad, giving to those in need is a fundamental pillar in the Islamic faith (Pharaon, 2004). Muhammad was known as a kind and giving person and spent his days as leader of Madinah giving to those in need. To reflect this value, every year Muslims give a percentage of their total wealth.

The fourth pillar is fasting during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is a significant month, which marks when Allah, or God, choose Muhammad as his messenger and began providing revelations that now make up the teachings in the Quran (Maqsood, 2010). The descent of the Quran is celebrated after twenty-seven days of Ramadan. There are three main reasons Muslims fast during Ramadan: to draw closer to Allah through meditation, prayer, and solitude; second, to practice self-control and physical discipline; and third, to make an extra attempt at reaching out to those in need (Maqsood, 2010). This means that from sun up to sun down, during this month Muslims cannot eat, drink, smoke, or other acts that go against the tenets of Islamic faith. The reason fasting is so important is that the purpose is not to suffer, but rather to understand what it is like to go without food, water, or other pleasures or necessities. There are exemptions if someone medically needs food or liquid, is pregnant, or is an elder or child. This month is also seen as a time of celebration and joy with family; particularly at the end of Ramadan during the celebration of Eid al-Fitr, a celebration of breaking the fast.

Finally, the pilgrimage to Makkah is the most significant representation of the Islamic faith in which all practicing Muslims must make the pilgrimage at least one in their life if one is physically and financially able to do so. The pilgrimage pays homage to three important events in Muslim history (Maqsood, 2010): first, the forgiveness of Adam and Eve; second, the sacrifice of Ismael; and finally it celebrates the life of Muhammad who was an obedient prophet. During

the pilgrimage there are four things that are mandatory: a) to enter a state of holiness through physically purifying the body with water and then wearing simple clothing that covers the body; b) to circle the Ka'bah seven times counter clockwise; c) to stand at Arafat; and d) to circle the Ka'bah again.

Religion is one of the primary aspects to understand the people of Saudi Arabia because all aspects of Saudi life revolve around Islam. Knowledge of the five pillars provides a foundation toward understanding the core values of Saudi students. For example, praying five times a day affects scheduling. In Saudi Arabia there is a call to prayer in which all business and daily activities come to a halt in order to pray.

Culture. Islam is the core of Saudi culture influencing all aspects of daily life from the country's flag to the legal system (Al-Shahri, 2002). Culture, defined as networks of shared knowledge in which thoughts, emotions, and interactions are learned behaviors (Hong, 2009), is derived from the morals, values, and teachings of the Quran. The concept of knowledge is prominent in the culture itself, knowing leads to godliness. Saudi Arabia is described as a strong collectivist and patriarchal society. Power distance or the hierarchical structure is accepted and there is a high emphasis placed on relationships and most importantly family (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993).

According to Geert Hofstede's (2013) data on Saudi Arabia, four cultural dimensions provide insight on understanding the culture. First, Saudi Arabia is ranked as a higher power distance culture in which people accept a hierarchical structure. Second, the data indicate that Saudi Arabia is a highly collectivist society with a high value for family and extended relationships. Third, it is considered a highly masculine society driven by competition and achievement for success. Lastly, there is a high preference for uncertainty avoidance in which the

country maintains rigid codes of belief and does not tolerate untraditional behavior and ideas (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993).

Gannon and Pillai (2013) describe the impact religion has on Saudi Arabian culture and the role of women within the society. First, they note that no religion other than Islam may be practiced in Saudi Arabia. Part of the religion is viewed in their high value for family. Loyalty to the family is extremely essential between immediate and extended family (Gannon & Pillai, 2013). This value identifies with the collectivist nature of the country and the importance of relationships. Saudis are highly generous and entertain their guest to the highest quality (Rice, 2004). The emphasis on generosity is reflected in Islam through the Five Pillars.

In brief, the most important aspects found in the Saudi culture is a high value for family and relationships, obtaining knowledge through the Quran, and understanding of power structures. These cultural aspects are fundamental to understand because when Saudi students come to study in the United States, their values influence their learning styles and ability to adapt to a western style education system of mixed gender classes, concepts of time, and interactions with faculty (Carty, Hale, Carty, Williams, Rigney, & Principato, 1998).

Hijab. One topic that is embedded in both Saudi religion and culture is the hijab. The origins of the veil date back to a pre-Islamic era when veiling was a form of social status. On the other hand, according to Maqsood (2010) the veil's origins in Islam derived from a physical curtain that separated the Prophet's public and private life. Muslims adopted the concept of the veil and although it is interpreted that women should cover up, the Quran does not specifically state or recommend that women wear the hijab (Hoodfar, 1993). When it comes to the issue of the veil, only conservative Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, require women to cover up

(Barna, 2008). However, some women believe wearing the veil is Allah's will and choose to wear it to uphold religious values and to protect them against unwanted attention (Ali, 2005).

From a western perspective the hijab may be seen as a sign of oppression (Carle, 2004); however, from a religious and cultural context, the hijab is a symbol of modesty and adheres to Islamic values (Sloan, 2011). Robert Carle writes about the topic of the hijab stating that "veiling makes women powerful actors, creating a public and collective identity for women" (2004, p. 63). He argues that the veil is not only a religious symbol but also a political one that goes against Western modernity.

Barna (2008) interviews a female American Muslim on her views of the physical and metaphorical veil of gender segregation. The participant made the case that the physical and metaphorical veil was a non-issue for her. She does not wear the hijab but chooses to dress modestly and understands that interpretation of the Quran varies. The participant discussed how certain passages in the Quran could be interpreted in many ways, and since Islamic culture is male dominated, much of the interpretations come from men (Barna, 2008). Further, in a study conducted by Hopkins and Greenwood (2013), they addressed the topic of the hijab in terms of identity. Using self-categorization theory, they interviewed twenty-two British Muslims to understand how wearing the hijab had an impact on varying levels of identity. The findings indicated that wearing the hijab displayed their Muslim identity and had implications for gender and nationality.

Although there are different understandings and research on the topic of the hijab, it remains a religious part of Muslim women's lives. The various arguments presented above mark the hijab as a symbol of religious, national, and self-identity.

Education

From a constructivist worldview in which knowledge is created through assessment of experiences, and taking from the theoretical lens of Piaget's (1993) intellectual development, understanding education in Saudi Arabia is important in order to assess how they will perceive their academic experiences in the United States. Further, the development of higher education in Saudi Arabia ties into the Islamic value to obtain knowledge. All educational levels are built on the teachings and values of Islam.

Education system in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia currently has free public education available to both men and women. Islam places a high emphasis on learning and education. The current agenda on education aims at creating a knowledge-based economy in which all Saudi citizens will be able to work and be competitive in the global market. Education is based on religious, social and economic needs of the country (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2013). Formal education is still relatively new and did not begin till the 1930s. Schools for girls were established in 1964.

The educational structure in Saudi Arabia is founded on Islamic teachings and values. Madrasas are the spaces used to study or learn about Islam and the Quran; this set the foundation for how educational spaces are created away from the mosques yet still maintaining the values of religion. How students are taught dates back to the origins of Islam and maintaining its sanctity. Islam places a high value on the concept of knowledge since having knowledge allows one to get closer to God (Hilgendorf, 2003). Based on this, knowledge comes from the Quran and in order to gain that knowledge one must first be literate and must be able to recite religious text. In learning the Quran the student is not allowed to question and must conquer the art of memorization (Hilgendorf, 2003). Comprehending this aspect of how religion ties into education

is crucial; when students go abroad to study under a different system that promotes and facilitates critical thinking, this belief may become an issue for faculty to understand without knowledge of Islam and its effects on education.

Higher education in Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia established a university in the 1920s, a strong emphasis on higher education began in the 1970s during a time of rapid development. The Kingdom has now placed a large focus on higher education both at home and abroad in order to develop a more competitive workforce. Currently there over six million foreign workers in the country and the goal is to educate Saudi citizens to fulfill skilled areas (Alkhazim, 2003). Even though higher education is encouraged, there are several organizational issues that hinder the development of quality education to fill the need for an increasing number of students. As it stands now, the government pays for all tuition so higher education is free, plus students receive monthly stipends from the government (Alkhazim, 2003). There are several institutions of higher education, public and private in the country, but there also is an increase of students and the current universities are having trouble meeting the demands. Since all institutions are government run there are no quality measures that hold institutions accountable for quality of education. Funding is provided to any student who is admitted, but students who do not make it into universities and opt to attend a community college have no funding, and this group is the one that needs it most (Alkhazim, 2003). Other issues present are that students are not prepared for the workforce; this is part of why students are encouraged to apply to study abroad. Receiving a foreign degree allows a student to be better prepared for the workforce and once he or she returns to Saudi Arabia, they can be globally skilled to develop the economy. Since there is a need for a higher quantity and quality of institutions, Saudi Arabia becomes a place of interest for private foreign owned institutions. However, the country is very strict on

bringing in foreign institutions for several reasons, primarily stemming from their high value of Islam in everyday life. To try and alleviate some of these issues and to facilitate stronger foreign relations, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program was established. In 2005, the scholarship program was established so that students from Saudi Arabia could have experience in cultural exchange with other countries. In the United States alone there are about 54,000 students from Saudi Arabia (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2014).

Women in higher education. Women represent a high percentage of the population in higher education. However, there are several shortcomings that women face during and after degree completion. First, although some universities in Saudi Arabia are coeducational, women are separated from the men in classrooms. Lessons are conducted through audiovisual means. This separation aligns with the country's Islamic laws in which women do not publicly interact with men. This can be a challenge if women are to join the workforce in a global setting and may have difficulties adapting to a male presence. To align with gender roles, many all-female universities are present within the country. Renn (2012) uses a qualitative multi-case study approach to analyze the need for all-women universities and their impact on higher education. She does fourteen case studies in nine different nations. The common themes she discovered were a) access, b) gender empowerment, and c) leadership development. She makes reference to the fact that some all-female universities are established to provide access in areas that have different cultural values on gender such as Saudi Arabia, which has women's universities, both public and private.

Women in the workforce. The lack of women in the workforce is a current issue that Saudi Arabia is facing. A large percentage of their female population is educated with graduate degrees but there are limited employment options. Younis (2013) describes the state of women in

the Arab countries in regards to employment. In two-thirds of the Arab countries there are more women than men enrolled in universities. For example, in Saudi Arabia women who have a tertiary education make up 60% of the unemployment population. What happens is that women continue their education while they wait for marriage or a job. Men, on the other hand, do not struggle with this because they are able to find employment without advanced degrees. The main argument that the author makes is that now that women have access to education and improved health, the focus is on gaining economic integration that can in turn integrate them into the political world. It does not help that women are educated if they are unable to gain employment skills and are unable to economically contribute to the country in means of employment. Younis recommends that policy changes must occur, but it takes a visionary leader who has religious maturity to present different options that can accommodate old traditions and new ones that focus on incorporating women into the workforce. This article provides the employment gap that exists and may also help understand why Saudi women have higher attrition rates in higher education at home and abroad. Further, studying abroad may provide different opportunities that are not currently accessible in their home country.

International student studies. Since Saudi students studying in the United States has increased in number, understanding commonalities or research on international student experiences is critical. Much of the literature on international student experiences focuses on the Asian student population, and is often aligned with the theme of assimilation and cultural challenges. However, persistence and retention studies on international students shed light to other areas of success such as engagement.

Engagement in the campus culture is different from assimilation because it is not just the matter of fitting in, but rather engagement allows for a cross-cultural exchange of knowledge. A

study by Mamiseishvili (2012) noted that international student engagement usually occurs after the first year and was a positive factor in student persistence. Interaction or engagement between international students and native students is a strong focus in most of the literature. Using Social Capital Theory (defined as having relationships with individuals that allows for access to opportunities), Trice (2004) measured social patterns to understand whether the amount of contact with natives has an impact on access to opportunities and to overall assimilation. Based on Social Capital Theory, language and culture are the main barriers for international student interactions with Americans. Nonetheless, it is important for the host university to attempt to engage international students within the school and outside community (Jackson, 2005.)

Further, the other aspect to consider when doing studies on international students is the academic component of studying abroad. A study on international graduate student perspectives discovered that student satisfaction on the quality of education was based on how applicable their degree is upon returning to their home country, student-faculty relationships and accessibility, and finally, cultural awareness within the curriculum (Trice & Yoo, 2007).

Similar studies. As stated above, much of the literature on international students focuses on other cultures and limited studies have been conducted on Saudi students, let alone all female students. One particular study that is on the subject of Saudi women as international students was conducted using grounded theory (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). The study interviewed five Saudi females and then surveyed twenty Saudi women on their cultural adjustment of the United States. Seven themes were found: expectations, cultural adjustment, cultural differences, experiences of discrimination, English proficiency, their relationships and support systems, and lastly, the experience of being a woman (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Results of the study included some personal growth of the participant.

Further, other similar studies on the experiences of Middle Eastern female students found that the host institution had limited knowledge of their culture. McDermott-Levy's (2011) phenomenological study on twelve female Omani undergraduate nursing students studying in the United States found that strong family values and religion are comforting factors that aid in overcoming obstacles. One of the recommendations provided is that educators and students alike need to be open and understanding of the differing cultures. For these Omani women their faith is what helped them overcome their obstacles, but they often mentioned that Americans have no knowledge of their culture or religion and much of the negative perspectives stem from misrepresentation by the media.

Available studies on Saudi females are in the form of dissertations. For example, one particular study that does align with the research question focused on how English as a second language impacted Saudi women's roles and identity (Alsweek, 2013). This study used an Islamic feminist framework to understand the voices of Saudi women. Alsweek herself is a Saudi student and offered personal insight on the subject.

Further, a 2004 dissertation by Deraney explored the experiences of Saudi women in the northern United States, but did not look solely at students. Instead, the study focused on women ranging in age from 25 to mid-50s and their experiences of adapting. Two common themes emerged from the study: first, the Saudi women had an appreciation of the different services such as education, mail system, and other public services, as well as a positive view of American people. The second theme was based on mixed or negative reactions to the Midwest; their concern of American culture, and American perceptions of Saudi women (Deraney, 2004). Although this dissertation adds some knowledge on the experiences of Saudi women in the United States, it does not offer information on their experiences within higher education. One of

the recommendations of the study states that more qualitative research needs to be conducted on Saudi women in order to understand their experiences.

Although there are other dissertations or similar studies on the subject of Saudi women, this particular study will focus on the experiences of Saudi women studying in the United States in terms of academic, social, and cultural integration. According to Tinto's model (1975) social and academic integration are key components to student retention. Andrade (2007) used Tinto's model to conduct a qualitative study on 17 international students from Asia to understand their perspectives on adapting to the United States. Based on her findings she argues that "cultural differences between the home country and the United States play a significant role in international adjustment" (Andrade, 2006, p. 73). Using Tinto's model as a reference, the proposed study will interview Saudi women in order to comprehend their transition and experiences within American education. Focusing on understanding the experiences of female Saudi students is important for various reasons such as identifying challenges in social and academic endeavors, creating an environment of cultural awareness, and to engage them by telling their stories.

Role of Women

In 2004, a study on human rights in the Middle East claimed that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia oppressed women by enforcing gender segregation, abusing women who do not conform to the traditions of female modesty, and by not allowing them the right to drive (Afary, 2004). Recently, a slight change in the role of women outside the household has become evident. There are more females in management positions, there is one woman on the Council that was once restricted to just men, and in terms of employment, women have been able to expand their work

choices. Although the government is allowing some access for women into traditionally all male public sectors, this has all been done within reason based on Islamic law.

Contributing factors to gender separation. Much of the negative light that is shed on gender separation in Saudi Arabia is attributed to a lack of understanding on economic and social factors outside the realm of religion which have influenced this divide. Two different studies, one by Ross (2008) and the other by Le Renard (2008), make the case that the economic resource of oil is a large contributing factor to gender separation. Saudi Arabia's oil boom in the 1970s paved the way to rapid economic growth and modernization. Since the country had so much financial wealth, jobs held by men provided enough money to take care of the family, and women did not need to enter the workforce. The limitation of women in the workforce further maintained the division of space in which women did not need to be in the male public space. Around the same era access to higher education was provided to women. However, although women obtained higher degrees, employment has not been as abundant in all sectors. Le Renard (2008) argues there has not been a need for women to be integrated into male dominated areas due to the financial status of the country. However, she also finds that the other factor contributing to gender separation is that women have embraced their own space and value women only areas. Some of the division of space is attributed to tradition and customs, but the majority of it has been influenced by the economy and the new social structure in which women value their own public space. She even marks that the abaya, the black cloak covering everything but a women's eyes is now a form of national identity rather than something oppressive (Le Renard, 2008). Ross (2008) further defends the case of economics or oil being the key reasons gender separation and inequality is occurring. He states that when women are allowed or needed in the workforce gender equality increases because women are able to

organize and have a political voice. These arguments have gone against the assumptions that religion and culture are the main factors fueling gender separation.

Western perceptions of Muslims. Based on the arguments presented above there are still misconceptions and some negative light on Muslims in the west. Ramadan (2013) focuses on the role that Muslims in the West should take in order to dismiss any negative stigmas. He first reviews the top three challenges of a pluralistic society. First, the minority or new group is seen as a scapegoat for larger social or political problems in the West. Second, a sense of fear is instilled in the country and lastly, a victim mentality is fostered. Further, he discusses the challenges within Islam and how it is changing. He makes the clear distinction that religion is not culture, although the two intersect they are not the same thing. This is clearly stated and emphasized to make the argument that Islam and Muslims are not the same and that there are challenges that exist within their own culture and religion. Primarily, the author marks the changes that are occurring within Muslims in the West. Finally, Ramadan provides advice to Muslims in what he calls the three L's: law abiding, language proficiency, and loyalty. In order for Western Muslims to be seen as citizens and not immigrants or something negative he says that they should contribute, another manner of saying integrate, by being law abiding citizens as long as the law does not violate their religious freedom. Second, obtaining the language skills of the host or country of residency is important to be active citizens, and helps communicate their religion and culture. Third, being a critically loyal citizen is important. Ramadan marks that a critically loyal citizen is one that is with the nation yet can be critical of the government when in disagreement. The author concludes with noting that this process of being contributing citizens is a shared responsibility between Muslims and westerners.

Further, a study by Ryan (2011) aims to understand the collective stigmatization of Muslim women in Britain post 9/11. She is primarily interested in measuring the choices of self and collective perceptions that can stigmatize the group. Hilal and Denman (2013) used strategic interviewing of a total of 30 participants to understand the post 9/11 experience of Middle Eastern students studying in Australia. Sixteen were Saudi students ranging from undergraduate to graduate students, four of which were female, and 14 UAE male students. The authors found that the majority of the students interviewed had a positive experience and were thankful for being able to study abroad. Some of the limitations of the study included a lack of the female UAE perspective. One of the reasons why the pilot study was conducted was to see the climate of how Gulf Arabs are viewed post 9/11 ten years later. The study was conducted in various locations in Australia, which can be a limitation if one is trying to gauge the perspectives of Arabs in a post 9/11 world. A study in the United States might draw different conclusions. One of the advantages the principal researcher had was that he himself was a Saudi student and had access to his participants. One of the limitations that the author mentions is that he had trouble getting females to participate in the interviews. This is one reason why there may be limited research on the topic of Saudi women. The other area in the research that seemed to be disconnected was that the article begins with defining globalization and its impact to lead to student mobility, but ultimately wanted to assess student mobility and peace building.

What these authors found was that there are still negative stigmas against Middle Eastern students studying abroad. Assumptions about this population should be understood because these negative thoughts can create barriers for students, and can affect their experience during their studies. Further, it is by understanding the perceptions that are currently present that one can make a difference by presenting information that shines a more positive light. This is one of the

primary reasons that this research is from a constructivist worldview and includes an element of transformative thinking.

Feminist Theories

The study presents a theoretical framework based on Islamic feminism, however, it is important to understand the Western perspective on feminism for two reasons: the primary audience is from a Western ideology, and second, to understand the differences between secular and religious feminism. Grant (1993, p. 1) states that “there is no one feminist theory,” rather it cannot be defined because it has multiple cores. It is based on three core concepts, defining woman, the woman experience, and politics. Basically the whole notion of feminism rests on the belief that the female reality and experience will always be different from the male experience and perspective (Grant, 1993).

Western philosophies on women. In *The Politics*, Aristotle limits the role of women to the household and marks that they are naturally inferior to man. He contests that justice and equality are essential in political philosophy (Aristotle, 350BC/1962, p. 207). This is important because the concept of justice and equality in ancient Greece was a limited one that focused on the equality of man, excluding women from society.

MacKinnon (1989) argues her feminist theory that women are marginalized in a male dominated society. She contests that laws are created toward the advantage of men. For example, she marks that the injustices in the family are attributed to laws that work in favor for men. For instance, abortion is created for men to have the advantage of physical pleasure without consequences.

These two theoretical frameworks focus more on gender and justice in terms of laws. They base their perspectives using a political lens and address the experience of women in

context of her duties in the household. Many of the philosophical perspectives and theories that are the foundations of western ideology are based on the teachings and readings that focus more on the equality of men and view women as creatures of beauty and domestic responsibilities.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1996) originally written in 1792 revolves around the argument that men are not intellectually superior to women; rather the main difference is based on how men and women are educated. To a certain degree the manner in which education is executed is based on the society that is present. It is not until that society is changed that education will change (Wollstonecraft, 1996). She argues against the system that teaches women to be frail, inferior, and objects of beauty, voicing in favor of an education system that would facilitate knowledge and reasoning for both sexes.

Feminism in relation to the Arab world. The word feminism itself can connote a negative tone. In the context of the study, feminism is not the traditional philosophical thought that is present in the United States. Islamic feminism focuses on the balance between feminist thought and Islam. Islamic feminism in itself can connote different meanings within the Muslim community especially with those that identify as Islamist. Islamists strive to maintain traditional structures of society in which the ideal woman embodies traditional family and moral values (Jad, 2011). Islamists view feminism as a secular, anti-male extreme and although their characteristics or political platforms may align with feminism, they do not label themselves feminist (Jad, 2011). Additionally, Margot Badran (2011) contested that Muslim women express their feminism through rights granted to them in Islam.

Golley (2004) makes that case that feminism in the Arab world is not the same as the feminism depicted in the Western world. Feminism does exist but was fashioned in a different manner. For instance, the issue of the veil that can be seen as a symbol for gender segregation is

in fact an Arab woman's choice to limit harassment by men. By separating themselves both physically and metaphorically through the veil, it allows for women to have freedom and are able to interact more with females and do not have to worry about constantly entertaining men. Further, feminism in the Arab world is interconnected with religion, social economics, and politics. From a Western perspective the treatment of Arab women may have a negative perspective because the west does not understand the environment and inter-sectionality of the Arab world, thus both feminist thought and the Islamic religion must be understood in order to understand the perspectives of women from Saudi Arabia.

Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2008) introduce the issue of feminism from a religious-oriented view and a secular-oriented view. Religious-oriented feminists focus on challenging laws or policies that go against Islam. Secular-oriented feminists view the interconnection of Islam and politics as the root problem when it comes to gender issues. Religious feminist have not had much sustainable success on making policy changes and the divide between the religious feminist and secular feminist may be one of the issues hindering progress. Ali, Mohmood, Moel, Hudson, and Leathers (2008) argue that religion and spirituality need to be explored more in order to understand how religion shapes gender roles, women's issues, and feminist thought. From the Muslim perspective, women view Islam as a feminist religion that actually gives equality to women, but is often misinterpreted.

Aysha Hidayatullah (2011) discusses the era of Muslim feminist theology and how the new challenge is understanding their relationship with the Quran. Muslim feminists view the Quran and what it states about women as an unaltered text (Hidayatullah, 2011). However, any sexist notions that derive based on the Quran are from the misinterpretation of patriarchal

humans. Further, she discusses the struggle that Muslim feminists face both inside and outside of Islam.

What is most important in understanding the philosophical thoughts on women is that feminism, although has been present for centuries, is still a relatively new form of theory that is used to label the broad scope of women's issues. From a western perspective feminism can often connote a radical notion. However, feminism goes beyond the radical political realm in which women can gain access to things that were once limited to this population. In context with the study, the female Saudi students studying in the United States have been provided access to higher education abroad and are obtaining rights without having to undergo a radical political agenda. Further, understanding the feminist lens in the context of religion aids in dismissing some of the negative perceptions that are often present in the west in regards to female oppression.

Summary

The presented literature offers in depth information on the country, education, role of women, and the feminist framework proposed for the study. After reviewing the literature there are gaps that need to be filled. Deraney (2004) recommended that more qualitative studies be conducted on Saudi women. There is ample literature on the role of women in Islam, and higher education in Saudi Arabia, but there are limited studies on female Saudi student experiences of studying abroad, both during and after their study. This research will address this gap and will provide a voice to these women. These experiences can shine light on both positive and negative areas of improvement for higher education institutions.

Chapter 3: Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological approach is used to address the main research question: What are the perceptions of Saudi women on their experiences as international college students in the United States? Since the study focuses on human experiences and perceptions, the data collection and analysis is conducted from a qualitative design approach. The main points of this chapter address the use of a qualitative research design, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, reliability, ethical considerations, and concludes with the role of the researcher.

Methodology

One of the strengths of qualitative research is the ability to describe how a person experiences a given situation in a manner that is complex and rich. A phenomenological study based on a semi-structured individual interviews is presented. Phenomenology “recognizes that meanings are given in perception and modified in analysis” (Donalek, 2004, p. 516). It is based on “the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience... The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (Patton, 1990, p. 70). The main process of phenomenological research design is first to address the existing phenomenon, select willing participants, collect data through observations and interviews, and lastly analyze the data for reoccurring themes that bring meaning to the phenomenon (Donalek, 2004). Transcendental phenomenology is used because this particular design “focuses on the essential meanings of the individual experience” (Phillips-Pula, Strunk, & Pickler, 2011, p. 68) and is embedded in the notion of intentionality. Further, one of the important elements within this design is that the researcher’s own perceptions go into the analysis and understanding of the phenomenon. Throughout the entire process the researcher

must disclose the steps and rationale behind the research choices in order to provide a reliability to the study.

Setting of the study. The study took place at a faith based university in the southern part of Texas. The university has a current student population of 10, 984 and of that, 23% are international students. Within the international student population, 183 are from Saudi Arabia (UIW, 2015). This university has a higher percentage of female students compared to male students at all degree levels.

Sample selection. Eleven female Saudi students participated in the study, at which point the data reached saturation so no further participants were needed. For the purpose of this study, I began choosing participants based on a criterion sampling approach, in which participants for individual interviews were first selected from a faith-based private university in the southern United States. Criteria for selection included: (1) being a female from Saudi Arabia, (2) active degree seeking student, (3) over the age of 18, (4) comprehension of the English language and willingness to answer questions in English, (5) available to meet for an hour on the designated date, time, and location, and (6) willingness to participate in the study. The first three interviewees were gathered through the criterion sampling approach. The other seven participants were chosen based on a snowball sampling approach, which is a referral method whereby one participant will lead to another potential interviewee. Two of the first three participants acted as gatekeepers or cultural brokers to assist in finding participants that met the criteria for the study. Further, in order to actually get participants, I first began by building a professional relationship with the Saudi female community in order to gain access. Having two cultural brokers allowed other women to participate in the study without meeting me prior to the

interview. The participants gathered through snowball sampling had trust in the cultural brokers allowing access to group.

During the participant selection process, I learned that although there were many female Saudi students on campus, gaining participation was difficult without a cultural broker to assist in the recruitment efforts. I attempted to recruit via classes, student organizations, and references. Further, I found that communication via text messages was preferable for potential participants. Other external factors also emerged during recruitment efforts. Since more than half of the participants had not met me prior to the interview, some were hesitant to be interviewed, while others had scheduling difficulties. One external factor that was not anticipated was speaking to the husband of a potential participant before gaining access.

Data collection. Data collection took place for approximately one hour using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). Although I had an interview guide, phenomenological interviews often begin with conversations that create a comfortable atmosphere for the participant to fully express their experience (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, not all questions were used during the interviews. The interviews were held in a study room or private location, including but not limited to coffee shops and personal residences, based on the comfort level and accessibility of the participant. Meeting space was decided by the participant, mainly to accommodate to the participant's schedule and for accessibility. Not all of the participants drive, so transportation was taken into account when selecting meeting spaces. Most of the interviews were held on campus in between the participant's classes. Others were held off campus either at a local coffee shop or at the participant's residence. The interviews were captured using an audio recording device. Based on observations, notes were taken throughout the process.

Pseudonyms were selected in order to ensure anonymity of the participant. Participants are referred to by their pseudonyms throughout the process and in the final study report.

Following the interview, I transcribed recordings using a verbatim format. The transcriptions combined with the interview notes are compared and revised during the analysis process. I then proceeded with the thematic analysis (Grbich, 2007) to create themes and categories based on participant interviews relating to the purposes of the study.

Data analysis. Within the phenomenological structure there are three processes to analyze the data (see Figure 3): reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation (Merriam, 2012). Phenomenological reduction is the act of going back to the essence of the experience in order to understand the structure or meaning. It is also the process in which each experience is considered its own entity allowing for a “textual description of meanings and essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34) to emerge. Horizontalization gives all the data equal value during the primary analysis phase. Lastly, imaginative variation is analyzing the data through various perspectives and its purpose is to create a structural meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1994.)

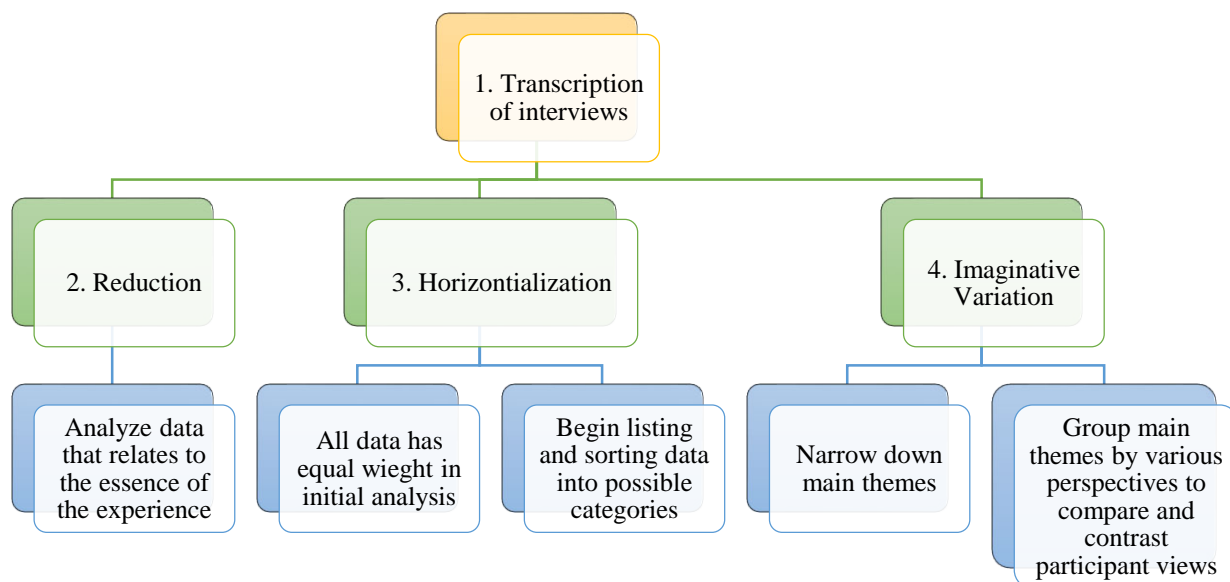


Figure 3. Levels of Analysis (Merriam, 2012). This figure explains the levels of analysis used in the study.

Levels of analysis. The first level of analysis is the transcription of the interviews and field notes. Transcription is the first analytical phase in which the transcription method is chosen. For this study, I transcribed each interview verbatim, excluding any verbal pauses. Once transcriptions were completed the analysis includes the three phenomenological techniques described above in order to create themes. Ryan and Bernard (2003) state that creating themes is the most important part of qualitative analysis. The process of theme development involves first identifying any main themes, then narrow down themes to the most important, create a list of themes based on level of importance, and finally support themes with theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Themes are developed through an inductive approach of the data and from previous theoretical understanding of the research topic (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

During the reduction phases of analysis, I reviewed each participant's response separately on how it related to the phenomenon of being a female Saudi international student. This phase describes what is observed, both external and internal, and extracts the qualities of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). During the horizontalization phase of analysis categorizing and coding each participant's response separately on how it related to the phenomenon was conducted (See Table 1). Throughout this phase all data were weighed equally. Data is then reviewed again and clusters of themes begin to emerge. Throughout the data analysis themes were identified through repetition and indigenous categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The last phase of analysis is imaginative variation in which "possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). During this phase data is narrowed down into four main themes that tie into the theoretical framework of the study.

Table 1

Excerpts of Transcribed Interviews With Preliminary Coding

| Participant | Statement | Code |
|-------------|---|---|
| Akilah | You lose if you don't like share with others and let them about your culture, about Saudi Arabia, about your background, and that's, maybe they know. Cause sometime I just ...I just a lot of people, they don't ask. Never, never. They don't ask why we are wearing hijab. They don't and sometimes we stay with them and so us like, uh, like how can you wear a longer dress, how can we our hair, uh, our head. And some of us cover our face, we can call them and let them know about it. We can transform our culture to them so they know they respect us more. And this is the challenge, we do face here. | Cultural Challenge/ understanding ; communication |
| Lina | Listening... we talk during the class, but here because the language... its new language for us. Because that ... we have to ... we have the word and vocabulary, but we can't make it like sentence... sentence, yea. We can't talk like this ... I don't know. | Language; Challenge |

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Reliability or validity of research is extremely important because it “refers to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, and other sort of account” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122). In order to ensure that the research is reliable, strategies recommended by Maxwell (2013) and by Merriam (2002) were used. Triangulation, which is defined as “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31), was used throughout the study. Further, a sample of the participants reviewed their respective results to ensure that data were not misinterpreted and to utilize the member checking format for reliability. Lastly, a peer review process was used congruous of reviews both knowledgeable and unfamiliar with the study.

Ethical Considerations

Anytime research is conducted with human subjects, ethical considerations must be made. Before conducting the interviews, I submitted this research project for Institutional Review Board approval, I took the CITI training course on the protection of human subjects, and I provided participants consent forms prior to data collection. The consent form (see Appendix B) gives the purpose of the study, rationale behind participation, permission to audio record the interviews, and ensures participant confidentiality. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained by keeping records on a password protected, encrypted computer. Any identifiable information is masked in the transcripts and the data analysis. Pseudonyms are used for all research participants and all the data collected is stored in a hard drive. If for any reason the information in the data had to be given to another party, it was only with the permission of the participants who own the information. Individual subject information included identities of the participants, voice recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms. The consent form was administered to the participants the day of the interview. There was minimal risk to the participants. The risk included potential possibility for identifying participants based on their responses.

Researcher Background

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) stated that all research is interpretative and is guided by the researcher's personal lens. In phenomenology the researcher explores their own experiences to understand any biases before moving onto the data collection (Merriam, 2012) therefore, it is important to identify the role of the researcher.

I am a Hispanic female doctoral student and former teacher of English as a second language. The topic of understanding Saudi women studying in the United States came to mind after I realized that the population of Saudi students was continuously rising and faculty and staff were not quite sure how to handle faculty-student interdependent symbiosis with Saudi women. I also noticed the increasing number of female Saudi students at American universities. Since Saudi Arabia has strict laws for females it was interesting to see that more women are able to come and study in a country that advocates for gender equality. These observations led to the desire to hear their stories of adjustment, cultural shock, and changes in perceptions.

Further, the identity of the researcher in qualitative studies changes based on the context of the research, location and on how the interviewees behave. I embodied different identities such as, an objective researcher, an outsider, a student, and a tutor. Establishing trust with the participants came in different forms. For some of the participants, I continued a relationship as a tutor and academic advisor. With others, I remained the outsider due to cultural and linguistic dissimilitude.

I viewed this study from a constructivist perspective that Creswell (2014, p. 8) defines as the process in which individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences.” This world viewpoint closely identifies with the main purpose of the study; understanding how Saudi women create meaning from their experience.

Summary

This chapter identified the phenomenological study in which eleven Saudi women were interviewed in an attempt to understand their experiences of studying in the United States. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview format. Analysis of the data was conducted via a four-step process that consisted of transcribing the interviews, reduction, horizontalization, and

imaginative variation. Further, I disclosed the process of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the role of the researcher.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Saudi women studying in the United States. It attempts to explore how Saudi women experience life as international students and any challenges that they may face during the experience. This chapter reveals the findings from eleven interviews.

The chapter introduces the eleven participants of the study (see Table 2). The participant profiles are followed by the main themes that emerged in the study. Based on the data analysis, four main themes materialized: religion, family, academics, and transformation. Religion is at the center of all things and is interwoven in each theme at some level.

Participant Profiles

A semi-structured interview of eleven Saudi women studying in the United States was conducted. The main purpose of the interviews was to hear the stories of these women in order to extract the essence of their experience as international students. In the participant profiles, block quotes are exact words from the participant's interview.

Participants of the study were first selected using a criterion sampling approach. After gathering three participants using this method, snowball sampling was then used. Cohen and Arieli (2011) define snowball sampling as:

A distinct method of convenience sampling which has been proven to be especially useful in conducting research in marginalized societies. This method is commonly used to locate, access, and involve people from specific populations in cases where the researcher anticipates difficulties in creating a representative sample of the research population. (pp. 426-427)

Using a snowball sample method allowed for access to more participants. Participants were more responsive if another Saudi woman asked them to participate in the study. Previous

participants provided the names and numbers of other potential participants. Initial communication for participation was sent via text message.

Four of the participants were asked to participate in the study after meeting them at a local conference or in one of the graduate classes. The other seven participants were asked to participate via text with the assistance of two of the previous participants who acted as cultural brokers. All the participants are from Saudi Arabia, are female, and are active degree seeking students or recent graduates at a higher education institution. All the participants first came to the United States to learn English; after completing English language courses, each participant had to apply and get accepted into programs at higher education institutions. Further, in accordance with Saudi Arabian government rules, each female is accompanied by a male guardian, either her father, brother, or husband. Ten of the eleven participants are graduate students. Three of the eleven are not married. All participants have been in the United States for at least two years.

Interviews were conducted at three different locations: a university campus, the participant's residence, or a local café. Locations and times of the interviews were determined by the participants based on availability and convenience. Some of the women do not drive so they are dependent upon their husbands or public transportation so that was a factor that determined interview location. Further, interviews in the evenings that took place at a private residence were determined based on transportation needs or because they have children and could not be away for an extended period of time.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

| <i>Participant</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Program of Study</i> | <i>Years in the United States</i> | <i>Married</i> | <i>Children</i> |
|--------------------|------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Farah | 27 | PhD in Education | 5 years | No | No |
| Lina | 27 | Master's in Education | 2.5 years* | No | No |
| Akilah | 27 | Master's in Education | 3 years | Yes | Yes, 1 |
| Malika | 30 | Master's in Education | 4 years | Yes | Yes, 1 |
| Hana | 33 | PhD in Education | 3 years | Yes | Yes, 3 |
| Kamilah | 27 | Master's in Education | 4 years | No | No |
| Dahlia | 30 | Master's in Education | 3 years | Yes | Yes, 4 |
| Nadia | 30 | Bachelor's in Nursing | 2 years | Yes | Yes, 2 |
| Maya | 31 | Master's in Biology | 6 years | Yes | Yes, 2 |
| Nadeen | 29 | Master's in Education | 3 years | Yes | Yes, 3 |
| Laila | 28 | Master's in Biology | 3.5 years | Yes | Yes, 1 |

*Indicates that there was a period during which participant returned home.

Individual Stories

Farah. Farah requested an early morning meeting at 9 am at a local café close to campus. She was wearing blue jeans, a grey long sleeve shirt, and a headscarf. Farah is a 27 year old PhD student at a local university studying education. She is living in the United States under the guardianship of her brother. Farah is not married. I first met Farah at a local conference and was introduced by a professor. We began talking and she took interest in the study and agreed to participate.

Farah received her bachelor and master degree in Saudi Arabia. She first moved to the United States five years ago to study English and then pursue a doctorate degree. "I was living in Ohio for 3 years and now, I will be 2 years here, in San Antonio." As the interview began Farah opened the conversation with some history about education in Saudi Arabia and female rights.

I just want to ... give you in the beginning ... to show example about the history of education in Saudi Arabia. For many years ago, education in Saudi Arabia is just for men... only. People at that time, they believed that all women should stay at home to care of their children.

She includes a discussion on the challenge of changing the Saudi mind to allow women to go to school. However, there are still some who do not believe that women should be educated.

So King Abdulaziz bin Abdelrahman Al-Saud took the people at the time and it was so difficult to change their minds and convince them to help, so King Abdulaziz talk to them that ... I talk to you ... I respect you ... and it is up to you, if you would like to send your daughter or your sister to school but I'm going to open the schools for girls anyway, So at that time, if a family would like to send their daughter or sister to school after many years ... many years ... many years ... the education is now like for all women and men, but they have many people in Saudi Arabia and to in today 2015, doesn't like for women to complete higher education ... they just have to finish high school, get married, so that ...but at the same time many [Saudi women] have higher education but it is difficult to have job because as you know, until today Saudi Arabia is like women taught to be teacher.

Further, she provided that in their country, teachers are known as prophets so they do not question the teacher. This concept made it difficult for Farah to speak with her professors during the first semester of her studies. Farah, like most of the participants, found the first semester of her studies to be the most difficult.

Lina. Lina met with me at the university library in a private study room in the afternoon around 2pm. Before beginning the interview she requested prayer time. I respectfully agreed. Lina was dressed in a maroon abaya and head scarf. Lina is studying for a Master's in Education and is here in the United States under the guardianship of her brother. Lina is not yet married. However, when the meeting concluded she mentioned going back to her country to meet a potential suitor for marriage. Lina has a Bachelor's degree from Saudi Arabia in textile design.

I first met Lina in one of the graduate classes during her first semester in graduate studies. She is now into her second semester. She had first come to the United States to learn English. Upon completion of the language program she returned to Saudi Arabia for about a year and a half before coming back to the United States for the master's program. During her time in Saudi Arabia, she lost the proficiency of the English language. Lina, like all the participants,

states that one of the biggest challenges for her is proficiency in speaking English. She is more confident in her reading and writing skills, but not in her speaking skills.

Akilah. Akilah met me at a local café near her residence in the evening around 8pm. She was dressed in a white long sleeve chiffon shirt with blue jeans and a white headscarf. She is married and has a two-year child. Both her husband and child reside here in the United States with her. I first met Akilah at a local conference. From that first meeting she had agreed to participant in the study.

Akilah has a Bachelor's degree in Arabic Literature from Saudi Arabia. She chose to pursue a Master's in Education because she wants to teach upon her return to her country.

My undergraduate major is ... was in Arabic literature. So I just, uh,... when I came here, there was no Arabic literature or something or letter of Arabic literature. So decided to make, uh, to get any majors like, um, to help me if I came back again in my country to help me, how can I make contact other educations and how if I become a teacher as well, can I explain the major, explain the subject, or something. So I just research about all of it and I find adult education.

Akilah first came to the United States to study English. Her first experience with an English language program was with one that she stated had too many holidays and few hours of study. In order to grasp the language, Akilah transferred to an ELS program that hosts classes as full-time study.

As Saudi female students under the King Abdullah Scholarship in the United States, a male guardian must accompany them. When Akilah first came, her husband was unable to accompany her at the beginning due to work, so her father came with her. During the nine months that her father was with her it was an uncomfortable time.

My mom call me, your husband doesn't finish his work. We miss your dad. I cannot do the anything here... without your dad and I said okay mom, okay.

Further, she felt responsible for her family's sadness and for taking him away from the rest of her family.

He feel sad. When he call my friends their [back home in Saudi Arabia] he'd cry and I just feel responsible about that. Why I bring my dad with me?

Once her husband was able to join her, she felt more comfortable and was able to focus more on her studies. She will be graduating this semester and will stay in the United States for an additional year to gain workforce experience.

Malika. Malika requested to meet at a public space in her residence. Malika was wearing a full brown abaya in which only her eyes were visible. She greeted me with the customary handshake and cheek-to-cheek kiss. She offered me water and chocolates, a Saudi tradition to offer guests something to drink and something sweet. Malika is a Master's student in education. She is accompanied by her husband and child here in the United States. Malika agreed to participate in the study based on the recommendation from one of the other participants. She first lived in Orlando, FL, and studied English.

I came here to America on 2011... May 2011. I want... I was... I use to live in Orlando because I studied English as Second Language and I finish there. I went to the ELS test. It's from British and they have an American taught artist. I took ELS test and I get the score that they'd ask me to be as a graduate as student.

Malika received her bachelor's degree in Saudi Arabia, and completed a master's program in education, in hopes to return to her country to become a school principal. Malika began the interview with introducing how Saudi Arabia is controlled by Islam and how no matter where she is, she upholds her religious values.

Anything I do in Saudi Arabia, I will do it everywhere. If I want to take my covering of my face away, I will do it in Saudi Arabia first, then I will do it anywhere in the world. My perspective I follow God's rules. God is everywhere, in the whole universe.

This aspect of upholding her religious values and not changing based on environment is seen throughout the interview and in some of the challenges based on conflict with religious values.

Hana. Hana is a first semester doctoral student in higher education. She received both her bachelor's and master's degree in Saudi Arabia. She requested a meeting at a public space at her residence. This location was most convenient because Hana does not drive yet and has three children at home. She greeted me with the customary handshake and kiss on each cheek. She offered me a drink and something sweet; a Saudi tradition when entertaining guests. She was wearing a purple abaya and matching scarf. When I first met Hana' she had her face covered in which only her eyes were visible. When we were acquainted she was in one of the graduate classes with other international students and Saudi men. She explained that she covers her entire face when in class out of respect for the other Saudi students. Hana' is accompanied by her husband and children.

Hana is well traveled. She has been to 15 countries so far and is "use to different cultures and to different people" so being in the United States and in co-ed classes was not a shock or adjustment. When Hana came to the United States to study English she chose an institution that did not have any Saudi students.

We cannot improve our language so when I heard that I told my husband, let's try to find a place and he told me, you will never find a place that does not have students from Saudi Arabia.

She found an institution in which she was the only Saudi student. For three years she studied English there and even took college courses to get an understanding of the American style of higher education. Hana states that taking courses before beginning the doctoral program greatly helped. She was able to take a communication course that helped with her presenting and public speaking skills.

Kamilah. Kamilah agreed to participate in the study based on the recommendation from one of the other participants. She requested a meeting at her home. I had not met Kamilah before the interview. When I arrived she welcomed me into her home. She was wearing American style clothing, pants, and a long sleeve sweater, she did not have an abaya, or head scarf on because we were in the comfort of her home. Mid way through our meeting she offered me a drink and candy. I kindly accepted. She was soft spoken discussed her experience both in her current Master's program and during her first arrival in the US while studying English. Kamilah is accompanied here by her brother. Kamilah will be graduating this semester and wants to teach in Saudi Arabia. She holds a Bachelor's in history from Saudi Arabia and will now complete her Master's in education this semester. She chose education because they closed the history major in her country.

I actually I wanted to get my master degree in history, but I didn't get a chance to take it. Because my government didn't give me the chance to take it. History, because they close the major in my country. If I return to university, I didn't find the history.

Kamilah's first month in the United States was the most difficult. She was shocked by the different lifestyle and culture. Prior to arriving she thought learning another language will be easy, and once here she realized "it's not easy to learn a new language." Language is still a challenge for Kamilah. She does not practice English at home; she only speaks Arabic to her brother.

Later when I saw Kamilah, I at first did not recognize her in her full abaya. I realized who it was from her voice and by looking at her eyes. It was a different experience, being able to both the covered and uncovered woman.

Dahlia. Dahlia accepted to participate in the study based on the recommendation from another participant. I didn't meet Dahlia till our interview day. After rescheduling due to time

constraints, we met in the evening at the library in private study room. She was dressed in a long sleeve teal shirt, black pants, and her head covered with a tan scarf. We met in between Dahlia's class schedule. She is the mother of four children and is accompanied by her children and husband.

I come here alone, just me and my children in the first year. Oh, my god, it's very, very difficult when I stay here because, you know, I need to complete my degree. I need to study here in United States but my husband doesn't have like...not certificate. What I mean like vacation from his work in Saudi Arabia. Just stay here with us like two months, yeah and after that, he go to Saudi Arabia and he told me, It's OK. You are sure if you want to be...complete your degree here. It's very different than Saudi Arabia and you have three children and it's OK. I say, Hmm, I think it's OK, like, you know, I need to challenge myself. All the time, I say to myself, I can do this.

Dahlia holds a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry from Saudi Arabia and is now pursuing a Master's in education. Upon graduating with her bachelors, she stayed home for three years because she was unable to find a job in Saudi Arabia. She tried to find a position at a university but was told she needed a master's degree. Dahlia had decided to pursue a master's in Saudi Arabia but was told she should complete her degree in America.

Nadia. Nadia agreed to participant in the study based on the recommendation from another participant. Nadia and I met on campus in a private room. She is an undergraduate student with a focus on nursing. Nadia is married with two children and has been in the United States for about two years. She first came to the United States to study English before beginning the undergraduate program. She is the only participant in the study that is not on the King Abdullah Scholarship; she is on scholarship from her employer in Saudi Arabia.

Nadia is a health care assistant in Saudi Arabia and was provided a scholarship to study nursing. She said that:

They prefer going outside of the country to...more than to study in the country. I don't know why. They told me, 'if you want to stay in this job, go and study. If you don't want, you just leave.

Once Nadia returns from her studies in the United States she is under contract to work the same amount of years that she took to study. She enjoys health care and working with patients. She chose this university because of the strong nursing program. Nadia loves to cook and stated that she would change her major to cooking but she can't because she is here under scholarship from the hospital.

Maya. Maya is a close friend of one of the other participants and agreed to participate in the study. She requested we meet at a local coffee shop near her residence. She entered the coffee shop with her son and after purchasing some beverages, her husband took their son. Throughout the interview her husband was waiting for her outside with their son and daughter.

Maya wore black pants, black long sleeve blouse, and a matching head scarf. Maya first came to the United States six years ago to study English in Miami, FL. Upon completion of a language program she was accepted into a master's program in genetics.

Nadeen. Nadeen is a master's student in education. She agreed to participate in the study based on the recommendation from another Saudi woman. We met on campus in the library in a private study room right before one of her evening classes. Nadeen was dressed in blue jeans, a long sleeve navy blue blouse, and a navy blue head scarf with a trim of white embroidery.

Nadeen is married with two children. She did not intend on coming to study in the United States at first. A friend of hers suggested coming to study here, but at first reaction she said no; it was not safe in which her husband agreed. However, after thinking it over with husband, they decided to apply of the scholarship.

I want to come and I told my husband, what do you think about this idea?
Actually, I was...hesitate about this because I have...I don't know English and I

have no idea about United States and I have heard that American people...some people, they have...they don't have belief and they have very bad guys there. So according to what I have heard, I felt like it's...I'm not sure. I can't come or not. So my husband told me, No, no, no, no, no, no, no. impossible, we're not going to leave our country. We will stay. So he...I think he start talking with his family, his friend and they...I don't know what he did. He just came to me one day and told me, OK, I will... What's the...I will ask the scholarship to...ask them to take you to the scholarship, and I told him, Why you change your mind? And he said, No, I just want to try.

Once she was accepted for the scholarship, it was met with resistance from her family. They were not in full support of her coming to the United States and bringing her children. Their assumption was that if anything happens to the children during their stay, for example an accident, the US government will take custody of them. The only supportive member of her family was her mother.

Nadeen stated that she makes learning a habit, not studying. She loves learning about new things and about different people and cultures. She said before coming to study in the United States she had a limited scope of thinking. Nadeen has been here for three years and is enjoying learning everything that she can.

Lalia. Lalia is a master's student in biology that will be graduating this semester. She agreed to participate after one of the other Saudi women provided me her contact information. From the initial meeting set up, she told me her story is unlike any other. Lalia and I met outside on a picnic table located in the center of campus around mid-day. She was dressed with a white head scarf, white long sleeve chiffon blouse, and large sunglasses. From the minute the interview began she started telling her story. Since the Saudi government requires that females be accompanied by a male guardian this was a challenge for Lalia. She does not have any brothers and at the time she was not married. The only other male that was eligible to accompany her was her father.

So my first decision is how I can take this father from his family just for me alone and I just feel...in that time, I was selfish, but I did it.

Her father came with her for two months to get her settled with an apartment and to ensure she had friends, then he returned to Saudi Arabia. This was the first time Lalia was living alone and away from her family which was a difficult time for her.

Further, she had the challenge of passing the IELTS exam. She took the exam several times and finally received a high score for university, however, at first she was unable to get accepted to the schools she applied to. After going back to Saudi Arabia for vacation, she returned to the United States with a husband and admission to a master's program. Laila expressed that she married her best friend's brother after he proposed two times. She said that it worked out well because she would be able to come and study without having to bring her father, instead she could be accompanied by her new husband.

Themes

After transcription of the eleven interviews, data were coded using different techniques such as repetition and indigenous categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After the data collection and analysis, it revealed that the Saudi female experience has multiple layers. Analysis of the data identified four main themes (see Figure 4): religion, family, academics, and transformation. Religion is depicted in the center because all aspects of the Saudi experience are interwoven within Islam.

Religion

Islam is interwoven in all aspects of the Saudi female experience. It is an important part of understanding Saudi culture, as Malika states, "religion controls us and we have rules and we have to follow it."

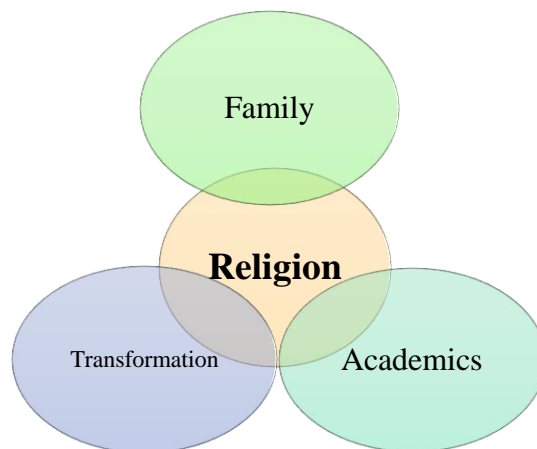


Figure 4. Main Themes. This figure represents the four main themes that emerged from the data. Religion is at the center to indicate that the theme of religion was at the center of all understanding within the Saudi female experience.

The Veil. Within the theme of religion the topic of the veil emerged. First, there is an invisible veil that creates a boundary between men and women. Two of the participants gave the example that in their religion they cannot shake hands or hug a man. Malika stated that:

Our religion prohibits... I cannot touch the man's hand or anything if it's not my husband or my dad or my, uh, brother, because of our strange people, I can't touch you.

Further, Dahlia said: “In my culture and my religion, should be like the man and woman, they didn’t touch.” These comments reflect the invisible veil that exists between men and women within Saudi Arabia.

Second, there is the physical veil that covers the woman. All the participants wear at least the hijab, a head scarf that covers the woman’s hair. The topic of the veil and the level of exposure depends upon individual. Seven of the eleven participants wear only the head scarf, although their face is exposed, they all wear long sleeves and pants that cover their bodies. One participant wears the head scarf and abaya, but her face is exposed. Two of the participants dress in full abayas in which only their eyes are exposed. One of the participants uses the head scarf

and abaya outside of class and in class she wears the full veil that exposes only her eyes because she has other Saudi students in the course. The veil is both a cultural and religious value. Some participants provide the reasoning that they wear the full abaya because of their religious beliefs and values. Other's provide the rational that it is to maintain the Saudi culture, especially when in the presence of other Saudis.

Akilah provides the description that in Saudi Arabia all women cover their bodies and face with the full black abaya. However, when away from Saudi Arabia you may show your face because not all people in other countries are Muslim and maybe if she is covered up no one will speak to her or will be afraid. Her explanation is that religion allows this flexibility to either fully cover or partly cover the face. Akilah uses only the hijab here in the United States.

I just, uh, open my face and some of my friend, they cover their face because they think more comfortable if they cover their face, but religion give us excuse if you cover or part cover.

Farah wears only the hijab. She further reiterates how the hijab fits into religion and how the topic of the full abaya is more cultural than religious. She provides that the Quran gives a woman the choice on how to cover herself.

They say Muslim should cover hijab. Many, many people agree with that Saudi woman should stay with the hair and just, uh, just cover everything except your face. This just your hand, not this one. Just your hand. Okay? But in the Quran, god says that is that you choose. If you want to do, do it. If you do, as you know, because no one can judge you except the god. This the Quran, but that doesn't work in Saudi Arabia.

From the cultural standpoint, Farah states that the act of covering up is to abide by the cultural standards set forth by other Saudis. If Farah was found not wearing her hijab, someone could report her to the government and she could get in trouble.

Here I have to wear hijab. I have to wear hijab because I, yea, everybody knows I'm Saudi women and, as you know, happens during the school... I don't want to something to put me in uncomfortable situation. So I just to focus on my

education. So that's okay and I just wear hijab. You know, so I will do what I want to do. Sometime, so that for me. For Saudi woman, as you know, it something in my culture.

Malika uses the full abaya. When she first arrived in the United States she was afraid that she would not be accepted because she was covering her face. When she realized that no one had a problem with it, she felt relief. Malika is more comfortable in the full abaya. Her philosophy is that although she has seen other women choose not to wear the full abaya, she will continue to cover up because it is what is done in her religion and back home in Saudi Arabia.

Anything, I do it in Saudi Arabia I will do it everywhere. If I want to take, uh, my covering my face away, I will do it in Saudi Arabia first and then I will do it anywhere in the whole world. Uh, because my perspective I follow God's rules. God everywhere, in the whole universe. There is nothing in the whole planet, when I go anywhere I ... God will see me.

Hana wears the hijab and an abaya. During class she will cover her face and only expose her eyes, outside of class she does not cover her face. For Hana, covering her face in class is out of respect for the other Saudi students in her class that are accustomed to full covered women.

Sometimes I have to cover my face, because, you know, for me it's difficult to, you know, face-to-face, because in my country I cover my face. Like, when you saw me in the class. That's for me and another thing I, for me it's okay. I can deal with it and I can talk with them. They respect each other.

Dahlia had a different experience. Dahlia wears just the hijab. She said that people do not understand it and have asked her before if she was sick and missing her hair, insinuating that she was a cancer patient. She said: "Yes, I have hair. This, I wear hijab because my religion, you know."

Although each participant displayed a different understanding or choice in wearing the hijab or full abaya, each one still was dressed modestly with their hair covered. The veil is a form of religious expression, and the full abaya a form of national identity. The participants in the study represented a varying perspective of what the hijab means to them.

Family

In Saudi culture, family is very important. Each Saudi woman comes to study in the United States with family members such as their husbands, children, brothers, or fathers. An overview of remarks participants made regarding family are presented as well as the findings of the sub-theme of motherhood.

One of the challenges that some of the participants had was being away from their family. Although all the participants are here with a family member, the extended family is an important part of a Saudi women's life because in Saudi Arabia socialization happens at home. The relationship aspect of the female experience begins within the family structure.

Hana, who is joined here in the United States by her husband and children, still missing her family in Saudi Arabia.

It's different. I know my husband, my husband is very supportive, but, you know, still your family is very important for you, you know. So for me, this is one of the obstacles.

Motherhood. Eight of the participants are married with children. One of the themes that emerged from the study was that of motherhood. The concept of being a good mother or a mother in general came up repeatedly in the data. In the theme of motherhood there was more discussion on balancing being a good mother and good student, care taking, worrying about their children's socialization into a new culture, language, and environment, co-parenting which is a foreign concept in Saudi Arabia.

Good student or good mother. Farah, although not married and does not have children, still made reference to being a mother. During her interview she mentioned that her mother wants her to get married and have children. Although Farah does want this at some point in her life, she wants to wait till she is finish with her studies.

My mother doesn't like to come to here to complete the education. My father supports me. But my mother no. Just my mother wants me to marry and have children. That's unique for her. And also my mother told me that education doesn't give children for you. [Laughing] I told her, I know okay okay. But I want to be strong before I have a child. I want to strong, because I don't know who will come to my life and if they ... if my husband will support me or man so that I want to be strong before I have a child. After that, if I have any problem, I have education.

Lalia, similar to Farah in that she wanted to get her education first before having a family, became pregnant during her studies in the United States. Lalia first came to the United States to study English under the guardianship of her father. After multiple proposals from her best friend's brother she decided to get married. She told her now husband that her intentions of being in the US were to focus on her studies and postpone having children till she had completed the master's program.

So when I came here, I asked my husband to study and we just focus. We're not going to be...have any children in that time but guess what? I didn't know how I can take care of myself so I didn't get pregnant. So my fault, I get pregnant but I didn't know that until when I was in UTSA. They want to give me injection for meningitis and she asked me, "Are you pregnant?" I said, "No. Why do you think that?" My husband said, "No, you have to think, because we are married now." So I just get scared and I went home that time and I get the test and I surprised myself that I get pregnant.

When Lalia found out she was having a baby she questioned whether or not she was ready and if she would be a good mother. It would add another responsibility for her and she was not yet prepared.

I cry because I don't want...I want to study. I came here for study and I don't want to have children. So I just get scared because this is a new responsible for me other than my husband. So I didn't know if I'm going to be a good mother or not. I didn't prepare for that. So I just have to be accept the new surprise and I was prepare myself.

Lalia prepared herself but later mentions that it was a big challenge having a baby in the middle of the semester. Even though she was about to be a mother she was still very focused and concerned about her class and taking exams.

I didn't know what I have to do. I just sit with the teacher and the professor. I told them...told him I'm going to have baby and what I have to do by that because I study but I'm going to be absent for two weeks and he said, "That's OK. After you deliver, you can...delivery, you can come here and we can talk." I send...after my deliver, I send to him an email and he said, "You have to meet me." OK and this is my first week after delivery. I was tired but I went to him and I just meet him in his office and he's just surprised, "How can you come here and you just have your baby?" I told him that, "Yes, I'm tired but you want that and I want my grade and I want to have A so please help me." I can bring my baby with me. Just tell me.

After this first experience Lalia stated that she now manages being a mother and student and it is not as difficult of a challenge as it was during that semester.

Nadeen is the mother of three. She struggles with balancing being a good student and being a good mother. Nadeen went from taking three courses to two in order to limit the amount of school stress so that she could focus on her children and their needs.

Because if you want to be a good student, you can...it's difficult to be a good mom. So I chose to be a good student. I want to get a high grade. I want to get applied for the universities. So I studied hard. I left my kids just to the school. When I came here, the youngest boys were in the day care and my daughter in kindergarten. I have never seen their files. I don't know what they need, their homework, never. Just focus in my homework, what I need, what I need to do, you know. Actually, I was not a good mom at that time.

Nadeen feels that out of her three children her daughter is the one that was most affected by her focus on school.

The ones that get that or harm from that or...that's my daughter. She's the most one that's affected from that and she learned how to be responsible of her works, of her homework because she always hear that from me, "I'm busy. I don't have time for you." That's all and their dad don't like to teach them or just help them. He don't like that. He gets angry quickly. So he don't like to just study for them. So now, I start just helping her. She is trying hard to learn and I almost heard from her teachers that he's...she studied how to...just learn but because I didn't

help her, she always get low grade. That's why I...so I'm trying to make her better now and she start now learning Arabic and English. So she is so excited because she started to learn Arabic. She want to learn Arabic and at the same time, she learn English. So she's getting better and better now which makes me...she's kind. She's lovely girl.

Childcare. The other aspect of motherhood that was revealed was the difference between having a family and studying in Saudi Arabia compared to having your family here in the United States with you. In Saudi Arabia if a woman needs someone to watch her children while she goes to school, the family such as a mother or sister helps. Since extended family does not often come for extended periods of time during their studies, the children either spend the day in school or in day care.

Hana, the mother of three, mentioned that while working on her master's degree in Saudi Arabia, if she needed to leave her kids for a bit to go work on things, she would leave them with her mother. She did not feel guilty or bad for doing this because she knew her children would be taken care of.

When I study for my master if I feel, you know, I want them to take my kids a little bit, then I, you know, I drop them at my family house, then I go to my office. I feel, you know, I feel comfortable because they with my family. I know that mom going to cook for them, take them to... I don't feel guilty, if I, you know? Like here, no. It's different. I know my husband, my husband is very supportive, but, you know, still your family is very important for you, you know. So for me, this is one of the obstacles also, for one of barriers, or difficulties or challenges.

Nadia, the mother of two, describes her life of being a student and mother. She leaves her children in day care while she is at school. She picks her children up in the evenings and spends time with them, but says it is difficult to be both a student and a mother because there are certain expectations of the woman.

I pick up my children from the day care. I start to feed them, change them, and play with them until they get to sleep. After they get to sleep, sometimes I have to study. Sometimes I am very tired. Just I sleep with them. Yeah, the man in my

country is not helping a lot with the housework. So the most pressure is for the woman. She's doing everything. She has to do...to cook, she has to wash. She has to look after her children. She have to do a lot of things instead of studying.

Maya has two children, a son and a four month old daughter. While she was pursuing her master's degree she would take her son to day care. She said that she would take him from 6:00 am to 6:00pm. She was able to balance school and the role of mother by using that time to study even if she didn't have class. Once she picked her son up from day care she would not study in order to make time for her son. Sometimes it was difficult to balance, especially when taking exams.

It get pretty hard because, for example, if we have exam I cannot finish it after 6:00pm. I have to complete after 6:00pm. When he gets back, 'Mama, I want to stay with you' and he will...he wants food. So he wants to sleep, he wants to go the bathroom, you know.

Other ways that Maya is able to balance motherhood and academics is by having family time on the weekends. At least one day out of the weekend she would spends with her children.

The worrying mother. Malika, the mother of one child, talked about her son during the interview. Malika came to the United States four years ago when her son was only two years old. During her time her Malika decided to solely focus on practicing her English language skills both inside and outside the home. She stated that at home she speaks in English with her husband to practice. Since her focus has been on English proficiency, her son's first language is English and currently her son knows limited Arabic.

My son went to the childcare and she couldn't speak no Arabic, no English. No any language, just he want to fight. He want to... and I wanted a doctor, she... the doctor told me please, speak with him at home in English, because you are here. He ask me, how long you stay here? I said... maybe... maybe three years. He said, please speak with him English now until he get to socialize here in... in...in the school and can learn Arabic after that, but I hope I can't... I want to speak with him two language at home. It's better. I took a class bilingual education and they said this child... a child can catch two language at the same time. If I speak with my son, I think at home Arabic and English. He will catch

two language, because children are smart to catch two language, but I didn't do that. If I had this knowledge, I... I can enlighten my son, but I will do it with my other son. I wanted him... or my child...another one if I have to speak with him two languages.

Malika plans to return to Saudi Arabia in January 2016. Her son's lack of Arabic proficiency worries her. He is at school age and in Saudi Arabia in order to interact and socialize at school he needs to speak the language.

I'm very afraid to have an issue with him when I go to Saudi Arabia. I don't know maybe I will... I'm afraid of him to like to I want to stay home. I don't want to go there. I... I cannot talk with them. I... I really afraid to have... to have this scenario when I go back there. Yes, I told him don't worry I'll help you. I'll translate to you, but it's hard to him, to me to translate for the kids. They blame me. If the kids, they say him they... for example, they want to play any game and they explain the game to all of the five kid...kids and my son, of course, he will not understand anything and this are to bring my son sit like that while they are doing.

Co-parenting. Akilah has one child. Her experience was a bit different when she spoke about the role of being a mother. In her interview she talked about how men in her country do not necessarily know what women go through when pregnant, nor do they parent the children. It is the woman's role to care for the child and during a woman's pregnancy; other females in the family that help her through the process. The husband usually comes by to visit to make sure the wife is fine but does not really experience the changes in behavior or once the child is born the husband is not always exposed to all the crying a baby makes.

It's different because, you know, in Saudi Arabia, we like, uh, they always... woman doesn't work in Saudi Arabia. A lot of woman doesn't work. They stay at home. They take care of their children and the man they go to work to do everything and they came at home, he eat. He stay with his family or something, but here it's different, because the woman is work also and she has school and she is busy... He saw everything with me. No anyone take care of me, except him. He stay with me half the time. Uh, sometime when we sleep early my son he wake up us at night, three o'clock, four o'clock, he is crying. He doesn't know what he needs and he said what's going on with him? Why? Maybe he is sick? Maybe he is.. and I said no. He is like this. This is the deal. The baby when he born and he know and he start to like open his eye and he start to make it like...

give us, me and my son more like to care and give us like more attention and he... and you know what? Sometime, we become like a friend. We not become like husband and wife.

Academics

The third theme that emerged from the data was that of academics (see Figure 5). Subthemes included in this experience are: language, adapting the American education system, and faculty support.

| Language | Adapting to American Higher Education |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students came to US to learn English before applying to a University • Challenge/Barrier • Writing and speaking skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-ed classrooms • Faculty Support • Academic expectations |

Figure 5. Academics Theme. This figure shows the sub-themes that emerged within the theme of academics.

Language. All eleven participants first came to the United States to learn English prior to applying to an intuition of higher education. In all eleven interviews the participants all made reference to English being a challenge. Some of the participants are more comfortable with writing than speaking and others are more confident when speaking than writing. One of the main concerns in regard to the language was grammar. All the interviews were conducted in English and in a couple of them prior to beginning the recording, the participant would apologize about their grammar.

Lina stated that she is more confident in her writing, but she is not as comfortable when speaking. This was a challenge especially since most, if not all, courses require some sort of presentation or group discussion.

This is the first semester for me here. I can write anything I write a lot of paper and when I listen something I understand what this is.... just I can't speak.

Farah is also more confident in her writing skills than her communication skills. One of the issues that arise in language being a challenge is the time spent on reading. Reading takes more time and understanding the assignments that are far different than expected in the Saudi system.

For me challenges is like for me number one is like communication... Also speaking, speaking is like I didn't know how to do that, but I feel like ... or I think is like both these semesters the speaking is new because I don't have friends here I just talk English in class and come back to home just I'm not talking, I don't even have Arab friends. But I feel like in my home I am just reading, reading in silence. Reading and writing. Reading and writing. So that I think I have to work more with my speaking as well.

Malika stated that English is the number one challenge for her. When she came to the United States she was only provided one year to learn the language by the Saudi government. In that time she said she worked really hard and even asked her husband to speak only English at home. This later posed a different issue in that her son learned English first and does not speak much Arabic.

The language was the first challenge for me, but I'm good. It is really hard and I came I don't know even I write my name in English. I didn't know how to write my name in English.

Nadia also finds reading and writing difficult because of the language. She is focused on health sciences in the nursing program and not only is learning English difficult but also learning scientific terms in English as well.

It's difficult for me because, you know, I study language here. So English is not my language and I have to learn more about reading and writing. Still, I didn't master it. So the university needs too much work for reading and writing. So it's difficult for me.

Laila had the challenge of passing the IELTS exam. Although she knows the language it was difficult for her to get a score that was desirable for the universities that she was going to apply to. After taking the exam several times, she was able to get the score of a six.

Then I was...have challenge to get my IELTS. So my first time I take IELTS was in my country. I get 5. Then I stuck with 5. I take the exams eight times then in the 9 and 10, I get 5 ½ but that is not working with me because I cannot find any acceptance from university by this score. So I just try and try and try. Finally, I get 6.

Hana specifically looked for an English program that did not have any other students from Saudi Arabia so that she could focus on learning English. She stated that language, in the context of proper grammar, is an obstacle. She does not struggle with speaking in front of large groups of people but fears that her argument can look weak if she does not use proper grammar.

You know the language for me, it the big, the big, the big, uh, obstacle. Um, for example when I... when I want to present something, for me it is okay. I have the confidence. I read a lot. I, I... After I finish the ELS program, I finished the ELS program early. Then I think about, I still have time. So, I think I thought about take some... study to take some college classes to be a relative speaker and, you know, to get experience to be relative speaker, because, you know, the ELS is different. All the students have the same level of the language. So, I started to take public speaking, interpersonal speaking. So for me, that's helped me a lot. Uh, when I reach to this point, but still, you know, the language for me is difficult, because, you know, for me it is okay to, you know, to go and present because I taught at university. I used to present in front of 300 students so for me it is okay, but when it's come to the language it's something totally different. You know, I feel sometimes, you know, embarrassed with, um, pronunciation. When I present it is... it is very hard to think about your idea and the grammar at the same time. I don't want to make, you know, my idea, you know, look like weak because the grammar... when you miss the grammar. So, for me the language is really... is really one of the big obstacles for me.

Kamilah at first thought learning a new language would be easy. Now she states that she is working on improving her writing and speaking skills. She speaks mainly Arabic at home with her brother and expresses that she would like to practice English more both inside and outside her home.

Sometimes I speak with Arabic only, with my brother Arabic, Arabic... so that's a maybe, I need to stop a speak Arabic and try to speak English more than Arabic.

Dahlia stated that speaking in front of others was a challenge, especially doing so in English. She jokingly remarked that she would rather go back to Saudi Arabia then speak in front of others.

I want to go to Saudi Arabia. I can't. I can't like stand up and talk in front of people and in English language. Oh, my god. It's very difficult.

Nadeen learned English in one year. She said that she wanted to do well and learn as much as she could because even if she did not get accepted to a university she wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to learn English.

I came here, my English is...I have nothing. Just I know, what's your name? How old are you? How tall are you? The main points but if I...I can read English but I don't understand it. I don't know what I'm reading. So I just focused on my studying because I love learn English. I love it. So when I came here, I get the chance to learn it. I don't want to lose this chance. So was my main goal, just to learn English.

Akilah said that she did not have any background in English before coming to the United States. She said that the first English language program she started upon her arrival did not have many hours of availability to practice and learn English. Akilah transferred to a full time program so that she could grasp the language.

[ELS] didn't have a lot of vacations. So I saw that was very good for me and I adjusted there and I stay with them until I finish level 11 and if I finish I just get extra tool from the university and then I started my college in the spring.

Maya studied English for one and half years and stated that was not enough time to fully comprehend the language. In addition to learning the general language, Maya also had to learn scientific terms in English. Maya is in the field of biology so she would have to translate what she knew in science from Arabic to English.

My English language, you know, it is difficult for me. I'm not perfect for English language, you know. Just one year, you know, one year is not enough to get all the...get all the things for English language.

Adapting to the American education system. A sub-theme that emerged in the data was that of the adaption process into the American higher education system. Ten out of the eleven participants have experience receiving either a bachelor or master degree from Saudi Arabia. According the participants, the class room structure and expectations are extremely different. First, the classes are co-ed. In Saudi Arabia, classes are separated by gender. Second, class structure and expectations took getting used to. Grades are based on test taking, classes are lecture style and there is only one exam. In the American system grades are based on participation in discussion and group work, writing and presenting. There are certain expectations required of the student in America that is different from Saudi Arabia such as literature reviews. Third, in Saudi Arabia the teacher is seen as a prophet, therefore they do not question the teacher. In the American system, teachers can be questioned and often time encourage it. This was part of the adaption process of developing a relationship with faculty. Lastly, participants found the first semester to be the most challenging and often times thought of returning home.

Coed classes. In regards to gender integrated classes, this was a challenge at first for some participants. Saudi Arabia has gender segregated schools and public spaces. All participants made reference to the women-only universities or classes in Saudi Arabia. If any universities are co-ed, women still have separate spaces and do not interact with men. If there is a male professor then they hear the lecture via telecast. They can see the professor but the professor cannot see the women.

Lina questioned why both men and women are in the same class. This was new for her. She stated:

At first, when we come to the school we saw boys with us in the school and in the same class. We told the teacher why you do that. They say this is the United States like this. All the classrooms like that, boys and girls.

Akilah had a similar reaction like Lina. In her cases she spoke of being uncomfortable at first because she could not communicate with the male students or male professors.

I just feel shock for the first time and we cannot contact with my students even my teacher, because teacher, they are man and so day by day we just know this is the culture of America.

Dahlia had a similar experience like Akilah in feeling uncomfortable interacting with male students. In Dahlia's experience the professor encouraged interaction with men in the classroom. She did not become comfortable until she realized as long as she spoke only of education, the experience in the classroom, or the class activity did she feel ok. Dahlia spoke to her husband about the situation:

When I talk of this situation with my husband, it's ok if I talk with another man, just in the classroom and he say, Yeah it's ok but out of the classroom, no.

Kamilah spoke of her challenge of studying with men.

In my country we live separate and we study separate. The men study in another building. We study in another. So I didn't study with them the whole of my life. When I came here I found that difficult...I don't have experience how to deal with man in the classroom.

Hana had a different perspective on the matter. Hana has traveled to many places and has been exposed to gender integrated spaces so studying in the same class with men was not a challenge.

Maybe my experience is different because I like to travel a lot. So, I have been, you know, 15 countries so far not. So for me it is, you know, I am used to different culture, to different people. So for me, it's not that difficult.

Class structure. Classes in Saudi Arabia are lecture based and grades are determined by a mid-term and final. Some of the participants shared their experience on the differences in the class structure and grading between their country and the United States.

Kamilah, who studied for her bachelor's in Saudi Arabia, referred to the manner in which she was graded.

In my country we have just a final. We didn't have homework. Just we have final test and the mid-test.

Farah discussed what she liked about the grading and class structure here in America.

Education here depends on my work, I mean that it doesn't depend on exam or quiz as in my country. My country, it depends on quiz even if I come every day to school. But if I fail in the quiz, I drop the class, but here no. It depends on if you come to assignments and that's good.

Laila had a similar comment like Farah. She spoke about how students talk about their learning and have class discussions, something that is not common in her country.

They let students have some presentation and explain some way and so the student explain to each other a new, like a new chapter, but in my country we wouldn't have like that.

Hana likes the idea of the syllabus. She worked on her bachelor's and master's in Saudi Arabia and mentioned that not all professors provide a syllabus. Sometime they only provide a general guide as oppose to specifics like assignments and learning outcomes.

Here I like it because they are very specific. So, from the first day you know what you are going to take, you know the topic the professor is going to cover during the semester. So, I like it here I think it's more clear. You know from the first day what the professor is going to expect from you and what you are going to expect from your professor.

Hana further discusses the classroom setting in regards to group work. This is different from classes in Saudi Arabia, however, she makes note of the positive outcomes of working with the group.

Usually in two classes or each class we have group work, discussions, something like that. During my master's degree I don't remember we did something like this a lot. Usually we have discussion with the professor as a whole, not in the group. So, this for me is also different. Because you know

when you think with your group, brainstorm with your group, it helps you improve your communication skills, leadership skills.

The role of the teacher. Farah explains that in the Saudi culture and education system that they “believe that teacher or professor as prophet” (personal communication, May 11, 2015). Teachers or professors do not make any mistakes and students agree if they say everything is ok. There is no relationship or interactions between the teachers and students, it is just listening and writing. Lalia further enforced this concept of not questioning the professor and the absence of student teacher interaction when stating:

My country, they just give the presentation and you have to study and you have to figure out by yourself. I cannot meet the professor in his office hour. I cannot see him and they just me the exam and the exam was very difficult because I didn't understand. I didn't have anyone to go and in my country we didn't have tutor to go. To go to them I have to pay myself, from my own pocket to have tutor and that is a little difficult for me.

This mindset of the professor as prophet posed a challenge for some to the women because it was difficult for them to speak and question the professor. Farah provides the experience of her first semester in which she was not comfortable speaking to the professor.

In the first semester for me, I cannot look at my advisor and I can't go to her office, it is very difficult to me to talk to him or explain something to him or for example, can you explain this point? It is more and more difficult so I just to my classmate, anyone to ask him or her about something, but it's so difficult to me.

However, in the United States the participants expressed that they liked the faculty here because they are willing to help them succeed. Any questions or concerns the faculty is available and ready to assist. Nadia spoke highly of the faculty when stating:

I love them. They know how hard is to study for us here and I feel they are very helpful. I love them... They didn't compare me to other student.

Hana also had a similar reaction to faculty support. She mentioned how from orientation the professor kept saying how they were there to help them succeed and support them in which she remarked:

That gave me encouragement from the first day, I know there is people they want to succeed. They want to see me going to achieve my goals, and I really found that with my professor.

Dahlia likes how faculty is supportive and understanding of her as a Saudi student and as a mother. She says that they are flexible and work with her on scheduling especially since she has small children in day care.

Sometimes they change the time for the class because I don't have anyone to...for example, my children because my children come from day care like 6pm. Also, I have a class from 6pm to 9pm. When I talk with my professor, they say: It's okay. If you don't like this time in Monday, I will let you change in Tuesday.

First semester. For most of the participants there were points within their experience that they wanted to return to their country for several different reasons. Some of them experienced culture shock. Some were home sick. And others felt uncomfortable and out of place. Kamilah experienced culture shock within the first three months and wanted to quit her studies and return home.

I was culture shocked. I don't know. I want to return to my country. I want to, I don't want to study and I call my family and my family support me. You, you have a goal. You need to complete your goal.

Lina experienced homesickness for about three months as well while she was learning English.

I get homesick, about three month. About three months, when I go to the ELS and I go back to the home and just cry.

Farah felt out of place the first semester and often contemplated going back home to Saudi Arabia.

In the classroom I just sit down and I feel uncomfortable. I feel just sometimes I'm thinking many, many times come back to my country. Every day. Every day. I finish a class and I'm thinking no, no, no, I think this is not my place. This not what I want to do. Something like that. I think everything is difficult, if you take relationships with faculty, everything.

Other participants also made remarks about the first semester and the challenge to adjust. For the participants adjusting to the American higher education system posed some challenges because the Saudi higher education system and dynamics is very different. The women had issues of homesickness, culture shock, adjusting to a gender integrated class and public setting. Some of the positive experiences of the American system were faculty support and more opinion dialogue between classmates the professor.

Transformation

The third theme that emerged from the study is the transformation of the Saudi woman. Within the context of transformation are the following sub-themes: empowerment and becoming a change agent. About half of the participants commented on some sort of self-motivation or confidence that empowers them while studying here in the United States.

Empowerment. Laila said she was using this opportunity of studying here as a chance to develop and make herself stronger. She further stated that if she finds a job here in the United States that the Saudi government will no longer support her so she will have to rely on her husband and herself remarking "It's a new challenge but I can do it."

Malika spoke of being independent in the context that she does not need her husband to talk to professors or other men for her. When it comes to school if she has any issue she handles it on her own.

Some of the woman she wants her husband to talk to the man...they don't want to talk to the man, but for me no. I don't have any issue. I will do my stuff for myself.

Dahlia spoke of the challenge of being a mother of three and trying to balance school and family. However, she spoke of it in a positive manner when stating: “I need to challenge myself. All the time, I say to myself, I can do this.” Nadeen found empowerment through her studies that now she wants to work in management.

I’m now dreaming to work in management field, to be manager or leadership but I like to learn about nutrition, early childhood, health. I start learning about manager, management which is good.

Farah and Akilah used observations of other women in their classes as examples that empowered them. Farah made note that here in the United States women can do everything. She said:

Women here do everything...So I keep that in my heart and my mind. Also to know it doesn’t matter between American woman and Saudi woman, doesn’t matter. So women are strong and they can do what they want to do.

Farah further discusses that she sees women here manage family, school, and jobs and somehow they can do many things. She keeps this idea within her and expresses:

Even if I see many Saudi women cannot do something, but I will keep this in my life to be always strong to always tell myself, I can do that, I can do that. But maybe even if the society or the community doesn’t support me to do that, but I believe that I can.

Akilah had a similar experience in being exposed to women who manage to do many things. She spoke about seeing a lot of single mothers that still manage to work, go to school, and care for the children. Akilah said that she has her husband help her so anytime she thinks she cannot do it she thinks of these women and says:

I can do it...Never, I don't say I can't. Never, never. It’s all because I saw them and I saw everything here.

Change Agent. More than half the participants discussed what they plan to do when they return to Saudi Arabia. Many focused on changing some part of their environment when they

return, many focused on changing some aspect of education in Saudi Arabia or the mindset of their families. Dahlia spoke about what she hopes to accomplish when she returns stating that she wants to:

Improve the education system in Saudi Arabia especially the method of teaching, you know. I need to change. I need to like help a student to develop critical thinking and, you know, like give them freedom when he talk and discuss and give advice.

Kamilah had a similar response about returning to her country when she expressed, “I will try to change some strategies in education” (personal communication, October 1, 2015). Malika also wanted to change or apply things she learned in the United States to her profession in Saudi Arabia.

I learn a lot of things here in American, a lot of programs that we didn’t have in Saudi Arabia and also I have my friend’s number and email. I told him when I go back maybe I will be a principal. I will be assistant principal. I will contact with you if I need any help or any program that you have a new one. I want to... I have to go back to apply to my school, of course.

Hana is another participant that wants to use what she learned to improved herself and education back in Saudi Arabia. She wants to use best practices from the US and apply it to her teaching style.

I have a folder I call it ‘what I am going to take from here.’ So whenever I have an idea or you know, a good paper or something I take I think as a professor I will use it. I keep it in this folder.

Akilah and Nadeen focused on how they want to begin change within their families. Akilah discussed how she wants to change her family and how they view time. She spoke about how here in the United States she wakes up early and gets most of her things accomplished during the day but also works till the evening, this is different than being back home where the work day ends around 2:30pm.

I will become different in my home, specific home if I come back again in my country and I can change my sister, my brother, my family. Start with them, but I cannot change all the world. I can't do this. I just want to them... there is like... cause sometimes Saudi Arabia, they didn't sleep early. They just... and all the like the shopping, the restaurant... open at every 24 hour in Saudi Arabia and sometime they close at like twelve in the afternoon. And then after 2:30 or sometime, 1:30... they open everything. So it's different than here.

Nadeen focused on wanting to change the mindset of those around her. During the interview she spoke about coming the United States with a closed mind and that by studying here she has been able to open her mind to other ideas, beliefs, and cultures. This is something she later in the interview expressed wanting to share with her family.

My dream is to improve myself, my family then take that to my society just to improve our society. Not everybody think as we think. There's people... just people think differently and we should agree... we should just respect other's beliefs. That's the main issue in my country, that people don't accept other's belief, don't accept others opinion. They just stuck with their ideas and they think the... their ideas is the only right. So we just think about ourselves. We don't think about others, how they think, how they see their life. So I want to just get rid of that. Just get them understand what is... how people think, how we should understand their thinking, respect their thinking. So that's the main thing that I learned and I want to take back.

Summary

This chapter introduced the eleven participants that agreed to share their experiences of studying in the United States. Analysis of the data revealed the Saudi female student experience is multi layered and what they experience is often, if not always, tied into their religion. Factors that contribute to understanding the experience are understanding of the role of the family in Saudi culture, academics as an international student, and the transformative process that developed through the time spent studying in the United States. The final chapter will provide conclusions and recommendations for further research based on the findings discovered through the data.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Since the experience of the Saudi female student is multilayered, this final chapter will compare and contrast the findings with existing literature and discuss how the findings fit into the Islamic feminist theoretical framework. Secondly, implications and recommendations for university personnel will be presented. Further, the chapter will assess the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research. Finally, I will present a personal reflection from notes and observations taken during the study.

This study aimed to answer the research question: What are the perceptions of Saudi women on their experience as international college students in the United States? Since there is a lack of research on female Saudi student experiences, this phenomenological study focused on understanding their perceptions in order to identify challenges and provide recommendations for university personnel. Using a semi-structured interview process eleven female Saudi students studying in the United States were interviewed, data were transcribed and analyzed. Analysis of the data led to the following themes: religion, family, academics, and transformation.

Context of Findings

Religion in Saudi Arabia is interwoven and at the core of Saudi culture. In all eleven interviews, some aspect of religion is found in each of the main themes that emerged. Religion affects their rights as women, the way they understand the classroom and education, and how they perceive their experience. Islam is an integral part of the Saudi lifestyle and emerged as one of the main themes during analysis of the data.

Religion

Within the first theme of religion, there was a focus on the topic of the veil or hijab. Akou (2010) defined hijab as the “practice of modesty or covering” in which the Quran “offers

so little guidance on proper dress” (p. 331). All eleven participants wear the hijab but there are varying levels that range from a headscarf to the full abaya, which is when women cover everything but their eyes. Each participant held a different understanding of how much to cover based on their religious understanding. Droogsma (2007) stated, “Women who wear veils probably possess qualitatively different understandings of how hijab actually functions in their lives” (p. 295). This statement is a good representation of some of the findings in regard to the topic of the veil. Through the qualitative process of interviews, each participant was able to express their story and the role of the hijab in their personal understanding. The veil for most of the participants was their way of maintaining their culture and religious values abroad.

For example, in the context of maintaining the Saudi culture, Farah discussed wearing the hijab as a means to adhere to the Saudi standard. She stated that if she were the only student from Saudi Arabia, she might not wear the hijab, but since there are other students from the country then she could get reprimanded. However, in Malika’s case, she wore the full abaya covering everything but her eyes because of her religious understanding, rather than cultural. Malika stated that if she ever wanted not to wear the full abaya she would start in Saudi Arabia before doing it elsewhere. She further discussed how her religious beliefs are carried no matter where she goes, thus covering everything was a way of maintaining that religious value.

Further, each participant’s understanding of how much to cover varied. Within the Quran there is little guidance on how to dress (Akou, 2010) and the face veil is not required by the Quran (Sloan, 2011); however, since Saudi Arabia requires women to fully cover and use the abaya, many of the participants felt more comfortable covered rather than using just the headscarf. Additionally, the black cloak covering everything but a woman’s eyes is now a form of national identity rather than something oppressive (Le Renard, 2008).

Family

Family has an important cultural value in Saudi Arabia. The theme of family focuses on the family value as well as the topic of motherhood, which was an unexpected finding. Eight of the participants were mothers with at least one child. If their children are not of school age, then the participant's would take them to day care in order to focus on their studies. There are many layers of motherhood (D'Arcy, Turner, Crockett, & Gridley, 2011), but only a few were present during participant interviews.

First, questioning whether they were good mothers or feeling guilty about spending limited time with their children was a reoccurring notion. In feminist theory, much has been written on "maternal guilt and its exploitation, on the endemic feeling that whatever a mother does, her loving care may be inadequate or wrong, with the consequences that can damage a child for life" (Brownmiller, 2000, pp. 83-84).

Second, there was the topic of childcare. Many of the participants discussed how being away from their families in Saudi Arabia was a challenge, because back home if they needed to attend class they could leave their children in the care of family. The way it was described is that the other women in the family, such as sisters or mothers, help care for the children, alleviating some guilt because the children would be among family and not strange care takers. However, there was a reverse affect for one of the participants, Nadeen, who mentioned that being away from her family was a relief because even in Saudi Arabia the notion of going to school and being a mother was not supported by her family.

Academics

The third theme that emerged during data analysis was academics. Within this context, academics was layered with not only their experience as an international student but also as a

Saudi Muslim female. The experience had multiple layers beginning with the language barrier. Other studies on international students note that language remains a challenge within their time frame in the United States. Based on Social Capital Theory (Trice, 2004), language and culture are the main barriers for international student interactions with Americans.

Language. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) conducted a similar qualitative study on the cultural adjustment of Saudi women as international students and one of their themes was English language proficiency as a barrier. Like this study, all eleven participants stated that English remained a challenge. Since the participants are studying to receive a degree from the United States, they first had to learn English for academic purposes. All the participants had spent at least one year in English as Second Language courses prior to beginning university. Although the interviews were conducted in English, many still apologized or stated that they worry about their English speaking skills, particularly grammar. For example, Hana mentioned that she worries about her grammar especially when speaking in front of the class. She stated that she does not want to make grammatical mistakes because it may weaken the presentation or argument she is making (personal communication, September 29, 2015).

Another concern in regards to language was not only learning English but also subject specific jargon such as scientific terms. Three of the eleven participants were in the natural sciences and mentioned learning technical terms was an added stress because they knew the concepts and terms in Arabic, but have to learn them in English.

Additionally, most of the participants remarked that they were more comfortable with writing than speaking. Many stated that writing is a bit easier because it is a skill they can continue to practice alone, whereas speaking is best improved with native English speakers.

Within the first semester many of the participants marked that it was difficult because they were shy and did not speak to anyone, so the ability to practice English was limited.

Adapting to American higher education. According to Tinto's (1975) model social and academic integration are key components to student retention. However, in the case of the Saudi female experience, it is a bit different due to their religious and cultural values. These values influence their learning styles and ability to adapt to a western education system of mixed gender classes, different concepts of time, and interactions with faculty (Carty, Hale, Carty, Williams, Rigney, & Principato, 1998). The participants of the study focused more on academic integration as opposed to social integration. When asked about the concept of free time or student involvement, many stated that they have limited time to socialize outside of the classroom due to family obligations and academics.

The first aspect of trying to academically integrate was adapting to a gender mixed classroom. This was at first an adjustment because in Saudi Arabia, even in co-ed. universities, women are separated and do not interact with men (Sloan, 2011). One of the challenges at first was interacting with men in the classroom. Dahlia mentioned that the professor encouraged her to interact. Before feeling comfortable, she spoke to her husband about speaking to other men for educational purposes (personal communication, October 13, 2015). Kamilah also mentioned co-ed classes as a challenge because she had never experienced it before (personal communication, October 1, 2015).

Furthermore, another aspect of adapting to the American higher education system was that of faculty support. In Saudi Arabia, if there is a male professor, women hear the lectures via telecast and do not have direct access to the professor. This was different and was a challenge. In learning the Quran, the student is not allowed to question and must conquer the art of

memorization (Hilgendorf, 2003). Since the Saudi culture and Islamic teachings indicated that the teacher is a prophet, students do not question the professors. This was a challenge because in the first semester, Farah discussed that she was not able to speak or look at her professor. If she had any questions regarding the class she either kept it to herself or would ask someone in the class, but even speaking to the students took a while (personal communication, May 11, 2015). Other participants had the same issue and it was not until after the first semester that they became comfortable asking questions of the professor. Most of the participants discussed how supportive the faculty is and how they encourage them to ask questions. Further, they marked that it was different in the United States because faculty wanted to know the student and help them succeed, whereas in their country a professional relationship with a faculty member is unheard of.

Lastly, the theme of adapting to academic expectations emerged. One of the main concerns, especially for the ten graduate participants, was learning how to write literature reviews in the American Psychological Association (APA) format and learning what plagiarism is and how it affects American academics. Nadeen discussed the issue of plagiarism when she recalled that in her first semester the professor had to explain to her that her bibliographic assignment was plagiarized (personal communication, November 5, 2015). From Nadeen's perspective, writing what the author said verbatim would be considered acceptable in Saudi Arabia, but in the American academic system it is seen as stealing another's ideas.

Further, participants like the concept of a syllabus because it was structured and indicated the expectations of the course. It informed the students of what they would need to do. For instance, Hana really liked the syllabus style because she was able to prepare and knew exactly what the outcomes of the course were (personal communication, September 29, 2015).

Transformation

The final theme that emerged was transformation. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, transformation is described as the process of change in someone (Transformation, n.d.). Within this theme it includes the outcomes of the experience of studying in the United States in terms of empowerment and acting as a change agent.

Empowerment. The topic of empowerment emerged when participants made note that based on observations of other women here in the United States who work, have a family, and go to school, can manage, sometimes even as single parents, it gave the Saudi participant motivation. Pradhan (2003, p. 52) described empowerment as “the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives” leading to greater self-confidence, and a transformation of mindset that allows one to overcome obstacles. In the context of this study, the Saudi female participants were able to express a sense of empowerment by being here in the United States. Seven of the eleven participants expressed an increase in self-confidence by stating that they “could do it.” Through the experience of studying in the United States the participants were able to find an inner strength that even if their community does not recognize it, they know they are capable of accomplishing anything.

Change Agent. Amartya Sen (1999) indicated that women have the power to transform both social and economic means that affect both women and men. In regards to becoming a change agent, participants were asked what they planned to do upon return to Saudi Arabia; they mentioned changing some aspect of their environment. Since most of the participants have a focus on education, many remarked that they would like to change some aspect of the education system in the Saudi Arabia, especially within the classroom. Hana described how she lectured before coming to the United States to study and how she really enjoyed the concept of the

syllabus. She maintains a folder of all the activities or teaching ideas she receives within her classes so that she can use this information later when she returns to Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Malika, who wants to become a principal when returning, wants to use the personable aspect she observed in her son's school here in the United States. She mentioned how the principal at her son's school knows every child and back in her country that is not very common. She would like to implement that type of relationship when she becomes principal.

Other participants wanted to use their change in mentality to transform the manner in which their family thinks. This particular finding intersects with the value of family. Nadeen had discussed how she wants to change the mindset of those around her starting with herself and then her family. She expressed how she wants to share her experience in hopes that it will help those around her see the world differently. Akilah also focused on changing the mindset of her family in Saudi Arabia, taking what she liked about the United States and implementing it at home.

The aspect of becoming a change agent can also be viewed as the transferring of knowledge. In Islam knowledge is important. The Quran "emphasizes on the status of knowledge, the importance of learning, and the value of scholars, teachers and students" (Faryab, 2012, p. 74). The participants of the study voiced how they want to use the knowledge they gained from this experience to share with their communities.

Islamic Feminist Theoretical Framework

Haideh Moghissi (1999, pp. 9-10) stated that "feminism is diversified and flexible enough to embrace all individuals and movements which are self-identified or are identified by others as feminist based on distinguishable ideological and political characteristics." Moreover, Grant (1993) argues that the concept of feminism is based on the belief that the female reality and experience will always be different from the male experience and perspective. In the context

of this study, Islamic feminism is defined as a balance between feminist thought, and the female experience, within the boundaries of the Islamic religion. Further, to understand how Islamic feminism aligns within this study, it will be described within political and religious contexts because Saudi Arabia does not separate the two.

Islamic feminism from a political standpoint best aligns with the theme of transformation. The Saudi female participants want to change some aspect of their environment, particularly the education system. This idea of slowly changing it within the confines of their culture and religion was addressed. Many of the participants wanted to begin with changes in their own classroom because they noted that changing the system as a whole is not a feasible task. Further, the issue of the veil can be identified as a political characteristic if viewed in the sense of national or cultural identity. Participants, such as Farah, noted that wearing the hijab was more to avoid conflict within her own culture.

Additionally, there are other political aspects of the study that need to be considered, but were not identified as major themes. Two of these were the King Abdullah Scholarship and the topic of guardians. The King Abdullah Scholarship is a major part of the Saudi female experience. Ten of the eleven participants are on the scholarship, which pays for tuition, cost of living, insurance, and provides monthly stipends for the students and their families. One participant was studying here through an employment scholarship that upon return she must work with the company for four years.

The scholarship is a political characteristic within the feminist framework because it provided access for the women to come and study in the United States. The scholarship determines what universities the women can attend. Further, within the guidelines of the Saudi government all women studying abroad must be accompanied by a guardian, this can be a father,

brother, or husband. This was a challenge for some of the participants, especially if they were not married, do not have brothers, or if they were married their husbands were unable to accompany them right away. It was also mentioned during the interviews that many women are unable to take advantage of the scholarship because they do not have a guardian and are not allowed to be unaccompanied and on scholarship.

Moreover, the religious aspect within the feminist framework is represented in all the findings and is at the core of the Saudi female experience. Everything from the manner of attire to how the participants represented themselves was interwoven within their understanding of Islam and its core values. The topics of family, academics, and transformation, all held some regard for Islam. For example within the theme of academics, the issue of the teacher as a prophet affected the student teacher relationship, especially during the first semester.

Theoretical Implications

This section provides recommendations for those who work with female Saudi students during their time in the United States. Since the experience of Saudi women studying in the United States is multilayered, all the findings do not fit into one theoretical framework. In order to understand the experience of a Saudi female student studying in the United States, multiple theories can provide guidance.

Foremost, looking at cultural theories can aid in placing the Saudi culture into context. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theories places Saudi Arabia as a high power distance culture, highly collectivist, highly masculine, and high preference for uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2013.) Using these four dimensions and taking what other literature and the findings of this study articulates about the Saudi culture, one can begin to understand the context of Saudi students. Further, Edward Hall's (1966) cultural theory that includes space, or his theory of proxemics,

and time can also be integrated. He argues that there are four types of distances; intimate, personal, social, and public. The whole idea or construct of space is based on observations and varies among cultures.

Space is a major cultural and religious issue within the female Saudi population. In the context of the Saudi culture there are varying levels of space, however, the public space is the one that impacts the learning environment. For instance, in the findings participants discussed how adapting to the American education system was a challenge because the public space is shared with men. In Saudi Arabia, educational spaces are separated and interaction between the two sexes does not occur. This is crucial in understanding why female students may not be comfortable at first when speaking to male classmates or even male professors. This also contributes to their personal space and the protocols of shaking hands or hugging males. Another aspect of personal space revolves around the issue of the veil. In some instances the hijab was a level of comfort and a sense of privacy.

Additionally, if analyzing time in a cultural theoretical construct, it also impacts the experience of studying in the United States. Looking at how the religious component of time is essential because prayer occurs five times a day. This has an effect on scheduling of classes in which the participants mentioned taking turns leaving class to have prayer time. This also has an impact on the issue of space as well. During this time, if students were too far from the designated prayer room, they would have to find some space in the halls or outside of class to have prayer.

Another theoretical layer that can be assessed is that of understanding the experience as an international student. Tinto's (1975) model of student retention includes the areas of academic and social integration. When looking at academic integration, participants discussed trying to

adjust in the first semester. Many tried to integrate in the sense of gaining comfort to speak in class, learning new tools like literature reviews and APA style, and even attended workshops that focused on academic success. In the context of social integration, it too is a process because some participants mentioned not speaking or making friends until after the first semester. Most of the participants also remarked that they do not have free time and if they ever do, they are studying because reading and writing takes them longer since English is not the first language. Thus, this leaves little time for social integration outside of the classroom. Those who do have social interactions outside of class either befriend other Saudi female students or other female students.

Furthermore, implications of the study indicate that the female experience can be seen through the lens of feminist theory. Grant (1993, p. 1) stated that “there is no one feminist theory, it is multicentered and undefinable.” Feminist theory is embedded with three core concepts; defining woman, the woman experience, and politics (Grant, 1993). Through the findings there were indications on how the participants defined what it meant to be a Saudi woman such as being a good mother, good student, or even how they present themselves with the hijab. The woman experience is layered and varies depending on the context of the individual. If looking at the female experience as a Saudi international student, there were challenges in language, faculty relations, and adapting the American higher education system. In the context of the female experience, having family while participating in the study abroad journey brought about the challenges of motherhood, balancing school and family, and change.

Research Implications

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations for future research will be discussed: (1) Understanding the effect studying abroad has on Saudi children that

accompany their mothers, (2) Understanding how Saudi Muslim females interpret the Quran, and (3) tracking female Saudi students from first arrival in the United States till they return to Saudi Arabia after graduation.

First, within the theme of family the sub-theme of motherhood emerged. Eight of the eleven female Saudi participants were married with children. One of the concerns was the socialization process of their children both in the United States and when they return to Saudi Arabia. Although this was an unexpected outcome of the study, there is a need for research on how studying abroad affects the children that come along for the journey. Many of the participants begin with one year of English study then move on to complete either a four year degree, whether it be a bachelor's or doctorate, or complete a master's degree in two to three years. Participants have been in the United States anywhere between 2 years to 6 years. The women come to study in the United States and the age of their children range between newborn and 15 years old. A dissertation on the topic of how Saudi female students readjusted to Saudi Arabia upon return from the United States found that participants worried about their families and children also readjusting to life in Saudi Arabia (Alandejani, 2013). Alandejani remarks that the older the child, the more difficult it became for them to adjust to the Saudi lifestyle. Although the dissertation did not focus on family readjustment, it indicates that there is a concern among Saudi female students and there is a need for more research on this topic.

Second, since religion was one of the main findings that is at the core of Saudi culture and life, more research is needed on how Saudi Muslim females interpret the Quran. During the participant interviews, many interpret certain aspects of the Quran differently, such as the topic of the hijab.

Lastly, there is limited research on tracking Saudi female students from their first arrival to the United States till their return to Saudi Arabia after graduation. Although there are other studies on female Saudi students studying in the United States and a dissertation that focuses on understanding how these women readjust back home, there is still a need for a longitudinal study in order to fully understand the experience and process from beginning to end.

Implications for Practice

By understanding the experiences of Saudi women studying in the United States, research studies can inform those who work in environments with this population. Implications for practice include the following: (1) a need to understand the Saudi culture and know the difference between religion and cultural rules, (2) a need to provide an academic orientation, support systems, such as mentoring, and time to adjust to the American education system within the first semester, and (3) a need to consider the family when creating programming or student support.

First, it is essential to understand how culture and religion play a large role in the Saudi Muslim female experience. Since Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country that follows Islamic law, sometimes the lines between what is Saudi culture and what is Islam are blurred. For example, the topic of the guardian, the male that must accompany the Saudi women during her study abroad, is a cultural outcome, not religious. Understanding the balance between the two will aid when developing course curriculum, programming, or support for this student population. Advisors, for example, need to know that it is culturally necessary for the guardian to come with the woman student and to meet the advisor. Then he can be dismissed so that a confidential meeting can be held between the faculty and the student.

Second, there is a need to provide an academic orientation with an Arabic speaker to help translate necessary policies; institutions need to create support systems, such as mentors of other Saudi students; and faculty need to allow time for an adjustment period. Some of the participants provided recommendations on areas that would help other female Saudi students during their studies. Akilah provided the recommendation for a special program or orientation that introduces the differences in culture between their native culture and the American culture.

I think make like a program for international students. For the student who came from a different culture. It's not Saudi Arabia just from different culture and they make a program for them to learn how the culture here is different than your culture. How can you engage with the students?

Nadia recommended that there should be a slightly different grading system in the beginning because as an international student, especially with science courses, grasping the language and content becomes difficult and maintaining good grades is important. Further, Dahlia recommended that the initial orientation on policies and any immigration paperwork, there should be someone who speaks Arabic that can translate the policies. Lastly, Farah recommended that there should be workshops that focus on speaking for international students. All the participants found language to still be a challenge, most indicated that speaking remained a challenge due to grammar. A speaking workshop would also aid students because most courses require some sort of presentation.

Lastly, since family is a strong cultural value in Saudi Arabia and students bring their families along for the experience, programming and support services should take family into consideration. An example would be creating systems that help tutor the female Saudi student as well as help their children in areas that they may not be able to assist, such as understanding the American primary and secondary education system.

Study Strengths and Limitations

Using a qualitative method holds both strengths and limitations. One of the strengths of using phenomenological inquiry is that it allows the researcher to get to the essence of the phenomenon being experienced. For the purpose of this study, the method of phenomenology was well suited for the research question at hand on understanding the perceptions and experiences of Saudi women studying in the United States.

Limitations of the study include the sample size of eleven participants. Ten out of the eleven participants were graduate students and all ranged from first semester students to graduating students. Although the data were saturated for the study, in which themes and ideas continued to repeat themselves and no new data were discovered in the last few interviews, the sample size is not large enough to make generalizations of the entire female Saudi student population attending universities in the United States.

The second limitation of the study is my inability to speak Arabic. Although the interviews were conducted in English, and all participants have some fluency, language remained a challenge for the participants. The study may have yielded different results if I was knowledgeable and able to communicate in the participant's primary language of Arabic. This may have also aided in creating a more relaxed environment in which participants may have expressed different stories in their interviews.

Furthermore, time was also a limitation in the sense that most, if not all, the participants spend most of their time studying, in class, or with their families so finding time to meet was at times a limitation. On average, each interview lasted about an hour to two hours. In some cases, the interviews were limited to an hour due to class schedule or because their spouses were

waiting for them. Different results may have occurred if participants were able to meet longer or several times throughout the semester.

Lastly, four of the participants were recruited via criterion sampling and the other seven were recruited via snowball sampling. The seven participants that were recruited using the snowball sampling method agreed to participate in the study and met me for the first time during the interview. This may have created different results since this was the initial meeting.

Researcher Reflection

W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1994) spoke of an invisible veil that exists, and it is only when one is behind the veil that a person will understand the experience of those already behind it. Although Du Bois spoke in a different context related to the African American experience, the metaphor of the invisible veil is applicable to the context of this study. Furthermore, an invisible veil separates women from public life through gender separation (Walther, 2006).

As the researcher, I am an outsider on the other side of the invisible veil. I am a Hispanic female with no knowledge of the Arabic language and the Saudi culture is still relatively new to me. Although this is a strength since the researcher is the primary instrument, it created some obstacles in recruiting participants. I began to build a working relationship with at least two of the participants that later acted as cultural brokers assisting in recruitment for the study. This was key to completing data collection.

Prior to beginning the study, I taught English as a second language for academic purposes in which most of my students were from Saudi Arabia. Some of the assumptions that I held before beginning the study, based on previous experience, were: 1) I would be able to somewhat relate and gain access into the lived experience of an international Saudi female student, 2) gathering participants would not be difficult because of the increased Saudi population on

campus, and 3) I assumed that the greatest challenge would have been the integration of both men and women in the classroom.

Even though the women I interviewed had a different cultural and religious background, I found myself identifying with the cultural pressures of the role of a woman. For example, coming from a Mexican American cultural background, when compared to Saudi culture using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, they both rate high in collectivist and masculine cultures. First, in the Saudi culture family is highly valued and all relationships stem from the family unit. In Mexican culture there is a high regard for family as well. With the strong family value comes the topic of children. I do not have children but imagine the difficulty in balancing being a good student and good mother. I find in my own culture that there is pressure that being a good mother means completely sacrificing one's self for the well-being of the family. Listening to the stories of how the participants balanced and managed raising children in the midst of a new culture and environment was interesting and was an unexpected finding. Since I primarily focused on academics, finding that the topic of motherhood was an emergent theme was a surprise.

During the course of the study I found myself in different roles; student, researcher, academic support, and observer. One of the most rewarding and watershed moments during the study was being invited to the Saudi Student Association. When studying other cultures there is a point of entry that is often led by a cultural broker. I began developing a working relationship with one of the Saudi females that organically became the cultural broker. Being invited in allowed for an experience like no other. I was completely out of my comfort zone and out of my element. The meeting was conducted in Arabic, a language I do not understand, and it was a perfect opportunity to become the participant observer. It was a glimpse into being in a foreign culture where you are still an outsider or divided by an invisible veil. I did not know what to

expect, how long the meeting would run, or what it entailed. What I gathered from attending the meeting is that it was a better idea of what happens when a group of Saudi women gather. It seemed more culturally Saudi than the personal experience from the one on one interviews with participants. Children attended with their mothers, women removed their abayas, and prayer occurred in an area of the room. Traditions of Arabic coffee, tea, and sweets were present.

Studying Saudi women transformed me in several ways. First, it empowered me to see that women, no matter the culture, religion, or nationality, can identify with each other at some level. Second, it was a reminder that when trying to understand others, one must understand one's self and any bias. Lastly, it allowed for exploration of a theoretical framework that can adapt to an experience that is multi-layered and does not resonate with one particular framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although each participant told a different story, they share a common experience as a Saudi female international student. Each had a high regard for Islam and how it shapes their experience here in the United States. Islam remains at the core of their daily lives and affected everything from scheduling for prayer time to wearing the hijab. Within the study, cultural aspects such as a high regard for the family emerged as a main theme. Family is an essential component of the collectivist culture and had an impact on the experience of the Saudi women, ranging from being a mother to the family that accompanies them. Additionally, the Saudi female participants underwent similar challenges and experiences as other international students such as language barriers and adapting to a new system. Lastly, the women indicated some sort of transformation that emerged as part of their experience studying in the United States. The study found that the female Muslim Saudi student experience is multilayered and imbedded in the Islamic religion and the Saudi culture.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Welcome

Welcome to the interview. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study on the experiences of women from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States.

Introduction

My name is Trinidad Macias; I will be facilitating the interview and will be taking notes. I am from the University of the Incarnate Word. I am a doctoral student and am conducting this study for my dissertation.

Purpose

You were invited to participate in this interview because you are an active degree-seeking female student from Saudi Arabia and I am interested in hearing about your experiences of studying in the United States. Keep in mind that I am interested in both positive and negative comments.

Guidelines

There is no right or wrong answer. I want you to feel comfortable expressing your thoughts. I will audio record the interview in order to ensure I get all the information that is discussed today. In order to maintain your confidentiality I shall use a pseudo name and the data collected shall be stored only in my file. If for any reason the information in the data has to be given to another party, it shall be only with the permission of the participants who own the information. Individual subject information includes identities of the participants, voice recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms. Before beginning the interview do you have any questions?

Potential Interview Questions

Engagement Questions

1. Tell me about what your country.
2. Tell me about what you are studying.
3. What do you like best about the program?

Exploration Questions

1. What were your first reactions to studying in the United States?
2. What issues or challenges do you face in your academic pursuit?
3. How do handle school and personal matters?

Exit Questions

1. Is there anything else you would like to say about experience?

Appendix B

Consent to Participate in a Research Study **Understanding the Experience of Saudi Women Studying in the United States** University of the Incarnate Word

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Trinidad Macias, a doctoral student at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), under the supervision of Osman Ozturgut, PhD. The goal of the study is to understand your experiences of studying in the United States through personal interviews.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an active, degree-seeking, female student from Saudi Arabia. If you choose to participate in this study, the researcher will arrange to meet with you for a 60 minute interview. Interviews will be audio recorded.

There is minimal risk to you for participating in the study. Your information will remain confidential and pseudo names will be created to protect your identity. The data collected in the course of the research will be stored in a safe place and only accessed by the researchers. At the end of transcription all audio recordings will be destroyed.

There is no financial or any other type of incentive for participating in the study.

Benefits of the study include a better understanding of the female Saudi Arabian student experience, feedback and recommendations for the university pertaining the experience, and contribution to the greater body of knowledge.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate or to stop participation at any time. If you choose not to participate or to stop participating at any point during the study, your current or future status at your university will not be affected. If you choose to stop taking part in the study, your audio recordings and interview transcripts will be destroyed.

If you have additional questions at any time, contact:

Trinidad Macias
(210) 325-4675
trmacias@student.uiwtx.edu

Osman Ozturgut, PhD
(210) 805-5885
ozturgut@uiwtx.edu

The UIW committee that reviews research on human subjects, the Institutional Review Board, will answer any questions about your rights as a research subject. Contact the IRB by calling (210) 805-3036.

Your signature indicates (1) that you are consenting to participate in the individual interview, (2) that you have read and understand the information provided above, and (3) that the information above was explained to you.

Print Name

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date