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# Self-Identity and Community Through Social Media: the Experience of Saudi Female International College Students in the United States

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

SELF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY THROUGH SOCIAL  
MEDIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF SAUDI FEMALE  
INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS  
IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Tahani Obaid M Alruwaili

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Educational Technology

May 2017

This Dissertation by: Tahani Obaid M Alruwaili

Entitled: *Self Identity and Community Through Social Media: The Experience of Saudi Female College Students in the United States*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Educational Technology

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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Heng-Yu Ku, Ph.D., Research Advisor

---

Linda L. Black, Ed.D., Committee Member

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Christin Kyser, Ed.D., Committee Member

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Randy Larkins, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense \_\_\_\_\_

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Linda L. Black, Ed.D.  
Associate Provost and Dean  
Graduate School and International Admission

## ABSTRACT

Alruwaili, Tahani Obaid. *Self-Identity and Community Through Social Media: The Experience of Saudi Female International College Students in the United States*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2017.

This study examined the role of social media in the lives of Saudi female international college students as they faced issues related to adjusting to living and studying in a culture vastly different from their own. Social media is an increasingly important consideration in literature on self-identity, education, and community. This study employed qualitative interview methods to explore this topic. Fourteen Saudi female international college students living in the United States for three to nine years answered questions about their personal identities in Saudi Arabia and in the United States, their social media use in Saudi Arabia and in the United States, their experiences with online communities, and their experiences with educational social media. Of the 14 participants, nine were married and five were unmarried, nine were graduate students and five were undergraduate students, and all ranged in age from 18 to 40. Major themes that emerged were identity as a Saudi, female, Muslim, and student; identity changes after arriving in the United States; social media and the expression of identity; the role of communities in the lives of Saudi female international college students; and educational social media and Saudi female international students. Recommendations developed from this study's findings aimed to help U.S. professors better understand their male and female Saudi students, how Saudi cultural and religious factors impacted these males and

females differently, and how to effectively use educational social media in a way that acknowledged Saudi culture but still encouraged participation by all Saudi students. Limitations of this study, recommendations for future research topics, and a conclusion are also provided. The findings of this research further point the need for educators to understand how to implement social media in the classroom in a way that serves students of all cultural backgrounds as the U.S. educational system continues to receive large numbers of Saudi international students each year. Overall, this study found the experiences of Saudi female international college students studying in the United States impacted their identities, their use of social media to connect with their communities, and how they interacted in a culturally diverse classroom through educational social media.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of social media is expanding across the world as more users gain access to social media and integrate into their everyday lives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media is a broad term used to denote any technological system used for collaboration, interaction, and/or community (Tess, 2013). Social media is an umbrella term that covers various types of interactive technologies including networking sites, collaborative wikis, blogs, content communities, multimedia platforms, online game worlds, and online social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tess, 2013). These overarching categories serve as general examples of types of social media, whereas specific sites, such as Twitter, serve as specific examples (Tess, 2013). Social networks are a central element of the social media movement (Harvey, 2013). Digital social networks are the social groups and relationships created and/or sustained through online social media technologies.

The establishment and alteration in self-identity in today's global world has changed vastly in just a few decades, especially with the development of advanced technology in computers, the Internet, and the many varieties of available social media. In addition, exposure to many different cultures and societies throughout the world has influenced how people establish, maintain, and revise their self-identity as they come in contact with different belief systems, values, social mores, and ways of thinking and feeling. In particular, women's identities have undergone dramatic changes not only due

to the above-mentioned factors but also as they see changes in their roles and responsibilities throughout various cultures and countries. Furthermore, females are traveling more and living temporarily in other cultures and societies, particularly as they work on undergraduate and graduate degrees abroad. All of these factors have led to different ways females establish their identities and how these identities undergo alterations through different experiences and interactions with other cultures and societies.

The development of self-identity has historically been derived from one's own immediate community and interactions of the self with that community (Buckingham, 2008). Although there is yet no consensus on the meaning of identity, there is some general agreement on essential components of identity--centered on ways in which the self is perceived as the same or similar to its surroundings and contexts and ways in which the self is perceived as different or distinctive from these surroundings and contexts.

In recent times, the study of identity has been the focus of several disciplines including psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and others (Buckingham, 2008). Although self-identity was originally conceived as an issue of development from childhood to adulthood and was described in detail in Erikson's (1968) theory of development, more recently identity has been conceived as more of a process than an accomplishment (Waterman, 1988). Identity is being portrayed as extending beyond the age range generally attributed to youth and extending into and perhaps throughout adulthood (Erikson, 1968). As such, the concept of identity is morphing from a static,

fixed possession into a fluid, contingent matter that takes place through ongoing interactions and negotiations with others.

Buckingham (2008) pointed out an inherent dichotomy in discussions about identity; this term implies both a component that differentiates individual unique identity from the context, culture, or community of which it is a part as well as a component that implies a relationship or similarity with that context, culture, or community. He remarks that much debate on identity centers on the tensions of these two components of identity. Buckingham shows this dual nature of identity and its fluidity by explaining, “On one level, I am the product of my unique personal biography. Yet who I am...varies according to who I am with, the social situations in which I find myself” (p. 1).

Buckingham (2008) goes on to highlight identity formation and change from various developmental and theoretical perspectives, noting many traditional theories postulate adolescence as a particularly important time in identity formation. In Hall’s (cited in Buckingham, 2008) accounts, he popularized the idea of adolescence as a period of stress and storm represented by intergenerational conflicts, dramatic mood swings, and a propensity for risk taking and deviation from accepted norms for behavior. Erikson (1968) sets aside adolescence as a separate developmental stage--that of resolving the conflict between identity and role confusion as a necessary stage to adulthood. Adolescence for Erikson is that stage where a personal and unique identity is formed and created, involving processes of self-reflection and self-definition to arrive at a coherent sense of identity.

These traditional theories are being challenged by recent researchers who question the idea that identity formation occurs as a stage process (Buckingham, 2008). New

historical, gender, and international studies have raised questions about whether this developmental stage of adolescence existed in the past, or in other cultures, or even across gender lines. Adolescence is perceived by some as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, whereas the issue of identity and its formation transcends age groups (Buckingham, 2008). Identity crises can also be the result of life changes such as marriage, divorce, and retirement that occur far beyond adolescence (Buckingham, 2008).

With the growth of globalization and widespread use of social media, Buckingham (2008) described how identity formation and re-creation are now influenced by factors such as blogs, homepages, social networking, and online social exchanges. He noted the importance of social media and the amount of time young people spend on social media as predictors in identity formation and change. In fact, the increasing role of social media and networking has served to replace traditional terms of differentiating groups of people by age group (childhood, adolescence, or adulthood) into a new tendency to differentiate groups of people along generational lines (Baby Boomers, Generation X, or Generation Y, etc.). Identity has come to include membership in a group differentiated by how and how much the individuals in that group use social media rather than by stages of growth and development.

Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009) examined college students' social networking experiences on Facebook, finding not only was social media use nearly universal but it was also a daily part of most students' lives. They also discovered while students used social media mainly to interact with others, they also used it to express their identity by sharing religion, interests, and political ideology. Because students



consistently used Facebook to strengthen social connections and share personal information, it was an important tool in constructing and expressing identity.

Identity is also increasingly being seen as more fluid, moving from a notion of a fixed possession to one of a social process (Buckingham, 2008). Identity is changing and changeable; with the advent of social networking, a concept of an “online identity” has emerged along with questions about similarities and differences between online and offline identities.

There are several implications for identity formation through social media, particularly for female international students. A recently developing pattern of increased numbers of young females from all over the world temporarily migrating to Western universities for undergraduate and graduate studies has been noted (Kim, 2011b). For many of these international students, this temporary migration means leaving behind the culture, language, and individual identity of their home country to reside in a different culture using a different language. These female students find themselves forming a new identity or modifying their previous identity in response to this change (Kim, 2011b). Alongside this trend of significant increases in female international students attending Western universities, there has also been a dramatic increase in personal electronic communication technologies and devices. Women use these devices to maintain connections with families and friends back home and to develop new connections at their temporary locations (Kim, 2011b). It is through the use of these electronic devices that these females forge their new or adapted identity. The devices are tools used to attempt to make sense of their lives and identity during their prolonged departure from their home culture (Kim, 2011b).

Another feature of the lives of females as international college students is their changing role and departure from traditional roles (Kim, 2011a). Unlike the women of past generations, these female international college students are preparing themselves for a career and plan to enter the workforce in their home country rather than remaining in the homes of their fathers or husbands. This change in role has an impact in the forging of their emerging identity.

Individuals from other countries, cultures, and nationalities are also experiencing changes in the formation of identity due to technology and social media. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is a developing country in the Middle East and, as such, electronic technologies are just emerging in Saudi culture. Although the KSA is rapidly reforming its education system to reflect modern teaching methods and learning from research in Western countries, Saudi schools still primarily use traditional methods such as teacher-centered approaches and rote learning (Sofi, 2015). One of the reforms the KSA is working to implement is to incorporate better teaching and learning strategies as well as to integrate technology in their school systems, which has led to the creation of an extensive international scholarship program named The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (Peters & Lahman, In Press). To successfully achieve these goals, this scholarship program sponsors thousands of Saudi college students to study in Western universities to become familiar with these technologies and teaching and learning strategies.

College students in the KSA are already familiar with electronic devices for personal, recreational, and social purposes. Those college students studying in Western universities are also becoming acquainted with the application of these devices in

education. Therefore, these students from Saudi Arabia attending Western universities and already using these electronic devices comprise an appropriate population to study the formation and alteration of self-identity. However, because electronic technology and social media is still relatively new to the KSA, its use is not as widespread as in the United States. In the United States, citizens are exposed to social media sites years before other nations because this is where most social media sites were created, developed, and expanded (Leiner et al., 2009), which is substantially more extensive than for Saudi citizens.

Research has begun to examine the use of social media in education (Lim, Harper, & Chicharo, 2014). Educators and researchers alike are terming young students immersed in electronics and social media “digital natives.” Digital natives are essentially “native speakers” of digital technology who have grown up using these technologies throughout their lives (Prensky, 2001). These young students are so familiar with the technology they may even learn differently from past generations (Lim et al., 2014). Thus, social media can be employed in concert with traditional learning methods to support this generation of students in their education. Lim et al. (2014) explained that social media technology is most effective when it helps students find relative content for their learning and connects them with fellow students. McLoughlin and Lee (2010) demonstrated social media is most beneficial to education when it encourages discussion, dialogue, collaboration, and idea exchange between students. As social media becomes more widely implemented in education, McLoughlin and Lee stated it should be structured in ways that allow students to personalize their experience and create a social and participatory educational atmosphere.

The United States and other Western countries are increasingly using social media to supplement online learning environments by building educational communities.

McCarthy (2012) studied the addition of social networking on Facebook to university courses in Australia and the United States. He found students preferred the inclusion of social media to the course and benefitted from the online community created around the course. Social media can be used in a variety of ways to create educational communities around shared interests. Communities created around shared knowledge and interests are called Communities of Practice (CoP) and are being developed internationally to connect individuals across different cultures and/or geographical spaces (Hanewald, 2013). As effective educational tools, CoPs provide opportunities for students to support each other in shared aims.

Finally, the link between social media, community, and identity is an important consideration in the use of educational social media. As Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, and González Canché (2015) explained, social media is an increasing means of communication, social interaction, and exchange of information. They went on to note social media could become a part of personal identity and community-building. For educational use of social media, culturally different identities can inform one's place and interaction within a community. For instance, a Saudi female might be hesitant to join a class Facebook group that consists of males and females as her cultural identity might make her uncomfortable with this type of interaction with males. On the other hand, she might be uncomfortable with the situation at first but joining this community could reshape her feelings about the situation and ultimately influence her identity. Through social media, identity and community can interact with one another.

## **Problem Statement**

Although research has been conducted on social media use and identity for international students from a few foreign countries studying in Western cultures, such as China, research has not specifically examined social media use and identity for Saudi Arabian females studying in the United States (Kutbi, 2015; Xu & Mocariski, 2014). Research on this particular demographic would result in new insights and findings. For instance, because social media is relatively new to the KSA but long established in the United States, migration to the United States might result in expanded and extended use of social media for Saudi female international students. Because the migration is temporary, a temporary modification of identity or social media use might occur rather than a permanent change to identity. Through the use of these electronic devices and social media, females might be forging a new or adapted identity as they attempt to make sense of their lives and their identity during their prolonged departure from their home culture. As of now, little published research exists relating to the role of social media on identity formation and alteration for citizens of Middle East countries nor for Arabic international students studying in Western cultures. In particular, no research presently exists on the impact of social media on Arabic female international students currently attending universities in Western cultures where social media is so widespread.

## **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research study was to address this gap in examining the role of social media on Saudi female international college students as they grapple with the issues of adjusting to living and studying in a culture vastly different from their home culture. By migrating to the United States, a Saudi woman's social media use might

change to reflect the kind of use displayed by students in the United States. Being in an environment where social media is heavily used to form social connections and express identity could also influence Saudi female international students to use social media in this manner.

The focus of this qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

- Q1 How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the United States and while studying in the United States?
- Q2 How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the United States?
- Q3 What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the United States?

### **Rationale**

When Saudi females come to the United States for their education, they encounter a culture and society vastly different from their own. As they go through their education in the United States, their identity can be impacted. Although some research has examined the fluxing identities of Saudi females studying in the United States (Al-Ghamdi, 2015), very little research on this topic has been conducted since the rapid expansion of social media technology in education. Further, most research on the relationship between Saudi females and social media has been conducted in Saudi Arabia rather than in the United States after Saudi females arrive (Aljasir, Woodcock, & Harrison, 2014). Some of this research indicated Saudi females attempt to navigate cultural and societal norms with tactics such as using multiple Facebook accounts, not

showing their faces in profile pictures, using nicknames, etc. (Aljasir et al., 2014; Guta & Karolak, 2015). While previous research is useful in understanding how Saudi females negotiate their identity on social media in Saudi culture, it does not explain how this might change when they arrive in the United States. In the United States, it is not as common to conceal these certain aspects of one's identity such as one's face or real name. These differing cultural norms might influence the way Saudi females express their identities on social media. Additionally, the expansion of social media in education could further influence the way Saudi females use social media while studying in the United States as the use of social media in education is much more common in the United States than in Saudi Arabia.

Other research has shed light on the way Saudi females are represented in mass media but has not illuminated how females might represent themselves through social media in differing cultural and social conditions (Sakr, 2008). Overall, some scholarly attention has been given to the status of women's identities in the context of evolving media technologies. However, it typically focuses on females currently living in Saudi Arabia rather than examining the interplay between factors such as the identity of Saudi female students in the United States, social media, and education.

### **Significance**

The significance of this study was to contribute to research on the interaction between Saudi females' identities in the United States and social media in education. As explained, research in this area has examined certain elements of this topic but has not taken all particular aspects of it into consideration to provide comprehensive

understanding and explanation. The present study aimed to shed light upon this subject and add to the body of literature.

The findings and implications of this research could be of practical use to various groups. For one, it might help Saudi females be better equipped to navigate the different cultural expectations of studying in the United States and using social media in their studies. As Saudi females might not be as familiar in using social media in an educational setting, it could be a difficult adjustment for them. For example, to facilitate class interaction, some professors ask students to post a profile picture of themselves on the social media site for the class. This might be a worrisome request for Saudi females as their culture often prefers they do not post pictures of their faces on social media. This study could be useful to Saudi females facing challenging situations such as this one as they can better understand how other Saudi female have navigated identity issues on social media used in education.

It could also be beneficial to Saudi females experiencing changes in identity after arriving in the United States. Al-Saggaf (2011) was one of a few scholars who have investigated Saudi women's relationship with social media. The participants in this study were females living in Saudi Arabia. She collected interviews and observational data to describe their use and perceptions of the social media site (Facebook). Al-Saggaf found Saudi females mainly used the site to maintain social relationships and express their personal thoughts and feelings. While they often disclosed information about themselves and their personal thoughts, they still expressed concern over privacy. Overall, the females felt Facebook was a tool that helped them become more social and confident about themselves. Al-Saggaf's study offered insight into the relationship between Saudi



females and social media that is contextual to Saudi Arabia and its culture but it did not speak to a possible shift in this relationship that might occur for Saudi female international students who live in the United States. The present findings indicated while some females were comfortable posting their pictures, most of the females did not feel comfortable posting their pictures online--even on an educational site.

In the previous example, professors and other educational faculty could also benefit from this research. Educators have Saudi females enrolled in their classes and might be able to better understand how seemingly typical requests (i.e., uploading a profile picture) might be received and reacted to differently by Saudi females. The participants of this study offered useful and thoughtful suggestions to educators on how to navigate cultural differences in the classroom when implementing educational social media. This research and its suggestions might help educators develop culturally sensitive ways of employing social media in the classroom. Thus, Saudi female students and educators alike could benefit from this study.

### **Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Communities of Practice (CoP).** The creation of a community based on a shared learning interest using a social network (Lim, Agostinho, Harper, & Chicharo, 2013).

**Community.** Defined as “a group of individuals who share the same sense of history, culture, values, norms, and rituals” (Warburton, 2012, p. 27). In this definition, individuals do not necessarily need to be in a shared geographical location to belong to a community; rather, they belong to the community because they share similar characteristics and may connect in either a physical space or virtual space.

**Connectivism.** The purposeful forming of connections through a social network (Lim et al., 2013).

**Educational social media.** Educational social media is specifically the application of social media types and platforms in an educational setting. For example, a teacher might create a Facebook group for a class where students can share information and connect outside of the physical classroom.

**Ethno-nationalistic perspective.** A narrow personal perspective focused on one's own cultural and national identity (Kim, 2011a).

**Self-identity.** Defined as “the self as reflexively understood by the person” (Giddens, 1991, p. 53). This definition contends self-identity is created through personal perceptions of oneself and might be alterable as the individual's self-reflections fluctuate.

**Social media.** Broadly describes “any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community” (Tess, 2013, p. 1). “Social networking sites, blogs, wikis, multimedia platforms, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds” are general examples of types of social media with platforms such as Facebook serving as more specific examples (Tess, 2013, p. 1).

**Social self-efficacy.** An individual's beliefs about her abilities to confidently interact in an online community (Sheng-Yi, Shih-Ting, Liu, Da-Chain, & Hwang, 2012).

**Social trust.** How well an individual believes she can trust other individuals in the space and the community as a whole (Sheng-Yi et al., 2012).

### **Limitations of the Study**

As this study employed a qualitative design, generalizability of the findings is limited. While interviews and other qualitative methods can offer depth of information, they rely on small sample sizes and thus cannot be generalized to larger populations. This study also utilized a convenience sample, which has less validity than a random sample. Another limitation was a possible language barrier. The interviews were conducted in English but the native language of the interviewees was Arabic. Thus, interviewees might not have been able to fully express their feelings and opinions to the extent they would have been able to in Arabic.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced the subject and purpose of this study. This study aimed to address a gap in the literature by examining the role of social media in the lives of Saudi females as they faced issues related to adjusting to living and studying in a culture vastly different from their own. The act of migrating to the United States could influence a Saudi woman's social media use and influence her identity. To explore this topic, this study used qualitative research guided by research questions on Saudi female college student's social media use, identity in social media, social networking communities, and use of social media in their educational studies.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The following literature review is arranged into four parts. First, the relationship between identity and social media in the literature is explored. This includes a discussion of cultural identity and social media and the role of social media in the lives and identities of Saudi female international students. The next section focuses on literature related to education and social media including social networking communities that exist through educational social media. The third part of this chapter covers literature involving online communities. Lastly, the fourth part discusses self-identity theory and its various aspects. Reviewing this literature gave a greater understanding of the possible link among online education, community, social media, and the identity of Saudi female international students.

Since the early 1900s, Saudi students have been given scholarships and sent to study abroad in Arab countries such as Lebanon and Egypt (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). By 1960, study abroad programs were expanded to Western nations such as the United States. Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to expand their scholarship programs to other countries at the time, very few students studied in non-Arab countries until decades later. In 2005, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) was implemented in Saudi Arabia to send more Saudi students to universities in the United States. This agreement between King Abdullah and President George W. Bush aimed to

increase cross-cultural education by financially supporting Saudi students studying in the United States (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015).

The KASP is the largest scholarship program in the history of Saudi Arabia and is widely considered a success (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). Today, over 70,000 students are sponsored to study in the United States through monthly stipends, full tuition coverage, health insurance, and other benefits (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). The KASP has partnered with the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM; 2016), a program that assists Saudi international students in achieving their educational goals. The KASP and SACM support students in their efforts to learn from the United States and contribute professionally and culturally upon returning to Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2016).

For female Saudi college students studying in the United States, self-identity undergoes cultural shock. In their home country, females are extremely limited in their ability to move about (Internations, 2016). They cannot even leave their home without the permission of a responsible male and, if alone, they must be accompanied by a male guardian. Their roles within society are strictly defined--even to their dress code and social conduct. Even though they can be much more open and free within their homes, beyond the home or in the presence of males, restrictive protocols must be followed, which has a powerful influence on the formation of female Saudi identity. When these female students move to the United States to continue their university studies, the immense differences in culture have a strong and enduring impact on their self-identities.

An example of the role of culture affecting the formation of identity is the strict separation of males and females in all aspects of life throughout their lifetime (Menea,

2013). Females and males often have their own separate entrances into and areas within homes and public buildings, are educated in segregated schools (even though materials are identical), gather in separate areas in places of worship, and do not participate in entertainment or leisure activities together. In the presence of males, Saudi females necessarily assume a more submissive role except possibly in close family circumstances.

## **Identity and Social Media**

### **Identity Formation in Online Spaces**

Recent advancements in technology have expanded research into the formation of identity to include the effects of interactions on the Internet and within cyberspace (Turkle, 1995). Turkle (1995) described this transformation in terms of the way identity is now being established since the introduction and expansion of electronic technology and the Internet. In later research, Turkle began researching not just how people use computers as tools but how the very extensive use of computers was affecting and changing people (Turkle, 2011). She observed that face-to-face interactions via computers allowed people to reflect upon who they were through the mirror of the computer via a digital culture. Both in her clinical work as a psychoanalyst and in her fieldwork, Turkle observed the increasing role of social media in the formation and transformation of identity formation--not just in Western cultures but throughout the world as electronic technology is introduced and integrated.

### **Identity Formation and Sharing Online**

In addition to research on identity formation, Stutzman (2006) examined identity-sharing behavior on social media sites. He investigated the level of personal information

individuals were willing to share on their Facebook profiles including relationship status, location, and political ideology. The findings indicated a large number of users were very willing to share particularly personal information about themselves online. Rather than striving to protect personal information, it became a tool in the creation of an online self-image. Therefore, sharing personal information on this social media site played an important role in the presentation of self to others.

The structure of some social media sites might actually encourage identity-sharing behaviors (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). For example, Facebook asks users to create profiles about themselves that display personal information such as gender, name, and age. In addition to conscious identity-sharing users share knowingly and on purpose, users also frequently share elements of their identity unconsciously (Kietzmann et al., 2011). This type of unconscious disclosure about oneself occurs through status updates, posts, likes, dislikes, group memberships, pictures, etc. While users often do not view these activities as identity-sharing behaviors, these types of behaviors contribute to other social media users' understandings of who the user is as an individual and his/her various characteristics.

Kietzmann et al. (2011) also noted while a vast majority of users openly and willingly share information about themselves online, some users have begun to express concerns over privacy. As a result, they are taking measures to protect their privacy online. Many users are particularly worried about how their data are used by corporations and governments. Social media users have become increasingly aware of advertising techniques such as data mining where individuals are targeted with ads based on their demographics, interests, and patterns of social media use. Others fear

governments could use social media for surveillance purposes. While most individuals are still willing to share information about their identities, there is an increasing awareness of privacy issues online (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

### **Identity and Online Interaction**

Online communications have increased dramatically, creating new forms and outlets for media and social exchange (Ito et al., 2008). Media constitutes collections from online networks, interactive media, and media forms, amalgamating into a new media ecology and requiring media literacy. Media literacy requires not only skills for using it for understanding, critiquing, or interpreting but also provides a way for creative and social expression, online search and navigation, and ever-evolving new technical skills. Although technology is now becoming familiar and embedded in our lives, how people engage with technology and use and share information is different from one person to another (Ito et al., 2008). This has also created a noticeable difference in successive generations' skills, abilities, and desires in using these technology, presenting new challenges to educators to incorporate social media into classroom and educational settings. Media have had an impact on using technology in terms of understanding what it means for learning.

Ito et al. (2008) observed this increasingly complex and interwoven fabric of media and social communication has led to growth in interactive media, widespread sharing, and exchange of information and ideas. It has also led to the formation of new links between and among peers, educators, researchers, and scientists around the world. This has led to increases in situated learning and mass media distribution as well as more intimate shared online spaces where individuals not only share information in general but



also share personal information. This has resulted in a new visibility and equalization of shared power. Inevitably, challenges are being made to traditional views of intellectual property, privacy, piracy, and particularly to the ability of young people circumventing adult authority (Ito et al., 2008). This emerging power shift has had a profound effect on how today's young people form, shape, and remold their identities via this social media.

When observing and reflecting on the effect of new technology on forming and reforming identity, Gee (2000) remarked on the influence of access to social media, social networking via these media, and experiences now available due to many technological advances. He proposed today's world has opened up new vistas for personal experiences, new opportunities for people to get together in a wide variety of contexts, an ability to rapidly move around and change these contexts, as well as an extensive availability of connections of all sorts via social media. People now participate in many different groups and remold their identities to match these groups and contexts, all of which has led to increased flexibility in identity. Gee described four basic aspects of identity relating to these different contexts, roles within these contexts, and alterations in identity because of these contexts. Particularly relevant in relation to social media, networking, and formation of special interest groups (such as communities of learning) is what Gee calls affinity group identity, or A-identity, to describe the particular transformation of identity to correspond with the group and its context.

For young people, the college experience can be particularly influential in impacting their identity (Ahlquist, 2015). Identity development is not only a private, personal experience, it is also takes place on a public, social scale (Stone, as cited by Ahlquist, 2015). With the advent of social media technologies, the public element of

identity development now has the ability to take place online. This can be especially the case for college students who are typically more familiarized with social media and have used it recreationally for years. Dalton and Crosby (2013) reflected these notions; they explained social media is so ubiquitous for most young people that it has actually become a part of their identities. They term this new type of identity development a “digital identity,” which refers to the ways individuals express and present themselves online. To advance understanding and theory on identity development, Ahlquist (2015) called for more research on online public identity development regarding young people and college students. Most research on the development of student identity was conducted before social media existed, which left them lacking in explanatory power in today’s digital world (Ahlquist, 2015).

To further knowledge on student identity development, Ahlquist (2015) conducted a study of online behaviors of junior and senior college students. Ahlquist’s findings suggested educators should begin integrating social media into education before higher education including during elementary and middle school. These initiatives to integrate social media into all stages of learning should focus on identity expression. Ahlquist noted this might require a change in thinking about social media as educators often hold negative views of social media and attempt to avoid it altogether. Rather than avoiding it and discouraging its use, Ahlquist recommended that educators embrace its potential to enrich students’ learning and enhance their ability to express their identities. As an example, educators could create Twitter accounts that allow them to communicate with students on a platform familiar to them. This would open up communication

between instructors and students and also allow students create a learning network where they could support each other in their learning objectives.

However, in implementing more educational social media in higher education, it is important that students feel comfortable in expressing their identities online. If they feel inclined to do so, they should also feel comfortable testing out different identities as the college age is a formative and fluctuating time in many students' lives. Ahlquist (2015) suggested educators could help students feel more comfortable using educational social media by encouraging digital safe spaces that are private and allow for both real and anonymous profiles, depending on the preference of the student.

### **Identity Performance Online**

Buckingham (2008) made the observation that issues of performance are an important component of identity formation and change, noting increases in social media, integrity, and honesty have become intricately linked with performance and online identity. Many questions can be asked related to identity and performance such as, are you who you say you are? Did you really do what you said you did? Increasingly complex social interactions are transforming social relationships, communications, and ways of interacting. An interesting question that has arisen is how technologies in themselves affect or influence our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the role of our perceptions in identity shifts and modifications. Discussions are now taking place about how young people "write themselves into being" via mobile phones, which have become online platforms moving far from merely being a phone that is mobile and constantly accessible (Buckingham, 2008). With today's younger generations, the construction of identity is also aligned with the new consumer culture and with perceived freedoms of

expression and communication. Identity formation for youth through social media has been extensively researched as youths have been immersed in modern technology from a young age (Buckingham, 2008). However, as the general population also increasingly utilizes social media, the effect on all age groups deserves research as well.

### **Cultural Identity and Social Media**

Young people and students also wrestle with the change from an ethno-nationalistic perspective to a much more global cosmopolitan perspective (Kim, 2011a). This change in perspective often creates a conflictual relationship with national cultures and localism. The conflict between these two perspectives also shapes the emerging identity female international college students are creating. Hogan's (2010) identification of exhibitions and the theory of lowest common denominator are relevant to these emerging identities shaped through social media. Exhibitions are a form of self-presentation such as personal descriptions on social media profiles. They are fluid and continually curated according to time, space, situation, and audience. In the virtual space of social media, this curating allows the individual to exert control over digital content related to their impression.

Exhibitions become highly important in self-presentation to an audience because the lowest common denominator is considered (Hogan, 2010). For example, a person might not post a status that would upset a family member because they know their family member is a part of their audience, even if the post was unrelated to that family member. That family member (or perhaps multiple family members) is considered the lowest common denominator. As female international students manage their emerging identities, their exhibitions and considerations of the lowest common denominator

become crucial in navigating potential conflicts that might arise from their existence in two distinct cultures.

**Cultural identity and online expression.** Identity can also mediate a person's use of social media to express themselves. Marissa (2013) studied how Indonesians used Twitter to learn English. It was found in the process of reading and writing in English, the participants negotiated their identity and sense of self. Four dimensions of the identities of the writers were key to understanding this process. The first dimension was the autobiographical self--the personal identity participants presented in their use of Twitter. The second dimension was the discursal self--where participants constructed their identities through the act of writing on Twitter. In the third dimension, the "self as author" was how authoritative and confident an individual felt in writing about various subjects including his/her own thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Lastly, the possibility for selfhood involved a process of continually constructing and reconstructing the three previously mentioned dimensions. This final dimension took place through the use of Twitter. As the participants used Twitter to both express themselves and learn English, Marissa found the creation and interpretation of texts on Twitter were mediated by participants' identities. Marissa further explained that language, writing, identity, and social life were inseparable. Language development and the process of writing are phenomena that can ultimately shape identity. As language and writing were performed on Twitter by participants, participants had to continually negotiate and construct their identities in relation to others with whom they were interacting online.

A study that examined two conflicting portrayals of race and ethnicity was conducted by Boutte-White (2011) in which she investigated the effects of media

portrayal of African American females on their emerging racial and ethnic identity during adolescence. She found media portrayal of African American females was in general negative, demeaning, and one-dimensional. There were three specific types of African American females. “Mammy” was portrayed as obese, a house servant, with little or no pay but devoted to the Caucasian household in which she worked and for whom she provided extensive support. A second image was “Jezebel,” which was portrayed as sexually promiscuous, provocative, single, and alluring. The third image was “Sapphire”--a wise-cracking, smart-mouthed, aggressive woman who degrades men but is professionally successful. This negative portrayal of African American females delivering destructive messages led to feelings of humiliation, rejection, and poor self-esteem, affecting how young African-American girls forged their identities.

Boutte-White (2011) sought to extend the current research on the struggle of adolescent African-American girls to form their identity and develop their self-worth by examining specifically both positive and negative media portrayals of African American females. She administered three self-report scales and three surveys to 118 African American girls aged 13-18 who attended a middle school or high school in an urban district in Texas. Significant findings of this study were (a) exposure to either negative or positive images was significant in forming racial identities but not ethnic identities; and (b) the more exposure to these negative or positive images, the stronger the influence upon the development of racial identity (Boutte-White, 2011). Positive images influenced the development of a positive identity, whereas negative images influenced the development of a negative identity. Her conclusion was media were a powerful factor in shaping the development of a racial identity; negative images only compounded

the struggle of adolescent African American girls in developing their identities. In this study, traditional media were a factor in shaping the identities of these young females. However, further research could be conducted with new media portrayals (such as digital technology and social media).

**Culture and identity maintenance.** Previous research (Kim, 2011a, 2011b) has indicated nationality, culture, and family as influencing factors in identity maintenance. In a study of Asian females, Kim (2011a, 2011b) found the experience of studying in a Western culture for an extended period of time was linked to changes in beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors such as more openness, understanding of people from different countries and cultures, more respect, and an increased use of social media for a variety of purposes.

Kim (2012) also conducted research on identity formation of international college students over time, yielding a new identity development model for international students. Qualitative interviews of international students were used to create the International Student Identity model (ISI), which has six phases: pre-exposure, exposure, enclosure, emergence, integration, and internalization. Not all international students go through each phase and many might linger in one stage or the other for the duration of their study. However, Kim contended that reaching the sixth and final phase was psychologically and socially best for international students.

The first phase for international students is pre-exposure. In this phase, students have not yet arrived in the United States and are preparing for their move and future studies. They frequently spend their time learning about American universities,

language, and culture. Their identity still heavily revolves around socially constructed cultural values, traditions, and expectations from friends and family.

The second phase occurs upon arrival in the United States (Kim, 2012). In this phase, students are exposed to the new cultural and educational atmosphere of the United States. For some students, the planning and research of the pre-exposure phase prepared them for the challenges they face. Some become increasingly independent but might still feel connected to their home culture and related identity.

Phase three is termed the enclosure phase. Students who go through this phase socially withdraw from extracurricular activities and new experiences. They do not socialize with people outside their cultural background. Kim (2012) found a majority of student participants were in this phase at the time of the study. Students were not confident about their ability to interact with Americans and international students who came from other countries and cultures. Remaining in this phase could solidify international students' culturally-based identities and not challenge them to open themselves to new cultural and social experiences.

The fourth phase students could experience is integration where they actively work to overcome identity challenges and evolve their identities. They successfully and thoughtfully reshape their identities by integrating positive characteristics of the new culture while still retaining positive characteristics of their home culture. In this phase, students' identities become increasingly multicultural. The final phase is internationalization. Students occupying this phase are capable of respecting the diverse views and practices of other cultural groups. They are more inclusive of individuals who differ from them in culture, nationality, ethnicity, religion, ideology, and behaviors, etc.



Their identity is rooted in a multicultural outlook. Kim (2012) found no student participants had reached this phase.

While some research has demonstrated changes in attitudes and behaviors as a result of being an international student, other research indicated this effect might not take place if the student felt discriminated against in the host country (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). In fact, a perception of discrimination could actually strengthen an international student's identity with their home nation and culture. These findings exemplified the fluid nature of an international student's self-identity. They also pointed to the need to consider several influencing factors when researching the self-identity of international students.

### **Identity of Saudi Female International College Students and Social Media**

When immigrant students arrive in another country, their identity can often shift as a result of exposure to a new culture even if it is widely different from their native culture. Al-Ghamdi (2015) detailed this phenomenon in a study of Saudi students who had spent 6-10 years studying in the United States. Over time, they developed what was termed "dual-cultural" identities. The students valued elements of both Saudi and American cultures. This sentiment was reflected in their everyday life. Although this study did not examine social media as a factor in this cultural shift, social media could play an important role in how international students develop and express their identities in an unfamiliar culture. This is often particularly apparent for Saudi female students in the United States as their cultural expectations and roles can vastly differ in American culture.

Sites such as Facebook are not only more widely used in the United States, they were also developed in particular social, cultural, and historical contexts that might not effectively apply to other cultures. As Kimmons (2014) explained, Facebook was originally developed by Mark Zuckerberg as a way to assist college students in their social and dating experiences. The ability to display one's "relationship status" and "interested in male/female" on profile pages is an example of Facebook's original uses and intentions. For a Saudi female international student using Facebook, these underlying cultural norms and values might not translate as well. An example is some Saudi females, according to their cultural and religious beliefs, do not add males as friends on Facebook or post their own picture on their homepages. To make Facebook more suitable to their cultural and religious backgrounds, Saudi females might either ignore or alter certain features and uses of this social media site. Thus, cultural and historical backgrounds of social media sites are important to consider in studies of social media use by international students.

Shi (2005) found while Chinese migrants used ethnic media (Chinese TV programs, movies, etc.) to emotionally and psychologically connect with their homeland, their identities were still somewhere between their home culture and their new existence in mainstream American culture. Participants of this study lived in one culture, yet consistently reconnected with a previous culture through media use. This practice not only blurred the lines between "here" and "there," it also blurred the lines between their identities in each distinct culture.

Mainstream media was utilized in the current study; however, social media use for female international college students could also be a useful way to examine identity.

For example, although many Saudi female international students still use Facebook profiles to connect with Americans they encounter, some still do not use pictures of their faces in their profiles because it is not customary or acceptable in their home cultures to do so. This could be one way some Saudi females are managing and navigating their identities in two different cultures they occupy through social media.

**Identity concealment online.** Guta and Karolak (2015) described identity concealing behaviors for some Saudi females using social media. In their study of Saudi females using various social media sites, including Facebook and blogging platforms, they found females often used nicknames and concealed personal images and information. They also frequently used multiple accounts to express different aspects of their identity depending on the chosen audience. For example, they might create one account for friends, while the other is created for family. The Internet and social media were seen as new means of self-expression. Social media and the Internet were also a way to avoid cultural gatekeepers that often regulated their everyday life and behavior in offline spaces. However, online expression was performed carefully and thoughtfully without personal identifiers rather than freely and openly. Guta and Karolak's study illuminated the way Saudi females managed cultural expectations and social media use. As this study was highly geographically and culturally contextual, it spoke to the need to compare changes that could occur for international Saudi females living in different cultures.

**Social networking and cultural adjustment.** While the aforementioned studies did not examine cultural or identity changes that could occur for Saudi female international college students in relation to social media, other studies investigated the

general adjustment experiences of Saudi females arriving in the United States. For example, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) conducted a qualitative investigation of how Saudi female international students adjusted to their new lives in the United States. A key factor in their ability to adjust was their level of proficiency with the English language. Females had a more difficult time interacting with Americans in everyday life, holding conversations, and making friends if they felt unconfident about their English skills. Another highly influential factor to their adjustment was the quality of their social support and relationships with others, which included social support from friends and family in Saudi Arabia and in the United States. Although Saudi females often found it difficult to develop friendships and close ties with Americans, those who were able to form relationships with Americans appeared to be better adjusted to their life in the United States.

One interesting finding was many females reported changes in their identity after living in the United States (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). They reported increased open-mindedness and tolerance for others. Although they originally came to the United States with the sole intention of furthering their education, they felt they learned from U.S. culture and changed in the process (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). The women reported increased senses of independence and more open personalities after living in the United States for a period of time. As social support was a key factor in their ability to adjust to living in the United States, future research could examine the role of social media in fostering social support for Saudi female international students.

**The role of religion in social media use.** Culture is an important consideration in transnational social media research, as is religion. In her research on Muslim identity and social media use, Basiony (2013) demonstrated how religion was an influencing factor on how social media was perceived and used by Muslims. The findings indicated a majority of Muslim youth not only viewed social media as a platform to express their opinions, they also believed social media is a factor in shaping the identities of young Muslim followers. Lastly, Basiony found social media helped individuals accentuate and express certain aspects of their identity including religious beliefs. For example, some Saudi females might enjoy using Facebook to post pictures of themselves wearing the hijab because it is an identifier of their religious beliefs. In this way, their religion both guides and is expressed through their social media use.

**Adapting to new surroundings and social media use.** Kim (2011a) identified that international students can experience a temporary migration upon arrival in another country. As they left behind the culture, language, and individual identity of their home country to reside in a different culture using a different language, they often found themselves forming a new identity or modifying their previous identity in response to this change. This finding also reflected Kim's (2011b) conclusions that it is through the use of electronic devices and social media that females forge their new or adapted identity as they attempt to make sense of their lives and identities during a prolonged departure from their home culture.

Participants in Kim's (2011b) study did not perceive this change or modification as a change in their identity but they all commented on how they had changed in their attitudes, perceptions, and reliance on social media for a variety of purposes. They also

noted changes in their response to people from other cultures, languages, and countries. They felt their identities had not changed but, somehow, they had changed and been changed. Throughout the interviews conducted by Kim, the participants saw their identities as shaping the way they used the media rather than the media shaping their identities. This finding did not appear in previously reviewed research but seemed to be a new finding of this study.

An examination of exactly this phenomenon in Saudi females temporarily living and studying in the United States was the focus of unpublished research conducted in the fall of 2013 by Alruwaili. Because of the influence of media and the power of electronic devices in influencing formation and changes of identity, Alruwaili's research examined the role of social media and studying in a different country for Saudi female international students as they struggled to revise their identity when moving to a very different culture. The purpose of Alruwaili's research was to investigate how Saudi female international students identified themselves through social media.

An open-ended, phenomenological interview format was employed in Alruwaili's (2013) study to investigate the perspectives of 5-10 participants who were female university students from KSA studying at a university. The findings revealed although the use of social media did not appear to be instrumental in the formation of identity, all of the participants gave some indication of how the experience of being an international female college student from Saudi Arabia extended and expanded their use of social media and how this increased use affected changes or modifications in the way these females saw themselves.

The formation and maintenance of self-identity have been impacted by technology and social media. This has occurred through exposure and participation in Internet connections and by increased mobility and familiarity with other people from different cultures, nations, societies, and religions. Especially for females, the additional factor of changing roles, responsibilities, and opportunities has had a major influence, whether experienced directly or indirectly. Social media not only have affected formation, maintenance, and revision of self-identity but also have become a means for creating this sense of identity or of the creation of several identities depending on context. A converse relationship has occurred as well--where identity has shaped the way social media are used. Identity and social media have evolved into a more complex, interactive relationship, which could prove to be an interesting area for future research.

### **Education and Social Media**

Social media are being utilized in higher education at increasing rates (Blankenship, 2011). Many educators are becoming more aware of the ubiquitous use of social media by younger generations. They are beginning to understand that rather than shunning it as a tool of learning, they can integrate it into the learning process to improve higher education (Blankenship, 2011). Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane (2011) reported over 90% of educators were aware of social media and its potential uses. Ninety percent of educators also used social media either professionally or in the courses they taught. For classroom use specifically, 80% of educators had used social media in their classes in some form as a supplement to traditional instruction (Moran et al., 2011). This included posting class material, sharing videos, and assigning social media content for students to access outside of class.

## **Challenges and Concerns Over Educational Social Media Use**

Despite the increased use of social media, educators cited challenges and concerns over its use. Moran et al. (2011) found privacy and the integrity of student submissions were the two largest concerns. Regardless, a large majority of educators (70%) still found social media tools valuable to teaching. As social media are used in higher education settings more and more, studies have examined different aspects of its use in a learning environment, e.g., how students perceive its use in education, its effectiveness, and how it can support learning by creating social networks.

The use of social media can be particularly influential on identity for Ph.D. students. Bennett and Folley (2014) explained Ph.D. students inhabit a hybridized identity as both students and professionals. They hold a multiplicity of roles that can vary from context to context, i.e., being a student in a doctoral level class versus teaching undergraduate students. This hybridized identity is intensified by the use of social media and often becomes difficult for them to manage (Bennett & Folley, 2014). Sometimes Ph.D. students in Bennett and Folley's study struggled in deciding what audience to write to on social media as they interacted with a variety of individuals who held different roles. The journey of obtaining a Ph.D. is typically a time of intense identity development. Bennett and Folley contended social media added yet another complexity to this often difficult and challenging process. Despite the aforementioned challenges, Bennett and Folley suggested social media could facilitate the creation of a community of doctoral students. It could also increase access to useful knowledge and information from other students, professors, and professionals.



One often overlooked, yet important, consideration when examining the use of social media in education is the role of culture (Xu & Mocarski, 2014). Xu and Mocarski (2014) investigated the educational use of social media by Chinese and American university students. They found American students were more likely to view social media as important and useful educational tools than Chinese students. Xu and Mocarski suggested culture should be heavily considered by higher education when looking to employ educational social media as it is an important factor in how social media are received by students coming from different cultural backgrounds.

**Educational social media use and Saudi females.** Some scholars have been interested in how students perceive the use of social media in education overall. While much of this research has been conducted in the United States with American students, some studies have been conducted with students of other nationalities. For example, Kutbi (2015) examined undergraduate Saudi female students in Saudi Arabia using various forms of social media in one of their courses including blogs, social network sites, virtual worlds, vlogs, and content-sharing applications. A majority of the students preferred the use of social media in the classroom for several key reasons. For one, most students were already highly familiar with social media and used them on a daily basis. It was easy for them to begin using such a familiar medium for learning purposes. Another reason they enjoyed its use was it gave them the ability to interact with others and socially support each other in their learning aims. This collaboration improved their learning as they were able to easily exchange knowledge and ideas with each other.

However, it is important to note this study by Kubti (2015) was conducted with Saudi females in Saudi Arabia. The higher education environment of Saudi Arabia is

quite different from the United States. The females of this study were in a single-sex university so they did not face the potential issue of interacting with males via social media as would most likely occur in the United States. Also, the professors who directed the use of educational social media in this study were Saudi so they were culturally aware of how certain requests and expectations would be received by the students. Likewise, no students of this study expressed concerns with cultural or social aspects of their identity with regard to educational social media. Thus, more studies of this nature might need to be conducted with Saudi females in different cultural settings to further understanding on this topic.

Al-Harhi (2005) examined social interaction of Arab students in an online course through discussion boards. These students were pursuing degrees in the United States, which allowed the researcher to better understand the cultural dynamics and pressures that could occur for students experiencing educational social interaction online while immersed in a different culture. Results indicated online social interaction in the course was particularly difficult for Arab females. These participants often worried their interactions with males in the course would bring shame to themselves and their families. Additionally, they felt uncomfortable when American students openly mentioned what they perceived as “inappropriate” topics and words. For these females, the use of social media in the classroom was not readily easy or helpful to their learning because of the cultural barriers.

Of crucial note, however, was no profile photos were used in the course in this study. Al-Harhi (2005) explained this lack of physical identification might have helped ease some pressures for the Arab students as the experience felt more private and

anonymous. In many other courses implementing social media, professors asked students to upload a picture of themselves. This might especially be the case when social media tools are used in education rather than incorporating social interaction into an online course as was the case for this study. Posting a picture of one's face can be particularly troublesome for some Muslim females as many believe other males should not be able to view their faces online. These females might face a dilemma when choosing between their beliefs and requirements of the course. Thus, it might be necessary to examine courses that call for a profile picture to gain a better view of how Arab females perceive educational social media in relation to their cultural and religious identities.

**The role of the course instructor in educational social media.** The course instructor can play a crucial role in the success or failure of students' experiences with educational social media. Hourigan and Murray (2010) examined the use of blog writing in a university course. They found instructors needed to provide thoughtful structure and guidance for the blogs to be successfully implemented into the course. Students often expressed hesitation when asked to write reflective blog posts but their apprehension could be assuaged with direction from the instructor. Receiving guidance and validating feedback helped students feel more comfortable in writing blog posts. Hourigan and Murray's research pointed to the influence instructors could have on how useful and beneficial social media in education could be for their students.

Rambe (2013) also called for greater attention to the role of the instructor in creating a successful social media space for learning. In studying university students' use of Facebook, Rambe found many students had concerns about educators judging their profiles and a possible invasion of privacy. The students felt interacting with educators

online might make personal information less secure, jeopardize their academic careers, and influence educators' perceptions about them. Rambe claimed these fears and concerns could be alleviated if educators adopted certain approaches to implementing social media in the classroom including emphasizing engagement (including with the instructor and between students), ensuring safe communication, and implementing a clear protocol regarding individual privacy and information security.

### **Social Networking Communities and Education**

Education has been evolving in our increasingly technological society and continues to do so (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Learners are now able to access information instantly to solve problems and answer questions. In the past, such problems and questions were typically addressed through learning institutions such as schools, libraries, and universities. Today, learners are able to consult vast databases of information and knowledge through networked online technologies. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) explained this has led learners to become more autonomous and informal in their learning styles and expectations of the process of learning. Although slow to act at first, universities and higher learning institutions are now taking notice of a changing learning landscape and incorporating digital and social networking technologies into the learning experiences they provide.

Gee (2000) also described social networking, the formation of communities of learning, and the affinity identity molded to correspond to the particular community. Even when different communities are similar, such as communities of scholars or communities of graduate students, there are still alterations to identity. For example, Saudi female students studying abroad have formed their own communities to participate

in shared experiences and dialogue, utilizing social media, networking, and online exchanges. A new community to emerge just recently is that of Saudi female students who have received their doctorates, returned home but remained in contact despite large distances, and to stay in touch with friends made abroad and with professional contacts often made at professional conferences on specific interests.

One of the main purposes of educational social media is to foster collaborative learning. Students are encouraged and expected to interact with one another. Interactive behavior is seen as a means of improving the learning process through the exchange of opinions, ideas, and dialogue (Friesen & Lowe, 2012). Friesen and Lowe (2012) contended social media must also help to create disagreement and debate in addition to simple conversation and discussion. Although students can sometimes be hesitant to engage in debate with other students, debate is an important element of social learning that can help students think about topics from differing perspectives. Creating a sense of community in educational social media can encourage these types of interactions and improve the quality of collaborative learning by helping students feel comfortable in an educational social media space.

Lim et al. (2013) used the concepts of CoP to create learning networks in Malaysia through social media. Connectivism occurs when students purposefully form connections through a social network to create a community based on a shared learning interest. These types of communities are termed CoPs. On an individual level, persons are able to create their own personal learning network, which is a personalized online learning community surrounding a person's particular areas of interest, study, and educational goals. Lim et al. demonstrated the utility of social media in fostering these

types of relationships as they can ultimately lead to communities that enhance and supplement the learning process.

Ahlquist (2015) pointed to the potential of digital communities mirroring traditional learning communities in university residence halls. Upon arrival at the university, students could be asked to join digital communities where groups of students take courses together, have shared advisors, etc. This allows students to support each other academically. They can be centered around shared majors, interests, campus organizations, etc. These digital communities could be supported by offline activities that bring individuals together face-to-face, e.g., meeting to study for a test.

### **Social Networking Communities and Educational Goals**

Dalton and Crosby (2013) offered an overview of the ways social media could transform many of the goals and objectives of higher learning institutions. For one, social media have the capability to make students more engaged in educational activities. Social media also make educational resources more easily accessible and useful to students who are able access those resources from a variety of sources (laptop, mobile device, etc.). Social media also have the capability to nurture friendships and communities among the student population. Additionally, digital technologies such as social media can allow institutions and educators to communicate important information instantaneously to students. Lastly, social media can encourage positive relationships between students and educators. Dalton and Crosby recommended universities and educators take notice of an increasingly digital world and work to integrate it into the educational system in positive and beneficial ways.

To advise and assist higher education institutions in implementing social media in the classroom, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) developed a framework for using social media to foster self-regulated learning and personal learning environments. Self-regulated learning occurs when learners are able to autonomously engage in the learning process through their own motivation to learn rather than being motivated through external motivators. Personal learning environments are understood as online spaces that allow students to tailor learning to their personal needs, pace, and interests. Dabbagh and Kitsantas described three levels of interactivity that occurred through the use of educational social media. They explained these three levels are crucial to the success of educational social media and should be considered by higher education practitioners.

The first level is personal information management. In this level, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) states educators need to help students use social media in a way that allows them to perform self-regulated learning. The goal is to encourage students to create and manage their own content (such as blogs, journals, calendars, etc.) in the process of learning about a subject or topic. The second level is social collaboration. Educators should encourage social collaboration by using interactive features of social media sites such as comment sections. This allows students to create a collaborative learning space and support each other in their learning goals.

Lastly, level three involves information collection and management. This level occurs when students use social media tools to collect, synthesize, and manage information and data produced from the previous two levels. Students are capable of controlling their personal learning environment by collecting information they find most valuable and essential to their learning. They are also able to reflect upon their learning

experience and evaluate their mastery of the subject or topic. Educators can assign these activities to students and guide them through it. Overall, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) emphasized the importance of helping students develop the skills to self-regulate their learning experience through technological tools such as social media.

Social media have also been used to provide resources and information to students who are adjusting to new programs of study. Ryan, Magro, and Sharp (2011) investigated the ability of a Facebook site to assist first semester doctoral students in adapting to the program. A majority of participants were from other countries than the United States so various cultural and program-related tips were posted to the account each week. Students were also able to have discussions, share observations, and ask questions. Through interview data, Ryan et al. identified three main themes related to students' perceptions of the site. First, students found the site highly useful for knowledge and information sharing. They also felt the site eased apprehension and concerns related to the program and adapting to a new culture. Lastly, students believed the site was a tool for socialization and community building. Ryan et al.'s study demonstrated the utility of social media in helping students adjust to a new culture and educational program.

Social media are not only used in education to foster learning in the classroom and provide useful information, they can also be a source of social support for college students. DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, and Fiore (2012) researched how a social media site aimed toward university students could create a sense of social support for incoming students. The students were asked how they felt the site would help them adjust to college life and make meaningful connections with other students. They found



a majority of students surveyed found the site beneficial and believed they would be able to cultivate strong social support systems upon their arrival (DeAndrea et al., 2012). According to DeAndrea et al., social support is a highly influential factor in the ability of incoming students to positively adjust to college.

DeAndrea et al.'s (2012) study illuminated a core element of social media use in educational settings--the creation of a community. The social media site in this study was found to be successful not only because it was a source of information for incoming students but also because it fostered an online community that improved students' perceptions of social support (DeAndrea et al., 2012). This social support helped them feel better adjusted to their new life at college. Students were able to ask and answer questions about the university and discuss various topics related to college life. They were also able to join groups based on shared interests and residence halls. These features helped make the social media site more than just a means of distributing information to students; it was a way for students to socially connect and build communities.

### **Online Communities**

The Internet has become a social space that helps individuals connect with friends, acquaintances, family, and professional and educational contacts (Hung & Yuen, 2010). In the social interaction that occurs online, individuals often come together to create communities. While some communities occur organically as a result of social interaction online, others can be purposefully created for professional or educational purposes. Hung and Yuen (2010) investigated the use of a social media site as a supplement to traditional or face-to-face college courses at two universities in Taiwan.

Guided by the concept of CoPs, Hung and Yuen designed the site in a way that encouraged social interaction, knowledge sharing, inquiry about the course, and building a community centered on the course. Participants expressed an increased sense of connectedness and community as compared to a solely face-to-face classroom experience. They found it helpful to ask questions or receive feedback from others. Additionally, a majority of students were in favor of the use of social media as a supplement to the traditional classroom.

It was important to note, however, that some students found the inclusion of social media challenging. This typically occurred with students who were unfamiliar with social media. Hung and Yuen (2010) contended this finding demonstrated the need for instructors to take learner characteristics into account when looking to integrate social media into a course. This study offered quantitative understanding into how social media could impact academia. However, Hung and Yuen called for further in-depth, qualitative research to advance scholarly knowledge of this subject and its various complexities. Interviews were particularly recommended as they give deeper insight into participants' perceptions and views about social media in education.

The current generation of young people is frequently termed "digital natives" as they have grown up surrounded by technology and spend considerable amounts of their time online and on social media (Davis et al., 2015). According to Davis et al. (2015), scholars are increasingly calling for educators to pay attention to the unique characteristics of this digital generation and find ways to implement technology into the classroom. In a comprehensive review of published literature on the subject, Davis et al.

found not enough research has been systematically conducted on the variety of benefits of social media use in higher education.

### **Web 2.0 Technologies**

In studies that have been conducted on the subject, it was found universities often view social media as a one-way communication tool where interaction among the institution and its educators and the students is limited. Davis et al. (2015) recommended universities move away from this style of social media use and toward what is termed “Web 2.0” technologies. Web 2.0 technologies are collective spaces where students can contribute to the content provided (Davis et al., 2015). This collaborative space allows for the creation of a community through social interaction and collective efforts. Davis et al. called for more research on how collaborative social media technology could connect students and create a sense of community. They also called for more investigation into the benefits of student communities created through social media.

### **The Central Role of Communities in Successful Social Networking Sites**

An overview of research on social network sites (social media) and a brief history of how these sites developed over the years was conducted by Ellison and Boyd (2007). Some of the more successful social media sites were those that were able to foster communities and social ties. Most of these communities were based around shared characteristics, interests, or previously existing membership in offline groups/communities. The people of these online communities might not necessarily know each other but typically have ties to each other in offline spaces. For example, an individual might join a Facebook network for the university they attend so they can interact with other students. Social media sites increasingly follow this trend of

community creation and social networks more closely reflect offline social spaces (Ellison & Boyd, 2007). Accordingly, Ellison and Boyd found most studies on the topic suggested the primary purpose of social media sites was to sustain pre-existing social ties in offline spaces.

According to Ellison and Boyd (2007), social media can strengthen networks of individuals as they offer a typically easily accessible space for social gathering and interaction. This could especially be the case for groups of individuals that often cannot gather together offline, e.g., teenagers or those geographically distant from each other. As noted by Ellison and Boyd, an important category of research on this topic deals with the influence of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and gender on the use of social media to foster online communities. These factors raise questions about how identity is both tied to and shaped through social media interactions. The interaction among identity, community, and social media is an area of research that merits further investigation (Ellison & Boyd, 2007).

**Social self-efficacy and online communities.** An essential element of online communities is social self-efficacy (an individual's beliefs about his/her abilities to confidently interact in an online community) and social trust (how well an individual believes he/she can trust other individuals in the space and the community as a whole) (Sheng-Yi et al., 2012). In their study of online communities on Facebook, Sheng-Yi et al. (2012) suggested social self-efficacy positively influenced social trust, which in turn supported the social health and strength of the community. The researchers contended social trust is fundamental to social interactions and community creation online even

when online communities are an extension of offline interactions as is typically the case for online communities.

**Collective self-esteem and online communities.** A factor in an individual's willingness to participate in an online community is the level of collective self-esteem he/she holds for the group (Barker, 2009). Collective self-esteem is how much value is placed on membership to the group. Some individuals might perceive the group as socially undesirable or unpopular, while others might feel proud of their belonging in the community. Barker (2009) discovered individuals were more likely to participate in an online community through social media if they had positive collective self-esteem toward the group. In addition, females were more likely to demonstrate higher positive collective self-esteem, which led to greater communication and interaction in the community. If individuals felt a community was important their identity and sense of self, they were more likely to actively participate in it and believe they stood to benefit from it (Barker, 2009).

**Identity and online communities.** Akkaya's (2012) research also pointed to the links between community and identity in her study of the use of Facebook by Turkish-American females. The participants of the study were a group of females involved in a faith-based service/volunteer movement called "Hizmet." Akkaya found the females used Facebook to maintain social ties and create a meaningful community centered around the practices of their Muslim faith. As the online community supported the practice of "tefani" (religious friendship and brotherhood), it was essential to their identities and everyday lives (Akkaya, 2012). The community they created on Facebook

not only supported their involvement in Hizmet, it also helped sustain the kind of social connections they found fundamental to their Muslim identity.

Facebook's role in maintaining social connections was magnified when many of the females moved to dispersed geographical locations (Akkaya, 2012). Without social media, it could have been much more difficult for them to maintain their friendships. While the women's online relationships initially developed from offline interactions, the online space later became central to the maintenance of their ties. Another interesting finding was the females had developed ways of using Facebook that were particular to their community and identity as Muslim females. Akkaya (2012) explained the females used the features of Facebook to take measures to avoid talking about others behind their back as this type of behavior is looked down upon in Islam. For instance, females would often tag someone in a picture or post on Facebook even if the person was not there or involved in the event. This was done to make sure the person would receive a notification and know what was going on at the time.

Finally, Akkaya (2012) discovered the female's use of Facebook became a performance of community. Community was a continually performed action demonstrated through particular discursive techniques, various social practices, expressions of emotion, certain narrative practices, and ways of exerting control over their level of privacy on Facebook. According to Akkaya, the various ways the females used Facebook to suit their cultural, social, and religious needs meant they were able to give meaning to the mediated medium of Facebook.

## **Theoretical Foundation of the Study**

### **Self-Identity Theory**

Identity is defined as the multitude of meanings associated with an individual and is located in both a personal (self) and social space (Hitlin, 2003). Self-identity is essentially how an individual understands themselves (Giddens, 1991) and is developed through one's perceptions of themselves. It is not static and can change over time (Giddens, 1991). Self-identity is not only shaped by individuals and their perceptions of themselves. Rather, self-identity is a social process influenced by personal relationships and one's place in a larger societal and cultural context (Erez, 1993). Thus, the development of self-identity takes place largely through socialization.

Self-identity takes places through identity construction (Papacharissi, 2010). As Papacharissi (2010) explained, identity construction is a process in which people observe and organize their experiences into a sense of self. However, individuals do not simply collect experiences to develop their self-identity, they also continually process these experiences and construct their self-identity through interactions with their experiences (Papacharissi, 2010). Papacharissi also noted other scholars have emphasized the role of social networks and social power dynamics in creating self-identity. In this view, the societal and cultural structures of society can cause an individual to constantly negotiate his/her self-identity to fit within societal structures and boundaries.

### **Values and Self-Identity**

Values are a key component to the construction and maintenance of one's self-identity. Values are one's guiding principles and consist of five characteristics: (a) they are personal beliefs, (b) they relate to desirable behaviors, (c) they direct the performance

and evaluation of behavior, (d) they are not limited to specific situations or events, and (e) they are ranked according to importance (Hitlin, 2003). Values exist within both a personal and social space. Some values might be tied to one's membership in a larger social group (such as a religion), while others are viewed as one's personal values (Hitlin, 2003).

Hitlin (2003) argued values are central to self-identity and the primary factor in the development of one's identity. Through a process of self-reflection, individuals observe and examine events and behaviors according to their values. For example, if a person values generosity, he/she might give someone money. They then process this behavior as a reflection of their identity as a "good person" because it aligns with their value of generosity. Values work to help an individual determine the meaning of events and behaviors, which ultimately shapes his/her knowledge of self and self-identity.

### **Self-Identity, Social Identity, and Behavior**

According to some scholars, an essential component of self-identity is social identity (Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999). This view contends individuals evaluate and describe themselves largely based on their belonging to social groups. Social groups can refer to a variety of categories including class, race, sex, religion, nationality, etc. People tend to process their behavior through their understandings and stereotypes of the various groups to which they belong. Certain behaviors either belong to the group or are part of the "out-group" (Terry et al., 1999).

A social-based self-identity can relate strongly to actions and behaviors. Terry et al. (1999) explained when people strongly identify with a social group, behaviors related to the characteristics of the group can often be predicted. For example, if a person



identifies as health-conscious, he/she is likely to perform what is perceived as healthy behaviors (e.g., exercise) as they believe that is what healthy people do. The stronger a person identifies as a belonging to the group of healthy people, the more likely he/she is to perform a wide array of healthy behaviors (Terry et al., 1999).

However, social identity does not necessarily need to be present to predict behavior. Personal or self-identity is also a predictor of behavior. Researchers examining the link between self-identity (e.g., “I am the kind of person who donates blood”) and actual behavior (donating blood when given the opportunity) found self-identity could predict behavior (Terry et al., 1999). When measuring both social identity and self-identity, it was found the combination of both social and personal identities was the strongest predictor of behavior. For example, identifying as an environmentalist (social membership in a group) and the kind of person who recycles and performs other various environmental behaviors (personal identity) could strongly predict the actual performance of environmental behaviors such as recycling (Terry et al., 1999).

### **Singular Self-Identity**

Some scholars on self-identity view it singularly, i.e., there is one, single identity held by the individual (Waggoner, 2009). This is termed a singular self-identity. Giddens (1991) described self-identity in an individualistic manner, explaining self-identity is a continuous, consistent narrative about oneself. The self is reflexively understood by the individual and created through personal interpretations of oneself rather than being simply based on objective traits or characteristics. Waggoner (2009) explains Giddens’ description of the self assumes a singular self-identity as it consists of one narrative about oneself and does not fragment into different parts.

Giddens (1991) believed the self is not divided as self-identity exists as one's inner core. He stated one remains relatively constant in his/her narrative about him/herself even across various settings and types of interactions (Waggoner, 2009). Later, however, Giddens did admit this core is continually shifting rather than remaining a stable core as he once believed (Waggoner, 2009). However, he never wavered from his notion of a singular core of self-identity even if this core tended to shift and alter in different situations.

### **Multiple Self-Identities**

As mentioned, other scholars contended self-identity is not a singular core, even a shifting one. Waggoner (2009) noted some feminist scholars questioned the idea of a core in the first place, saying self-identity is actually a fragmented multiplicity of selves. These selves might even contradict each other and do not necessarily exist in harmony. Self-identity has no core at all for these scholars and exists in a variety of situations, narratives, and contexts. As Waggoner (2009) further explained, these scholars see self-identity as strategic and purposefully manipulated by the individual. A part of one's identity might be better suited for certain situations as compared to others. Thus, the individual lives in a state of flux from one moment to the next, switching from one narrative of the self to another. Different self-identities can also be employed depending on the individual's needs and wants outside of a certain context (Waggoner, 2009). Essentially, self-identity is flexible and fragmented rather than a singular core of self-identity.

## **Self-Identities Online**

Online technologies have created additional questions about the nature of self-identity (Papacharissi, 2010). Scholars such as Giddens (1991) pointed to a mediated experience that could be occurring during online interactions. Papacharissi (2010) explained online interactions often exist on a continuum from personal to professional. This causes a user to negotiate his/her identity online. They find some elements of their self-identity might conflict with each other depending on the nature of the online interaction. Thus, individuals fluctuate between different identities to appropriately interact with others in any given online situation. This becomes especially apparent when individuals begin to build relationships online (Papacharissi, 2010). Connections with others based on a part of one's self-identity confirms and validates that part of one's identity. This can especially occur on social media sites.

### **Summary**

Social media are an increasingly important consideration in literature on self-identity, education, and community. The literature covered in this chapter sought to increase understanding about identity and social media, educational social media, online communities, self-identity theory, and the possible role all of these concepts play in the lives of Saudi female international students. As the U.S. educational system continues to receive large numbers of Saudi international students each year, it is important for educators to understand how to implement social media in the classroom in a way that serves students of all cultural backgrounds.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter covers the methods and procedures applied in conducting this study and underlying theoretical foundations and assumptions including the statement of the research questions, descriptions of the study design, method of data collection, research instruments, researcher stance, and trustworthiness. A qualitative approach employed semi-structured interviews with 14 Saudi female international students.

The purpose of qualitative research is to obtain complex, extensive, and detailed understanding of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). One way qualitative research can be conducted is through the perspective of participants. Termed a phenomenological approach, it allows participants to take an active role in the research as their words and stories constitute the data of the study (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research has many characteristics that set it apart from quantitative research: the collection of data in natural settings, collection of data directly through interactions between the researcher and participants, employing an inductive approach, and employing an emergent design that requires the researcher be prepared to change or modify any aspect of the inquiry process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is an appropriate method for investigating problems and issues through in-depth, exploratory techniques and instruments.

The purpose of this research study was to address a gap in literature concerning the role of social media in the lives of Saudi female international college students as they adjust to living and studying in a culture vastly different from their home culture. When Saudi females migrate to the United States, their social media use might change and increasingly mirror social media use displayed by American students. Living in an environment that heavily emphasizes social media use to foster social connections and express identity could influence Saudi female international college students to use social media in this manner. Utilizing qualitative research to further examine this topic allowed the researcher to gain insight into the social media use and identity of Saudi females studying in the United States.

The focus of this study was guided by the following research questions:

- Q1 How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the United States and while studying in the United States?
- Q2 How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the United States?
- Q3 What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the United States?

### **Theoretical Framework of the Methodology**

This research utilized an interpretive, qualitative theoretical approach and methodology--a phenomenon is examined in a self-reflective manner to understand that phenomenon from eye-witnesses and participants in that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In particular, a phenomenological approach guided the exploration of lived experiences of female international college students from Saudi Arabia and the meaning they attached

to forging or altering their identity when using social media. Within a phenomenological approach, a transcendental perspective was taken that emphasized the descriptive experiences of the participants rather than the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2007).

Methodologically, transcendental, phenomenological, qualitative inquiry focuses upon data gathered in words the participants use in describing their experiences and seeks to understand the meaning of these words based on the idea that meanings are constructed both individually and collectively as individuals engage with the social world (Merriam, 2009). Methods used to gather these data included interviews, informal observations during the interviews, field notes during interviews, and review of documents-- interviews were extensively used and sometimes exclusively as a source for data.

This research was conducted through the lens of “self-identity theory.” Implementing a theoretical framework is central to any research study as it describes the researcher’s orientation and way of understanding a phenomenon (Mertens, 2008). Self-identity theory contends identity is shaped in a constructive manner through individuals’ perceptions of themselves and the influence of others around them (Giddens, 1991). This understanding of identity guided the methodology approach of this study. As Mertens (2008) explained, it is especially important to describe one’s theoretical lens when conducting qualitative research because the researcher is intensively involved in the collection and interpretation of data. Rather than feigning complete objectivity, researchers can disclose their particular theoretical lens and explain how it will guide the process of research (Mertens, 2008). This study assumed identity is constructive and

flexible as described by self-identity theory. This notion of identity guided the collection and interpretation of data throughout the research process.

For any type of research, it is important to outline the researcher's theoretical framework (Mertens, 2008), which defines his/her view of knowledge and how knowledge can be understood. In qualitative research, the researcher is particularly immersed in the research process. Rather than attempting objectivity, researchers purposefully view themselves as a tool in the process of research (Mertens, 2008). The researcher's theoretical framework shapes both the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. For this reason, it is important to understand the researcher's theoretical framework and how it impacted his/her research. As a form of qualitative research, this study embraced this viewpoint on how knowledge is constructed.

### **Epistemology**

Merriam (2009) defined epistemology as the assumptions and beliefs about what constitutes knowledge, what knowledge is, and what its characteristics are. Two basic but very different views about knowledge persist in scientific inquiry today. First is the view that knowledge is apart from the observer, that the observer seeks to find this knowledge objectively, and that it is finite, measurable, and obtained through empirical methodologies. The second point of view is knowledge and knowing can never be separated from the knower, humans perceive and interpret their experiences influenced by social and cultural factors that cannot be isolated from the perceiver, and knowledge is not found but constructed through the lens of these social and cultural factors (Merriam, 2009).

This research aligned with the second type of epistemology, i.e., the research was guided by the assumption that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower, which was the researcher in this case. Within this type of epistemology, meanings are created by humans through an interpretive process of engaging with the world (Crotty, 1998). Although data were interpreted as openly and objectively as possible, the researcher was aware the interpretations could not be fully separated from personal experiences and one's social and cultural background.

### **Social Constructivism**

As a belief system about the nature of knowledge, constructivism asserts realities are constructed by both individuals and groups, knowledge is seen as dynamic and changing in contrast to static, and this knowledge is negotiated within groups rather than absolute (Harasim, 2012). Constructivists view reality as a socially and culturally influenced process of creating knowledge to establish meaning (Harasim, 2012). In constructivism, individuals develop a variety of meanings surrounding different concepts or things, which means a constructivist researcher searches for complexity in individuals' viewpoints (Creswell, 2007). To find this complexity in meaning, the researcher heavily relies on participants' own views and interpretations of any given phenomenon or concept. These meanings typically do not occur solely at the individual level; rather, they are negotiated socially, culturally, and historically (Creswell, 2007).

Methodologies utilized by constructivists are as divergent from the objective paradigm of behaviorism and cognitivism as their theoretical and philosophical stances (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research methodologies are more focused upon exploration of a problem and developing an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon.



Also, the purpose and research questions are stated in a way that allows for the inclusion of perspectives from participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). Typically, the number of participants is small but there is considerable volume in collecting the data that are most often expressed in words from participants' points of view. Analysis of these data does not rely on statistical methods but rather in the search for text analysis and interpretation of larger meanings underlying the data (Creswell, 2012). Finally, when writing the report of the research, authors use flexible, emerging structures and include their own subjective bias and reflexivity as they write in a more narrative style (Creswell, 2012).

When applied to research, social constructivism requires the interview questions be open and broad. This gives participants the opportunity to create their own meanings and interpretations (Creswell, 2012). The role of the researcher is then to carefully listen to those meanings, which places the researcher in the position to adequately analyze participants' responses and place them in a cultural, societal, and/or historical context. Researchers are also required to be upfront about how their own personal and cultural backgrounds might influence their perceptions and analyses (Creswell, 2012). The researcher aims to make sense of participants' statements; thus, the findings are a combination of participants' own meanings and the interpretations of the researcher.

Constructivism is closely tied to phenomenological methodology--a type of methodology that examines how individuals make sense of their experiences and draw meaning from them (Merriam, 2009). Applying a constructivist framework and phenomenological methodology to this study allowed me to better understand how Saudi

female international students interpreted their experiences in the United States with regard to identity and social media use.

### **Researcher Stance**

As the researcher is the agent for gathering and analyzing data, it is important the researcher maintain reflexivity in which biases, beliefs, and assumptions are examined and explained so others can better understand how the researcher arrived at interpretations and conclusions (Merriam, 2009). This technique recognizes it is not possible or even feasible to eliminate researchers' values and beliefs. Rather, one attempts to suspend these values and belief as much as possible to reduce his/her influence in the research. As a Saudi woman studying in another country, I might have shared many beliefs with my participants; however, I consciously aimed to distance myself from my own beliefs and experiences as I sought to understand the perspectives of my participants. However, I realize my personal beliefs and assumptions as a Saudi female international student could have possibly influenced how I conducted my study and the conclusions I reached.

While in I was in Saudi Arabia, social media existed but was not used often. When I did use it, I had to be under supervision of my family. Supervision of teens and young adults while they use social media is a common practice in Saudi Arabia due to fears online predators could take advantage of young people on the Internet. These fears have some basis in reality as profile hacking, information theft, and online threats are not uncommon in the Middle East and often go unpunished. Similarly, I was required to conceal all personal identification such as my photo, my real name, where I lived, and where I attend school, etc.

I later arrived in the United States to pursue my master's degree. At first, it was difficult for me to adjust to a vastly different society and educational culture. The differences became even more apparent when I took an online course that required me to discuss topics with other students and post a profile picture. I already felt somewhat uncomfortable being in discussion groups with males (as males and females are separated in schools in Saudi Arabia) but I especially did not feel comfortable posting a picture of my face for others to see. Other Saudi female students were in the class with me so we tried to convince the professor to let us not post a profile picture. In the end, we were still required to follow through with her request. However, we slightly blurred our pictures to attempt to conceal our identity. As I gained more familiarity with American culture and took more classes, I began to feel interacting with others online was not as dangerous as I once thought. As a result, I felt more comfortable sharing personal information on social media, e.g., my real name, the university I attended, etc. These experiences led me to become curious about the influence of culture on identity in relation to social media use. My unique perspective and experiences were inevitably part of this research but personal biases and beliefs were suspended (Merriam, 2009) throughout the entire research process to be fully open to what might appear.

### **Participants**

When conducting qualitative research such as interviews, purposeful sampling is typically the most appropriate sampling selection strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Purposeful sampling is applied when the researcher aims to gain in-depth insight from his/her sample by selecting information-rich participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This allows the researcher to gain a large amount of insightful, useful data from a small

number of participants. Snowball sampling is the most widely used form of purposeful sampling. This type of sampling involves first selecting one or two participants who clearly fit the criteria for participating in the study. These initial participants are then asked to help the researcher recruit other participants for the study who might also fit the criteria. This process is continued until the researcher feels he/she has collected the right number of well-qualified participants for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher aimed to recruit a minimum of nine participants who might be both graduate and undergraduate students until saturation was reached. Fourteen participants were recruited using this approach.

Participants were purposefully selected to meet certain eligibility criteria and ranged in age from 18 to 40 years. To be eligible, participants had to fit certain criteria. First, they had to be Saudi. Second, they had to be female. Third, they had to also be students enrolled at a university. Lastly, they needed to have been living in the United States for at least two years to ensure they had had enough exposure to the U.S. environment including the culture, educational institutions, social norms, etc. In addition, one feature of Saudi culture needed to be explained--the general principle of separation of males and females. In KSA, each gender attends schools exclusively for that gender; social occasions are organized around gender and most day-to-day activities and interactions are separated by gender. Since I am a female, it was not just appropriate to study female students only, it was a necessary part of Saudi culture.

### **Setting**

This study took place with students from three different universities located in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States. These universities have been given the

pseudonyms of University A, University B, and University C. Interviews took place in university libraries in a separate room to reduce distractions and facilitate audio recordings of the interviews.

### **Procedures**

I adhered to the following procedures in conducting this study:

1. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained to conduct the study (see Appendix A).
2. I contacted one or two Saudi female international students via email or text (see Appendix B and C) and asked them if they would like to participate in the study (if they fit the criteria for participation in the study). These females were provided with a consent form that explained the details, assured them of their confidentiality, and any possible risks associated with participation in the study were delineated (see Appendix D).
3. I then asked the initial participants if they knew of any other Saudi female international college students who would also be a good fit for the study. These possible participants were contacted by email in which the purpose of the study was briefly explained, they were asked to participate, they were assured of their confidentiality, and they were provided with a consent form.
4. Once all 14 participants had returned their consent forms, I assigned a unique code for each participant and only these coded names were used throughout the research.

5. I then scheduled interviews with each participant.
6. I began the study by collecting interview data from each participant (see Appendix E).
7. After the sample of participants was selected, and consent forms signed and received, individual interviews were scheduled for each participant. Interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, concluding with the request to draw pictures reflecting how they saw themselves both in Saudi Arabia and in the United States; they were recorded electronically.
8. Electronic recordings were later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. In addition, I took handwritten notes throughout each interview. This allowed me to record anything that was particularly notable or stood out during the interviews.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected from audio-recorded, open-ended interviews of 14 individual Saudi female international students. These interviews took place in person at an agreed-upon location. During the interviews, handwritten notes were also taken through informal observations to collect more detailed data. Although the interviews were recorded and could be referred to at any time, taking notes throughout the interview allowed me to record any interesting observations or thoughts I had during the course of the interview.

Although this research followed a general framework for collecting data (number of participants, predetermined interview questions, etc.), more data could be collected if deemed necessary. For example, more participants could have been recruited or further

questions could have been asked during the interviews. This aligned with the qualitative nature of this study and ensured adequate data collection. Upon completion of the interview questions, participants were requested to draw pictures of how they saw themselves in two contexts: Saudi Arabia and the United States.

### **Instrument**

An open-ended, phenomenological, semi-structured interview format was employed to investigate the perspectives of 14 female university students from KSA. A series of semi-structured interview questions was asked of each participant. The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions written before the interview took place but were purposefully worded in a flexible manner. Questions were a mix of open-ended and structured questions, such as “yes or no” questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This type of interview allowed me to guide the interview with pre-constructed questions but also gave the participants the freedom to respond fully and openly (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although a list of questions was used for structure and guidance, the exact wording and order of the questions was not predetermined. By employing semi-structured interviews, I could also respond to participants in real time and ask further questions as they arose. There was also the possibility of follow-up questions that were sometimes given to obtain more specific and in-depth data.

In developing the interview questions, I included a variety of types of questions to initiate responses from participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) listed six different types of questions an interviewer should include to elicit detailed and useful responses: background/demographic questions, behavior/experience questions, opinions and values questions, affective questions, knowledge questions, and sensory questions. The

interview questions for this research mostly fell in the categories of background/demographic questions, behavior/experience questions, opinions and values questions, and affective questions. These types of questions yielded varied and detailed responses and helped answer the research questions as they encouraged participants to express their experiences and feelings toward the topic. To gather even more detailed and descriptive data, many questions asked participants for specific instances or examples while still remaining open-ended. For example, some questions led with statements such as “tell me about a time when...” or “what was it like for you when...” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 121).

### **Data Analysis of Transcripts**

Qualitative data analysis is a process of making sense of the data through consolidation, interpretation, and meaning-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This process can take place through coding of the data. Coding is the method of assigning short-hand symbols to different elements of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Symbols can be single words, numbers, colors, etc. The purpose is to make specific parts of the data organized and easily retrievable.

Data analysis did not begin after the interviews were completed and transcribed, however. Data analysis is a continual process for qualitative research that also takes place when notes are being taken during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, it was important for me to take detailed notes during the interviews so I could note trends in the data, interesting findings, and specific characteristics of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The notes taken during interviews were stored and analyzed separately from raw data collected.



### **Themes and Sub-Themes**

Data gathered from these interviews were analyzed through an inductive coding process. The first step in coding was to transcribe the data. This was considered a step of the data analysis process as it was a chance for me to gain insights about the data. After transcription, the data were examined carefully. In this stage, an open coding scheme was used to take notes about any themes or phenomena that might be appearing. I followed the data wherever it led and was open to anything that might emerge in this stage. Rather than applying preconceived codes to the data, I attempted to answer the research questions of the study by allowing the data to speak for itself through the expressions and opinions of the participants.

This careful examination and process of openly assigning codes led to category construction. Categories are larger conceptual themes that contain many singular examples or smaller pieces of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). When constructing categories, the data were reexamined with the codes created in the previous step. These codes were grouped together according to likeness and shared overarching themes. Broad themes were developed along with sub-themes that fit underneath larger, overarching themes. Themes and sub-themes were guided by the research questions of the study.

I coded emerging themes and common ideas, which were verified by an external researcher familiar with qualitative research. After an extensive review of the data and initial coding in the form of common or significant words, phrases, and bits of data, common ideas were categorized and summarized. This grouping phase of coding is called axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Techniques such as epoche (suspending

researcher biases), bracketing, graphic diagrams (such as Venn diagrams, scatterplots), and reclassification of categories into schemes were employed throughout the coding process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This process was repeated until saturation was reached--that point when no new information, interpretations, and conclusions appeared.

### **Data Analysis of Artifacts**

The participants were asked to describe and explain the pictures they drew of themselves. This conversation was electronically transcribed and transcripts were utilized in conjunction with the actual drawings to derive similarities and differences between the pictures and the meaning ascribed to these similarities and differences. In addition, my reflections, notes, and insights were used to analyze the artifacts.

### **Data Handling Procedures**

Several practices are recommended for storing and handling data. First, a researcher should always create backup copies of data when using computer files (Creswell, 2007). Computers have become more widely used for data storage but are not always as reliable as hardcopies of data as they can crash or have other technical issues that cause a loss of data. Secondly, researchers should conceal the names of participants when storing data (Creswell, 2007). Lastly, researchers should create an organization scheme to ensure they can easily locate information if needed in the future (Creswell, 2007).

All hardcopy data, e.g., handwritten notes, were stored in a locked file at my personal office. I possessed the only key to the file. All electronic data were kept in an Excel file and secured by password protection on a Mac laptop. This Excel file was highly organized to assure data would be easily located if needed. The data were backed

up on an external file storage website that was password protected. Names and any identifying information of participants were concealed through the use of anonymous code names. None of the data were shared with others except the four committee members directing this research. All of the audio recordings will be destroyed at the end of three years.

### **Trustworthiness**

Several techniques were utilized to assure the data gathered and the analysis conducted were rigorous and authentic. Merriam (2009) described these techniques as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in place of the traditional internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity of quantitative research. Credibility of the data and findings are key to the internal validity of a study. Credibility refers to the degree findings obtained are congruent with reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Researchers can help ensure their study is credible through several different techniques: triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement with the data, logging notes and details about the study to increase consistency, and ethical considerations.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is a means of strengthening the internal validity of a study through two or three strategies of checking the data for its credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Several means of triangulating data included offering the opportunity for follow-up interviews. Triangulation through optional follow-up interviews was employed to strengthen validity of the data. Participants were given my contact information and informed they had the option of arranging a follow-up interview if they wanted to do so. This was a chance for participants to fully express themselves if they felt they wanted to

further clarify responses, felt the interview did not go how they would have liked, or if they thought of additional information after the interview they would wanted included in the data.

### **Member Checks**

Member checks were also conducted to further increase credibility of the data. This strategy was a way to solicit feedback on emerging findings. Member checks helped eliminate the possibility I misinterpreted and/or injected my own perceptions and biases into the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Once interviews were transcribed, participants were sent the transcriptions via email. They were asked to look over their transcribed interview and inform me of any mistakes or parts of the interview they wanted to further clarify. Once the interviews were initially analyzed, participants were contacted a second time and asked to check for any misinterpretations or incorrect perceptions of their perspectives. I then took participants' comments into account and reanalyzed the data if necessary.

Other techniques to increase dependability and consistency in efforts to control for bias were audit trails, often in the form of researcher journals or logs of processes (Merriam, 2009). These audit trails provided evidence and documentation of the steps, procedures, decision-making processes, and critical thinking employed in all aspects of the research project processes. These audit trails consisted of reflections, insights, questions, and ideas throughout the research such as how and why data were collected, coding and concept formation, derivation of categories and themes, and logical processes behind decisions made in carrying out the research. These audit trails also illuminated problems, issues, and any obstacles I encountered. They served as a running record of

my engagement with all the data obtained detailing how the research was conducted, how data were analyzed, and conclusions reached.

### **Adequate Engagement with the Data**

Adequate engagement with data is another technique to ensure credibility. This process involves the collection of data until no more emerging findings and repetition are occurring (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I employed the technique of adequate engagement when collecting data until the research reached saturation. This technique was used at several stages of data collection including determining the adequate length of interviews, determining the number of participants that needed to be interviewed, and how many questions should be included in the interview.

Consistency is the degree of dependability or consistency of results with gathered data and can be strengthened by training and experience of the researcher, conducting pilot studies, and creating an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). A journal or log was kept in which careful details were noted and described about how data were gathered, analyzed, and how decisions were arrived at throughout the research process. Reflections, insights, and questions were also included.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues can often emerge during the collection and analysis phases of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although ethical guidelines are available to researchers, it is mostly the researcher's responsibility to ensure the ethical rigor of his/her study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Several ethical considerations were carefully taken into account throughout the course of this study: providing full descriptions of the study and potential risks to participants, providing information on mental health

assistance if necessary, requiring participant consent, ensuring their anonymity, and limiting researcher bias.

The consent forms provided to participants outlined the purpose of the study and explained possible risks associated with participation in the study. Due to the nature of the study and interview questions, the only potential risk to participants was they might have uncomfortable emotions arise during the course of the interview. As they talked about their identity as Saudi female international students and how their identity related to their experiences, they sometimes discussed difficult memories or feelings. This risk was minimal overall and was mitigated by also providing participants with information on mental health services available to them. If they felt the need, they could access this resource and talk with a trained therapist about their feelings. However, this risk was also further mitigated by a possible benefit to participants from discussing their feelings. The interview might have provided an opportunity for participants to vent their emotions and gain self-awareness.

Another ethical consideration taken was requiring all participants to sign and return a consent form. This helped ensure the participants had a full understanding of the study they were participating in and were willing to participate. I also guaranteed anonymity of the participants by protecting their identities as this was another crucial ethical component of research. The participants were given pseudonyms and had their data securely stored. Finally, I aimed to limit bias during every stage of the research. This was a key element of ethical research as I might have had the opportunity to perceive data through my own biases and subsequently ignore or misinterpret pieces of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Summary**

The aim of this research was to explore the connections among identity, community, and social media in education for Saudi female international students. Qualitative research principles were used to explore these concepts and answer the research questions of the study. Specifically, in-depth interviews of Saudi female international students were utilized. The ultimate goal of this research was to use the findings to create recommendations for educators on the best practices for implementing educational social media with students of different cultural backgrounds such as Saudi females.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of this study and describes the themes that emerged from the Saudi female international college students' responses. These themes were developed in relation to the following research questions that guided this study:

- Q1 How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the United States and while studying in the United States?
- Q2 How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the United States?
- Q3 What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the United States?

After reading and rereading all of the transcripts and notes taken during the interviews, I identified recurring words, phrases, and similar ideas. Certain concepts appeared repeatedly in the interviews so these concepts were developed into the following themes: identity as a Saudi, female, Muslim, and student; identity changes after arriving in the United States; social media and the expression of identity; the role of communities in the lives of Saudi female international college students; and the impact of educational social media on Saudi female international college students. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes.



Table 1

*Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes*

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes
1. How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the United States and while studying in the United States?	Saudi female international college student's identity in Saudi Arabia and in the United States	Feeling more closed off in Saudi Arabia
		Becoming more open in the United States
	Social media and the expression of identity	Becoming more independent in the United States
		Expression of identity online while in Saudi Arabia
2. How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the United States?	The role of online communities in the lives of Saudi female international college students	Expression of identity online after coming to the United States
		Protecting privacy online
		Seeking information from social networking communities
		Social media and maintaining relationships with communities
3. What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the United States?	The impact of educational social media on Saudi female international college students	Cultural roles and social media communities
		Enjoying social interaction on online educational sites
		Feeling uncomfortable posting pictures on online educational sites
		Feeling comfortable posting pictures on online educational sites
		Cultural expectations and Saudi male classmates
Suggestions for professors using educational social media		

Identity was expressed by these females often with regard to the roles they fulfilled in their lives including being a woman, being a Muslim, being a student, and being a mom. Regarding the expression of identity through social media, several words were used over and over: being careful; not using pictures of themselves; using nicknames; and using pictures that represent aspects of their identity, meaning, and personality such as photos of their children or a picture of nature. Some behaviors changed for these female students after they came to the United States such as using real names instead of nicknames but others did not, e.g., not using pictures of themselves. Another recurring theme was changes in their identity after coming to the United States, which involved changes in the women's views, becoming more open, having more contact with others, greater appreciation and respect of people from other backgrounds, living a more independent lifestyle, and feeling more sociable.

The females often explained social media were used to express identity but there were differences in how it was used in Saudi Arabia and in the United States. Another theme throughout the interviews was online communities were important to the females and social media were used to maintain these communities. With regard to educational social media, females continually expressed they enjoyed online educational tools and interacting online but they still felt uncomfortable posting pictures of themselves online (even after a professor's request) and had reservations about interacting with Saudi males in a classroom setting. Finally, the females provided constructive suggestions for professors looking to include educational social media in their classrooms.

### Participant Demographics

This research was conducted with 14 Saudi female international college students studying in the United States. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 40 and were either undergraduate (5) or graduate (9) students. All of the participants had been living in the United States for more than three years and some of them had been living in the United States for eight or nine years. All of them had traveled outside of Saudi Arabia at some point before coming to the United States. They varied in terms of being married or not. All of the participants indicated they used technology and social media often, typically on their phones and computers. Table 2 provides an overview of the participant demographics; each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identity.

Table 2

#### *Overview of Participant Information*

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Length of Time in the United States	Student Level
Renad	35-40	Married	6 years	Graduate
Fahdah	25-30	Married	5 years	Graduate
Ahlam	35-40	Married	8 years	Graduate
Suzan	35-40	Married	8 years	Graduate
Maha	18-25	Not Married	8 years	Undergraduate
Samah	25-30	Married	6 years	Undergraduate
Huda	18-25	Not Married	3 years	Undergraduate
Haya	35-40	Not Married	8 years	Graduate
Waad	18-25	Married	5 years	Undergraduate
Rahaf	35-40	Married	9 years	Graduate
Dalal	30-35	Married	7 years	Graduate
Faten	30-35	Married	4 years	Graduate
Duaa	18-25	Not Married	3 years	Undergraduate
Elham	30-35	Not Married	8 years	Graduate

## Themes

### **Identity as a Saudi, Female, Muslim, and Student**

As the opening question of the interview, the female participants were asked about what personal identity meant to them before questions relating to the research questions were asked. Some concepts appeared repeatedly in the answers the participants gave. Participants often described their identity and its meaning as being Saudi, a female, a Muslim, and a student. Each participant might not have necessarily said all of these identities applied to them at once; often a combination of two or more appeared in each individual answer. However, all of these identities appeared for many of the females. Thus, these descriptors were identified as the strongest pieces to these participants' identities overall.

For example, Fahdah described her personal identity in several ways: "It means my name, it means me as person, it means the stuff maybe I like or I don't like and stuff I'm working on, like I'm a student, I'm a teacher, I work, and I'm a mother." Fahdah's identity came from her personal thoughts and opinions, what she does with her time, and her role as a mother. Suzan found personal identity in information about herself and her religion. She answered the question about personal identity by explaining, "Personal identity, it's who I am, like my names and my personal information. This is my identity, my religion, and my ideas. This is what I think is identity." Maha saw her personal identity in a similar way to Suzan. She said, "To me, personal identity is my name, my first and last name, my age, my gender, my ethnicity and race, and my religion." Faten in particular found her personal identity resided in her religion. To describe her personal

identity, she stated, “I describe myself as a Muslim, and I use my scarf to define my identity. This is what I basically found out about myself here in United States.”

When asked what personal identity meant to her, Ahlam described her identity using several of these descriptors: “I am a woman, a Muslim woman. A Saudi Muslim woman. I am a Ph.D. student.” Dalal also used these descriptors to answer this question, stating, “My personal identity is where I am from, and I am from Saudi Arabia. A Muslim female that came here to seek her goal of getting her Ph.D. degree.

Q1 How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the United States and while studying in the United States?

In response to the first research question, many of the participants expressed their identity had changed in some ways after coming to the United States. A phrase used repeatedly was “more open,” which was how the participants described changes in their personalities and identities after spending some time in the United States. After being asked about how her personal identity changed since arriving in the United States, Duaa stated, “I think I'm more open now and since I arrived here in the U.S., I think I'm the one who'll go and talk to people. Before they used to come talk to me and I would be shy about it.” The participants had different experiences in the United States as compared to Saudi Arabia. For one, Saudi Arabia was seen as a more closed environment that led their identities to be more closed as well. The United States was a more open environment for the participants and gave them greater independence.

The differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States also led to differences in how females used social media. In Saudi Arabia, females had very high privacy concerns and often had reservations about sharing any kind of personal opinion

online. In the United States, their use of social media expanded (using more sites and applications) and they became somewhat more open on social media. Some measures were still taken to protect privacy such as not showing one's face on social media. Rahf explained how her use of social media changed after coming to the United States:

Actually when I came to United States, I have more freedom, but not a lot more. It's a little bit. In social media, still, they can see me in Saudi Arabia using social media. It's improving a lot. I became more loose, more relaxed, more comfortable using social media while I'm in United States, but in Saudi Arabia, I have to follow my culture's rules, so I can't use it very openly.

Rahaf's feelings about her use of social media in the United States as compared to Saudi Arabia seemed to be reflected in her drawing (see Figure 1). Her drawing symbolized her increased openness after coming to the United States with a book that is closed in Saudi Arabia and mostly opened up once in the United States.

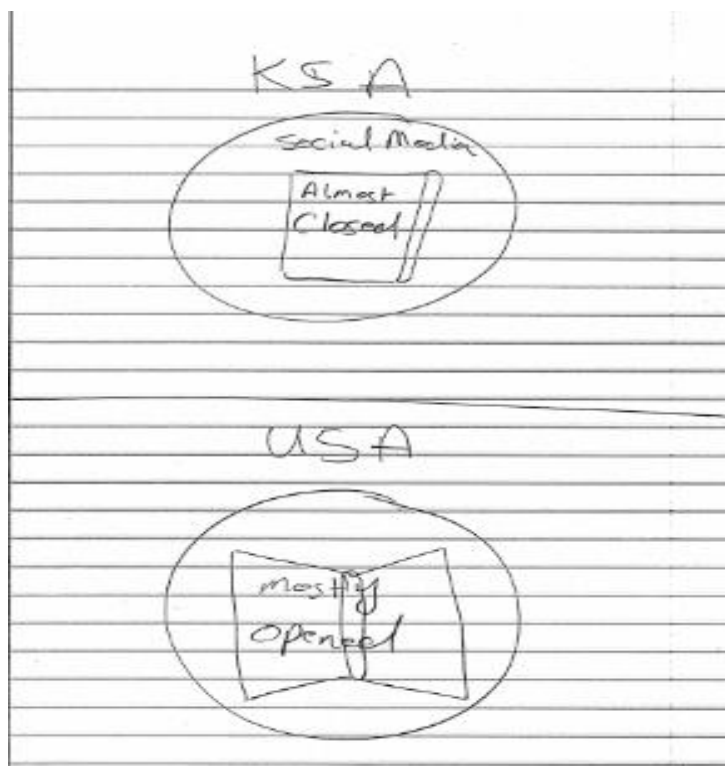


Figure 1. Illustration of identity in Saudi Arabia and in the United States by Rahaf.

**Feeling more closed off in Saudi Arabia.** Saudi Arabia seemed to present a more closed environment that impacted the women's day-to-day lives, identities, and use of social media. The society of Saudi Arabia made the use of social media very difficult for many females. As Dalal explained, "We are from kind of closed religious society so it was hard for me to share almost anything on social media while I was in Saudi Arabia."

Several factors about Saudi Arabia created challenges to using social media openly including the culture and family expectations. Explaining how she expressed her identity online while in Saudi Arabia, Maha said, "I did not really feel comfortable sharing my identity because my parents never really told me that I should post my identity on social media." The culture of Saudi Arabia largely dictated what was acceptable and unacceptable to post and share on social media. Waad explained what parts of her identity she shared on social media while in Saudi Arabia: "I did post some picture of my family (brothers, father) in my Facebook profile. I also shared my gender, country, and city. Those things are alright to post because of the culture strictness."

**Becoming more open in the United States.** After spending time in the cultural setting of the United States, many of the participants became more open and expressive, both in their personal lives and on social media. Elham felt she became less shy and more confident after coming to the United States: "I became less shy when I do formal presentations but in social events I'm still shy but not to the same extent." She also described the factors of the U.S. educational environment that have impacted her identity: "Being educated in a mix environment and supervised by male professors who view Muslim women as brave, smart, and caring social beings." In Figure 2, Elham illustrates

how she became a more open and social person after coming to the United States; whereas in Saudi Arabia, she was a shy and closed person.

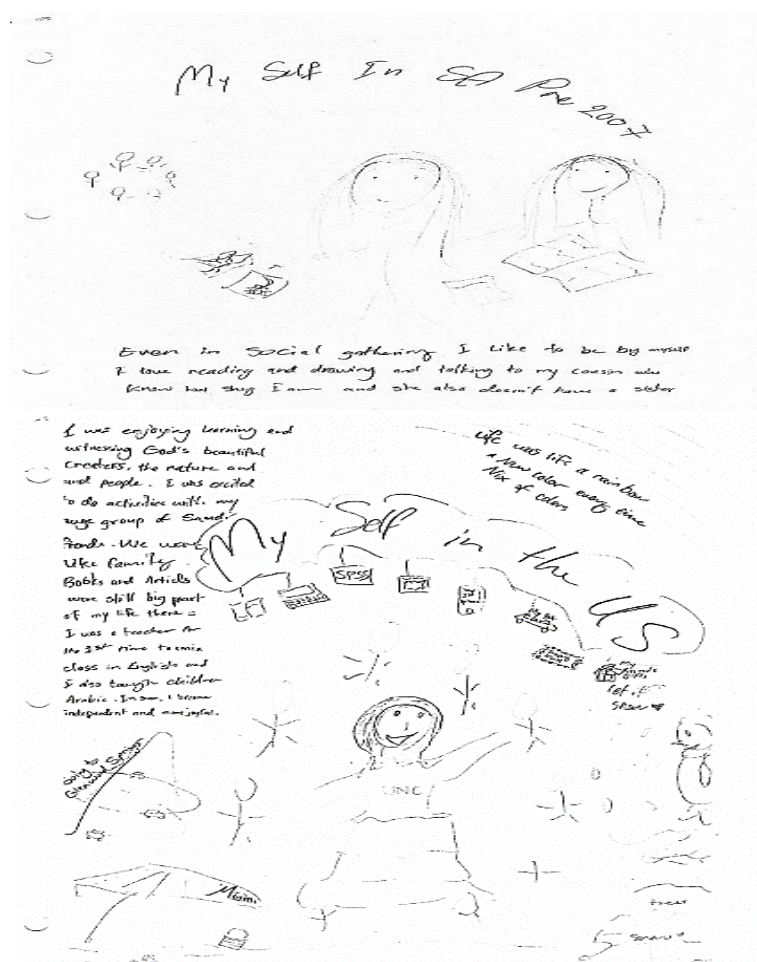


Figure 2. Illustration of the identity in Saudi Arabia and in the United States by Elham.

For some participants, social media use and online interactions changed quite dramatically after coming to the United States. Rahf expressed how her use of social media changed and added to her personality after coming to the United States:

Oh, it's changed. It's changed a lot. It's made me...I can use social media without being too strict...I can use it with a little bit of freedom with my friends, with my



family, with my classmates, with my professor also. While in Saudi Arabia, I'm very very strict.

**Becoming more independent in the United States.** In addition to becoming more open in the United States, participants also indicated they became more independent. While few females said explicitly they became more independent, several of them described new behaviors and outlooks that demonstrated their increased sense of independence in the United States. When asked how her personal identity had developed since arriving in the United States, Renad clearly expressed she became more independent, stating, "I have become more independent, more aware of the world and I became a mother so I became more protective and care about the future of my children." Huda also identified an increased sense of independence when she explained how her personal identity changed since arriving in the United States:

I feel like I started to look out for myself more and be more independent. Living in United States gave me a chance to explore myself deeper, and have a better control on my emotions and thoughts or in other words, I learned how to deal with the emotions that result from life stress.

Huda indicated she became more independent and this identity change was a positive one. Her increased independence helped her mature emotionally and deal with stress in a better way. Elham described a variety of behaviors that began after she came to the United States. While she did not directly state she became more independent, Elham described several behaviors that demonstrated her increased independence:

I was open to try new things to me in the new culture (for example, swimming in an Islamic bathing suit and playing in a water park with my friends, ice skating with my friends and their kids, going in a picnic close to the river or barbeque in Greeley or Loveland parks, wearing makeup in public and wearing pants and hijab modest colorful cloths, walking for stress relief with my friend and going to the gym, staying late in Starbucks with my laptop, articles and my friends, driving a car and speeding in the highway, and finally, having a sleepover with my female friends, which I used to not have when I was back home. In sum, I became an

outgoing and outdoor person and I didn't want to miss anything. My mom was right when she told me that I will learn a lot and overcome my fears.

Elham described many behaviors commonplace to an American but were new and different for her. She indicates the cultural setting of the United States allowed her to explore new ways of living that called for an increased sense of independence.

Fadah illustrated her increased independence after coming the United States in her drawing (see Figure 3). Her drawing showed in Saudi Arabia she was dependent on her family as described by what seemed to be a closed-off house. In the United States, however, the door to the house is open. She can be more independent, come and go as she pleases, and express her thoughts.

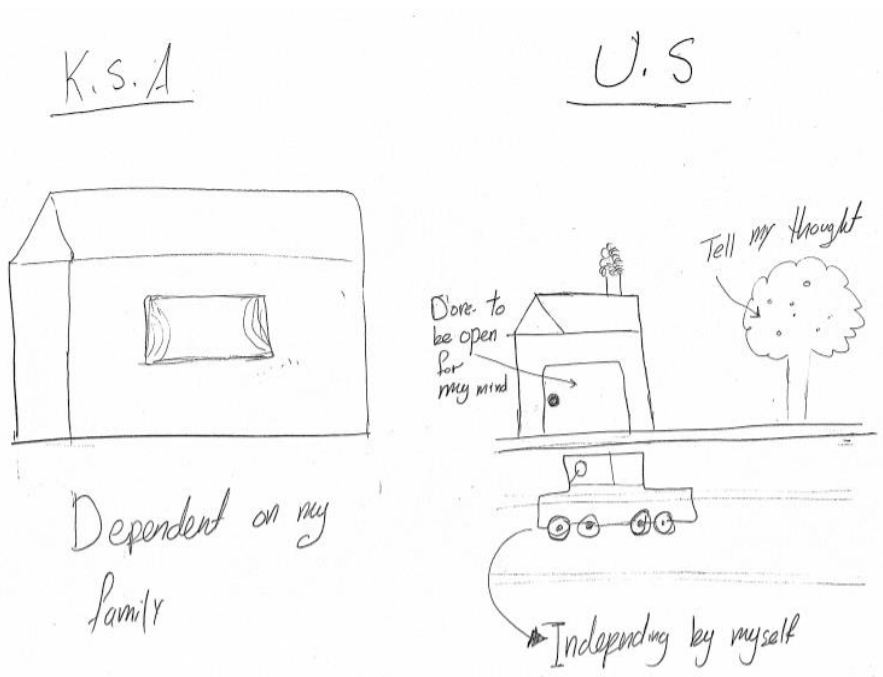


Figure 3. Illustration of becoming more independent in the United States by Fahdah.

Americans might be confused by the changes these participants described as they have lived in a culture that expects independence and sees independent behaviors as normal and common. However, independence was a new concept for the participants in this study as the culture they originated from often expected them to be dependent rather than independent. In Saudi Arabia, females must travel with a male guardian, which is typically a father, brother, or husband. For example, Elham might not have been able to stay late in a coffee shop because she would be dependent on her male guardian. The cultural setting of Saudi Arabia impacted the identity of the females and led them to be more dependent. Coming to a culture that expects, and often requires, a certain level of independence effectively changed their identities and shaped their sense of independence.

### **Social Media and the Expression of Identity**

There were several differences between social media use by the participants in Saudi Arabia and their social media use in the United States. Most of the participants became more expressive and open on social media. They were more willing to share information and certain parts of their identities. Although most of the participants became more comfortable with interaction and expression on social media in the United States, many of them still retained some measures to ensure their privacy. Some continued to use nicknames instead of their real names, while others began using their real names. A majority of the participants did not share photos of their faces on social media even after being in the United States. Instead, they would post pictures (including their profile pictures) that represented their identity in some other way such as a photo of nature or something related to Islam.

**Expression of identity online while in Saudi Arabia.** When asked about social media use while in Saudi Arabia, the participants explained they had to be very careful while using the Internet there. They shared very little about themselves and never shared photos of their faces. The participants seemed to have developed extensive ways of protecting their online privacy while in Saudi Arabia. Suzan explained how she was completely unwilling to share parts of her identity online while in Saudi Arabia:

I was trying to not share anything personal or about my identity. Even my name was a nickname. I put a nickname for me and a picture that expressed my character or something, but I didn't share even with people I know sometimes. Like, I didn't share.

Suzan took measures to protect her privacy and sometimes did not even feel comfortable sharing her identity online with people she knew. Expression of identity in Saudi Arabia was limited at best for most of the participants, sometimes due to pressures from family and/or culture. Suzan demonstrated how she viewed social media in Saudi Arabia as compared to the United States in Figure 4. Her drawing shows while in Saudi Arabia, she found social media to be a dangerous place that required measures to protect privacy as illustrated with the drawing of a devil-like figure on the computer screen and a closed door that represented privacy. However, her drawing of the computer in the United States shows smiling friends and family. The United States led Suzan to feel social media was a place to connect with friends and family and find social interactions rather than a place full of danger.

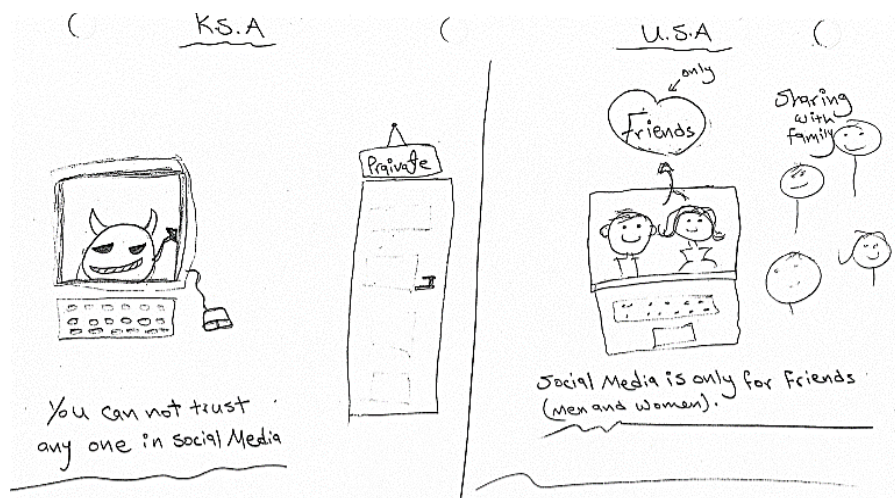


Figure 4. Illustration of social media and the expression of identity by Suzan.

Maha described how cultural and familial expectations directed what she did and did not post on social media while in Saudi Arabia:

I did not really feel comfortable sharing my identity because my parents never really told me that I should post my identity on social media. For a picture, I had a picture that is not of me, and even my name wasn't my real name, it was a nickname, I used a nickname. My parents, as a child, told me that it's dangerous to put my personal information on social media, so I never really put any part of my identity.

Because of her surroundings in Saudi Arabia, Maha was not willing to share any parts of her identity and was told sharing this information could actually put her in danger. In Figure 5, she shows her profile picture was a flower or something from nature while in Saudi Arabia but she became more comfortable making her profile picture a photo of herself while in the United States.

Duaa used several privacy measures while in Saudi Arabia as well. She said, "I wasn't willing to share any part of my identity. I didn't like to post my real name, I didn't like to post any kind of picture of me." Duaa was also unwilling to post information specific to her in some way; instead, she relied on highly generalized information that

could not be tied to her particular identity. When asked what kind of information she posted while in Saudi Arabia, Duaa said, “General information, maybe... No information about myself but more of information of like people would already know like, ‘Oh, today is National Day.’” Duaa, like most of the other females, was very unwilling to express her identity online while in Saudi Arabia.

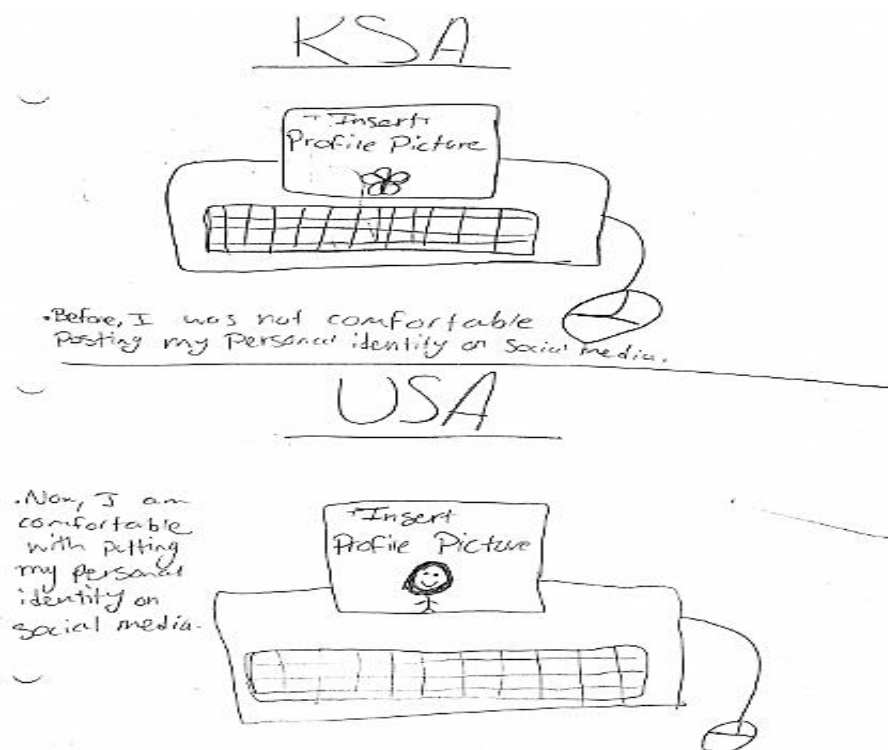


Figure 5. Illustration of the social media and the expression of identity by Maha.

**Expression of identity online after coming to the United States.** After coming to the United States, Suzan, Maha, and Duaa became more comfortable sharing parts of their identity on social media and did not use as many measures to protect their privacy as they did previously. Suzan explained how the environment of the United States impacted her views on expressing her identity on social media:

I think my identity, because the culture here is more open, compared with Saudi Arabia. There we have to hide more. As a woman I have to not show my name and a lot of things. But when I lived here like from the first month I felt okay with sharing just me and what my identity is so that people can interact with me as a person. Like, with my name, the fear of hiding my identity vanished from me, it didn't stay. This was the first thing that happened when I came here and I was even shocked for myself. I created a Facebook page for my account here in the U.S., and I put my real name. All my name, full name, even the family name, the whole thing.

Suzan was surprised by the sudden changes in her willingness to share information about herself on social media. While people in the United States might find it normal to share their full names, for Suzan it was a big step in expressing herself online. Suzan also became more comfortable sharing photos of herself online but only with people she knew. She described her current Facebook profile picture and how it was mostly private: “It is not for the public, like just for friends. In Facebook, the profile could show the picture for anyone, but they cannot see the detail about me.” Suzan described a privacy setting on Facebook that allows anyone to see a person’s profile picture as a smaller thumbnail but they cannot click on the picture to enlarge it unless they are accepted as a Facebook friend. This gave Suzan a level of privacy she was comfortable with and still allowed her to share her identity with people she knows.

Maha also became more open to expressing her identity online after coming to the United States. She began to use her real first and last name and a picture of herself, although this picture still did not show her face up close. When she was asked about how her personal identity has developed since arriving in the United States, Maha described how her personal identity changed in relation to her social media use: “I feel comfortable using my personal identity, my first and last name in social media in the U.S. compared to back home in Saudi Arabia.” Instead of using a nickname, Maha became comfortable

sharing her real name on social media, which was a change from when she was in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to sharing her real name on social media, Maha also began using a picture of herself as her profile picture. However, she still takes certain measures to protect her privacy and personal image. Maha explained her role in selecting her current profile picture:

I have two social media. I have a personal account on Instagram and a personal account on Facebook, and in those profile pictures, I have a profile picture of myself, but you can't really see me in the profile picture, you can't really tell it was me unless you personally know me.

Maha then explained further how she gave her picture this level of privacy:

It's a picture of me, but it's far away in the distance, and I have sunglasses, so you can't really see my face. It's a full-body picture so you can't identify who it is unless you really know me. Then I have a public Instagram page, it's a photography page where I post my photography, but I do not have a profile picture of myself, I just have a profile picture of one of my photos, and I do not post photos of myself.

By using a picture of herself far in the distance and wearing sunglasses, Maha navigated a balance between sharing her identity and maintaining her privacy. This allowed her to share her identity with friends and family but remain somewhat anonymous to those who did not personally know her. Maha also shared how she was influenced by the way Americans use social media. When she was asked if her use of social media while in the United States has affected her personal identity, she explained:

Yes, I think my use of social media in the U.S. has affected my personal identity because anyone could freely use their identity here in the U.S., while in Saudi Arabia a lot of people do not really use personal identity such as profile pictures, names, etc., but here in the U.S. it's very normal to use your profile picture and to put your real name, so I guess, the people around me really affected me.



Social media use is quite different in Saudi Arabia as compared to the United States; the Saudi government both censors and monitors social media (Freedom House, 2015). The United States views social media as a tool to express one's personal identity but Saudi Arabia finds the use of social media is potentially dangerous and threatening to one's identity. As a result, Saudis protect their privacy online and keep profiles unidentifiable. Maha demonstrated how the U.S. environment could influence the way Saudi female international students begin using social media to express personal identity.

After coming to the United States, Duaa became more open about sharing some parts of her identity on social media but not others. She began using her real name on social media but still did not feel comfortable posting photos of her face: "I don't post any kind of, I don't post my face in social media. I still don't like to put my picture on there but I do put my name." Duaa's drawing (see Figure 6) shows she generally became more open and outgoing after coming to the United States and it seemed she became more open and outgoing on social media as well.

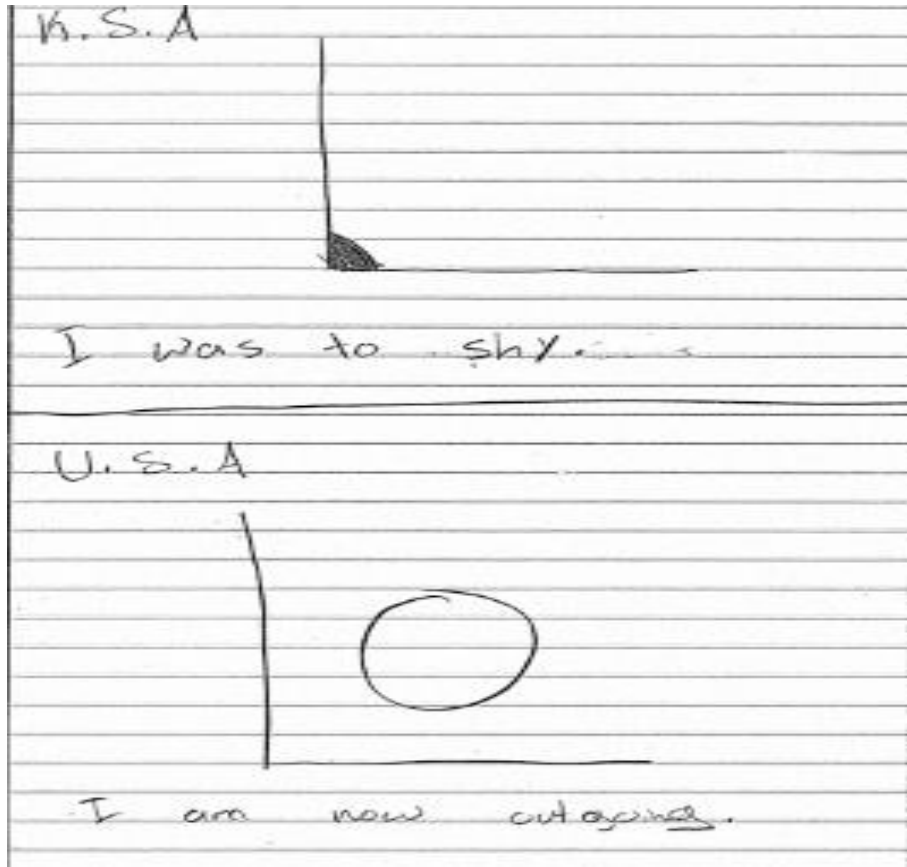


Figure 6. Duaa's illustration of expression of identity online after coming to the United States.

Not only is it often difficult to share one's personal identity online in Saudi Arabia, it is also often difficult to share personal opinions. Rahf became more open on social media after arriving in the United States and she started to feel comfortable expressing her opinions online. In Saudi Arabia, she would never post a personal opinion that could be seen as going against her culture, religion, or family tribe even if she used a nickname instead of her real name. In the United States, however, she started to post opinions under a nickname. This decision was partly due to what she noticed about how the people surrounding her were using social media. She explained, "Actually I started using this when I come here in United States. In Saudi Arabia, I was discouraged from

doing this, I felt scared a little bit...but here, I see people use it a lot of time. I feel that, why not? I can use it, it's okay." Despite feeling more open about using a nickname to post opinions, Rahf still had reservations about using her real name to post personal thoughts. Rahf was asked if she would start putting her real name when posting opinions, and she answered emphatically,

No, no, no, no. Impossible. I can't put my name if I'm posting comments about anything rejecting my culture, or rejecting my tribe, or rejecting tribe regulation, or rejecting my religion. Sometimes I post something like this, but using nickname or using hiding identity.

Rahf's quote demonstrated that although posting opinions under a nickname was a big step toward openness in her use of social media, she still felt pressure from the cultural and social environment back in Saudi Arabia to be careful to disassociate her identity from her personal opinions.

**Protecting privacy online.** Although many participants increased their openness on social media to some degree after arriving in the United States, most still had concerns about privacy and the need to protect their identities online. Rahf explained she still has difficulties posting a picture of her face online and how she manages this concern:

I have a difficult time posting my face. Like if it's myself taking pictures of myself. But if it's my body from the back or if it's me walking while hiding my face and identity, I can post it; it's okay. I'm not that strict about posting my whole body because my body is not... They don't know who I am, so I can post my children's faces or my whole body.

In answering a question about her privacy concerns online, Rahf also reiterated her concerns about posting opinions under her real name or in association with any identifiable information. "If it's against my family, culture, I will not post anything leading to me, like my children or anything else," she explained. Ahlam also expressed

reservations about expressing her identity and thoughts online in Saudi Arabia.

Explaining her concerns about having her identity public online, she said:

Yeah, I feel like threatened. If I have the people that I do know online, they know much about like my identity.... so that's why I don't post much. So how can I handle it? It's like I have to be very careful, very cautious about posting anything under my real name, like anything related to social manners, or something related to religion, or something related to open thoughts, or anything like that. I cannot do that. I have to be very careful.

As Saudi Arabia is a more closed society, which does not encourage open expression as much as in the United States, the participants remained careful and cautious about what kinds of thoughts and information they shared online (Freedom House, 2015). However, the United States seemed to provide a setting where Ahlam could open up on social media and feel more comfortable expressing her identity. This is visually represented in her drawing (see Figure 7) where she is a closed flower in Saudi Arabia but able to bloom and open in the United States.



*Figure 7.* Illustration of expression of identity online in Saudi Arabia and in the United States by Ahlam.

Samah expressed she did not have any concerns expressing her identity online. However, the reason Samah did not have concerns was because she already knew she was not going to post something that would threaten her identity in the first place. As Samah explained, “I don't have any concerns. I know myself, if there is any concern, I don't post things. I usually post natural things, or somewhere, or places I've visited, or something I did.” Although she does not explicitly say it, it is implied she knows she cannot go beyond neutral posts such as nature scenes or places she has visited.

Fahdah utilized the tools and settings made available by social media platforms to protect her identity and privacy online. She made all her social media accounts private and felt more comfortable sharing personal information on platforms that afforded greater privacy such as Instagram: “I don't have my social media stuff in public, everything is set to private. The only thing public is Twitter, and I don't post anything about my personal life.” She also explained why Instagram was particularly useful to her in protecting her privacy:

Something in social media...it's called Instagram. All these years, I was using just my nickname, but just last month I changed my Instagram to my real name, and I made my status I'm married, and I'm Ph.D. student, so I have been changing in this way. I think it's a good change.

Instagram allows a user to make his/her entire profile private so no one can see Fahdah's posts unless she accepts them as a follower. This helped her feel more comfortable sharing pieces of her identity online while still protecting her privacy.

Q2 How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the United States?

Online communities play a large role in the lives of these Saudi female international college students. A great majority of the participants shared they used

social networking communities to seek information from others, e.g., academic information, health information, and information about different beliefs and cultures.

Haya explained how she used social networking communities:

I'm looking for academic information and sometimes other information. I'm looking sometimes for information about some specific disease, healthy food, anything that develops my personality or changes my habit. I really like to read about different beliefs, different cultures, and different religions.

In this quote, Haya demonstrated how online networking communities were a valuable source of information to her and her life. Online communities were also a valuable source of social interaction for the participants. Most of them strongly expressed social networking sites were extremely valuable in maintaining community ties and relationships, especially with friends and family in Saudi Arabia. As Renad exemplified, social media platforms are important to females and help them support their relationships:

I use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Whatsapp. I connect with family and friends and I know more about the families and lives of new friends. Social media is very important, especially since I am living very far away from family and friends.

Although social media plays a key role in helping the participants maintain strong community ties, cultural roles still had influence over how they interacted with their communities. Cultural expectations could occasionally cause some friction in how the females used social media, particularly with regard to having pictures of themselves on social media. Dalal demonstrated the cultural expectations she felt in selecting a profile picture:

I think that when selecting a picture on any social media I guess I don't have a specific rule, but as long as I feel it goes with my religion and does not have anything in it to affect or offend anyone over there (in Saudi Arabia). So I am okay with selecting any picture but maybe the most important thing for me is that it follows the religion of Islam.

Dalal still felt cultural pressure when selecting profile pictures for social media but her drawing indicated she did become more open on social media after coming to the United States (see Figure 8). It seemed although she is still cautious, she is able to be somewhat more open now that she is living in the United States.

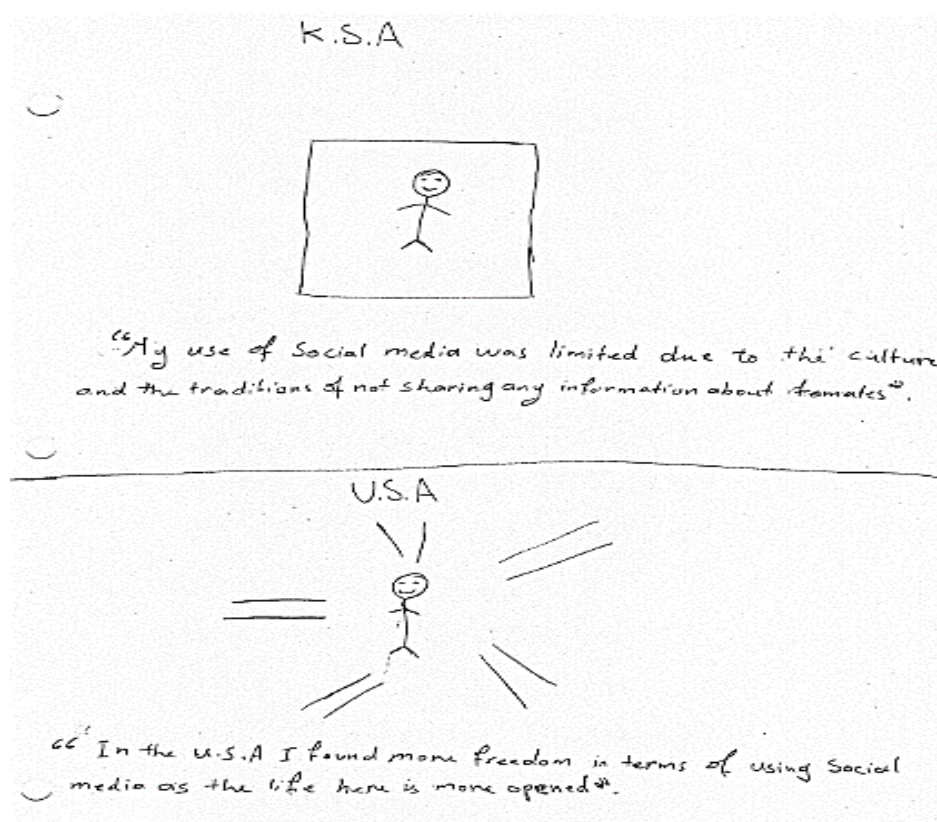


Figure 8. Illustration of social media use by Dalal.

Dalal felt she must be careful about not upsetting her online community by not following strict cultural rules. She demonstrated how several participants in the study often made choices about what to post online based on their communities.

**Seeking information from social networking communities.** The participants found social networking communities highly valuable for information-seeking purposes.

The type of information sought greatly varied from woman to woman but a common theme emerged--social media are highly valuable for seeking out information from others online. Elham used social media to poll her social networking community on how they felt about different issues and topics in Saudi Arabia. She expressed, "I survey people's opinion about a trending topic in my country. For example, who people support or object matter X and their rationale." Social media provided something an Internet search could not--it connected Elham with others so she could hear people's personal views on various topics, which went beyond gathering information about a topic and exposed her to different viewpoints.

Renad found social media particularly useful in gathering information on topics important to her. She used Facebook pages specific to her life and her interests:

I have a Facebook page for a breastfeeding group. We used to share our experiences about breastfeeding, and now we communicate about raising our toddlers. I am also subscribed to many other Facebook groups for computer science students, Saudis in the U.S., Saudis in Denver, etc.

As it did with Elham, social media provided highly valuable information that came from social interaction with others online. Renad used Facebook as a way to connect with others who had similar lives and interests to share information with them and gain information from them.

Samah used another social media platform, Snapchat, to get personalized information through the online network. She explained, "I have only one person on Snapchat, who just shows people who are in her profile about where to travel in the United States. So I added her to my Snapchat to just know where she goes, and what people usually experience in the United States." Samah did not use Snapchat for social interaction with people she knew as she only has this one person on Snapchat. Instead,



she used Snapchat to learn first-hand about the United States and the best places to travel directly from a person who shared this kind of information on the platform.

For Maha, social media provided a way of gathering information related to her education and stress that could come from her studies:

Mostly it's information based, maybe, on my studies, or even lifestyle. For example, how do I handle stress? Maybe I look for ways to handle stress, or maybe even contact a personal friend or a teacher from my social media from Facebook.

For the participants in this study, social media provided a unique way to gain valuable information and insights from others. In this way, social networking and online communities played an important role in enriching their lives and helping them stay informed about the topics they cared about.

**Social media and maintaining relationships with communities.** In addition to seeking information from online communities, social media was also an important way for the participants to remain close to their communities and keep in contact with friends and family still in Saudi Arabia. A large majority of the participants indicated social media was very important to them when maintaining their relationships. Rahaf found social media particularly useful for congratulating friends and family on life events, which was a way for her to maintain her relationships. She explained,

Actually, social media makes my relationship more deep, more strong, because I can chat with friends and family anytime I want. Also, if I do a mistake or upset someone, through social media, I can apologize. I can also congratulate them when they are having a good moment in their lives, at anytime. Because they're using social media, I can see what they do, then I can post "congratulations to you, because you got married, had a child, etc." In this way, social media makes my relationships stronger and makes my relationship last long time.

Rahaf used social media as a way to connect with her friends and family anytime, anywhere. It was more convenient and easier for her to congratulate them through social

media; she seemed to prefer social media over other types of communication such as the telephone. She felt the ability to share her happiness for them any time made her relationships even stronger and better.

Like Rahaf, Samah found social media useful for overcoming time constraints and barriers that might have prevented her from keeping in touch with her community before social media. She explained how social media helped her keep connected with friends and family in Saudi Arabia who are in a very different time zone than the United States:

Social media is very important. Actually since the time is different between Saudi Arabia and United States, I can't call my parents or my sibling anytime I want. So I just record something I want to say to them, or take a picture of my kids and send it to them.

Samah indicated she was able to communicate with her family without having to communicate with them in real time, which was often difficult because of the time difference. Social media strengthened her bond with her family and helped her feel close to them even though they were thousands of miles away.

Huda had similar experiences with social media and community maintenance as the other participants. When asked what her experiences were in using social media to meet and interact with others, she answered,

It is a very good and effective way to connect with my friends. Social media is a something we cannot live without, especially since we're living far away from home. So, it is the only way to know about our significant others and friends who live thousands mile away. I cannot live without it.

Social media was extremely important to Huda. She considered it the only way to keep up with her friends and family because of the great distance between her and them. She even went so far as to say she "cannot live without it," which showed how central it was to her life and the maintenance of her community.

Most of the Saudi participants in this study expressed the importance of social media in their lives. It was a key way they maintained community ties with loved ones and friends who lived far away in Saudi Arabia. Part of the reason social media was so important to maintain community relationships was because of its convenience. Social media tools made it easier for participants to keep in touch with those whom they cared about by overcoming barriers related to time. The participants seemed to feel without social media, they would not have as strong of a bond with their communities as they currently did.

**Cultural roles and social media communities.** Social media was very important to the participants in this study. It helped them seek out information from others and maintain community relationships. The way the participants used social media and interacted with their communities was often shaped by cultural expectations, however. Often, participants expressed they could post certain things over others or they worried about what their online communities might find out about them through social media. Waad described the kinds of things she felt she was able to post because of the strictness of her culture: “I do post some picture of my family (brothers, father) in my Facebook profile. I also share my gender, country, and city. Those things are alright to post because of the culture’s strictness.” Waad was selective about what kinds of information and pictures she posted because the culture of the online community she was a part of expected her to post certain things but not others.

Elham had specific concerns about following cultural rules and what her online community might see about her on social media. She explained the reason she did not post a photo of her face online was because of the potential consequences: “I have

concerns that my relatives brag to my father that they have seen my face. When I cover my face, I do it in respect of my father's wishes and to adhere to social norms." Elham's father was particularly culturally strict and this impacted the kinds of things she felt comfortable sharing online because she did not want to upset him. Elham was aware of the community that could view her actions online as she felt they might tell her father if she went against the culture.

Sometimes the culture of the United States clashed with the cultural backgrounds of some of the participants. Dalal was particularly culturally strict in comparison to the other participants in the study. She described a situation where interaction with an American student caused some conflict and stress. When asked to describe her concerns about having parts of her identity publicly available through the use of social media, she responded: "Actually that happened to me once. One of the students took a picture of me and posted on the Facebook without me knowing." Although Dalal's face was covered with a veil and nothing but her eyes could be seen, she felt very upset by the student's actions:

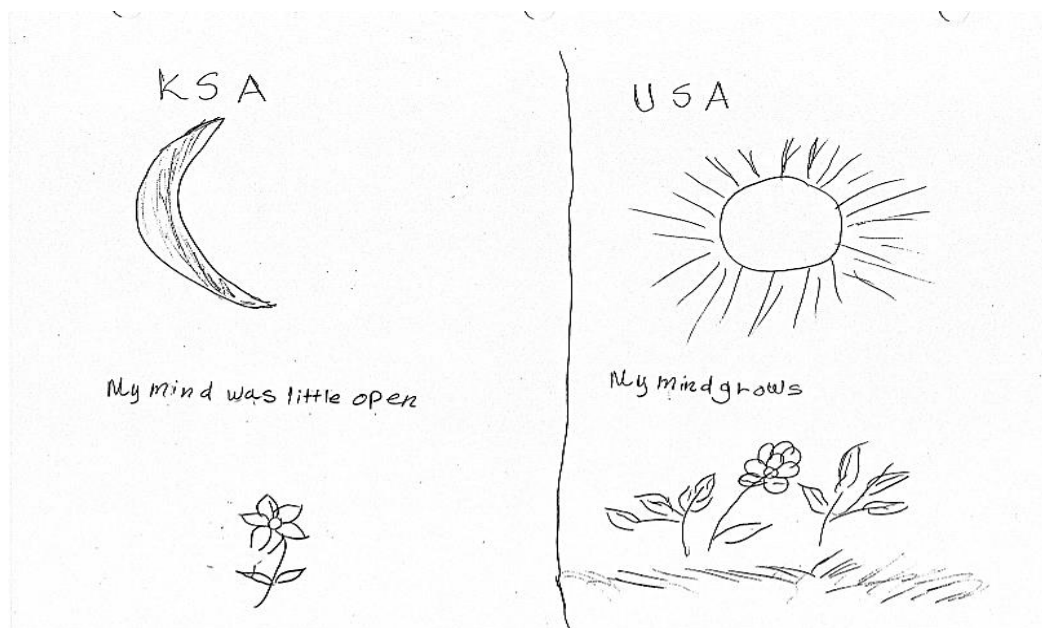
Yeah, I was covering my face but still, she should have gotten permission from me. I just asked her to delete it because for me as a female, in our country this is a special and very close topic even to talk about it, so how could she do that to me? So I think that sharing my picture on Facebook is the biggest concern. It's about sharing the picture.

Dalal's situation demonstrated how social media could lead to tension because of cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States. While not all Saudi females would have been upset with the student's actions, Dalal was because she came from a particularly strict and conservative background. Her solution was to ask the student to

remove the picture even if that made for an uncomfortable situation with the other student.

Haya became more open and comfortable with social media after coming to the United States. Her new openness made it even more noticeable that her friends still in Saudi Arabia were very closed off and private while using social media. Haya explained, “It’s okay for me to send a picture through social media without a scarf to my family and friends, but I notice that my friends never send any pictures of themselves, or their kids even, without a scarf.” While Haya saw no issue with sending a picture of herself to family and friends without a scarf, her friends in Saudi Arabia had reservations about sharing these types of photos on social media. This could be due to the fears many Saudis have about social media due to the lack of security and being potentially vulnerable to hacking and breaches of privacy. Because of these fears, Haya’s friends only shared photos of themselves with their scarf on. But if they were face-to-face with Haya in a private setting, they would not need to wear their scarf because females do not have to cover in front of each other.

Haya drew how her mind became more open after coming to the United States (see Figure 9). In Saudi Arabia, her mind was represented by one flower under a crescent moon (which seemed to represent Saudi Arabia) but in the United States, her mind grew, which was symbolized by more flowers and foliage. The United States was drawn as a shining sun that allowed her mind to grow.



*Figure 9.* Illustration of becoming more open in the United States by Haya.

For Samah, culture became less influential to her actions and thoughts in the United States as compared to Saudi Arabia. In her drawing (see Figure 10), she represented things she was dependent on while in Saudi Arabia with a circle. Everything she was dependent upon existed in that circle including family and culture. In the United States, culture and the people around her are moved outside of the circle, which indicated she was no longer dependent on them and they no longer influenced her.

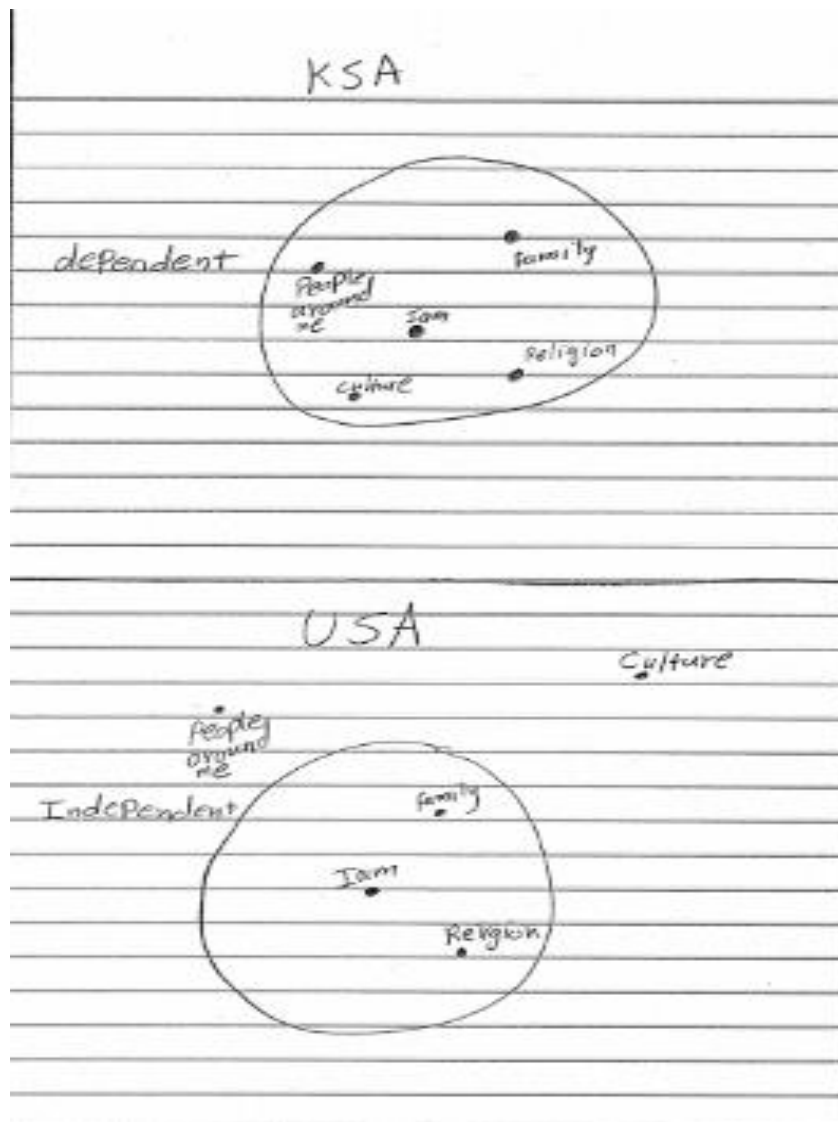


Figure 10. The role of culture in Samah's life before and after coming to the United States.

For many of the participants in this study, cultural roles and expectations influenced how they used social media and interacted with others online. Both the cultures of Saudi Arabia and the United States could influence their social media choices and behaviors but in different ways for each individual.

Q3 What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the United States?

In response to research question three, a large majority of the participants indicated they greatly enjoyed online education and interacting with others online for educational purposes. They felt online education was enjoyable and they felt more comfortable participating in discussions online than in person. They also expressed they found it useful in promoting collaborative learning and cultural interaction. Elham explained, “It’s always a positive thing to have a cross cultural conversation and the technology is facilitating more collaborative learning activities.” The participants were mixed on how they felt about posting pictures of themselves on online educational sites, even at the request of the professor. Some were comfortable and had no issues with it, while others had reservations about it. Most of the participants enjoyed interacting with other cultures in an online educational setting. However, the Saudi culture influenced how they acted on online educational sites. Finally, many of the participants offered thoughtful advice to professors looking to use online education and educational social media.

### **Impact of Educational Social Media on Saudi Female International College Students**

**Enjoying social interaction on online educational sites.** Many of the participants had positive feelings about the use of educational social media. They felt it provided many benefits and enriched their learning experiences. Maha reflected this theme when she gave an example of how she used educational social media to enhance her learning and collaborate with fellow students:



In one of my classes with 30 students, we used a Facebook page to just get information about our class, and it was very helpful. You can get instant answers. I just had to post, “When do we have an exam?” Or, “What is this exam about?” If I have other questions related to it, it will be super easy for me to get answers from the people who are in the Facebook group with me.

Maha also enjoyed online education because it helped her feel more comfortable taking part in discussions: “I feel that when you talk, maybe, behind a computer, you’ll be more confident than when you’re talking to people face to face, and you won’t feel pressured and things like that.” Social interaction was easier for Maha in an online space than face-to-face because of the separation between her and other students.

One reason the participants might have felt more comfortable in an online space was because of cultural differences in the United States as compared to Saudi Arabia. Some females might still not be used to having their face uncovered while interacting with others. While in Saudi Arabia many females cover their faces in public except for their eyes, in the United States, many of them just wear a scarf and leave their faces uncovered. It could be difficult for females to overcome years of experience with only being in front of males in public while their faces are covered. Additionally, females and males are kept separate in the educational system in Saudi Arabia, even in a university setting. When Saudi females come to the United States and are placed in classrooms with males and females, it could be difficult for them to take part in class discussions because they are not used to interacting with males in the classroom.

Samah’s positive feelings about online education seemed to exemplify the difficulties Saudi females could face when adjusting to the kind of interaction that takes place in a U.S. classroom. She was asked how she would feel if a professor asked her to join an online group of students consisting of both males and females and how

comfortable she would be interacting with the group. She answered, “Since the group will be online, I’m fine with that. It’s actually easier for me to interact with them online than face-to-face. Online is easier, because they will focus only on what I said, or what I wrote. Not on my face.”

Waad reflected Samah’s feelings about online interaction being easier and more comfortable than face-to-face. Waad was also asked about how she would feel if a professor asked her to join an online group of male and female students. She answered she would be more comfortable with this interaction than face-to-face: “I would definitely do it, and it is okay to interact with everyone regarding the gender. I will contribute and interact with everyone as much as I can. It is different from face-to-face interactions and it is easier for me because I am a shy person.”

Rahaf also felt her ability to interact with fellow classmates online was different than in a face-to-face setting. Explaining how she felt her interaction with others was different when using educational social media as compared to face-to-face interaction, she said, “Oh yes, this is a good question. When using social media, because I’m hiding behind a device, I can express myself more. I can talk more. I can explain more, but with face-to-face, I feel shy.”

Dalal spoke about how the differences between online interaction and face-to-face were largely because of what she was comfortable with and what she had experience with:

In an online group, I would be happy to be with both women and men, because it is more maybe comfortable for us instead of being face-to-face with males which I’m not that used to. When I am here in the U.S. we have to do that, but I am more comfortable being online. I would like that I can be online because I can share everything comfortably and interact better than in a face-to-face setting.

Online education provided the participants with benefits and opportunities for learning. Many found it particularly useful in overcoming barriers to participation that could occur in a face-to-face educational setting. Online education was also seen as a unique tool that facilitated learning as Faten demonstrated:

I love using social media for collaborative learning, and I'm willing to use it with my professor. We now created a website, a type of network site like a Facebook page, about my topic. We also connect with each other based on Facebook. Educational social media is a good thing if it is used in the right way.

Overall, educational social media held many possibilities for the participants and was seen as a useful tool they enjoyed.

**Feeling uncomfortable posting pictures on online educational sites.** As previously described, many of the participants indicated online discussion was preferable to face-to-face. One of the major benefits of online education was it helped them overcome their reservations about interacting with others while their faces are uncovered. Although online education provided this sense of security, it could be negated when a professor asked students to post a photo of their face on an online educational site. Saudi females are not comfortable posting photos of their faces online or even having males see their faces in public--online or offline. When professors often asked students to post a photo of their face on an online educational site, they were attempting to foster social interaction between students and help them get to know each other. A personal photo helped make students more recognizable and memorable than just a name. Professors had good intentions when they made this request and might even be surprised to find out some students were unwilling to post a photo of themselves.

Most of the participants did not feel comfortable posting pictures of themselves online, even at the request of a professor. Many of them experienced internal conflict

about what they should do as they did not want to post a picture of their faces but also did not want to go against the professor's wishes. Maha explained that while she would be comfortable posting her real name on an online educational site, she would not be comfortable posting her picture: "Maybe I wouldn't feel comfortable posting my picture, but I would feel comfortable posting my name."

Waad did not feel comfortable posting pictures of herself on an online educational site but tried to rationalize doing so to avoid going against class requirements. When asked how she would feel if a professor asked her to post a picture of herself on an educational social media site, Waad answered: "I do not like to put my picture online, so I will ask the professor permission to not share personal information, but if he/she refused I will share it. Even though I won't be comfortable doing it." However, she also explained how she tried to handle these concerns in the past during a class project:

I have some of my pictures available online as part of class project. I was very concerned then, but I said whatever, I did not do something wrong, it's just a picture, nobody is going to be harmed from it. So basically I ignored the subject and focused on more important things.

While Waad's first reaction was to feel uncomfortable and resist posting her picture, she also felt it was easier to talk herself through it and try to be comfortable with it. Perhaps for Waad this was an easier option than going against the requirements of the class.

Rahaf described her experiences with professors asking her to post her picture on an online educational site and how she coped with those requests. She explained:

Actually I feel very, very embarrassed when any teacher or professor asks me to post my picture. For example, one of my professors asked us to create a website. In the homepage, the professor wanted us to put one sentence about ourselves, who we are, and post a picture. For me, it's very embarrassing. I don't want to post my own picture. So I did what most of my Saudi female friends in that class do, they post pictures of their own children, not themselves.

She then went on to explain the stress and anxiety she felt over posting pictures of herself online and the cause of that stress:

For me, I put my picture up for maybe three or four days, and then I changed it to my children's picture or my laptop picture because I wanted to satisfy my professor, but still I couldn't go to sleep that day when I posted my picture in public. Because I cover my face in Saudi Arabia, and this website is public, I feel they can see it, my family, they can see my face, my picture of my face in public. It's against my culture's rules.

Although Rahaf does not cover her face while in the cultural setting of the United States, she still feels very uncomfortable posting a picture of her face on an educational website because it is public. She feared her family, who are still in Saudi Arabia, would see she posted a picture of her face. The stress it caused her was so great she lost sleep over it until she was able to find a way to compromise between the professor's request and her reluctance to post a picture of herself by changing the picture to something else.

Several participants had very similar responses when asked how they would feel if a professor asked them to post a picture of themselves on an educational social media site. Dalal, Faten, Duaa, and Elham all answered with a similar variation of "I would ask the professor permission to not share my picture." These responses indicated they were unwilling to follow this request and would attempt to obtain the professor's permission to not post their pictures.

Many professors might feel that asking students to post a picture of themselves was a simple and easy request. Even if they had Saudi females in their classes, they might be unaware this request would bother the females because many Saudi female students do not cover their faces while in the United States. Thus, the professors might think that because they do not cover their faces in public, they would be comfortable posting pictures of their faces online. However, cultural expectations still impact females

and what they feel comfortable sharing. Partly due to a lack of trust in social media, females might feel very afraid to post a picture of their face online even if they do not cover it in their daily lives.

**Feeling comfortable posting pictures on online educational sites.** While most of the participants did not feel comfortable posting pictures of themselves online at a professor's request, some of them said it did not bother them. This was especially true if they felt they could trust the website. Answering how she would feel if a professor asked her to post a picture of herself online, Fahdah explained: "This has happened to me in the real life. The professor asked us to post a picture and talk a little bit about ourselves. I felt very confident in doing that since it's in a secure website." She also explained this was how she felt even when there were both males and females in the class:

As I mentioned before, the way I introduce myself, it's in line with my belief, my religion, and it's not like being so private. As they see me in the class, they're going to see me online. It's the same picture and I am wearing the scarf in class and in the picture.

Ahlam also reflected Fahdah's feelings about posting a picture of her face on an online educational social media site. She said, "Yeah I am okay using my real identity, my picture, whatever, in an educational setting of a social media site. That's okay for me."

Haya also thought it would be okay for her to post her picture online at the professor's request because it would be in an educational context. She explained: "Actually, I don't have a problem with an educational social media site. It's okay for me to share my pictures and my information because it's kind of private. It's not public and it's okay for me." Finally, Suzan said she was very willing to share her picture. When asked how she would feel about a professor making this request, she answered, "No, I will share it and I will be happy to do that."

While all who took part in this study were Saudi females, they still had their own individual feelings about posting their pictures on an educational social media site. Not all of the participants felt exactly the same way and some were more comfortable than others. While some females might be individually more open than others, specific cultural influences might also play a role. While Saudi Arabia is generally a culturally strict country, some regions are more closed and culturally strict while others are more open. Also, the participants came from different families who had their own cultural expectations and feelings about posting pictures online. Because they had different experiences, the participants had different feelings about a professor asking them to post a picture of themselves online.

**Cultural expectations and Saudi male classmates.** One of the findings was a few of the participants chose how much they shared about themselves based on the presence of Saudi males in the classroom. Samah explained she was comfortable posting a picture of her face online only if there were no Saudi males in the class, especially if they knew her husband or family: “If there is no man from Saudi Arabia in my class, I’m fine sharing my picture, but if there’s some man from Saudi Arabia or someone who is my husband’s friend, or my family friend, I will ask for permission to not post my picture.”

Ahlam had a similar reaction to Samah. Her willingness to interact in a group setting was dependent on whether Saudi males were in the class and group with her. When she was asked how she would feel about joining an online group of students consisting of both males and females, she explained: “I will act exactly the same in class, except if we have a male from my country, to be honest. If there is a man from Saudi

Arabia, I'd rather to not be in discussion with him in terms of being traditional and respectful.”

Whether it was posting a picture online or interacting with others, Ahlam and Samah both indicated their actions in an educational setting were partially dependent on if Saudi males were in the class. This might be because Saudi males come from the same culture as these females so they know the cultural expectations for how males and females should act and interact. Accordingly, Saudi females might sometimes choose to be careful about their behavior while in the presence of Saudi males.

**Suggestions for professors using educational social media.** Some professors might have little to no experience with Saudi females in their classes. Even if they had Saudi females in their classrooms, they might still be unfamiliar with the cultural backgrounds of Saudi females and how that cultural background could impact their educational experience. To help professors become more aware of and familiar with the particular educational needs of Saudi females, the participants who took part in this study were asked to offer their suggestions to professors who want to use educational social media in their classes. Many of the participants gave thoughtful suggestions that would be useful to educators looking to honor the diversity of their classrooms and help all of their students succeed.

Some of the suggestions related to previous topics discussed by the participants including feeling shy in a face-to-face discussion, preferring online education, and Saudi females not being used to interacting with males in an educational setting. Ahlam offered this suggestion:

I think professors could design two discussion options, one face-to-face, and one online for the same topic. So the people who are more comfortable using online



can use the online discussion, and the people who are comfortable using face-to-face can use the face-to-face option.

Ahlam felt professors could offer two types of discussion options to accommodate those who are more comfortable with online than face-to-face. This suggestion fit with Ahlam's answers earlier in the interview regarding online discussions. She indicated she preferred this type of discussion as she was more open than in a face-to-face setting and could express herself better online.

Samah's suggestion spoke to the need for professors to recognize and understand that students come from different religions and cultures: "I think that since the professor will have different types of students, they may be from different religions and different cultures. The first thing the professor needs to know is more about their religion and their culture." If professors understood more about their students' religions and cultures, they might have a better understanding of how to implement educational social media in their classrooms and how to make their classrooms more inclusive to different types of people.

Huda suggested professors should implement more educational social media in their classrooms. She felt they could be using these tools to enhance their students' learning experiences. "It's a good way to connect, especially for online classes," she stated. "Professors can build a blog for students to discuss and shared their questions. Some professors could even use Twitter to share some information and real experiences."

For Haya, it was more comfortable for students to be broken up into small groups than all placed into one group. She suggested:

I think that the professor should divide the class into small groups. It's better than just making them one group. It's better for improving interaction and helping them to learn from each other and collaborate, and then communicate with each

other. Maybe professors should guide the student through discussions using educational social media in that way.

Haya's suggestion fit with her personality and her experiences interacting with classmates. When asked about her identity, she said she is a shy person. She also said it was more comfortable for her to interact with females than males in a group setting so perhaps a smaller group would help her feel more comfortable interacting with all the group members rather than interacting with a large group.

Rahaf felt professors have a duty to their students to try to understand them and learn about their backgrounds. She felt quite strongly about this subject and seemed to have experienced professors who did not take the time to consider a student's background. Her suggestions were as follows:

Because I'm an international student, I would love for any professor to sit with any student that's not from their culture, and to ask the student what things may bother them or things that make them uncomfortable in the classroom. Professors should care more about the privacy of their students, because privacy in the United States is very different than privacy in Saudi Arabia, and some of the professors don't care, and this makes me... I hate that. I don't like it.

Rahaf felt professors could greatly benefit their students if they took time to understand what they were comfortable and/or not comfortable with. Privacy is one area professors might assume students have the same feelings about; however, students from a different culture such as Saudi Arabia might have a very different relationship with privacy.

Dalal also felt professors could better communicate with students and understand their perspectives before implementing educational social media. She stated:

It is good to ask students at first, especially if they are adult students, their perspective of using the social media in class and if they have any concerns or if they are very conservative students. They can understand from the beginning how to use social media in the class. It is good thing to use it as it makes everything easier and faster.

While Dalal enjoyed social media in the classroom and thought it was a useful tool, she also felt professors should consider their students' perspectives before implementing it. This could help professors understand how to use educational social media in a way that considers all students and their varied backgrounds.

Finally, Faten had similar feedback for professors as Dalal. She felt looking at students' backgrounds was important when professors want to use educational social media. She explained:

The most important thing, they need to know the background for each one of their students, because the students come from different backgrounds, they need to know their background, and how they will use the media or anything that they need to respect them.

Faten would like to see professors become familiar with the backgrounds of their students so they can implement educational social media in a way that shows respect for their students.

### **Summary**

The findings of this study were the reflections and perspectives of 14 Saudi female international students living in the United States for more than two years. They answered questions about their personal identities in Saudi Arabia and in the United States, their social media use in Saudi Arabia and in the United States, their experiences with online communities, and their experiences with educational social media. The major themes that emerged were identity as a Saudi, female, Muslim, and student; identity changes after arriving in the United States; social media and the expression of identity; the role of communities in the lives of Saudi female international college students; and educational social media and Saudi female international college students. The next

chapter discusses the significance of these findings, provides limitations and recommendations, and draws conclusions about the overall study.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the role of social media in the lives of Saudi females as they grappled with the issues of adjusting to living and studying in a culture vastly different from their home culture. By migrating to the United States, a Saudi woman's social media use might change to reflect the kind of use displayed by students in the United States. Being in an environment where social media is heavily used to form social connections and express identity could influence Saudi female international students to also use social media in this manner.

The focus of this qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

- Q1 How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the United States and while studying in the United States?
- Q2 How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the United States?
- Q3 What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the United States?

Several themes that emerged from this study provided insight into the experiences and perspectives of Saudi females studying in the United States: identity as a Saudi, woman, Muslim, and student; identity changes after arriving in the United States; social media

and the expression of identity; the role of communities in the lives of Saudi female international college students; and educational social media and Saudi female international students. This chapter provide a discussion of the findings, recommendations for future research, limitations, and a conclusion.

### **Research Question One: Saudi Female International College Students' Identity in Saudi Arabia and the United States**

Many of the females who participated in this study described their identity with several descriptors such as being Saudi, female, Muslim, and student. Although they held onto these key pieces of their identities even after arriving in the United States, they indicated they experienced some changes to their identities after coming to the United States. The participants often said they were now “more open” and “more independent.” Changes to their identity were often linked to changes in how they viewed and used social media. Many of the participants became more comfortable with social media and less fearful about privacy concerns. They felt they could express their identities on social media to a greater degree and enjoyed using it to connect with friends and family. While most of the participants still did not post pictures of themselves on social media, they were more open toward it and shared some pieces of their identities online. However, cultural influences from Saudi Arabia still impacted their feelings toward social media. Many of the participants were careful about what they shared online and tried to find a balance between open expression and the protection of their privacy.

The findings of this study reflected previous research by Kim (2011a, 2011b). Kim (2011a, 2011b) explained students who study in a Western culture often experience changes in their beliefs and behaviors. They find their identities shifted and became

more open as they interacted with a different culture. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) studied identity changes for Saudi female international students specifically and found they reported becoming more open and independent after living in the United States for a period of time.

In Kim's study (2011a, 2011b), once students spent a significant amount of time in a different culture, their identities became multicultural. They were able to appreciate the practices of other cultural groups while still maintaining their own identities. In the current study, the female experienced shifts in their identities toward greater openness and independence. The participants expressed they were impacted by the U.S. culture in a positive way, their increased openness was beneficial, and they still maintained their own sense of cultural identity as Saudi Muslim females, thus demonstrating the kind of multicultural identity described by Kim.

Similarly, Al-Ghamdi (2015) found international students developed what was termed "dual-cultural" identities after studying in the United States. In a study of Saudi students, it was found students were able to appreciate elements of both Saudi and American cultures even though the two cultures were vastly different. The current study had similar findings to Kim (2011a, 2011b) and Al-Ghamdi and lent support to the idea that Saudi students developed complex identities from their experiences with U.S. culture.

The findings of this study indicated Saudi females studying in the United States found ways to make social media sites more suitable to their personal and cultural needs. Often, the participants would set their Facebook profiles to private so only those they added as "friends" could see their information. This helped them protect their identity

while still using social media to connect with others. Kimmons (2014) explained social media sites such as Facebook typically develop in the United States, which could provide a cultural setting very different from other cultural settings. For example, Facebook asks users to provide their relationship status and sexual orientation, which might be considered private information to those of a different culture (Kimmons, 2014). While Kimmons did not specifically discuss the use of Facebook and other social media sites by Saudi females, his claims about clashing cultural systems were relevant to the findings of the current study. Kimmons also found some Saudi females did not add males as friends on Facebook to adhere to cultural expectations, which showed Saudi females seemed to be using Facebook in a different way than in the American culture. However, Kimmons found Saudi females actually often had a more complex decision-making process when deciding whether or not to add males. Many of the participants interviewed in the present study felt comfortable adding some males, while others did not. They also felt comfortable adding male professors and advisors on Facebook and adding American male classmates on Facebook.

This finding may also be explained by Kim (2012) as all the Saudi females who were interviewed had been in the United States for over two years, some as many as eight, and might have reached the integration stage where behaviors from the culture in which they currently lived were integrated into their daily lives. Even so, the participants in the current study were careful not to add Saudi males. This was because they worried Saudi males would be more apt to judge their use of social media and might misinterpret the acceptance of a friend request. They understood the difference in the American culture and were careful to avoid adding Saudi males because of gender relations in the



Saudi culture. Furthermore, Guta and Karolak (2015) found a strict separation of males and females with males asserting much control over females in Saudi Arabia. The findings of this study expanded on Kim's (2012) findings by further explaining Saudi women's cultural considerations when using Facebook.

The participants in this study became more open toward the use of social media to express their identities but still concealed parts of their identities online. Most of the participants used nicknames while in Saudi Arabia but once they arrived in the United States, they felt comfortable using their real names online. Guta and Karolak (2015) found one of the main identity concealing behaviors for Saudi females was the use of nicknames. However, Guta and Karolak's study was only conducted in Saudi Arabia and did not look at changes in social media use for Saudi females living outside Saudi Arabia. The findings of the present study suggested the cultural setting influenced the use of nicknames or real names by Saudi females. Although the U.S. setting might lead Saudi females to become comfortable using their real names, the participants still largely felt uncomfortable posting pictures of themselves on social media. Guta and Karolak explained this discomfort was one of the main identity concealment behaviors for Saudi females in Saudi Arabia. It seemed this behavior continued for the Saudi participants in this study even after they arrived in the United States.

Some previous studies noted social media could be used by Saudis as a way to express religious identity. Basiony (2013) examined how young Saudi people used social media to express their identity and found social media was often used for expression of their religious identity. Basiony claimed Saudis in her study used Facebook and other social media sites to share identifiers of their religious identity such as a Saudi woman

posting a picture of herself wearing the hijab. The current study found no evidence the Saudi participants used social media in this way. Rather than seeing social media as a means of expressing religious identity, social media was seen as a way to connect with friends and family and maintain social ties. It was also a way to maintain the Saudi cultural tradition of establishing strong female-only interactions and support networks. National Geographic (2016) graphically described this female-only tradition along with supporting photos. In Saudi Arabia, females often get together in homes where special rooms are reserved just for these all-female gatherings, which happen very frequently. For the participants in this study, although the frequency of all-female gatherings was lower, the establishment of social networking communities was a way to retain this traditional cultural custom of all-female connections and support. It seemed this method of social media all-female interaction and connection became a way to enhance the custom of all-female gatherings. Although many of the participants saw their Islamic faith as a key part of their identity, social media was not seen as a way to express this part of their identity. Rather, social media was used for social networking--both for educational purposes and also for establishing, maintaining, and extending social ties among Saudi female international college students. Most females do not post pictures of themselves online so they would not use social media to post a picture of themselves wearing the hijab, for example. More frequently, they used a symbol or design or pictures from nature.

**Research Question Two: The Role of Online Communities  
in the Lives of Saudi Female International  
College Students**

Social media was very important to the participants of this study for maintaining relationships and seeking out information from others. A majority of the participants expressed they used social networking communities to seek out information from others including academic information, health information, and information about different beliefs and cultures. Social media was also an important way for females to remain close to their communities and keep in contact with Saudi friends and family. However, the use of social media to interact with their communities was often shaped by cultural expectations.

The participants often expressed they knew there were certain things they could and could not post because they worried about what their online Saudi communities might find out about them and their behaviors through social media. The participants might have become more open since living in the United States but their families and friends still lived in Saudi Arabia and a part of the Saudi culture. Family and friends often expected their female relatives and friends to remain the same as they were before they left Saudi Arabia. If the females remaining in Saudi Arabia saw their Saudi relatives or friends were acting differently as an international student than when they were in Saudi Arabia, the friends and relatives remaining in Saudi Arabia might be concerned with or even angered by their female relative's or friend's behavior as international students in keeping with traditional Saudi conservative cultural norms for females. Social media kept the females connected with their friends and family back home but it also kept them connected to the Saudi culture and its expectations.

The role of social media in maintaining community ties was especially important to the participants because they lived far away from friends and family in Saudi Arabia. This aligned with research by Ellison and Boyd (2007) and Akkaya (2012), which explained social media could strengthen communities by offering a convenient, easily accessible space for social interaction. These researchers also noted social media is particularly important for individuals who are geographically distant from each other. The present study supported these findings as social media was highly valued by the participants and seen as an important way of remaining close to their communities.

Collective self-esteem in an online community can direct how often an individual interacts with that community (Barker, 2009). Collective self-esteem is how much value is placed on membership to a group. Essentially, it is how proud a person feels to be part of a group. Barker (2009) stated higher collective self-esteem can lead individuals to participate more in a group, which reflected what one of the participants of this study expressed. Renad, was a part of a breastfeeding group for mothers. She participated in the group often and found it to be a valuable community. The group had existed for a few years and eventually evolved into a group for mothers of children around the same age. Renad seemed to feel pride in being a part of this group; thus, she was willing to participate in it often.

Some of the participants described in more detail the online communities of which they were a part, especially for educational purposes. Maha discussed a Facebook group she was a part of for her class and explained it was very helpful and useful to her. Hung and Yuen (2010) indicated individuals often come together on social media to create online communities. These online communities often centered around a shared

purpose such as professional or educational groups. These sites could be very useful and enriching to the individuals in the group as was the case for Maha in this study.

The use of social media could be influenced by one's race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and gender (Ellison & Boyd, 2007). Suzan and Haya seemed to exemplify Ellison and Boyd's (2007) claims about the influence of identity on social media use. They indicated they used social media to seek out information about different religions and cultures. They enjoyed being able to use social media in this way and felt it connected them with different types of people and groups.

Although social media was an enjoyable way to connect with different groups, the participants in the current study were often careful about what they posted online, a finding supported by Hogan (2010). Hogan explained that people often think about the "lowest common denominator" before they post something on social media. The lowest common denominator would be the person on their social media who would most likely judge their post. This was typically a family member who would find their post upsetting or possibly offensive (even if it was unrelated to that family member) because of generational or cultural differences. For example, the lowest common denominator for Saudi females studying in the United States might be the older female in their families or family members who have never gone abroad and are unfamiliar with the cultural differences in other countries. The participants in the current study were extremely cautious about the reactions of family members living in Saudi Arabia. As in Hogan's study, Saudi females often thought about who would see what they posted. For example, in the present study, Elham explained she worried about what her dad might see on her social media so she was careful about what she posted. Rahaf was even more worried

about the reactions of her entire family and was careful to conceal certain media postings by using a different name.

### **Research Question Three: The Impact of Educational Social Media on Saudi Female International College Students**

Most of the participants in this study greatly enjoyed online education and interacting with others in an online educational setting. They felt online education had many positive qualities. They often felt more comfortable participating in educational discussions online rather than in person. Online education was also seen as a useful tool for promoting collaborative learning and cultural interaction. Although most of the participants enjoyed interacting with other cultures in an online educational setting, the Saudi culture often influenced how they participated in online education.

Educational social media was seen in a positive light by most of the participants. They felt it was a convenient way to learn and interact with other classmates. Kutbi (2015) found Saudi females studying in Saudi Arabia had similar feelings toward educational social media. The female participants in Kutbi's study felt social media improved their learning through collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. Although Kutbi's study aligns with the current study in many ways, Kutbi's study was conducted in Saudi Arabia where females were separated from males and females have all female instructors who are also Saudi. This might explain why the participants in the present study enjoyed educational social media but had encountered some cultural difficulties when professors asked them to participate in it. For example, most of the participants indicated they would be uncomfortable if a professor asked them to post a profile picture of their face on an educational social media site. Some of the participants had actually

encountered this situation and struggled to figure out how to handle it. The professors in Kutbi's study, however, likely would never have asked their students to post a profile picture because they had the same cultural background. The findings of the current study added to findings like those of Kutbi and further explained Saudi female perspectives on educational social media in different social and cultural settings.

In addition to cultural difficulties with online education, some previous research studies conducted in several Arab Gulf countries indicated Arab students struggled with participation in an online educational setting (Al-Harhi, 2005). Al-Harhi's (2005) study found Arab females struggled in particular as they worried it would be shameful to interact with males in the course, even in an online setting, given the strict separation of unrelated males and females in all areas of life as dictated by their culture and religious beliefs. However, the current study seemed to contradict Al-Harhi's findings. For example, the participants largely indicated they preferred online interactions to face-to-face interaction. They said it was easier to interact with male classmates on an online discussion board as compared to a group discussion in a classroom. This might reflect changing attitudes in Saudi Arabia since Al-Harhi's study was conducted as Saudi Arabia works to become a more developed country and interact with different countries and cultures throughout the world. For example, Saudi females have recently been given the right to vote and to participate in political processes (National Geographic, 2016; Toumi, 2013). Within a deeply conservative culture, Saudi females are initiating changes and redefining their boundaries within Saudi public life in ways never seen previously. However, it is important to note the participants had conditions about the kinds of males with whom they were willing to interact. While they felt comfortable interacting with

American males, they did not feel comfortable interacting with Saudi males. This was because they thought Saudi males would interpret the interaction differently and possibly question their morals, an attitude substantiated by Altamimi (2014). Saudi females understand the culture Saudi males come from and thus avoid the interaction, a finding corroborated by Alqefari (2016).

However, Al-Harhi (2005) did not have similar findings and instead found Arab females were unwilling to interact with all males including those from a different culture. Although Al-Harhi found cultural barriers inhibited learning in an online space, he found online learning largely helped female overcome cultural barriers even when they felt the need to avoid interaction with Saudi males.

### **Social Media Enriches the Education of Saudi Females**

In the current study's findings, online education was viewed as a way for the participants to enrich their learning and connect with classmates and professors; Faten said she enjoyed using Facebook to communicate with her advisor. Ahlquist (2015) pointed to the potential of social media to connect students with fellow students and advisors. Faten seemed to enjoy using Facebook in this way. Additionally, Ahlquist described the possible use of educational social media for digital communities centered around a shared purpose. Many of the participants in the current study indicated they enjoyed group projects and often created online groups as a convenient and easy way to complete them.

### **Suggestions for Educators/Professors**

Educational social media was mostly seen as a positive and beneficial part of the educational experiences of the females in this study. Despite these benefits, the



participants were able to offer some suggestions to professors and educators in the United States about the use of social media in the classroom. The following suggestions were aimed to help educators become more culturally aware of the diverse needs of their multicultural classrooms and implement educational social media in a way that would be successful and beneficial for all of their students:

- In a classroom that is primarily face-to-face, educators could offer two types of discussions options: online and face-to-face. This would give students the opportunity to participate in the type of discussion most comfortable for them.
- Educators could learn about different types of cultures and religions. This would help them have a better understanding of how to best implement educational social media in their diverse classrooms (Razek & Coyner, 2013).
- More social media could be used in the classroom than is currently being used. Because students feel educational social media enriches their learning experience, finding more ways to integrate it into the curriculum could hold many benefits. Some examples might include building a class blog or professors using Twitter to share information--a suggestion also discussed by Davis et al. (2012).
- Different group sizes would be beneficial for some students. For shy students, a smaller group might be more comfortable than a larger one. Educational social media is an easy way to create different group sizes for different kinds of students.

- Professors could embrace the multicultural nature of their classrooms and take time to learn about the backgrounds of their international students. Concepts like privacy and social interaction vary from culture to culture. Professors who have more knowledge about different cultures would be better equipped to help international students be successful in their classrooms (Razek & Coyner, 2013).
- Before professors ask their students to post personal information such as pictures of themselves, they should consider the cultural backgrounds of students in their class. If professors had a better understanding of the Saudi culture, they might be more aware of the stress their Saudi students likely experience if they are asked to post a picture of themselves.
- Communication is important for professors looking to use educational social media. Professors could create an open dialogue with their students about their perspectives on social media.
- Professors could take time to learn about the Muslim culture and religion in particular. Ramadan is an example of a religious holiday about which professors could learn more. During this month-long holiday, Muslims fast from sunrise to sundown. Professors who understand this holiday and other aspects of the Muslim religion and culture might be more willing to help Muslim students be successful in their course while still following their culture and customs.

### **Limitations**

Three limitations to this study need to be addressed. First, the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the participants' native language. Conducting the interviews in Arabic might have allowed the participants to speak more freely and offer more explanation of their perspectives and thoughts. However, this approach could not be taken in the current study because resource constraints would have prevented the researcher from hiring a translator to translate all of the interviews.

Second, although a central element of this study was to better understand the changes that took place after the participants left Saudi Arabia and came to the United States, the interviews were only conducted after these participants came to the United States. Even though the participants were asked to recall their experiences and perspectives while they were in Saudi Arabia, it would have been more beneficial to collect data while they were in Saudi Arabia and then interviewed them again after they came to the United States. It is also important to mention that many of the participants left Saudi Arabia several years ago. During the time they have been in the United States, many advances have occurred in social media and its use has become more widespread.

It was clear from the findings of this study there were interconnections between the development and alteration of self-identity and social and cultural milieu in which the individual was a participant. Complex interactions influenced how social media was used in different environments and how self-identity was affected by this interaction of culture, society, and media.

Finally, although all of the participants were from Saudi Arabia, I did not ensure they were representative of the various subcultures within Saudi Arabia since Saudi

Arabia is not one homogeneous culture. Rather, many subcultures within the country vary to different degrees in their religious and cultural perspectives. Only examining females before and after coming to the United States might have limited the advances in technology. For example, Snapchat was not as popular a few years ago as it is today.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several avenues for further investigation are suggested by this study. For one, different qualitative methodologies could be used to explore this topic such as case study, ethnography, and narrative procedures. Follow-up research from this study could examine more in depth the effects of Saudi versus non-Saudi males on Saudi female international students to gain more insight into the reported effects Saudi females expressed in this study. In addition, further research might investigate effective practices that help Saudi females adjust to the presence of males in their educational activities. In conjunction with this, further research could examine possible different stages of Saudi females as they adjust and adapt to a culture where males and females interact in educational contexts and how these different stages influence Saudi females' participation in classes and social media. Further research could also delve more deeply into the different kinds of networking communities and connections mentioned by the participants in the current study and provide more information on the purposes, contexts, and uses of these networking activities.

Future research could also pursue a comparative analysis of interviews using the same interview questions. One part of the comparative analysis would be in English while the other would be in the native language of Arabic. This could be accomplished with assistance from scholars and/or translators competent in both languages. This would

better inform the analysis and ensure accuracy and fidelity of the translations, providing added sources to increase triangulation. This comparative analysis could be useful in pointing out difficulties in research with second language learners and show differences between the use of the second language and the native language.

Future studies could also question if reported changes in behavior, beliefs, and attitudes such as greater openness and increased independence were characteristic of just females from Saudi Arabia or whether it was more widespread throughout Muslim communities in the world. They also could investigate if these changes also occurred for Saudi males. These areas of research could also investigate more thoroughly where participants were with respect to the different stages Kim (2012) described in his research on changing portrayals of self-identity in international students.

To address one of the limitations of this study, future research could examine Saudi females before and after coming to the United States. This would give clearer insight into the kinds of changes that take place for Saudi female international students. Another interesting comparative analysis could compare Saudi females currently living in the United States to Saudi females currently living in Saudi Arabia. This approach would ensure the two groups were using similar kinds of social media at the same point in time as social media and online technology can change and develop rapidly.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a summary of the findings presented in Chapter IV. It also offered a discussion and analysis of the five themes developed in the findings: identity as a Saudi, female, Muslim, and student; identity changes after arriving in the United States; social media and the expression of identity; the role of communities in the lives of Saudi

female international college students; and finally, the impact of educational social media on Saudi female international college students. In general, the participants found it difficult initially to adjust to the presence of males in their classes and to participate in class activities including those online because of the males. Over time, the Saudi females were able to adjust and adapt to the presence of males, increase their participation, become more open and independent especially after living in the United States for a longer period of time, and develop a feeling of comfort in the presence of non-Saudi males. However, these participants also retained much of their own cultural identity and were careful in what they posted online and how they protected their identities. Part of their adjustment was to take the initiative to form their own networking communities, sometimes having several of them for different purposes.

Further, this chapter linked the findings of the current study to relevant research and literature. Recommendations for U.S. professors/educators looking to use educational social media were also given in this chapter. These recommendations might help U.S. professors/educators better understand their male and female Saudi students, how Saudi cultural and religious factors impact these males and females differentially, and how to effectively use educational social media in a way that acknowledges Saudi culture but still encourages participation by all Saudi students. Limitations of this study and recommendations for future research topics were also provided.

### **Conclusion**

The Saudi female international college students in this study experienced changes in their personal identities after coming to the United States. However, they still maintained a strong sense of their identity as Muslims, females, and Saudis. They used

social media as a tool to maintain communication with family and friends still in Saudi Arabia and valued these communities. Although social media was central to the social lives of the participants, they made great efforts to protect their identities online. They did not want to reveal certain aspects of themselves and worked to maintain their privacy. Many worried about judgments, misunderstandings, and concerns from other Saudi friends and family members about what they posted or wrote. Thus, the participants were careful to use social media in a way that connected them with others while still respecting cultural boundaries.

Educational social media was viewed positively by the participants. They appreciated its ability to enrich their learning experiences and help them feel comfortable interacting with others. However, they still experienced some cultural tension when professors/educators asked them to post pictures of themselves. They also carefully avoided interaction with Saudi males because of the shared cultural background. Although they had to navigate educational social media carefully and with consideration of their cultural backgrounds, they enjoyed its place in the classroom overall. They were able to offer many useful and relevant suggestions for professors and educators looking to use educational social media. Many of these suggestions asked professors simply to be more aware of the various cultures from which their students might come. Overall, the experiences of studying in the United States have impacted the participants' identities, their use of social media to connect with their communities, and how they interacted in a culturally diverse classroom through educational social media.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: September 26, 2016

TO: Tahani Alruwaili  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [951452-3] IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF SAUDI FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: September 26, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: September 26, 2020

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

**Thank you for submitting the requested modifications. Your protocols and updated materials are verified/approved exempt and you may begin participant recruitment and data collection.**

**Best wishes with your research.**

**Sincerely,**

**Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair**

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

**APPENDIX B**

**STUDENT RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Hello,

I am Tahani Alruwaili. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Technology department. I am conducting my dissertation on Saudi female international students' identities, communities, and educational experiences in relation to social media. The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in this study by taking 60-90 minutes of your time for an interview with me. If you participate, you will receive a \$10 gift card to Starbucks. If you are interested in participating in this study, please reply to this email.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions:

[alru5605@bears.unco.edu](mailto:alru5605@bears.unco.edu)

(970-405-5790)

Best regards,

Tahani Alruwaili

**APPENDIX C**

**STUDENT RECRUITMENT TEXT MESSAGE**

Hello,

This is Tahani Alruwaili, I would like to interview you about your experiences with identity, community, and education related to social media as a Saudi female international student. If you are available and willing, I would like to set up a time for a 60 to 90 minute interview. You will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card if you participate. Thank you.

**APPENDIX D**  
**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**  
**IN RESEARCH**





CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF  
NORTHERN COLORADO

Project title: Identity and Community through Social Media: The Experience of Saudi  
Female International College Students in the U.S.

Researcher: Tahani Alruwaili, Doctoral Student

Email: alru5605@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: (Heng-Yu Ku, 9703512935, Heng-Yu.Ku@unco.edu)

Phone: 970-351-1603

Purpose:

The purpose of this proposed research is to address this gap in examining the role of social media on Saudi women as they grapple with the issues of adjusting to living and studying in a culture vastly different from their home culture. By migrating to the United States, a Saudi woman's social media use may change to reflect the kind of use displayed by students in the United States. Being in an environment where social media is heavily used to form social connections and express identity could influence Saudi female international students to also use social media in this manner.

The first step in this research is to examine the establishment of identity by Saudi female international students via social media channels. The use of social media by Saudi female international students to build and maintain communities will also be examined. Next, the study will ask Saudi female international students how they feel about the use of educational social media.

Description:

This study will be conducted at the University of Northern Colorado with a sample of Saudi female university students over the age of 25. Open-ended interviews will be conducted to focus on the reported experiences of these students in relation to identity, community, and education using social media using qualitative methods for procedures and data analysis. Participation in interviews and in answering interview questions is voluntary, with the interview questions developed by the researcher specifically related to the topic.

Timeline:

Data collection will be accomplished in two steps. First, participants will be contacted through either an email or text message containing a project description and letter of consent. Once participants have consented, interviews will be

arranged and conducted. Consent forms will be reviewed prior to the beginning of interviews, and any questions about the research answered at that point. Interviews will be electronically recorded, to be transcribed later. Interviews are anticipated to last 60-90 minutes.

**Risks:**

There are no anticipated risks to being in this study. The data that is obtained through this study (both recorded and written) will be kept securely locked by secure passwords on computer files and locked files for written documents. No email correspondence will be shared with anyone, and all participants' names will be coded to maintain confidentiality, which will not be disclosed. All recorded data and consent forms will be kept for three years, and then the recorded data and written forms with identifying information will be destroyed. Coded transcripts and results will be retained by the University of Northern Colorado.

**Participation:**

All participation is voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw at any time. In addition, participants will be able to choose whether to answer particular questions in the interview. This project presents minimal risk to participants, and should not create any negative effects. In fact, participation may produce some benefits to participants by development of insight into this topic. While unlikely, if any emotional distress occurs, participants will be referred to a university counselor.

**To Participants:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study, and your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at any time, and if you begin participation, you may choose to answer or not answer any of the interview questions. Having read the above, and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. By signing this consent form, you are also giving your consent to have the interview electronically recorded. A copy of this form will be provided to you so you can retain it for your own records. If you have any questions or concerns about your selection, or your participation, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu)

Participant's signature and date:

---

**Signature**

**Date**

Researcher's signature and date:

---

**Signature**

**Date**

**APPENDIX E**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does personal identity mean to you? (who are you, what kind of personal are you, what are your characteristics)

**How did female international college students from Saudi Arabia identify themselves in social media before coming to the U.S. and while studying in the U.S.?**

2. While you were in Saudi Arabia, what type of social networks did you use? How often did you use it and in what way?
3. Describe your willingness to share parts of your identity on social media while in Saudi Arabia?
4. What kinds of information, pictures, links, etc. on social media related to your identity did you post while in Saudi Arabia? Give me an example, and would you please tell me why?
5. Please describe how your personal identity has developed or changed since arriving in the U.S.? What factors have impacted your identity since you have been studying in the U.S.?
6. What was your role in selecting your current profile picture you are using on social media?
7. Do you think your use of social media while in the U.S. has affected your personal identity? If so, please provide an example.
8. Describe your concerns about having parts of your identity publicly available through the use of social media? And how have you handled these concerns?

**How do female international college students from Saudi Arabia describe their social networking communities and the roles they play in them while in the U.S.?**

9. What are your experiences in using social media to meet and interact with others?
10. What type of advice do you seek from people when using social media?
11. Describe any friends on social media that you have never met in person?
12. How important is social media for maintaining your relationships?

**What impact does social media have on the educational environment of female international college students from Saudi Arabia while in the U.S?**

13. Describe your use of any types of social media for collaborative learning (For example, you might create a shared Facebook page with fellow students while working on a group project together)?
14. How would you feel if a professor asked you to post personal information (such as a picture of yourself) on an educational social media site? Would you be willing to share personal information or would you ask for the professor's permission to not share personal information?
15. What would you do if a professor asks you to join an online group of students consisting of both females and males? How willing would you be to contribute and interact with everyone in the group, and would this be different from face-to-face interactions?
16. What are some negative experiences you've had while using educational social media for academic learning?

17. Describe anything interesting or valuable you have learned from online interactions with fellow students?
18. What are your suggestions for professors that want to use educational social media in their classes?
19. Thinking about your self in Saudi, please draw a picture that represent how you experienced your self then. Would you please write a couple sentences that could explain the picture?
20. Reflecting yourself in USA, please draw a picture that represents how you experienced yourself. Would you please write a couple sentences that could explain the picture?

**Demographic questions including:**

1. Have you traveled abroad before?
2. Are you a graduate or undergraduate student?
3. What are you studying?
4. How long have you been in the U.S.?
5. How old are you: 18-25    25- 30    30-35    35-40
6. Are you married?
7. Do you have children?
8. What different technologies of social media do you personally use?