OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Insights into Saudi Female International Students: Transition Experiences

Alia Arafeh
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, USA

ABSTRACT

This study explored the transition experiences of 10 Saudi female international students when they made the decision to study and live in the United States. The transition theory provided the theoretical foundation for understanding how Saudi female sophomore students progressed through moving to a Midwestern university. In-depth individual interviews followed by a focus group interview with four of the participants elicited their reflections about their transition experiences evolving over time and the coping strategies they employed to facilitate their transition. The themes that emerged from data analysis emphasized the positive experiences of Saudi females in the United States, the importance of fathers' support, desire to go back to Saudi Arabia upon graduation, and the several resources Saudi females sought other than campus support.

Keywords: coping resources, Saudi female international students, transition experiences, transition theory

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning to live and learn in a foreign country presents several academic and nonacademic challenges to international students in general (Bhandari & Bluementhal, 2011; Shapiro et al., 2014) and to Saudi female international students in particular (Al Remaih, 2016; Davis, 2014; Davis & McGovern, 2015; Hakami, 2012). In addition to the restrictions Saudi women experience in their home country, arriving in the United States causes numerous complications for them. Stereotypes surrounding the Middle East and Middle Eastern women leave Saudi women vulnerable to discrimination, which puts additional pressure on them as they begin

their studies in the United States (Davis, 2014). Moreover, the terrorist attacks that erupted in several cities both in the United States and overseas in November and December 2015 in Paris and San Bernardino respectively, increased hate crimes against Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular (Siemaszko, 2015). Although offenders declared allegiance to ISIS and other terrorist groups, hate crimes in the United States targeted Muslims indiscriminately (Sullivan et al., 2015). The Institute of Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index asserted that terrorist attacks would not end even after 15 years of the "War on Terror" declared by former U.S. President George W. Bush (Friedman, 2016; The Global Terrorism Index, 2015).

Moreover, the U.S. presidential rhetoric against Muslims has contributed to increase the hateful sentiments toward Arabs and Muslims in the United States (Sarsour, 2018). In a study by Eissner (2016), researchers from Adelphi University in New York distributed a survey to explore the impact of Islamophobia during the 2016 presidential election campaign. More than 500 Muslim participants responded to the survey questions. The survey results revealed that 93% reported experiencing "some" or "extreme" negative impact from the campaign. Forty-seven percent reported feeling "somewhat safe" as a Muslim in the United States, whereas, 53% reported feeling "very" or "extremely" unsafe. The survey results implied that hate sentiments not only have a negative impact on Muslims who were either born or raised in the United States, but also on all Muslims who enter the United States for various reasons such as business and education.

Much of previous research on international students has focused on the students' academic challenges and language barriers and nonacademic challenges such as acculturation difficulties, alienation, and discrimination. The few studies that have addressed the specific experiences of Saudi female international students emphasized the social and academic challenges they encountered in the United States (Davis &McGovern, 2015; Abo Rabia, 2015). None of these studies explored the transition experiences of these females who arrive from a conservative culture where women's rights are very limited, to an open free society that adopts different perspectives, opinions, and beliefs about women.

Therefore, it becomes essential to understand the transition experiences of Saudi female international students who arrive from a conventional society, and how they cope with the challenges and hardships throughout their residence in the United States. It is also important to understand the coping strategies they adapt to assist them with their academic and social lives in a culture that is completely different from their homeland.

International Students in the United States

International students in the United States arrive from more than 200 countries. Fifty-eight percent of them arrive from China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia (Institute for International Education [IIE], 2019). According to the *Open Doors Report* released by IIE, the number of international students in the United States has increased from 565,039 in the 2004–2005 academic year to 1,095,299 in the 2018–2019 academic year (IIE, 2019). Saudi Arabia ranks fourth after China and India, and

South Korea in the number of students sent to earn their higher education degrees in U.S. academic institutions (IIE, 2019).

The term "Saudization" is used to describe the initiative to replace nonnational employees with nationals in almost all sectors in the country. The number of foreign workers who entered Saudi Arabia on work visas has increased since the oil advent in 1938. Some of these employees take leadership positions because of the lack of equivalent qualified Saudi nationals (Al Asfour & Khan, 2014). Therefore, the Saudi government started to offer a number of full scholarships to Saudi students beginning in the 1970s to encourage them to pursue their higher education in western countries, to replace the foreign workforce (Al Asfour & Khan, 2014).

Consequently, the number of international students arriving from Saudi Arabia to study at U.S. colleges and universities has consistently increased. For example, in the academic year 1997–1998 there were 4,571 Saudi students in the United States. However, this number sharply declined after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to become 3,035 in the academic year 2004–2005. The number started to increase again after an agreement between late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the former U.S. president George W. Bush, which launched the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in 2005. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program offers thousands of full scholarships to Saudi youth to pursue their higher education in the United States and other countries. The Program aims to bridge the gap between the East and the West and foster peace and solidarity after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (King Abdullah Scholarship Program, SACM, 2016).

Table 1: Saudi Students Studying at U.S. Campuses

Year	Number of Saudi students	% of previous year
1997–1998	4,571	N/A
1998–1999	4,931	7.9%
1999–2000	5,156	4.6%
2000–2001	5,273	2.3%
2001–2002	5,579	5.8%
2002–2003	4,175	−25.2%
2003–2004	3,521	−15.7%
2004–2005	3,035	−13.6%
2006–2007	7,886	128.7%
2007–2008	9,873	25.2%
2008–2009	12,661	28.2%
2010–2011	22,704	43.6%
2011–2012	34,139	50.4%

Note. Adapted from Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia (2013)

In the academic year 2016–2017, the number of Saudi students on U.S. campuses increased to 52,611 (IIE, 2018).

Female International Students from Saudi Arabia

The focus of this article on Saudi female international students stems from the fact that this unique body of international students arrive from the most conservative country in the world regarding women's role in society (Le Renard, 2014). In addition, Saudi females are not allowed to have any medical treatment or undergo any surgery without a permission and consent of their primary guardian (Le Renard, 2014). However, a few rights were recently given to Saudi women like the right of vote and nomination in 2015 for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia (BBC News, 2015). In 2017, the Saudi government sanctioned a decree that allows women to drive their own cars starting from June 2018. This law will end decades of oppression of women in the conservative country.

Although Saudi women encounter these struggles, they are determined to pursue their higher education in the United States and get a degree to create positive changes in their society. However, the misconceptions that most American people have about Saudi Arabia and Saudi women augment their challenges and cause them several frustrations.

Transition Theory

The transition theory introduced by Schlossberg (1983) addressed the transition of adults who undergo conditions that force them to change their habits, responsibilities, and relationships. Goodman et al. (2006) defined transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). If a transition occurs as a result of an anticipated event such as a marriage, travel, or getting a new job, people might be more prepared to adjust to the transition. On the other hand, if the transition is not anticipated in situations such as death, sudden sickness, or job loss, the consequences of these transitions might have undesirable results (Goodman et al., 2006). Building on Schlossberg's theory, Goodman et al. identified situation, support, self, and strategies—also known as the Four S's—to understand how adults experience transition and how they implement these resources to adjust to the new environment (Figure 1).

Goodman et al. (2006) described *situation* as an event that took place in a specific time and environment and the influence of various variables on it. *Support* encompasses all possible resources a person needs to accommodate to a transition phase. The types of support could be psychological, financial, or social. *Self* addresses how one's attitude toward life may be influenced by a combination of the demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, ethnicity, and culture. *Strategies* involve the approaches that individuals use to cope with the transition. Adults implement coping strategies that differ based on their gender and social status (Goodman et al., 2006). For instance, many men tend to hide their emotions, and therefore, their coping with transition takes longer than women who tend to share their worries and concerns to find applicable solutions (Ting-Toomey,

1999). Therefore, individuals use different coping strategies to reduce the stress that results from transition.
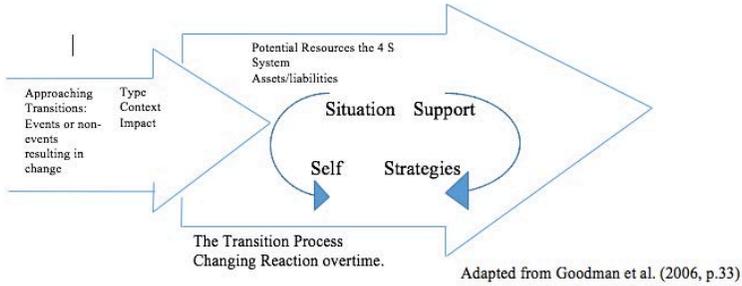

Figure 1: Schlossberg's Transition Model Reflecting Individual Transition

Saudi Female International Students' Transition

The transition theory that Schlossberg (1983) first presented to understand adult transition can be applied to international students because they experience similar stages to what Schlossberg introduced in her theory (Al Remaih, 2016). In addition, the four coping aspects that Goodman et al. (2006) implemented to understand the Adult transition, can provide insight into the Saudi female transition experiences of the moving in, moving though, and moving on phases. Therefore, for this article, my approach is to understand the role of the Four S's in four different stages (Figure 2).
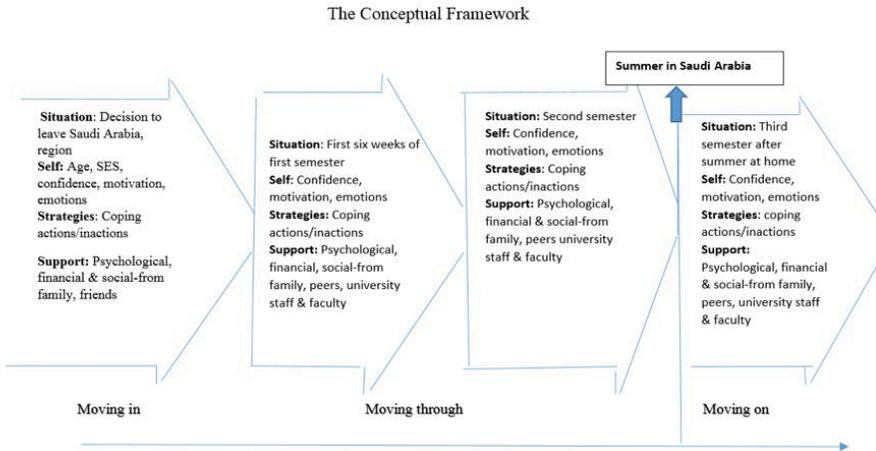

Figure 2: The Four S's in the Transition Process

Stage One: Moving In

Stage one starts when Saudi females make their decisions in Saudi Arabia to study abroad. This stage incorporates the four S's in supporting their decision. The *self* reflects their motivation to study abroad, and the strength of their determination to prove their abilities as successful women. The *situation* includes the socioeconomic status of Saudi females and the area of Saudi Arabia where these women were raised. Goodman et al. (2006) suggested that "strategies incorporate implementing resources, functions, information seeking, direct action, and inhabitation of action" (p. 56).

Stage Two: Moving Through

Part One

The first 6 weeks of the moving through this stage creates the most critical *situation* for most international students. In most cases, international students' *self* undergoes mixed feelings of happiness and fear when they first arrive in the host country (Pedersen, 1995). They may feel happy to be in the "Dreamland" and fear about the unforeseen future. Moreover, they may experience low self-esteem and lack self-confidence, which adds more pressure (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Nevertheless, they may implement *strategies* such as navigating options for housing, transportation, dinning places, and places for worship that might reduce their anxieties and pressure (Shapiro et al., 2014). They also seek help and *support* from campus resources and peers, who have been on campus for more than 1 year.

Part Two

The second part of this Moving Through phase starts in the second semester of the first academic year. In this stage, some Saudi female international students' sense of *self* becomes stronger as they become more self-confident to make their own decisions (Ting-Toomey, 1999). They are now more familiar with campus services, academic requirements, and the culture of the host country (Pedersen, 1995). However, they still seek *support* from campus resources, academic departments, professors, and friends to overcome various challenges (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Their familiarity with the academic and social situations helps them ponder various strategies to overcome different obstacles.

Moving On

This stage starts in the first semester in the second academic year. Saudi students who receive King Abdullah scholarship are offered free annual round trip tickets for them and their families to spend summer holidays in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2016). In this stage, it is necessary to understand the experiences of Saudi females when they come back to the United States after spending their summer vacation among family and friends back home. The implementation of the four coping resources back home and when they return to the United States might have changed

since their first arrival in the United States. In the second academic year, most international students become more self-confident and independent (Ting-Toomey, 1999). However, the continuous academic and social challenges might require different strategies to handle various situations.

Research shows that persistence in the first academic year is considered a great achievement for most college students (Wayt, 2012). There are several factors that assist college students with their persistence. Social support as well as family and financial support are among other factors that play a key role in college student persistence (Wayt, 2012).

Research Questions

This research sought to answer the main question: How do Saudi female international students navigate their transitional experiences to study and live during their first 2 academic years on a Midwest university campus? The guiding questions for this research were:

- How do Saudi females navigate challenges in their home country as they make the decision to study and live in the United States?

- How do Saudi females cope with the transition to living and learning on a U.S. campus during the first 6 weeks?

- How do Saudi females meet the transition challenges regarding academic and social lives?

METHOD

To understand Saudi female international students' experiences on a U.S. campus, a qualitative research methodology was used because it provided a large platform to describe, reflect, and interpret data collected (Patton, 2015). The focus was to understand the essence of transition of this small group of Saudi female international students through listening to their life stories by conducting individual interviews. In addition, using a hermeneutic phenomenology approach, the focus group provided insight into their collective essence of experiences (Crowther et al., 2016).

Participants

The participants of this study were 10 sophomore Saudi female international students who volunteered to participate, comprising approximately 60% of the population of Saudi female sophomore students attending a Midwestern university campus. The university where I conducted my study is situated in the most diverse city in the Midwest (Kent & Frohich, 2015). I received Institutional Review Board approval before conducting the individual and the focus group interviews. The Saudi female students were from different areas in Saudi Arabia: the capital city Riyadh, Jeddah, the East, and the West areas. Nine participants studied health care–related majors, and one student studied political science. Their ages range between 20–25 years old. Five of them have been in the United States for more than 4 years, and 5

have been in the United States for almost 3 years. Nine of them took intensive English courses before enrolling in the academic programs, and only one student took an intensive English course in Britain. Four out of the 10 students participated in the focus group. All Saudi females in this research voluntarily participated without getting any incentives or extra credits.

Data Collection

The individual interviews and the focus group align with the spirit of the phenomenological approach. My goal was to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of participants, elicit their interpretations of their transition experiences, their feelings about themselves when they made the decision, the essence of their experiences, and the coping strategies they implemented to overcome various difficulties. Therefore, the interview guide mirrored the conceptual framework.

In order to encourage Saudi females to share their lived experiences, it was important to build rapport with them through introducing the purpose of the study, the reason for conducting the interviews, and the benefits other might gain when the results of the study were published.

The individual interview questions addressed the five time periods of these females' transition experiences. Each time incorporated questions on the role of the Four S's in facilitating their transition: making the decision to study in the United States, the support they received, their feelings about themselves, and the strategies they implemented to overcome various obstacles. All Saudi females answered all questions without any reservations. The amount of information they shared revealed the level of comfort they felt when sharing their experiences.

The focus group interview took place after analyzing the individual interviews. I sent a Doodle Poll to arrange time and venue (www.doodle.com). Four students were able to join the focus group interview. Conducting focus group interviews assists with getting a variety of collaboration with the participants (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, the focus group was a unique opportunity to share their insights about several topics. I asked for permission to record the interviews, and all students agreed. The group discussion motivated me to share their experiences, agreements, and disagreements and get their feedback. All participants used Arabic to communicate in which they felt more comfortable to reveal their experiences. Later, I translated the interviews into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the Individual Interviews

Each recorded interview lasted 60–80 minutes and required between 7 to 9 hours of translation and transcribing. This process was done after each interview to help me stay engaged throughout the data collection and analysis based on three cycle coding as suggested by Miles et al. (2014). I added line numbers to each interview transcript to make it easier to refer to quotes. This means, for example, in the first cycle coding when I added the related quotations for each of the participants, I added the line

number, so it became easier for me to pull out the full quotation from the context. After being translated and transcribed, I coded the interviews. The coding process was based on three cycles. The first cycle coding was for all interviewees. I used an Excel sheet document to make it easier to expand horizontally and vertically to accommodate quotes from all 10 participants. Students' pseudonyms were added at the top of each column. Then, vertically, I divided the Excel sheet into five main sections representing the five time periods, starting from Time One when the Saudi female students were in Saudi Arabia and their experiences when they made their decisions to study in the United States. The second section included their Time Two reflections about their experiences in the first semester when they first arrived in the United States for the first time in their lives. The Time Three section included participants' reflections about their experiences in their second semester of their freshman year. The Time Four section reflected their experiences when six of them spent their summer vacations in their home country after spending one academic year in the United States. Finally, the Time Five section of the matrix included the participants' reflections about their experiences in the first semester of their sophomore year.

Then, I divided each main section into four categories for the four coping resources: situation, support, self, and strategies. The main reason for dividing each main section into four subcategories was to facilitate understanding of the Saudi female students' perspectives about their transitional experiences and the impact of the coping strategies on their transitions. So, the process of adding quotations for each participant for each time period that matched the coping resource made the coding and analysis processes easier and added credibility and trustworthiness to the work.

Analysis of the Focus Group Interview

After translating and transcribing the focus group interview, I carefully read the transcription for the initial coding so it became easier to generate themes and integrate then in the analysis of the individual interviews. Writing memos throughout the process helped me track the expressions used, participants' reflections on the issues and the subjects discussed, and participants' level of engagement and enthusiasm for the initial findings of the individual interviews. The second stage of analysis involved categorizing the common themes and patterns, and noting where and whether there were similarities with the themes emerging from the individual interviews. I also noted expressions that reflected the participants' interpretations of various incidents and issues, and the terms they used to describe situations and events.

Integration of Findings

After analyzing both the individual interviews and the focus group interview, the visual integration of findings helped me understand the phenomena, similarities, and differences between both results. Lambert and Loisell (2008) asserted that integration of individual interviews and focus group interview results guide the exploration of the phenomena that a research aims to investigate. For example, when I asked the females in the individual interviews about their American friends, they did not give a

detailed account of the nature of the relationship with domestic students. They only mentioned that they met some of them in their classes. However, in the focus group, they gave more details about the nature of their friendships with American students. They were also able to identify American students of different backgrounds. For example, one of the students mentioned that she had an American roommate from Latin America, another shared her experience with her African American friend, and a third one mentioned her White American friend.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the in-depth examination of the individual interviews and the focus group interview grounded in the hermeneutic phenomenological approach and transition theory, I derived five main findings from my study.

All the Saudi females who participated in this study described primarily positive feelings about their experiences during the five stages of their transition to live and study in the United States. They volunteered that life in the United States helped them became more mature, responsible, confident, and independent.

My interview questions, grounded in transition theory, had neither a negative nor a positive bias as I asked the Saudi females about situations, supports, strategies, and themselves during each of the five stages of transition (see Appendix). All expressed generally good feelings about their lives in the United States. They enjoyed and learned to take advantage of the freedom of mobility they had while at the Midwestern university which gave these students a feeling of independence. These females expressed appreciation for American culture in which people enjoy freedom of speech and mobility away from control, gossip, and interference. Furthermore, during individual interviews, two students described their experiences in the United States as "positive culture shock." Ghada, 23, Health Sciences, explained:

> I did not feel I was different. I did not imagine that I could immediately make friends. I got along with my teachers. It was a positive culture shock. I was afraid that people would treat me differently based on how I look and my dress, but actually, they did not care about how I look. They cared about my personality and morals.

In contrast, most prior research on international students at U.S. universities has focused on the challenges such students encounter, perhaps because the studies were grounded in culture shock theory (Davis, 2014; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Presbitero, 2016).

While discrimination in the host country is a prominent theme in international student research (Charles-Toussaint, & Crowson, 2010; Guillen & Ji, 2011; Ramos et al., 2016), none of the Saudi females mentioned any discriminatory behavior. On the contrary, they expressed their appreciation to their classmates, professors, and university staff who respected them and never humiliated them. One of the girls explained, "People usually exaggerate about discrimination against international students particularly Muslim females." Feeling safe in the United States was also a key factor in enjoying life in the United States.

An apparent strong relationship between support from their fathers and the Saudi females' ever-growing self-confidence helped them face several challenges and persist with their studies in the United States. Nine Saudi females confirmed that their fathers had a powerful impact on their decision to study abroad. The 10th girl's father passed away years ago. Lana, 22, Chemistry, conferred:

> My father was the main source of support for me. My father used to tell me that whenever I finish my classes and I have a break, I can travel to Saudi Arabia, so there is no need for me to cry or feel upset.

Almost all Saudi females who participated in this study expressed their desires to go back to Saudi Arabia upon graduation to create positive changes in their country. Freedom of mobility, independence, and successfully upholding several responsibilities in the United States augmented the Saudi females' sense of competence. They indicated that they wanted to apply what they learned in the United States in their home country and to become part of the positive changes they believed they could help make happen in Saudi Arabia. They also wanted to inspire other Saudi females to seek their higher education in the United States and be part of the future changes.

The constant increase in the numbers of educated Saudi women is expected to create positive changes in Saudi Arabia in the future (Alferaehy, 2016). Well educated women usually criticize the restrictions and laws that confine their freedom and regulate their activities. Saudi women now have no justification for being deprived of one of the simple rights, driving a car.

The interrelationship between the four coping resources, situation, support, self, and strategies fostered the emergence of *self* as a primary asset. To illustrate, the situation in both Saudi Arabia and in the United States played key roles in the growth of these females' self-confidence. The support they received augmented their confidence. The strategies they implemented in both Saudi Arabia and the United States indicated the amount of self-confidence they had even before they came to the United States, which helped them meet various challenges once they arrived in the United States. They also started to acknowledge their aptitudes and potentials that had been difficult to explore while in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, their identity as college students developed and they became more mature in the United States. The situation, support, and strategies collaborated to foster an even stronger and more positive sense of personal identity that they hoped would encourage them to be a source of inspiration for other Saudi females back home. Dalia, 24, Political Science, asserted:

> I adapted to a lifestyle that is difficult to change. For example, I depend on myself, I control my life and I do whatever I want but I feel that when I go back to Saudi Arabia, I feel that people will control my life and I will lose the privileges that I am enjoying here in the US, but of course, I want to graduate and go back to Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, as shown in Figure 3, these coping aspects were blended together as a metaphorical ice cream cone with three different flavored balls (situation, support,

and strategies) that fostered the emerging of essence of a stronger self, or identity, as the result of their integration.
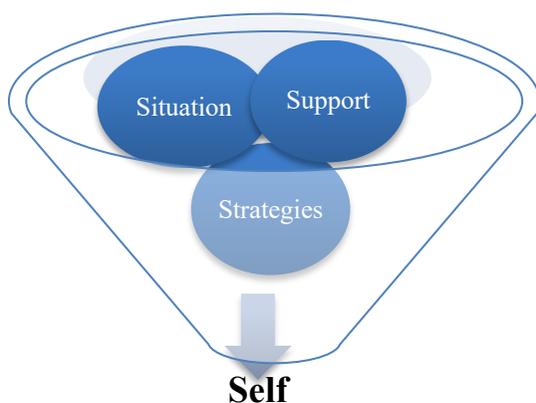
Figure 3: The Integration of the Four Coping Aspects of Transition

The transition process incorporates interactions between the Saudi females and both college and social environments. Self-confidence that had been reinforced since their arrival in the United States, as well growing independence and responsibility, contributed to their identity development. In addition, their interactions with their contexts, or situations, in both Saudi Arabia and the United States played a key role in fostering their identity development as they transitioned to live and study in the United States through the first semester of their sophomore year (Evans et al., 2010).

Although there is ample research on college student identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010; Jones & Abes, 2013; Kramer, 2007), there is still a need for research that explores identity development of female college students who arrive from segregated cultures such as the Saudi culture. Kim (2012) attempted to develop a new conceptual framework, the International Student Identity model, that addressed international students. However, this model did not fit the Saudi female identity development in this study when participants lived and studied in the United States. Kim (2012) suggested six stages that international students experience in the host country. However, when I tried to match her theory to my study, I found several discrepancies that did not match with the Saudi female experiences. Figure 3 proposes a model for exploring how the interrelationship between situation, strategies, and support may contribute to a stronger sense of self—of identity—for international students such as the Saudi females who participated in this study.

Campus support was inadequate to address the needs of first year Saudi females, so they sought support from other sources. All Saudi females who participated in this study conveyed that campus support upon arrival was almost absent as they did not know what to do and who to ask. Because all females I interviewed were able to succeed to their sophomore year, I was curious to understand the type of campus support they received that helped them persist. All girls indicated, however, that they

received minimal campus support during their first few months at the Midwestern university. Instead, campus support created more complications for these students, such as when a couple of the participants were provided incorrect guidance by academic advising services. Manal, 22, Biomedical Engineering, stated:

> I took a very difficult class that my advisors registered for me. Later, I realized that there was an easier class that I should take before that class as a prerequisite and my advisor did not tell me about that class. So, I did not get good scores in that class. I felt I was lost.

None of the Saudi females mentioned any significant campus support upon arrival. The mandatory orientation session did not satisfy their needs, as it only covered minor services such as getting a bus permit and health insurance. In addition, they were frustrated by the unprofessional academic advising they received as they ended up taking either unrequired courses, or difficult courses that required a prerequisite they had not yet completed. Their academic advisors did not help them select the right courses for their programs.

Research on international student advising services showed that appropriate advising for international students contributes to international students' retention (Shapiro et al., 2014). However, inappropriate advising leads to several complications and stresses for international students that encourages them to change their academic advisors or programs. A woman described how her academic advisor suggested taking four core courses in the same semester, which created a lot of anxiety for her. When she moved to her sophomore year, she did not consult her advisor, but her friend, who she considered more knowledgeable than her academic advisor. This example illustrates how, even though campuses services were inadequate, the participants in this study were resilient enough to begin to seek help they wanted from other sources.

Limitations of the Study

The small sample of the Saudi females, 10 sophomore participants, might not represent the whole population of Saudi female students on other U.S. campuses, even though the sample represents more than half the population of Saudi sophomore students at the Midwestern university. In addition, because this study addressed the transition experiences of sophomore Saudi female international students, their perspectives might be different from those of juniors, seniors, and graduate Saudi females. Moreover, this study addressed the transition experiences of Saudi female students whose experiences might be different from their male counterparts who enjoy a larger space of freedom from social, cultural, and religious standpoints.

CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to capture the essence of the transition experiences of 10 Saudi female sophomore students at the Midwestern university. The study revealed the huge impact of living and studying in the United States on these females. Besides learning new skills, living abroad opened their eyes to several social, cultural, and

political issues that they never had exposure to while living in Saudi Arabia. The reflections these females shared also revealed the positive changes that happened in Saudi Arabia in the last decade. The opportunity of studying abroad for these girls with the support of male members of their families are signs of the fundamental changes that have started in the conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi women have been usually depicted in Western media as oppressed and suppressed by male members of their families (Nawar, 2007). This study revealed that these social behaviors are influenced by the nature of the societal fabric of Saudi Arabia and may change as the society changes. Saudi females now have several opportunities to get higher education degrees, either in their home country or abroad. The generational differences mentioned by participants in this study reveal the progress that had already occurred for women rights in Saudi Arabia by 2016–2017 when this study was conducted. This progress already had positive impact on Saudi females. Offering education opportunities for Saudi women to get quality education abroad has contributed to creating a new generation of well-educated males and females who are projected to take leadership positions in their country. The eagerness of Saudi females like the participants in this study to return to Saudi Arabia to apply their education may make a positive difference for the future of their country and for future generations of women in Saudi Arabia.

The findings of this study indicated that Saudi women were willing to challenge themselves in difficult situations and succeed. The reflections they shared in both the individual interviews and the focus group provide evidence that their academic journeys in the United States created fundamental changes in themselves and their life perspectives that encouraged them to speak their minds and share their worries as well as critiquing several social and political behaviors in their country. The intellectual debate they were willing to handle with foreigners to defend their opinions was also an indication of the level of maturity they gained by living and studying in the United States.

Implications for Future Research

This research on the transition experiences of the Saudi female international students at a Midwest campus suggested two themes for further exploration. Future research should explore the transition experiences of Saudi female students when they go back to their home country upon completion of their academic programs to improve understanding of how they experience repatriated life in Saudi Arabia. More research is also needed about domestic students' perceptions of international students particularly, Muslim students.

The timing of this study coincided with the tension between the United States and the Middle East, which increased opportunities for American students to understand and learn from international students particularly from the Middle East.

REFERENCES

Abo Rabia, H. (2015). *Arab international students' experiences in a U.S. university* (Publication No. 10016577) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Hartford]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Al Asfour, A., & Khan, S. (2014). Workforce localization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Issues and challenges. *Human Resources Development International*, *17*(4), 243–253.

Al Remaih, D. (2016). *Social and academic challenges facing Saudi female students in the United States of America* (Publication No. 10130059) [Doctoral dissertation, The Claremont Graduate University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Alferaehy, R. (2016). *My right to drive: Women rights in Saudi Arabia explored through the lens of religion* (Publication No. 10189308) [Master's thesis, The George Washington University). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

BBC News. (2015, December 12). *Saudi Arabia's women voted for elections for the first time*. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35075702

Bhandari, R., & Bluementhal, P. (Eds). (2011). *International students and global mobility in higher education: National trends and new directions*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Charles-Toussaint, G., Crowson, M. (2010). Prejudice against international students: The role of threat perceptions and authoritarian disposition in U.S. students. *The Journal of Psychology, 144*(5), 413–428.

Chickering, A., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity*. Jossey-Bass.

Crowther, S., Ironside, P., Spenser, D., & Smythe, L. (2016). Crafting stories in hermeneutic phenomenological research: A methodological device. *Qualitative Health Research*, *27*(6), 826–835. doi:10.1177/1049732316656161

Davis, E. M. (2014). *Saudi women international students in the United States: A qualitative examination of cultural adjustment* (Publication No. 3632085) [Doctoral dissertation, Ball State University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Davis, E., & McGovern K. (2015). The cultural adjustment of Saudi women international students: A qualitative examination. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *46*(3), 406–434.

Evans, N., Forney, D., Guido, F., Patton, L., & Renn, K. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass.

Friedman, G. (2016, December 3). *We must set Muslims against ISIS*. Newsmax Finance. http://www.newsmax.com/Finance/GeorgeFriedman/muslims-isis-trump-terrorism/2016/12/03/id/762009/

Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N., & Anderson, M. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition*. Springer.

Guillen, P., & Ji, D. (2011). Trust, discrimination, and acculturation: Experimental evidence on Asian international and domestic Australian domestic university students. *Journal of Socio-Economics*, *40*(5), 594–608.

Hakami, S. (2012). *Applying the Rasch model to measure acculturation challenges faced by Saudi female students in the United States* (Publication No. 3550102)

[Doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Colorado]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Hendrickson, B., Rosen, D., & Aune, R. (2011). An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *35*(3), 281–295.

Hotta, J., & Ting-Toomey, S. (2013). Intercultural adjustment and friendship dialectical in international students: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *37*(5), 550–566.

Institute of International Education. (2019, November 18). Number of international students in the United States hits all-time high. https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2019/11/Number-of-International-Students-in-the-United-States-Hits-All-Time-High

Jones, S., & Abes, E. (2013). *Identity development of college students: Advancing frameworks for multiple dimensions of identity.* Jossey-Bass.

Kent, A., & Frohlich, T. (2015). *The 9 most segregated cities in America*. The Huffington Post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-9-most-segregated-cities-in-america_us_55df53e9e4b0e7117ba92d7f

Kim, E. (2012). An alternative theoretical model: Examining psychosocial identity development of international students in the United States. *College Student Journal*, *46*(1), 99–113.

King Abdullah Scholarship Program. (2016). Retrieved from https://www.sacm.org/

Lambert, S. D., & Loiselle, C. (2008). Combining individual interviews and focus groups to enhance data richness. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *62*(2), 228-237.

Le Renard, A. (2014). *A society of young women*. Stanford University Press.

Miles, M., Huberman, M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods Sourcebook.* Sage.

Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia (2020). Retrieved from https://www.moe.gov.sa/en/HigherEducation/governmenthighereducation/Pages/default.aspx

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Qualitative research methods series, Vol. 16. Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287

Nawar, I. (2007). *Portraying women in the western and Arab media, general remarks*. http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/8/q8_095.pdf

Patton, M. (2015*). Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage.

Pedersen, P. (1995). *The five stages of culture shock: Critical incidents around the world*. Greenwood Press.

Presbitero, A. (2016). Culture shock and reverse culture shock: The moderating role of cultural intelligence in international students' adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *53*, 28–38.

Ramos, M., Cassidy, C., Reicher, S., & Haslam, A. (2016). A longitudinal study of the effects of discrimination on the acculturation strategies of international students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 47*(3), 401–420.

Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission. (2016). *Saudi Cultural Mission to the United States*. http://www.sacm.org/ArabicSACM/pdf/education_web.pdf

Sarsour, L. (2018, January 30). *Linda Sarsour: Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric helps united America against him*. Time. http://time.com/5124920/president-trump-anti-muslim-policies/

Schlossberg, N. (1983). *Counseling adults in transition.* Springer.

Shapiro, S., Farrelly, R., & Tomas, Z. (2014). *Fostering international student success in higher education*. TESOL International Association.

Siemaszko, C. (2015). *Hate attacks on Muslims in U.S. spike after recent acts of terrorism.* NBC News. http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/hate-attacks-muslims-u-s-spike-after-recent-acts-terrorism-n482456

Sullivan, K., Izadi, E., & Bailey, S. (2015). *After Paris and California attacks, U.S. Muslims feeling tense backlash.* The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/after-paris-and-california-attacks-us-muslims-feel-intense-backlash/2015/12/03/bcf8e480-9a09-11e5-94f0-9eeaff906ef3_story.html

The Global Terrorism Index. (2015). http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Press.

Wayt, L. (2012). *The impact of students' academic and social relationships on college student persistence* [Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, Lincoln]. DigitalCommons. http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108andcontext=cehsedaddiss

ALIA ARAFEH, PhD, is an Adjunct Professor at the Administrative Leadership Department at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Research interests include international students, internationalization of higher education, multiculturalism, globalization, and minority students in higher education institutions. Email: aliaarafeh2014@gmail.com