

**THE EXPERIENCE OF UNDERGRADUATE SAUDI ARABIAN INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AT A CANADIAN UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences of undergraduate Saudi Arabian international students studying at a Canadian university. Considering the cultural, religious, and academic religious differences that the participants of this study experienced, this qualitative study highlights the personal and academic challenges that undergraduate Saudi Arabian international students encounter during their studies in Canada. By examining this group in interaction within ordinary settings, I expected to discern examples such as academic adjustments, social networks and events, and cultural themes. Data was gathered for this study by interviewing four Saudi Arabian students studying various undergraduate programs at one university in Canada. This study provides a wider understanding of the issues that Saudi Arabian international students encounter when they choose to come to pursue their university education in Canada. The findings of this study may have implications for higher education professionals and may add to the limited literature of Saudi Arabian international students in Canada. As well, it will contribute to the literature on cross-cultural education and international students' adjustment issues.

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DEDICATION

*This work is dedicated to my beloved late father **Ali Alamri** who passed away during my educational journey, you are truly missed; to **Sharah Alamri**, my mother, your love, encouragement, appreciation and wisdom supported me throughout my educational growth; to my soul mate **Fatima Alamri**, this work would not have been completed without your ongoing patience and encouragement.*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

Canadian universities attract many international students from all over the world. International students illustrate many reasons for choosing Canada as a place to pursue their education. These reasons include but not limited to the reputation of Canada as a safe country, opportunity to learn English and French for some students, and lower tuition compared to other countries (Pidgeon & Andres, 2005). However, most of these students have left their families in their home countries, and once they have arrived in Canada, they face numerous challenges in adjusting to their new environment and the English language (Zhou, 2014). These challenges include experiencing culture shock, the severity of which depends on the ability of the student to adapt to the new situation and manage the accompanying social, cultural, and linguistic challenges. In addition they encounter regarding their personal and social life, students face difficulties in adjusting in their new institutions, including but not limited to language barriers, academic literacy, and adapting to a new educational system and participatory learning styles.

The following sections provide a brief background about the Saudi Arabian culture. Saudi Arabian international students might face extra challenges due to cultural, religious, and linguistic differences. Therefore, the roles of religion, family, gender, and language in Saudi Arabian culture is discussed in order to give a better understanding of the massive transition that Saudi Arabian international students experience when they study abroad.

The Culture of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is known officially as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is located in the southwest corner of Asia. Saudi Arabia covers about 865,000 square miles constituting most of

the Arabian Peninsula, and making it the 12th largest country in the world. The total population of Saudi Arabia as amounted in 2010 was 29,195,895 million, 30 percent of them were non Saudis (General Authority for Statistics, 2017; Long & Maisel, 2010). Saudi Arabia was formally established on September 23, 1932 by King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud. With a rapid growth, the country became a very modern technological society with advanced infrastructure within a short time (Blanchard, 2009; Bowen, 2008; Long & Maisel, 2010). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is known for sustaining a balance between conservative Islamic and cultural values, traditions, and rapid advance of modernization (Long & Maisel, 2010). Saudi Arabia was described by (Long & Maisel, 2010) as “a country of startling contrasts—a huge landmass and a small population; a barren desert terrain situated over great oil wealth; a traditional Islamic society undergoing rapid modernization” (p. 1).

The following sections provide a brief background about some aspects in order to strengthen the understanding of the Saudi Arabian international student’s personal and academic experiences throughout their undergraduate studies in Canada. Within these sections, the contrasting roles of how religion, family, gender, and language affect the experience of this population.

Religion

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy state in which Islam is the official religion. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Islam is seen to be inseparable. Prior to discussing the importance of Islam in the Saudi Arabian culture, it must be stated that the Saudi culture is collectivist. Therefore, in simpler terms, all whom are Saudi Arabian are known as Arab Muslims (General Authority for Statistics, 2017; Keating, 2004; Long, 2005). Saudi Arabia’s relationship with Islam began in the early seventh century when Prophet Mohammad brought

Islam to Mecca, a city located in Saudi Arabia in the present (Long, 2005). The words Islam and Muslim are not interchangeable. The word Islam is the name of the religion itself which literally means peace *or* submission in Arabic. While Muslim is a name given to those who follow the teachings of Islam (Harper, 2007; Long, 2005). As of 2010, The Muslims population reached 1.6 billion, roughly 23% of the global population. This ranks Islam as the world's second largest religion after Christianity (Hackett et al., 2015).

Muslims perform different rituals in different bases including daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. Prayer (Salah in Arabic) is one of the most important pillars of Islam. Muslims pray five times every day at specific times, and perform their prayers almost anywhere, such as in homes, mosques, parks, workplace, or schools (Ali et al., 2004; Yackley-Franken, 2007). Another important pillar of Islam is fasting throughout the month of Ramadan every year. During this month, every Muslim who is physically able must fast from dawn until sundown by abstaining from drink, food, and sexual relations. Fasting Ramadan is a method of spiritual self-purification for Muslims to polish oneself, and to remember and sympathize with other people who are in need (Ali et al., 2004; Keating, 2004).

Muslims celebrate two major festivals. The first festival is Eid Al-Fitir which marks the completion of Ramadan, the month of fasting. It is a celebration of thanks, where people gather and feast with family and the community. The second festival is Eid Al-Adha which marks the completion of completion of Hajj. Hajj is one of the greatest acts of worship in Islam, an annual pilgrimage to Mecca which is the third largest city in Saudi Arabia. Every Muslim who is physically and financially able must perform Hajj once in a lifetime. Every year about two million Muslims, from many countries and races go to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj in Mecca (Ali et al., 2004). During Eid Al-Adha, families sacrifice animals, usually lamb or sheep, and

share their sacrifices with their relatives and neighbors, and donate some to the poor people. Parents gift their children toys or money during these festivals, similar to Christmas. Families also visit one another to share their joy of celebration and accomplishment after major acts of worship (Yackley-Franken, 2007).

Family

The backbone of the Saudi Arabian culture is built by strong family values. The sheer importance of family and tribal involvement as well as acknowledgement are the basis of the Saudi social structure. Individuals in Saudi Arabia take pride in their heritage and family tree. Individuals are known by their tribes and families. The importance of family and their place in the Saudi culture extends back to the collectivist attribute of the culture (Abu-Hilal, 1986; Long & Maisel, 2010).

In Saudi Arabia, the wisdom and input of elderly family members tend to be sought after for making life effecting decisions. The respect for elderly is derived from the Islamic teachings instructing a great respect for the elderly. The elderly family members are not limited to the grandparents, but rather to any uncles, aunts, siblings, or even cousins. The word family in Saudi Arabia is not only the mother, father, and children. Due to tribal involvement and acknowledgement, a family consists of all whom is related to you (Abu-Hilal, 1986; Long & Maisel, 2010).

In Saudi Arabian culture, the family is essential for support (Abu-Hilal, 1986). Families in Saudi Arabia provide support to their members from childhood to adulthood whenever they face economic, social, or health-related difficulties. Therefore, being absence from family plays a major role in the experience of Saudi Arabian international students (Al-Banyan, 1987; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Shaw, 2010).

Gender

Saudi Arabian society has strong opinions on distinct male and female roles while participating in society. These roles are motivated by the Islamic principles, which discourage socialization with opposite gender after children reach puberty (Ali & Reisen, 1999). Such a religious values encourage gender segregation which affect the way they interact with the each other. The females wear a long, usually black coloured, cloak covering their entire body called *Abayah*, and scarf covering the head called *Hijab* with the option of covering the facial features. This pertains to the Islamic beliefs that women are expected to cover their bodies in the presence of men whom are not family members (Harper, 2007; Yackley-Franken, 2007).

There is a clear distinction of segregation in the Saudi culture (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010). There are many occasions where you will find segregation present. For instance, in restaurants there are separate ordering lines or even completely separated sections, one designated for single males and one for families and females. Also, all public schools and universities are gender separated. Some shopping districts are completely blocked off for males while others have designated hours for females and families to shop (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010; Yackley-Franken, 2007).

Taking the cultural differences into perspective, when Saudi Arabian students start their studies in Canada, they are exposed to new lifestyles and are expected to adapt instantly. Many of these students, whether male or female, come to this new culture and face the fact that they are sharing a classroom with the opposite gender, having lunch in the cafeteria with the opposite gender, being taught by a professor or teacher of the opposite gender, participating in a group project, or even dealing with daily routines with the opposite gender. This is a new experience

for Saudi Arabian international students, and such case can affect their attempt to be more engaged in their new environment (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010; Hall, 2013; Heyn, 2013).

Language

Arabic is the language of Saudi Arabia. However, English and Arabic orthography are not similar in any way. They greatly differ from each other. A few of the many complexity between Arabic and English is that Arabic has 28 alphabets, capital and lower case letters do not exist, and texts are read and written from right to left where words are linked in a cursive like form. Compared to English, there are 26 alphabets, there is a distinction between upper and lower case letters, and texts are read written from left to right. Further, there are other differences relating to grammar, phonology, and orthography (Auty et al., 1993; Flege & Port, 1981; Heyn, 2013; Watson, 2007).

There are a myriad of studies showing that the language barrier is the greatest challenge that Saudi students face upon studying abroad (e.g. Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009, Shabeeb,1996; Shaw, 2010). Upon arrival in Canada, students will need to adapt to a new academic system centered around the English language. Saudi Arabian international students learning English do not only have to worry about the correct pronunciations or constructing proper sentence structure in academic writing, but also their ability to converse in Canadian society. Students learn the formal academic English language, yet are not familiar with slang, regional dialects, and humour in live their everyday life in an English dominant speaking country (Abdel Rezak, 2012; Al Musaiter, 2015; Al-Shehry, 1989; Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Jammaz,1972; Rabia, 2016; Razek & Coyner, 2013).

Statement of Problem

Due to the massive King Abdullah Scholarship Program for undergraduate studies pioneered

by the Saudi Arabian government, many countries have opened their doors to an increasing number of Saudi Arabian international students in recent years. In Canada alone, students from Saudi Arabia make up 3% of Canada's international student population (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2017). Despite this sudden increase of Saudi Arabian international students, particularly in English speaking countries, an in-depth review of the literature shows that there is lack of information about Middle Eastern international students in general, and Saudi Arabian students in particular (Heyn, 2013). With respect to limited research on the experience of Saudi Arabian international students in Canada (e.g. Ahmed, 2016; Altamimi, 2014; Hamad, 2012), further research is a major need to help institutional members as well as future students to understand the Saudi Arabian students' international experience. Considering the huge differences in terms of culture, religion, and language, prejudice and discrimination fostered by western media's portrayal of terrorism, further studies on the difficulties faced by Saudi Arabian international students in general and in Canada in particular are of an important need of study.

Significance of the Study

Given the increase in the number of Saudi Arabian international students who come to study in Canada, research on this population of international students in Canada remain to be neglected. Therefore, more research is needed to explore the academic experience of these students during their studies in Canada. Moreover, Saudi Arabian international students who choose to come to pursue their education in Canada experience an enormous transition. They find themselves exposed to a new life with different culture, values, attitudes, language and academic system. Thus, in order to add to the limited literature, this study seeks to understand the every day experiences of undergraduate Saudi Arabian international students in Canada.

Purpose of the Study

Coming to a new country with a different culture, religion, language, orthography, and learning style seems to be a massive transition in Saudi Arabian international students' lives. The researcher's purpose in conducting this study was to explore the cultural, social, linguistic, and academic experiences of undergraduate Saudi Arabian international students during their studies at a Canadian university. The researcher hopes that this study will add to the limited research on this subject and contribute to improving the experience of Saudi international students in Canada. Further, the researcher hopes that the results of this study would better inform higher education institutes, professors, and English language schools' professionals about this population's challenges and support services.

Research Question

This study investigated three research questions to understand the ever day experiences of four undergraduate Saudi Arabian students during their studies in Canada. The overarching research question was: "How do Saudi Arabian undergraduate students describe their academic life while studying at a Canadian university?" This major question was answered through three sub-questions in order to acquire more details.

The Researcher

I was born in a small city located in the south eastern part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I received my education in my hometown from grade one to grade twelve. After I finished my high school, I moved to another city to continue my postsecondary education. In order to give me more support during my university study, my mother and father decided to accompany me. A few months after I earned my Bachelor's degree in Education in 2006, I acquired a job in the capital city, Riyadh, to teach Arabic to sixth grade students. This was my

first time leaving my family to begin my own life. After five years of teaching, I decided to make changes to my career and life in general. This decision was driven by two reasons. First, I had a true passion for education and I wanted to pursue a more gratifying path. For me, this meant teaching Arabic as a second language to speakers of other languages, particularly to international students who come to Saudi Arabia to learn Arabic. Secondly, I had a strong desire to travel, meet new people from different backgrounds, and learn English, a global language that would connect me to people across the world. So, to catch two birds with one stone, I decided to immigrate to an English-speaking country to earn a Master's degree in second language education. This path would allow me to achieve my goals by opening new doors of opportunity for my "dream job," and would permit me to learn English and live abroad as an international student. On August 29th 2010, I flew to Ottawa, Canada, and I began my journey. After I spent about three years in Ottawa learning English as a second language, I moved to Saskatoon in 2014 to begin my Master's in Curriculum Studies, with a focus on second language education.

During my life as an international student, I lived many inconsistent moments between happiness and sadness, frustration and optimism, strength and weakness, to mention a few. This experience allowed me to see and feel many things that are particular to the experience of international students. It truly forms the starting point of this research, and it motivated me to capture the unique stories of other international students as they study in a new cultural and linguistic environment.

Definition of Terms

Cultural identity. Construction of traditions, values, religion, and norms, which are seen in an individual's life and shape their personality and perception of their environment (Pidgeon & Andres, 2005).

Cross-cultural Adjustment. This term has been defined as the degree of psychological and familiarity of individuals toward a new environment (Black, 1990).

Academic Adjustment. The ability of student to accommodate with university life and reach a level of satisfaction on his or her performance, colleagues, teachers and the environment as a whole (Al-Khatib, Awamleh, & Samawi, 2012).

Under graduate Saudi Arabian international students. This term is used in this study to refer to an individual who has come Canada from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to obtain a university degree; and who speaks English as a second language.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this literature review, I examine research and literature regarding international students to provide an overview of their issues. I begin with a brief overview of the general issues faced by international students. Next, I examine the literature discussing some key factors of this study including cultural adjustment, impact of discrimination, language difficulties, and academic adjustment. It is important to consider the limitations in the literature of Saudi Arabian international students in general and in Canada in particular. However, the literature discusses some issues related to Saudi, Middle Eastern, and Muslim international students as they share similar challenges in regard with cultural, religious, and linguistic differences.

General issues of International Students

An assessment of past literature illustrates some of the problems that international students endure. Baharak & Bin Baki's study (2013) give an important overview of the challenges faced by this student population. Their study illustrated that international students "face more difficulties adapting to the new situation. Furthermore, they face various challenges in terms of cultural and communication problems, loss of social support, language difficulties, academic problems, financial, psychological, health and recreational issues" (p.138). Tseng & Newton, (2002) indicated four major challenges that face international students in general. These challenges include (1) general living adjustment, such as adjusting to Canadian life, food, housing, environment, and transportation; (2) academic adjustment that require students to adjust to their new university system and the skills required for success; (3) sociocultural adjustment, such as cultural values, norms and behaviors; and (4) personal psychological adjustment, such as facing homesickness, loneliness, frustration, depression, lost identity, feeling of worthlessness, as

well as xenophobic attitudes emanating from the media in newspapers or in headline TV news briefs. In addition, international students are at a high risk of developing social and mental health problems linked to the exposure to a new way of life (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). International students experience a feeling of being stranger, a sense of weakness, anxiety or self-hate, as well as a feeling of loss and deprivation (Mori, 2000; Yuefang Zhou et al., 2008). Such problems occur when the international students arrive in Canada where they have no friends, family, or any viable social support networks outside school (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Unfortunately, most of the problems are emotional not physical, and are hence hard to detect. Andrade (2006) illustrates that professors did not recognize the emotional and psychological problems that international students experience. Consequently, many of the students may suffer in silence.

The following section introduces key literature on the role of cultural identity and culture adjustment and the difficulties faced by international students in Canada. This review forms a major factor, which interrogates the impact of cultural identity and cross-culture on international students' perceptions and challenges in their new Canadian academic and social setting.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Past literature and research show a strong association between cultural background, social support, language proficiency, and personality traits on cultural adjustment (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2012). These factors, among others, interact and determine a student's ability to adapt to the new culture (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013). Cultural identity, including language, ethnicity, religion, and upbringing, are important factors that shape an individual's personality and perception of their environment (Triandis & Suh, 2002; Ryder et al., 2000). Cultures follow different guidelines, which passed down generations, influencing

interactions, relationships, and decision making (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). This being said, cultural identity distinguishes members of various groups; it is observed in individual behavior and visible elements such as heroes, rituals, and symbols that include pictures, gestures, words, and objects. Consequently, collective activities such as social and religious ceremonies and greetings vary between people from different cultures (Hofstede et al., 1991; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). As cultural identity has a very strong influence on international students, the decision to migrate for educational purposes often positions students with a loss of personal and cultural identity that leads to psychological, social, and health problems (Smith & Damjanenko, 2011). For international students, an encounter with new norms, language, beliefs, and culture can result in a culture shock, the length and severity of which often depends on students' resilience, adaptation to their new environment, and management of the difficulties they face (Young-Chul, 1996).

That being said, the students face a dilemma of whether to abandon their primary identity, cultural, and religious beliefs or norms so that they can fit into the Canadian situation, settle in between the two cultures, or if they should persist with their home culture. Such situation usually causes confusion and internal conflict. (Piontkowski et al., 2000) indicated that

Lack of knowledge about the host culture and the loss of the reference group as a reinforcer of one's identity may cause anxiety and insecurity. Individuals and groups differ with regard to the strategy they choose to cope with this situation. Some may prefer to assimilate to the hosts; others may want to stay separate. (p. 3).

International students quickly take note of the cultural differences in their host country. On some occasions, their motives, attitudes, and actions are often misinterpreted by their hosts. The level of shock and resistances depends on the personality and degree of dissimilarity between Canadian culture and other countries. Further, the extent of shock depends on the difference between the customs, values, norms, and traditions of the foreign students with those

in Canada (Pelling, 2000). For instant, Canada is an individualist society; people are nurtured to be independent, focusing on their personal life and goals. While Canadians see the ability of university and college students to separate themselves from their families and social groupings as a key for success and independence, many students from non-western countries such as Saudi Arabian and Chinese students see that their actions, feelings, and thoughts should fall within their social groupings as they highly value group harmony. (Heyn, 2013; Roberts & Tuleja, 2008; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). It makes it difficult for students from other regions who prefer working and viewing themselves as part of a group to live in the country. For such reason, international students get confused not knowing whether to work individually or as a group. Hence, students from Western Europe and the United States studying in Canada have an easier time than international students from other regions (Altbach & Teichler, 2001).

As mentioned earlier cultural identity is made up of traditions, values, religion, and norms, which are seen in an individual's life (Pidgeon & Andres, 2005). International learners may have difficulty comprehending and operating in the new country while maintaining their original identity since massive cultural differences make up their day-to-day interactions. Thus, international students manage the problems when they meet with other international students with the same experiences as theirs (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013); this explains why international students are quick to form groups with people from their ethnic groups and countries to receive the much needed social contact. They find it easier to link and relate with students from similar cultural backgrounds, who help in the management of the stress due to the cultural change (Pelling, 2000). In most cases, international students find it easier to interact with other foreign students than domestic students, as they fear criticism and marginalization because of their views and beliefs (Zhou & Zhang, 2014) may be more diverse.

Impact of Discrimination on International Students

Discrimination is a common feature in many students' experiences. They face discrimination based on different factors including culture, language, religion, and skin color (Lee, 2015). A study by Wei Yeoh & Terry (2013) show that “[D]ifferences in cultural background may also result in miscommunication between international students and English native speakers (university staff, peers, supervisors) when interacting with one another” (p. 278). Discrimination by dominant group implies that one's social identity is excluded from what is seen as normal (Schmitt et al., 2003). Besides, ‘xenophobia’ which means fear and dislike of foreigners or strangers, as defined by Wimmer (1997), may contribute to discrimination toward international students. Yakushko (2008) explains that xenophobia is not a strange or new notion, it is largely built on unfounded or unverified fears, and the tendency to stereotype foreigners as causes of social and economic issues in a host country.

The media has a major role in essentializing and exaggerating xenophobia against Muslim people. Ismael & Measor (2003), state that after a few hours of the World Trade Center's collapse (9/11), an effort by the Canadian media “to provide explanation and context for the enormously emotional images transmitted into Canadian homes, trends began to emerge from the coverage as news producers and editors selected what they saw as [the story]” (p. 101). The media increase the discrimination towards international students in host countries. In some severe cases, many international students are victimized by some part of the local population; this is common particularly for Muslim and Arab students due to the effects of media narratives regarding terrorism (Hanassab, 2006; Hitlan et al., 2007; Nagra, 2011; Lee, 2015). Findings from study by Hanassab (2006) show that “international students from the regions of the Middle East

and Africa experience more discrimination than do students from other regions” (p.157).

Similarly, Nagra, (2011, p. 3) explains that

...many young Muslims recall living in a hostile environment in the post 9/11 era in Canada...young Canadian Muslims are racialized and increasingly othered through stereotypical conceptions about their gender identities. While Muslim men are perceived as barbaric and dangerous, Muslim women are imagined as passive, and oppressed by their communities.

Thus, some engage in acts of resistance due to the rejection they endure in a Canadian society.

Others renounce their home culture and communities so as to limit the level disdain to become accepted by domestic students (Husom ,2009).

Language Difficulties for International Students

Other than the age of arrival, the extent of social support, ethno-cultural identity, and duration of stay, it is also essential to consider the language competency of international student. International students face a language obstacle which limits their ability to adjust and interact with the people in their community; it hampers their ability to participate in learning discussions and social activities. Language barriers seem to be the most challenging issue for the majority of international students. Mori, (2000); Smith & Damjanenko, (2011) mention that language barriers limit international students’ interaction with instructors, classmates, and staff. International students who are not skilled and confident linguistically are at a disadvantage academically and socially (Wei Yeoh & Terry, 2013). The difficulty is observed even in the case where the foreign student is fluent in English because of non-verbal expressions. International students face great difficulty communicating and keep conversations as they are never sure of the impact of their verbal and non-verbal expressions on the host (Smith, 1987; Brumfit, 1993; Lacina, 2002).

Although they might have learned some English in their home countries for many years, they realize the stark contrast between learning a language and using it in everyday communication (Nawaz, et al., 2015; Wei Yeoh & Terry, 2013). For instance, while Canadians prefer short answers for routine greetings, which is a “part of this communicative competence” (Senft & Basso, 2009, p. 270), some international students will have long responses such as asking about the other person’s life, family, and work etc. (Senft & Basso, 2009; Sommer & Lupapula, 2012). Students who have a high verbal ability in English, depending on the locality have an easier time adjusting to the local cultural conditions (Wei Yeoh & Terry, 2013).

Another impact of language difficulties that affects international students is the language discrimination at academic institution. They face a difficult time displaying their ideas and needs when communicating with instructors and domestic students. Hence, their journeys to accomplish their academic goals become harder. Lacina (2002) illustrates that the accent of international students or their use of expressions usually prevent communication between students and faculty (Hanassab, 2006; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Trice, 2007). Mastenhauser (1983; as cited in Sam 2005) points out that international students tend to be seen as handicapped in various aspects including weak academic preparation, inappropriate language capability, and general inferiority to local students. This makes international students subject to discrimination, and subsequently to racial discrimination. Such discriminations might lead to negative psychological results for the discriminated students (Sanchez & Ferdnandez, 1993; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; as cited in Sam 2005).

Academic Adjustment

Culture background and learning has a fundamental relationship; this means that culture affects the way students learn, and interact with peers and instructors. Ghosh and Abdi (2004)

asserted that production and reproduction in schools are significantly influenced by culture. International students have different academic experiences as they come from different learning milieu which are often developed based on the local realities of each country. Therefore, international students have to adjust their prior academic experiences once they enter into a new academic environment. Such issue is well explained by Ridley (2004):

The discourses of academic disciplines in higher education can be confusing and mysterious for those who are new to university study. The confusion can be particularly greater for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds that are different to those underpinning the dominant ideologies of higher education institutions (p.91).

International students enter academic institutions in their host countries with different cultures and languages that have shaped their thinking and learning. As they arrive with their home language and culture, they encounter the local language and culture of the host community, as well as of the academic community (Bakhtin, 1986). Thus, international students usually find themselves engaged in a process of triple learning. Triple learning is defined by Palmer (2015) as “a transactional process between three distinct languages and registers, as well as three cultures and subcultures within the community of practice” (p. 190). Within this process, international students learn new ways of thinking and acting as well as the languages of their social and academic communities.

As most of international students in Canada are English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, they often face an uphill battle academically as learning an additional language is often occurring at the same time as studies that require a deep working knowledge of the English language (Allison, 2011; Galante, 2014). There are specific literacy skills needed to have success at the university level that includes writing, reading, listening, speaking, class discussion, and critical thinking (Alford & Jetnikoff, 2011). However, many students are challenged because the underlying language performance is still being developed. Cummins (2006) mentions that

many research studies have shown that English Language learners (ELL) require very different time periods to catch up to their peers in different dimensions of English proficiency. This can cause many EAL students to struggle at the introductory level in postsecondary education as a result of these language barriers.

Academic language requires higher level words that describe complex thinking processes or what is called higher order thinking skills. Different disciplines have different utility words for viewing the world, gathering information, interpreting and organizing knowledge in specific content areas. Within university classrooms, students are asked to interpret, compare, evaluate, estimate, apply, connect, analyze, describe, rethink, classify, define, sequence, predict or communicate in oral and written activities or exams (Zwiers, 2008). Mainstream students may know many of these function words but second language speakers who may not have background in a content area may find concepts and definitions abstract. Zwiers (2008) states:

Academic language functions to serve three interrelated and broad-ranging functions to describe complexity, higher order thinking, and abstraction. These overlapping purposes take different forms in each content area or grade level (p. 23).

What becomes confusing for second language students is that professors often uses figurative expressions to describe abstract concepts. Zwiers (2008) argues:

Figurative language includes metaphors, analogies, idioms and other terms that use concrete and common ideas to describe concepts and relationships. They are commonly found in works of literature, but they are also very prevalent in articles, letters, speeches, lectures, and conversations (P. 27).

Examples of figurative language are terms such as point of view, read between the lines, a thin argument, on the right track, or that answer does not hold water. Thus, figurative language should be explained so it is explicit to all students.

There are several major challenges when EAL students make the transition into postsecondary studies at the university level (Murphy & Unthiah, 2015). For instant, EAL students will be challenged when given new assignments which require a particular written format such as analyzing or comparing ideas with another article. EAL students will be faced with preliminary transitional challenges in the form of different teaching and grading styles, test-taking methods, paper writing requirements, and class discussions (Allison, 2011). Since language is a necessity to experience success with these activities, EAL students are often challenged with the initial transition into the postsecondary university environment. Moreover, language will directly impact major language skills activities such as reading, writing, listening, critical thinking and holding discussions in English (Gunderson, Odo, & D'Silva, 2013). Language skills have to be developed in order to adequately support academic performance. EAL students are often tested for meeting minimum proficiency levels; however, this student demographic is often continuing to develop language skills even though they are entering postsecondary education for the first time. This generally means that they will continue to need supports in place to continue working on language skills while also engaging in new educational environment.

Definitions of literacy have been point of debates. It has been defined as the ability to read and write at an adequate level. Blake and Hanley define it as (1995, p. 89): "[T]he attribute of literacy is generally recognised as one of the key educational objectives of compulsory schooling. It refers to the ability to read and write to an appropriate level of fluency". Similarly, (Spack,1997) illustrate that academic literacy in higher education is the capability to read and write various texts that are designated for university level across the disciplines. However, academic literacy is not only about acquiring the ability to read and write in English as it

includes more than just reading and writing. Rather, academic literacy has a broader meaning as it includes speaking, listening, viewing, and visual representing. Gilliver-Brown and Johnson, (2009) assert that academic literacy should be seen as “holistic in nature and includes reading competence, writing, critical thinking, knowledge of independent learning processes, tolerance and ambiguity, effective practice of good judgement and development of a deeper sense of personal identity” (p.334). Further, students’ capability of speaking in academic contents is a major key to success as most of classes in Canada and North America in general are dialogical. Myles & Cheng (2003) claim that speaking and writing are fundamental academic requirements that international students face within their academic lives. Oral presentations are common to most post-secondary institutions as they show the progress of students’ in the process of post-secondary education. Wang (2004) argues that presentations become challenging when students feel unable to perform the task because of their language, which indicates that they are lacking in oral language abilities. Other challenges that international students encounter upon entering post-secondary institutions is the use of academic English. They face difficulties related to reading speed, subject specific vocabulary and new vocabulary in general, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and use of adequate language in specific contents. Lee (2014) explains that some international students encounter a hard time reading because of their limited linguistic wealth, deficient prior knowledge in a subject, misunderstanding of complex syntax and polysemous words, sentence structure, and absence of corresponding words between their first language and English.

Canadian and most of North American post-secondary institutions adopt individualistic teaching styles; university learning values communicative language and critical thinking as an essential way of teaching which differs from other education systems adopted in other countries.

In Canada and mostly in North America, students are encouraged to present their individual achievements at acquiring language and skills, voluntarily answer the instructor's questions, explain their ideas and critical thinking with their peers, and challenge their instructor's opinions (Calloway-Thomas et al., 1999). In contrast, an Eastern style of teaching is collectivist where the instructor is centered and seen as the main resource of knowledge. Students within this style actively listen, present more respect for the instructor, and show formal harmony or authority driven in class (Slethaug, 2007). In Saudi Arabia for example, teachers are highly respected and therefore, students must raise their hand, waiting patiently, to be given permission to ask or answer a question (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Barnawi, 2009; Shaw, 2010). Such differences between learning styles challenge many international students coming with various learning experiences. Much research has been conducted on the challenges that international students face when they study abroad because of the differences between learning styles in their countries and host countries. For instant, many researchers focus on the differences between students' style of learning in China and Western countries (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Calloway-Thomas, Cooper, & Blake, 1999; Cheng, 2000; Holmes, 2004; Jones, 1999; Mooney, 2006; Tani, 2005; Wallach & Metcalf, 1995; as cited in Roberts, & Tuleja, 2008). Another compromising situation is that Chinese students appreciate only the instructors' opinions. They favor learning through memorization and repetition and doing work in groups, rather than participating in class discussions. Similarly, teachers in Saudi Arabia speak most of the class time. Students are not motivated to challenge the instructors, or to comment on the material during the lecture. Students simply memorize information provided by the teacher (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Barnawi, 2009; Shaw, 2010). Such differences between learning styles challenge many international students coming with various learning experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Ethnography is a collection of qualitative methods used in the social sciences that focus on the close observation of social practices, interconnections, and interactions of a particular group. I chose ethnography for the research study to look for patterns in the academic and social worlds of Saudi Arabian (Saudi) undergraduate students who are few in numbers compared to other groups at a Canadian University. The intent was to describe how this cultural group functions in an international setting and to explore their beliefs, language, behaviours and also academic, cultural and social challenges faced by the group. such as power, resistance, and dominance. In this study, I chose a critical approach “in response to current society in which systems of ... privilege serve to marginalize students who are from different races and cultures” (Creswell, 2013, p.93). Within a smaller group of international *Arab-Muslim* students, I wanted to understand from their point of view their enculturation, socialization, and learning.

Research Question

The overarching research question that underpins this thesis was: "How do Saudi Arabian undergraduate students describe their experiences during their studies at a Canadian university?" This major question was answered through three sub-questions in order to acquire more details. These questions are as follows:

- 1- Can you describe the personal and academic challenges Saudi encounter while studying at the university?
- 2- What is the impact of the cultural identity and cross-cultural experiences of Saudi students on their perceptions?

3- What strategies do Saudi students use in order to overcome the linguistic, social and cultural issues they encounter, and how do they experience support at the university?

Interviews were structured (with a perceived set of questions) semi-structured or non-structured to allow participants to respond as a dialogue or conversational interview.

Research Design and Data Collection

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore the experience of Saudi Arabian undergraduate students at a Canadian university from their perspectives. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of participants, a qualitative research approach was adopted using an ethnographic method, an open-ended interpretive approach which encompasses a broad range of strategies and techniques as in observation and conversational interviews.

1. I selected the participants through purposeful sampling so they can fully inform an understanding of the research question. Participants were Saudi Arabian undergraduate students, male or female who were in undergraduate degree programs at the same Canadian University. I chose this method to include the participants, settings, key events, and artifacts. This method is best used to describe the lived human experiences (Angrosino, 2007) of a group or culture (Fetterman, 1998).
2. A direct recruitment method, purposeful sampling, was used as the researcher has personal direct contact with some of the potential participants. In addition, a referral method or snowball sampling was used by asking participants to refer other participants who might be interested in participating, thus ensuring a sizable sample for the research.

3. Data was collected through field work with face-to-face semi-structured open-ended interviews. Interviews were used to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1996; p. 94). The interviews were conducted in Arabic, with hope that participants’ comfort in this language will lead to a better understanding of their culture and conditions inferred from the words and actions of the group.
4. Descriptive jot notes were sketched on site in the field containing factual data including time and date, the state of the physical setting. Later, the jot notes became the constructed representations of the experiences which were written after the interviews. The notes are detailed descriptive and included reflective information recorded in a researcher’s journal about observations within the interview sessions. Further, recalled descriptions of the participants in social and linguistic environments and the researcher’s relationship with the participants in the setting were added. While reflective information is the observer's reflections about the observation being conducted, these reflections are ideas, questions, concerns, and links to other studies in the literature.

Participants

The participants of this research were composed of four male Saudi undergraduate students who came to Canada as international students to pursue their post-secondary education in various programs. All participants were full-time international Saudi undergraduate students who have been in Canada for at least one year, and have no previous experience of learning overseas. To recruit participants to understand their perspective of their undergraduate

experiences, I was immersed in a social setting, The Saudi Student Association (sponsored by the Saudi Association Culture Bureau) where I was able to observe its members in a variety of social gatherings. Often I was able to listen to and engage in conversations of a variety of topics with members in that setting that pertained to their new life in a Canadian University. From this position, I was able to learn about the backgrounds of students and the topics they discussed in this group. In this study I came from an emic point of view where “the researcher relies on the participant views as an insider emic perspective and reports them in verbatim quotes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 92). Therefore, I was able to recruit four Saudi Arabian undergraduate students for this ethnographic study, and understand their responses. I did not interview female students because at the time I was seeking participants and interviewing there was no Saudi Arabian undergraduate female students registered at the university.

Procedures

At first, a short orientation was given to explain the importance of the study, and inform participants that there was no right or wrong answers. Their answers were audio tape-recorded and used only for research purposes. Then, participants had the chance to read and understand the ethical consent protocol, and they were given copies of it. Once they signed the form, we proceeded to the interview questions. The first part of the interview was a demographic inquiry about age, gender, major and length of living and studying abroad. Then the interview advanced to the research questions. In the ethical protocol, the participants were informed in writing that their participation is voluntarily, and that they may refuse to answer a question or withdraw their full participation at any time. As well, they were informed that they can use pseudonyms, and that their personal information was saved in a confidential place at the College of Education with the Graduate Supervisor, Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam for five years. Interviews

were one hour long for every participant, and they took place in different locations. Three interviews were conducted on campus, while one was conducted at a public coffee shop.

Data Collection

With the data collecting, I generated formal and informal questions flowing from the natural courses of conversations that were meant to be more egalitarian in conversational interviewing. According to Bogdan and Blikien (2007, p.104) “Good interviews are those in which subjects are at ease and talk freely about their points of view.” Therefore, I used an open-ended approach that is used by research interviewers to generate rich verbal data through talking about specified topics with participants in an informal and conversational way (Mishler,1986). Often, I leaned in to the participant and asked, “Can you tell me more?” I found this was a responsive strategy that follows conversational leads. Likewise, this encouraged the participant to talk in an area of interest and then I was able to probe and pick up on the issues or topics initiated.

Data Analysis

After recording all the interviews, they were transcribed from Arabic to English and then analyzed. Based on the collected data, the researcher began the first stage of coding data by aggregating comments on similar themes to generate concepts and categories and tagging them in my binder of transcripts. Subsequently, the researcher examined these notes, and codes from reading and memoing often organized by color coded highlighting and constructing mini-concept maps. I made numerous marginal comments on my field notes and transcripts to track my thinking. I circled words or phrases of my participants and my binder bulged with pages of concept maps. I followed Creswell’s idea of a “short list” of tentative codes (p. 184, 2013) matching text segments from the transcripts. After several reads, I began to confirm codes that

are related, and carefully reflected upon the participants' responses. Then final concepts and codes were transferred into a data table to work with words and ideas in categories relating to the analytic framework in the literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore, examine, understand, and describe the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian undergraduate students at a Canadian university from their perspectives. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of participants, a qualitative research approach was adopted using an ethnographic method, an open-ended interpretive approach which encompasses a broad range of strategies and techniques were used in this research. More specifically, data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured or unstructured open-ended interviews that resembled dialogues or conversational interviews (Mishler, 1986). I selected flexible, conversational interviewing methods to relax respondents, encourage open conversations, improve the depth of the response, address respondent concerns, and hoping to obtain high quality data. Interviews were chosen for a number of reasons. They permitted the researcher to focus on selected topics and to engage directly with the subjects at the centre of this study. In addition, the questions posed elicited descriptive data in the participants' own words, and allowed the researcher to develop insights on how participants interpret their perceptions about the research topic. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, with the assumption that making the participants comfortable by dialoguing in their first language would lead to their greater ability to share their experiences, thus generating more and better results. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

The present chapter is divided as follows. The First section addresses participants' personal experiences of living and studying in Canada. The second section focuses on the impact of cultural identity and cross-culture on participants' experiences during their stay in Canada.

The third section addresses participants' academic experiences in Canada. The fourth section concentrates on strategies for overcoming academic challenges.

Personal Experiences of Living in Canada

Missing life back home

All of the participants involved in this study reported that they miss their life activities and their culture back home in Saudi Arabia. They indicated that they experienced homesickness, and felt isolated. This feeling was so intense for P3, for instance, that it affected his mood, making him depressed particularly during his first year. As he explains in this passage, the severity of this situation made him consider returning to his home country:

It was very rough to the extent where I almost decided to go back to Saudi after the first couple of weeks. I seriously considered returning back. Some challenges I encountered were the food, and the entertainment alternatives. As for the food alternatives, I was not sure what to eat or where to go so I depended on lots of fast food... I felt depressed. I wanted to go home and see my family, and I was talking to them every day. The difficulty was getting out of this situation. I hated everything around me and just wanted to go home. The only thing that could have made me happy was to go see my family back home.

In this mood, even simple details about life in Canada came to affect P3. He mentions, for example, "I was not used to the fact that malls and restaurants close early here. Back home they close sometime around midnight while here most of the city is closed and off by 8-9 the latest."

Similarly, it was the daily and mundane living that struck P2, who felt isolated in part because the activities and food in Canada were so different than what he was used to back home.

Even when I am with fellow Saudis, I feel that we all together don't belong, or more like feel that we are isolated from society itself. The main reason why I feel isolated is particularly because the activities that I participated in, when I was back home, were very different than the ones here... food choices provided in the university are limited compared to the diversity of the university community. This led me to go to restaurants that are more globally known such as DQ and McDonalds.

This association of food with home was also reflected in P1's account of his early experiences in Canada, as he retells here:

It takes time to get used to the culture differences here... When I first got here I started off just wanting to eat our cultural foods. However, over time I was forced to explore different varieties. And looking back to where I was on this topic when I first started till now, I feel that my food choices have changed.

Impact of Cultural Identity and Cross-Culture

All the participants noticed that their culture mediated their experience of adjusting to life in Canada. Within this theme, the most salient data belonged to these three categories: 1. the cultural and religious differences; 2. gender roles; and 3. experiencing prejudice and stereotypes.

Cultural and religious differences

Besides the language barrier, a struggle shared by participants that will be detailed in the academic experiences section, all participants stated that they sometimes find themselves unable to participate in some gatherings and activities due to cultural and religious boundaries. All participants expressed that they face challenges while attempting to negotiate their religious and cultural values with the host culture. While they appreciate and want to hold on to their values, they also found them to be in conflict with their desire to engage more in their new lives and make new friendships. Due to the differences between their own values and those of the host culture and the cultures of other international students, Saudi students are challenged to keep balance between their values and those of the host culture. The challenge they face revolve mainly around meeting friends in places such as bars and night clubs where alcoholic drinks are served, while their Islamic religion prohibits alcohol.

P3 spoke of his internal struggle in deciding whether he should accept or refuse to meet in such places. On one hand, he does not want his refusal to join his friends to be stereotyped or seen as close-minded. On the other hand, he feels out of place and uncomfortable when he

decides to join them. He captured much of the sentiments expressed by all of the participants regarding this issue when he indicated:

The differences I faced mostly were revolving around the activities. Here lots of the fun and activities students participate in involve alcohol in some sort of way. We have a different approach to gatherings and activities. Many ask me if I want to hang out and get a drink after school and so that was somewhat of a shock to me. As you know we do not have that stuff in our culture. And even when I decided to join so that I was not left out, I felt very out of place and uncomfortable. The atmosphere is different.

P1 stated his experience as follows:

There is always some sort of barrier, some sort of constraint that makes me hesitant to encounter locals. Usually these are cultural and religious barriers. For example, maybe the local students would do what they see as normal or is the norm which doesn't suit my religion or culture, such as simply meeting up at a bar for a drink. Since as a Muslim, I do not affiliate myself with any activities containing alcohol, I find it very difficult to easily mingle with locals. It creates this barrier for me. I can't change the fact their culture is different than mine, and so I always keep it in mind while I interact with the locals.

P2 reported that his encounters with friends are mainly restricted to the university campus, and revolve around academic matters.

Most of my friendships are strictly on the premises of academics due to major cultural differences. As I mentioned earlier I don't drink and many of my university friends do. Therefore, this makes the encounters awkward especially when in a party setting. Also, when off campus, the topics and interests that local students have are fairly different than mine.

P4 mentioned that he is always happy to meet his friends whenever the gathering place is right for him.

I have few local friends. Whenever we would hang out and the point of gathering was a bar, I didn't participate much since it is both a cultural and religious concern to me. But when we chose to meet at a café or restaurant, I would gladly meet up with them.

Gender roles

Another theme that emerged from the data in this section is the significance of gender roles. Specifically, three participants shared that the intermingling between men and women in Canada is a new experience for them, as in their culture both genders do not interact constantly with the

opposite sex unless he or she is a family member. In this passage, P3 speaks to this new experience and the challenge it presented for him at first.

When talking about the different gender roles here, I found them to be something new. I am not used to the constant interaction between the two genders. For example, in group discussions it was uncomfortable when females would be in my group. I would be hesitant to address them. Also the way certain girls dress was something I found to be very different. Now I think I have gotten used to it.

While this situation was common for the participants within the university, P2 explained that he does not mingle with female students outside of his academic circle.

As for the gender role, it is different here. Back home males and females are always separate. For myself, I don't engage in any activities with women off campus and outside of academic needs. I'm not against women, because they also don't mingle with men outside of their families in our culture. It is just a religious concern.

P4 also employed this strategy to mediate this culture difference, as he describes here:

Gender role was a new experience as we don't interact with the opposite sex outside of our families back home. I am used to it now. It is normal here in Canada, and I respect the culture. However, I usually mingle with women within the academic setting and keep my interactions formal and respectful.

Experiencing prejudice and stereotypes

All participants reported that, so far in their time in Canada, they have not experienced a direct attack or discrimination. However, they all reported that they have been in different situations where they faced prejudice and stereotypes. P1 explained that one of the reasons that he finds it difficult to develop new friendships is the shift in people's interactions with him once they find out that he is Saudi Arabian.

It was most evident when making new friends. I noticed that when the locals would find out that I am of Saudi origin, they either began to avoid me or they would be interested in asking me many questions about my culture, but then maintain a formal and professional relationship with me. Rarely, I would have made a new friendship. It was very easy for people to stereotype me. People would be surprised to find out that I am Saudi, because I do not follow or show the stereotypes that many claim about Saudis.

On this subject, P1 had a story to share that illustrated how many people have false notions about Saudi Arabian people.

A student once asked me if I own a gun back home, and she was serious. I was shocked honestly. When I heard this, I didn't know how to react. I told her that I really haven't owned a gun at all. She kept pushing the stereotype on me that we all carry weapons back home and that we are somewhat nomadic. I simply responded and told her that no, we don't carry guns like that, the majority of us don't own guns. She confirmed by asking if we look like the extremists on the news. And I added that those individuals frighten me as much as they frighten any other person.

For P3, discrimination meant being treated differently than other in some situations. He also added that he has witnessed some cases where people were talking badly about his culture. He described his experience as follows:

Even though I haven't faced direct discrimination, I have felt that some people treat me a bit different than others. For example, my landlord treats me differently than other tenants. Some people also talk about how my culture is evil in front of me and they do not know that I am from that culture. It causes some discomfort to be looked upon as a lesser individual.

P4 expressed that many people have an unauthentic image about Saudi Arabia and its people, and he always finds himself in a position where he needs to explain the reality to them.

I realized that many local people have an interpretation about Saudi Arabian citizens as rich nomads. So I had many instances where I found myself explaining that these things are stereotypes and would explain our living situations, primarily discussing our culture.

P2 also confirmed that he has not faced a direct discrimination, but he has witnessed some verbal abuse toward his culture or religion. P2 shared the following story:

No one has verbally or physically attacked me or harassed me. However, there was once this poster talking about the issues or the topic of Islamophobia. Someone was going to give a speech about the topic. Well, on the poster itself, someone had written some words that disrespected the religion of Islam. That got under my skin honestly. A speaker is coming to talk about an important topic and this individual decided to write such graffiti directed at a whole religion. These types of actions create a negative atmosphere on campus and make things uncomfortable for me.

Two participants mentioned that the distorted image of Saudi Arabian people and

Muslims in general spread through media has influenced their reputation and made them an easy target for racism. P1 shares his experience in this passage:

I have felt that many assume that I am close minded or some sort of an extremist, by simply stereotyping me to those groups shown in the media. I do recall actually once that I was verbally abused by locals after a certain global issue that took place, I cannot recall exactly which honestly, but it was fairly recent. I was cussed at and verbally abused by a drive by. They simply saw me in the street and stereotyped me right on the spot. I didn't do anything about it and carried on walking without hesitation. I witness many discussions also on social media where people attack the religion and culture with live threats. It's scary, honestly, what people threaten and say on social media.

Similarly, P3 shared his thoughts on the impact of social media in fueling racism:

I haven't faced a personal attack where someone attacks me by calling me a terrorist or extremist. But due to the media, there is a negative impact of what is happening overall. None of what the media says is right. And they keep adding more pressure on Muslims... Sadly, the negative information that the media portrays about Muslims plays a role. I think it truly affects the minds of the general public giving them a bad idea about us.

Academic Experiences of Studying in Canada

Language barrier

The first theme that emerged from the data dealing with the academic experiences of the participants was the language barrier, which seems to be the biggest challenge they experienced during their studies in Canada. All of the participants reported that they have faced and are still facing challenges in regard to English proficiency at both personal and academic levels. P2 illustrated how hard it is to learn a new language, and he explained the challenges he faced during the first phase of learning English because of the difference between Arabic and English:

As for the difference between Arabic and English, I faced challenges processing the fact that I need to start on the left side of the page rather the right. It was most evident when I took the placement test in ESL. The placement test was a short picture story, and I started to interpret the pictures from right to left. This meant that I completely misunderstood the story. Now, I admit that it was a tough mental barrier to process the difference and get used to it since I have been writing from right to left my whole life and now I need to write and process the language from left to right.

For P4, learning the English language was the biggest challenge he faced.

The biggest challenge was that, before coming here, I thought that I knew how to speak English but when I came here I found out that I was at a novice level and had to accept the fact that I had to start from scratch.

All of the participants indicated that they faced and are still facing communication challenges when they interact with locals. P4 mentioned two points that make the situation hard when interacting with local people: “the extensive use of slang” and “the speed at which the people spoke.” He explained how he always interrupted people to ask them repeat what they have said so he could understand.

I used to always repeatedly say “sorry can you repeat?” or “pardon me”, and explain to people that I did not understand because I am still studying English”.

In P2’s case, he found it challenging to keep up with conversations when he talked to local people, as he explains here:

When I would speak with the locals, I would start off understanding. However, once the discussion got deep I began to understand less and less solely due to the use of slang terms and the speed at which they would talk... So I reached a point where I would pretend that I understood when in fact I only picked up one or two words from what they said.

P3 described how, he too, struggled to understand local terms and sayings.

I still face linguistic difficulties with phrases and metaphors used here. I have a difficult time understanding the local language when it comes to slang. I have been here for six years or so and I still find it hard to comprehend some things.

P1 expressed how hard it is to understand some phrases, even though he is familiar with each word on its own.

I have also faced certain situations, like when I encountered a local at the subway and he was trying to start a conversation with me and said “so what you up to?”. In this instance I knew what the words meant when separated, but had no clue what he meant when he mumbled them together. I found myself in an embarrassing situation not knowing what to say or reply, and informed him that I was fresh to English and am here as an international student.

As the goal of academic English language institutions is to prepare students for academic purposes, all participants indicated that they speak in a different way with locals versus other

domestic students on campus since terms used in academic and other formal environments differ from slang. They find it difficult to change the way they speak in classes and out of classes as they depend mainly on the language they learned at their language centres. P1 presented his experience as follows:

I realized that I needed to learn the difference between the academic language and the language of the locals. As I find it difficult to distinguish the difference between them at times till today, even though it seems easier to pick up the general context. Also I face a challenge in using the academic language when speaking with the locals because I find that even though these words or phrases are technically used correctly, they are not used in this manner when speaking in slang...At the ESL level we were taught the academic level rather than the local slang. Therefore, when we were to mingle I found it difficult, since the academic language I was learning was not always relevant when encountering the locals. During certain instance I found that some terms I would use were completely misused, even though academically they are correct.

P1 provided an example of how some terms are restricted to formal settings and are not common in daily life conversation.

An example would be the word tolerance. In the academic atmosphere they use the word tolerance to outline limits or boundaries. However, in the local language they use “I don’t agree” or “I don’t accept this matter” rather than say “I would not tolerate it”.

P3 also brought up that “the biggest difficulty was being able to comprehend the local language while learning academic English. It was difficult to keep the two from mixing.”

All participants reported that their limited proficiencies and communication skills affect their daily activities on campus including their engagement in classroom discussions, presentations, and conversations with classmates and professors. They all expressed how these limited communication skills make them feel inadequate comparing themselves to local students. P1 expands

on struggling with this language barrier in this passage:

In general, the language itself seems to be the biggest challenge even when I have the knowledge and understanding. Because, when I have the correct terminology I can confidently speak knowing that I can deliver the right idea. While, if my communication and English skills were of a high level yet I lacked the knowledge, or am not prepared for class, to a certain extent I would beat around the bush and try to make some sense of the content which makes it easier to participate...I have noticed that even though in the

formal setting I can get by, it still remains a challenge at times to communicate with the locals since they do not rely on the academic language as much as they rely on slang. Furthermore, synonyms play a role in making communication difficult since words are used interchangeably. However, in some circumstances when synonyms are used they can obscure the overall context. Due to these communication difficulties, it tends to create barriers which make me hesitant to interact in group discussions and encounter locals.

P2 also faces this hesitance to engage in group discussions due to his limited language and communication skills, and this make him feel inferior to local students. He indicated:

In classes where there is lots of participation, discussion, or group work, I always tend to accompany anyone other than local students and to avoid them at any cost. This is because I feel inferior to the local students because my communication skills are weaker. Hence I feel that I will waste the group member's time. I just feel that I need to always elaborate on every point I make and always think thoroughly about what I want to say because I feel that I can't get my point across as easily as local students.

P3 shares this experience with classrooms discussions, which he reflects on in the following passage.

In all honesty, I hate the classroom discussions... in discussions someone is standing in front of you and it's somewhat of a confrontation where I try to avoid eye contact at times to avoid interacting in the discussion. A difficulty I find is understanding English on the fly; it's just a big linguistic barrier for me. Many phrases and terms are always hard to understand. When I am in a group with locals and I cannot avoid that situation, I am straight forward and honest with them. I will tell them directly that I don't understand and ask them to repeat and to explain. I always find myself apologizing for my weaker level of language and asking to have the question rephrased a lot.

P4 compared his experience in classroom activities when he was first learning the language with his experience now, taking notice of how it was much easier to participate when he was surrounded by other learners rather than classmates who have English as their first language.

In the ESL I didn't see it as an issue because all of us in the class were speaking at the same level honestly, so I didn't feel scared or ashamed. However, when I was at the university level and started talking more frequently with the locals I would get scared to talk a lot because I didn't want to make many mistakes. Especially when talking to people who spoke English as a first language, I didn't want to be laughed at and therefore made sure that I was very concise and to the point when speaking with the locals. This was majorly my biggest issue.

Another challenge reported by participants revolved around how their limited proficiencies and communication skills prevent them from mingling with local students and engaging in after school encounters and activities. All participants mentioned that it is not easy to mingle and make friendship with local students due to linguistics challenges. Three of the participants addressed their experiences.

In what follows, P4 reflects on how his fear of making mistakes acts as a barrier to engaging with other students.

The fear of making mistakes is still an issue for me till today. My fear is mostly about making linguistics mistakes, whether to understand what is being said or to make my point across. I felt that since I am not as fluent in English, I don't want to have awkward encounters with the local students.

P2 noticed that the topics and interests that local students have are fairly different than his, and that they speak in more slang than he is used to. This makes him feel uneasy and at times inferior because when he does not understand everything, he feels that he is out of place and does not belong to the group. P2 offered an example to illustrate his linguistic challenges

The difficulties all relate back to the linguistic challenges mentioned. For example, I volunteered with a university organization and many jokes were told yet I didn't understand any, and I felt that I had to fake laugh so that I don't feel left out.

P3 shared a similar experience, which he reports here:

I feel that I don't understand much of what they are saying. I find myself in one of two scenarios, either I pretend that I understand, or I am asking them to repeat what they just said. When not in an academic setting, I find it weird and ill-mannered to keep asking what a person said especially when someone is saying a joke and trying to have a good time. I just feel the person will have a perspective that I am stupid and I don't understand. So I feel it is bad for both sides. Also, some jokes made might seem funny to them but I feel that it's not funny to me.

Other linguistics challenges

Another theme that emerged from this section relates to the challenges Saudi Arabian undergraduate international students face was with English language proficiency in reading and

writing for their academic tasks. Reading is incredibly time consuming for the students, as they require more time to comprehend what they read compared to local students due to their limited linguistics skills. As for writing, most of students expressed that they struggle with spelling and with mastering the various types of academic writing tasks. Below, I elaborate on the findings related to these two struggles.

Reading

P1 indicated that the biggest challenge he faces with reading is that he spends a very long time simply trying to understand what is being written.

If your skills in understanding the language are weak, I think it affects the understanding and performance because it takes longer to process the context. It will take more time compared to locals who process the language as it is being spoken on the spot. Therefore, they don't require a buffer time to understand or translate.

Similarly, P4 illustrated that the time he needs to comprehend readings is a huge challenge for him. He explained that some words make the processing time longer if he doesn't know the meaning or pronunciation of those words. He reported the following:

I found difficulties in reading. I am one of the slowest people in summarizing the main idea. The situation gets worse when I face some words that make me stop reading and instead try to figure out their meanings or pronunciations. So, time is a huge concern for me when it comes to reading, and this affects any other academic requirements because reading is connected to every academic task. Therefore, I spend a very long time to prepare for exams and any type of tasks.

Academic reading challenges students as they encounter vocabulary not always used in oral conversations. According to Zwiers (2008), readers need to utilize comprehension strategies such as predicting, synthesizing, inferring cause and effect and other higher order thinking skills or what he calls "mental multitasking that typifies academic reading" (p. 164).

Writing

As mentioned earlier, the challenges that participants face in regard to writing mainly

relate to spelling and the many varieties of writing forms.

P1 detailed his experience as follows:

In the English language, similarly to most languages, when knowing how to pronounce a word, it doesn't precisely mean that I would know the spelling. Therefore, I had a difficulty knowing how to spell some words even though I knew their meanings.

P1 also indicated that the different writing formats are key factors when completing academic tasks. He affirmed this when he shared the following story:

Some questions are expected to be answered in methods, such as when I was asked to summarize a lab in a report throughout the work period in one of my chemistry classes. So I understood the question, and it had 20 marks but I got 1.5 marks. So I talked to the TA and was told that the way I answered was not what they were looking for. I was told to make the report personal and to write about what I am doing by summarizing in detail what was happening and what was going on as if I was to explain it to someone who knows nothing about chemistry. It was eye opening when I realized that each class or course varied with its writing methods... This variability caused some kind of confusion for me. I have noticed that I have trouble tailoring the requirements for each course due to the professor's or department's writing expectations or likings.

In a similar way, P2 noticed that he finds his way of writing different than his domestic classmates. The issue is that he always writes in a formal language, as in an essay format, while local students mostly write in an informal way. He expands on this by sharing the following:

For essays, they are more academic and more formal. I face a challenge when I am asked to make written comments for article reviews in class. I usually end up writing in a formal matter similar to how I was taught during my ESL studies. When compared to my fellow local students I realize that their comments are much more informally written. In the ESL phase, we were taught to always write formally in any academic setting. This causes some confusion with how I interpret formal or informal writing at the university level.

P4 also struggles with completing his written assignments appropriately, which he, too, attributes to the different styles of writing required, but also to his limited time and linguistic competence.

During my ESL study, I was taught how to effectively write academic papers. However, at the university level, if I were to use those strategies, I would face time constraints due to the long procedure of writing, editing, rewriting, and more editing, up until the paper is of standard. However, since there are many assignments and pressures with time, I found myself cutting corners and restraining myself while writing so that I could be as effective and timely as possible. The different types of writing assignments are another challenge. Summarizing is the hardest type of writing as I am required to explain the concepts in my

own words. I really face a hard time rephrasing some sentences due to my limited vocabulary.

P3 acknowledged that he struggles with spelling and almost all sorts of writing assignments. This passage details his thoughts on the matter.

My issue with writing was spelling, and it is still a struggle till today. There are many words that have expectations for how to write them based on their pronunciations... As for now, I am better than when I first started at the ESL level. I still face spelling difficulties. When doing any sort of writing project, I still use a translator for some words... Summaries are always difficult for me to comprehend. I still face difficulties till today and find myself searching how to write good article summaries. Essays are a big issue for me in English. Since there is a difference in the forms of writing, I always search the internet for the best way to fulfill the requirements of the particular form of writing.

Strategies for Overcoming Academic Challenges

After having all participants explain their experiences in regard to academic challenges, it was important to understand how they overcome these challenges. Participants presented several strategies that they use in order to succeed in their studies and control the impact of academic challenges. Within this theme, four strategies were common and notable: 1. time and effort, 2. hiring tutors, 3. helping each other within the Saudi students' circle, and 4. seeking support at the university. Each one of these sub-themes will be discussed below.

Time and effort

As mentioned earlier in the language barrier section, all participants reported that they put more time and effort compared to local or native speakers of English students in order to overcome the academic challenges caused by language barriers. For instance, P2 expressed that he spends more time and effort due to his language limitations and the difference in customary university preparation between Saudi and Canadian educational systems. Likewise, P4 stated that he spends a very long time to prepare for exams and any type of academic tasks.

Hiring tutors

Secondly, three of the participants shared the strategy of hiring tutors to counteract their difficulties. P2 deems this to be one of the most helpful strategies he has adopted, as he explains here:

One of the most useful strategies is to simply hire tutors... I depend greatly on off campus tutors since they are, in my opinion, better than tutors provided on campus. I find that the off campus tutors know how to get the point across more efficiently. Tutors on campus are bright, because they cannot become a tutor unless they have an average above 80%, but they lack the skills to get the point across.

P4 also employs this strategy, and he does not hesitate to seek the help of a tutor for any subject that he finds hard to understand. He has found the tutors he hired to be professionals who benefited him greatly, allowing him to succeed in multiple courses.

The last participant to have used this strategy justifies it as follows:

I would rather hire a tutor rather than asking the professor. I feel that I can't keep asking the professor every time we learn something new in class... Tutors are beneficial and they have helped me for certain courses. They are costly, honestly, which is tough financially.

Cooperation with other Saudi students

Participants raised one strategy that they all use, which is helping each other in different ways whenever it is possible by hosting study groups, consulting each other about academic challenges, and exchanging notes. P1 talks more about this strategy here:

I usually ask my friends and contacts within the Saudi society and figure out who has previously taken certain classes. Or, who might be able to shed some light on how to overcome these issues. Our Saudi circle is somewhat small, so getting in contact with each other is easy and we feel comfortable asking each other.

P4 stated that, every time he takes a new class, he asks his Saudi friends if they have taken it . This has been beneficial to him, as he elaborates on here:

I always ask if anyone of my Saudi friends had ever taken this class before and if they have any tips for this class. Also I would look for friends in certain courses to make sure

we can work together on projects or assignments as much as possible. Basically to help each other as much as possible.

P2 indicated that he always engages in study groups with other Saudi students to help each other and work on assignment together. P3 does so too, and he explains why these study groups are so successful in this passage:

Most of students from the Saudi community help each other. It is really helpful when there is someone who can interpret and understand the material and be able to explain it in Arabic. It helps understanding the concept correctly.

Seeking support at university

The last strategy expressed by participants was seeking support at the university. While this support occurs in various ways, participants raised two main sources of aid: 1. professors, and 2. university services. Each one will be discussed below.

Professors. All participants expressed that they receive a great deal of support from professors. While this happens to varying degrees depending on the participant, each indicated that this help was beneficial. For instance, P1 reported that he usually tends to contact the professor and teaching assistants of his courses to overcome his academic difficulties. P2 shares how great of a resource professors are to him.

As for professors, I found that all of them are helpful and put time and effort to make sure I understand correctly. Many welcome you to ask questions during office hours, but if I were to need more time they are more than happy to give me more time when suitable for both of us.

Similarly, P3 shared his experience with professors as follows:

My interaction with professors has always been on good terms. They are very understanding and helpful. Many professors tell us that we can call them by their first names... I have met with many at their offices. Most of them have done lots to explain to me either in the same way they had already explained the material in class, or in new ways just for my sake.

University services. each participant indicated that they always receive a huge support

from the services provided by their university. As participants vary in their ways to utilize these services according to their needs and circumstances, they counted many services that support them during their academic lives.

The Writing Help Centre as well as Math Help Centre were the support services most frequently addressed by all participants. Each mentioned that they use these centres all the time.

For example, P4 states below that he relies on these centres for most of his assignments.

I find the writing help center and the math help center, in the...library, are extremely helpful. I have visited the writing center for almost every single paper I had written. As for the math help center, it has always provided me with methods and guided me with ways to find the answer. I really benefited from these two help centres greatly. They are truly beneficial.

P3 also mentioned that the writing help service has helped him a lot as they provide their help online.

I have experienced the writing help center where I have utilized their online help. I would write my essay and then would send it via email and they edited it for me. They provide lots of beneficial feedback within two days. They will specify where the major issues that I have with my writing structure are, more than the content of the essay. In my opinion, I think that anyone who was use to the writing help center regardless of their writing abilities, they will find a great benefit from having a new set of eyes editing the paper.

Similarly, P2 shared his enthusiasm for the helpfulness of these centres, which he addresses below.

At university there is a math help center which has benefited me a lot. It is located in the library and so it is convenient for me since I usually study there... There is also a writing center which is very helpful where they edit any paper for you before submission. I really benefited from them greatly. I had an experience with them where they checked the grammar and sentence structures of my essays. My experience was really good as I was able to submit my papers online and they were able to get back to me quickly and efficiently. Also their feedback was very helpful.

Participants have also mentioned other services including libraries, workshops, prayer room, and the tunnels. Here, P3 talks about the benefit of libraries

The libraries are very beneficial. I always use the library to its full extent. I have used the online access to the library content many times and was able to even find books related to my courses that have benefited my understanding honestly. They even have private meeting and study rooms for group study or even just to isolate yourself in the busy library to focus. Also, librarians help me in my search for books and materials for my courses and assignments.

All participants stated that they appreciate their university's dedication to providing a designated prayer room for Muslim students. For P3, having a designated prayer room enables him to perform his daily prayers in a comfortable environment.

As for designated prayer areas, we have a prayer hall at the university... The nice thing is that the prayer room on campus allows me to feel more secure about my religious practices and that I can freely and comfortably pray without disturbing people or causing a commotion.

Likewise, P2 detailed that having a designated prayer room helps him to practice his prayer on time as well as motivates him to spend a longer time on campus.

As for the prayer rooms, it is really comforting that there is a designated prayer room where I could freely practice my religion in a safe environment. As well as the fact that these prayers have specific times during the day, being able to spend the day at campus without the fear of missing a prayer made things easier for me to stay on campus for longer periods without leaving campus for the sake of the prayer.

For P3, having underground tunnels that connect the university buildings was of great help in adjusting to the extreme cold of Canadian winters, which are in stark contrast to the weather in Saudi Arabia. He considers these tunnels to be a great service provided by the university as well. Due to the weather conditions in this part of the world, especially in winters, this service is extremely important and helpful to him.

Finally, P1 captured the essence of the university services experience that each of the participants described:

Students can book appointments with academic advisors on any academic matter as they provide insight on services provided on campus. For example, I was advised to check out the writing and math help center for all questions regarding English or math. Also, I was advised to contact the professors for any issue whether it be academic or even personal at times, and then the professors will provide even further insight on how to understand the

material. Also, I was enlightened about services that are focused on students' mental and physical wellbeing. So, for example, there is a psychiatrist and even doctors on campus who might be easier to talk to about any personal problems or pressures that one faces alongside studying. So basically the advisors are very helpful in directing any student to any service that the student needs.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the participants face different challenges on both personal and academic levels. These challenges fall within four broad areas: (1) personal experiences of living in Canada; (2) the impact of cultural identity and cross-culture on participants' experiences during their stay in Canada; (3) Academic experiences of studying in Canada; and (4) strategies for overcoming academic challenges. Participants reported that they faced feelings of homesickness and isolation due to variety of reasons including being away from their families and friends, and differences of food and daily activities. Other challenges were regarding the impact of the participants' cultural identity and cross-culture with the Canadian culture. Within this area, participants indicated that they face hard time making new friends and engaging in activities because of the cultural and religious differences. Another challenge expressed by participants was the issue of facing prejudice and stereotypes. The most and major challenge reported by participants was the issue of language barrier. They illustrated that language barrier affects them at both academic and personal level as they face hard time understanding some terms, engaging in a long conversations or class discussions, making new friends or participating in activities with local students. Other linguistic challenge reported by participants were reading and writing. Finally, participants of this study reported their strategies for success and seeking support including putting extra time and effort, hiring tutors, cooperation with other Saudi students, seeking support from professors, and utilizing university services. Having that said, each one of these areas is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Using qualitative research approach, the researcher adopted an ethnographic method to analyze the interview data for this study in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of Saudi Arabian undergraduate students studying at a Canadian university. It was important to note the absence of literature surrounding Saudi Arabian international students in Canada with only one study that focused on personal constructs of Saudi Arabian graduate students at a Canadian university. It was also important to note that the literature about Saudi Arabian international students is limited, with few researchers focusing specifically on the Saudi experience in the United States. Hence, this study adds to the literature of Saudi Arabian international students in general, and in Canada in particular.

In order to address and discuss the salient findings reported by the participants, this chapter discusses the findings organized into four broad areas: (1) personal experiences of living in Canada; (2) the impact of cultural identity and cross-culture on participants' experiences during their stay in Canada; (3) Academic experiences of studying in Canada; and (4) strategies for overcoming academic challenges. The next section of the chapter considers the strengths and limitations of this study. This section is followed by a discussion of possible implications of the study. The final section of this chapter considers possible future directions for research on Saudi Arabian international students studying in the Canada.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

Personal Experiences of Living in Canada

The first broad area emerged from the data was regarding the personal challenges of the participants during their stay in Canada. During the interviews, the participants gave in-depth

responses about their lived experiences when asked about these challenges. What follows is a discussion about the findings that emerged from this broad area.

The personal challenges that Saudi Arabian international undergraduate students experienced during their living in Canada was related to homesickness and loneliness. All participants reported that they had such feelings due to the difficulty of being away from their home and families, as well as difficulty of adjusting to their new lives in Canada. In similar way, a study on Saudi Arabian graduate students studying at a large Canadian university by Hamad (2012) found that social life was found to result strong feelings of isolation whether on-campus or off campus. Also, the current study's finding regarding homesickness and loneliness corresponds with other studies that addressed the experiences of Saudi Arabian international students in the United States of America (Al-Banyan, 1987; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Shaw, 2010). Shabeeb's study (1996) reported that Saudi and Arabian Gulf international students faced difficulties related to homesickness and loneliness. Similarly, a study about by Hofer (2009) revealed that 51.9% of Saudi Arabian international students participated in the study reported that homesickness was the largest problem they faced during their study in the United States.

This finding from the current study appears consistent with many studies in the international student literature regarding homesickness (Al-nusair, 2000; Haneef, 1996; King-Irani, 2004; Lin & Yi, 1997; Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Maundeni, 1999; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Nydell, 2006; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Stafford et al., 1980; Zhou, 2014). The feeling of homesickness and loneliness is common among international students. Such feelings are usually associated with being away from family and lacking social support in the host country. Similar to international students, the Saudi Arabian international students in this study were found to be negatively affected by the separation from their home and families. This finding makes sense as

Saudi Arabian students come from a culture that is highly ranked as a collectivist culture (Long, 2005).

Impact of Cultural Identity and Cross-Culture

The second broad area focused on the impact of the impact of cultural identity and cross-culture on participants' experiences during their stay in Canada. Within this broad area, three main ideas emerged: Cultural and religious differences, gender role, and experiencing prejudice and stereotypes. The following is a discussion about the salient findings from this broad area.

Cultural and religious differences. The participants from this study expressed facing the challenge of adjusting to a different culture. While they appreciate their own culture and religious values, they also desire to adjust to the host culture and to be more engaged and included. Hence they face the difficulty of keeping their values and being engaged more in the host culture. This finding is similar to a study by Hamad (2012) on the personal constructs of Saudi Arabian studying in Canada. She found that her participants faced the challenge of adjusting to the Canadian culture due to cultural differences. This finding also corresponds with other studies about Saudi Arabian international students in the literature (e.g. Al Musaiter, 2015; Shabeeb,1996; Hofer, 2009; Rabia, 2016; Razek & Coyner, 2013). They reported that cultural and religious differences were a challenge for Saudi Arabian international students in the United States. For example, Abdel Rezak's study (2012) about the experience of Saudi Arabian students studying at an American university revealed that many barriers including religious, prevented Saudi Arabian students from the participation in social events. Hofer (2009) asserts that Saudi Arabian international students face difficulties to make friends with Americans students. One of the reasons he mentioned was that "Saudi students do not socialize in the same fashion that many domestic students do. Since alcohol consumption is prohibited, Saudis cannot

consume alcohol and don't usually frequent nightclubs” (p. 193). When one considers that Saudi Arabian international students come from a country that is 100% Arab Muslims (Keating, 2004), this finding makes a great deal of sense because of the massive cultural transition each participant experienced.

Similarly, many studies from the international students’ literature confirm that culture is a key factor that determines the students’ adjustment and socialization (Jackson & Heggins, 2003; Jiao, 2006; Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Liang, 2003; Pelling, 2000; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Cultural and religious differences influence international students in different ways including socializing and communicating with students from other cultures. Zhou & Zhang, (2014) pointed out that international students who grew up in a different culture show different personal interests, ways of communication, sense of humor, daily life practice, and perceptions on different things which will negatively impact their desire and attempts to make close friends with local students.

Gender roles. Another impact of cross-cultural experienced by participants of this study was the cultural transition about gender roles. As both genders do not interact constantly with the opposite sex unless he or she is a family member in their culture, participants expressed that the intermingling between men and women in Canada was a new experience for them. This finding is similar to other studies of Saudi Arabian international students (e.g. Abdel Rezak, 2012; Al MUSAITEER, 2015; Rabia, 2016). In Alhazmi & Nyland's study (2010) about intercultural engagement of Saudi Arabian international students in Australia, participants reported that being in a mixed gender environment for Saudi international students causes some uneasiness. The study indicated that the participants reported different reasons for these difficulties. The most common reason is because it is a new experience that they hadn’t been exposed to it before. Such

new cross cultural experience is logical to be a challenge for students coming from a segregated environment including segregated education system (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010).

Experiencing prejudice and stereotypes. Another impact of cross-cultural experience of participants was the recognition by the participants that many people in Canada have inaccurate perceptions of Saudi Arabia and its people. Despite the fact that they have not experienced a direct attack or discrimination, all participants reported that they have been in different situations where they faced prejudice and stereotypes. In many times, they engage in discussions about their culture with the desire to correct the faulty perceptions about Saudi Arabian people. They also reported that media is a major reason of the spread of stereotypes about Saudi Arabian people and Muslims in general. This finding corresponds with other studies reported that Saudi Arabian international students faced challenges associated with the issue of stereotypes (Abdel Rezak, 2012; Al Musaiteer, 2015; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Jammaz,1972; Shaw, 2010). Abdel Rezak (2012) expressed that his participants reported that media create faulty perceptions about Saudi Arabia. He illustrated how the common stereotypes about Saudi Arabia, especially those spread by media, were offending for his participants. Similar to the current study, Heyn (2013) found that Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United experienced being stereotyped. She reported that her participants have retained efforts to fix the wrong perceptions that many American have about Saudi Arabia.

Participants felt it was their responsibility to provide a positive view of Saudi Arabia to the American people. They also felt as though they were responsible for fixing Americans' misconceptions about Saudi Arabian people and the Saudi Arabian culture. (p.133)

This finding is similar to other studies that addressed Arab and Muslim people (e.g. Mansouri & Trembath, 2005; Hanassab, 2006; Husom, 2009; Merryfield, 2002; Nagra, 2011; Poynting & Noble, 2004). Eid & Karim (2011) note that over the last three decades, the tendency

to depict Muslims as terrorists has rapidly grown. They indicated that linking Islam to terrorism “has come to be accepted as part of the discourse on security and terrorism, so much so that the terms “Muslim” and “terrorist” have become almost synonymous” (p.4). The years after the incident of 9/11 the concept of linking terrorism and Islam has been more explicit and extremely increased (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008). Hence, this factor promotes the stereotypes of Arab and Muslim population and adds more pressure and burden on their shoulders, which lead to harder experiences for this population of international students. Therefore, it is logical that Arab and Muslim international students, in general, experience more discrimination and stereotype than other international students as they are painted as terrorists.

Academic Experiences of Studying in Canada

The third broad area to be discussed concerned the academic challenges that Saudi Arabian international students experienced during their studies in Canada. Within this broad area, two main ideas emerged: Language barrier and other linguistic difficulties related to reading and writing. What follows is a discussion about the salient findings from this this broad area.

Language Barrier. The findings of this study revealed that the most significant academic challenge for the participants during their Canadian studies was related to the English language proficiency. Participants reported that language barriers are the biggest challenge for them as it affects them negatively at both personal and academic levels in different ways including understanding slang and local language, mingling and making friendships with local students, and engaging in classroom activities including oral presentations, class discussions, and group works. This is consistent with other studies that addressed Saudi and Arab international students (e.g. Abdel Rezak, 2012; Al Musaiter, 2015; Al-Shehry, 1989; Al-Zubaidi & Rechards,

2010; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Jammaz,1972; Rabia, 2016; Razek & Coyner, 2013; Shabeeb,1996; Shaw, 2010). The issue of English language proficiency emerges as a salient challenge across these studies which seem to be logical due to the huge difference between Arabic and English.

This finding also emerges as a core factor in the international student literature (Brumfit, 1993; Lacina, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000; Smith, 1987; Smith & Demjanenko, 2011; Wan, 2001; Wei Yeoh & Terry, 2013). English proficiency is one significant challenge for students coming from countries where English is not the primary language. As the academic language uses higher level of words, international students face hard time to understand and perform such language. Zwiers (2008) explains that use of complex language as well as the knowledge that educators have leads to skipping over information that students need. International students face the challenge of understanding new concepts or terms. When instructors are aware of such issues, the experience of international students will be much easier. Thus, the use of simple and explicit language in classrooms is needed. Zhang and Zhou (2010) found out that limited English language proficiency affects international students' lives socially and academically, including developing friends with native English speakers, understanding the course materials, finding group work mates. In such situation, international students usually find themselves engaged in a process of triple learning, which has been defined by Palmer (2015) earlier as three different stages of language usage. International students come with the level of English language that they have learned in their countries. However, upon their arrival to Canada, they find that the level of English used in Canada is not the same as the one they know due to the use of slang and local language. Further, international students encounter a different language at their academic institution where they face the challenge of understanding the

academic language which is a higher level of English used to describe complex ideas in their discipline. When they arrive to the host country with their cultures and languages that have shaped their ways of learning and thinking, they encounter the challenge of understanding the local language of the host community as well as the academic language as communities of practice (Bakhtin, 1986), and this is where the process of triple learning occurs (Palmer 2015).

Other linguistics challenges. Another difficulty related to the issue of English language proficiency reported by participants was in regard with reading and writing for their academic tasks. For reading, participants reported that most challenge they face is time consuming. As for writing, the challenges revolve around spelling and mastering the various types of academic writing tasks formats required in their courses. This finding is similar to other studies that addressed Saudi and Arab international students (e.g. Abdel Rezak, 2012; Hall, 2013; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Rabia, 2016; Shabeeb, 1996). As the participants of the current study came from different academic literacy culture, it seems to be logical that they faced such difficulties. Al-Zubaidi (2012) indicated that

As Arab students belong to different academic culture, so their habits of mind tend to be different. As we have regularly observed, this is reflected in their different oral as well as writing activities in the classroom. Yet most current English academic course generally ignores the fact that Arab students have a different background in academic literacy. (p.48)

Al-Zubaidi (2012) asserted that Arab students need assistance to adjust to new academic requirements and the ethics of academic writing and to overcome some related issues including different genres involved in the academic writing.

The findings in the current study appear consistent with many studies in the international student literature. The challenge of acquiring competence in the English language to academic success is a major and common obstacle among international students. Most of international

students come from countries where English is not the native language as well as come from different learning milieu. Hence, language proficiency as well as different learning cultures result to more challenges for international students. (Alford & Jetnikoff, 2011; Allison, 2011; Galante, 2014; et al., 2013; Lee, 2014; Murphy & Unthiah, 2015; Palmer-Clarke, 2015; Wang, 2004).

Strategies for Overcoming Academic Challenges

The fourth broad area addressed is the success and seeking support strategies that the participants used to overcome academic challenges. What follows is a discussion about the salient findings from this this broad area.

The participants from this study presented some strategies that they use in order to succeed in their studies and control the impact of academic challenges. Within this theme, four strategies were common and notable: 1. time and effort, 2. hiring tutors, 3. helping each other within the Saudi students' circle, and 4. seeking support at the university by receiving support from professors, and taking advantage of campus resources. Within this strategy of taking advantage of campus resources, each of the participants indicated that they always receive a huge support from the services provided by the university. Because participants differ in their ways to utilize these services based on their needs and conditions, they counted many services that support them during their academic lives including the writing help centre, the math help centre, libraries, workshops, prayer room, and the underground tunnels between buildings. This is consistent with other studies that focused on Saudi Arabian international students and addressed the issue of success strategies (e.g. Abdel Razek, 2012; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Shaw, 2010). For example, a study by Shaw (2010) on Saudi Arabian international students' success strategies indicated many strategies reported by participants including managing time, studying hard, seeking help from writing help from professors, tutors, and Learning Centers. Heyn's study

(2013) on Saudi Arabian international students' experiences in the United States illustrated that her participants reported that they received support from their professors, religion, and other Saudi Arabian students. She mentioned that religion was an important form of support that the participants addressed. Muslims pray five times daily in a specific way by kneeling on prayer mats facing Mecca. The finding from this study makes a great deal of sense of the high appreciation, reported by the participants of this study, of providing a designated prayer room for Muslim students. Another study by Hofer (2009) on the experiences of Saudi Arabian students studying in the state of Missouri indicated that the participants used different strategies including friends from homeland and other friends, professors, international students' advisors, and academic advisors to overcome personal and academic challenges. However, the most frequent approach indicated by participants was asking friends from their home country as their main source for help in resolving problems.

The findings from this study support similar findings of other studies in the international students' literature that addressed many factors that contribute in the success of international students which include time management, study skills, study groups, tutors, friends, and support services (Abel, 2002; Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Stoyhoff, 1996, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Strengths and Limitations

This study utilized a qualitative method using an ethnographic approach by conducting in-depth face to face interviews which allowed the researcher to capture the lived experience of Saudi Arabian undergraduate students during their study at Canadian university. Thus, this study adds to the literature of Saudi Arabian international students specifically in Canada, and also in general. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the mother tongue of all participants as well as the researcher, to enable them sharing their thoughts that allowed the researcher to get richer

data from the participants' narratives. However, conducting the interviews in Arabic was also preferred by each of the participants. Thus, the in-depth qualitative conversational interviewing method using the first language of participants was a particular strength of the study.

Given that the qualitative method allowed the researcher to get richer data from the participants, the findings of this study may not be generalizable due to the nature of qualitative research and the small size of the sample. Thus, the findings may be descriptive of the experiences of the participants of this study, but may not be descriptive of other Saudi Arabian international students in Canada or the Saudi Arabian population. Additionally, when using a qualitative study there are limits to this study is the absence of comparative data from other studies that focus on the experience of Saudi Arabian international students in Canada due to the lack of such research. It is also important to note that all the participants of this study were males. Hence, inclusion of female Saudi Arabian students in the study may show different experience and/or other results. Despite the fact that conducting interviews in Arabic was a particular strength of this study, the translation of participants' responses to English is a limitation of the study. All the participants' responses were translated to English by the researcher who speaks Arabic as first language and English as a second language; however, it does not affect the overall results of this study.

Implications

This study sought to explore the lived experience of Saudi Arabian international students in Canada. Thus, it provides some implications for future Saudi Arabian students, Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in Canada, and Canadian universities and English language schools. The data of this study can be beneficial for future students planning to come from Saudi Arabia to Canada. They can take advantage of the shared data of this study to

have an idea about the potential challenges that they might face upon and after their arrival to Canada. So they can be somehow aware of some dimensions of their journey.

Other implications of this study are for the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education. The most challenge reported by participants of this study is the issue of language barrier. Therefore, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia should shed a light on its English language curriculum and pedagogies as well as the qualification of English teachers. Although teaching English is included in the Saudi curriculum from grade four, the outcomes of this subject is not satisfying as the language barrier is a challenge that emerged across most of the researches that addressed Saudi Arabian international students which span from the 1970s to 2013 (e.g. Heyn, 2013; Jammaz, 1972). It is hard for students to come to Canada with low level of English especially at the first stage upon their arrival. Another implication for the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education is to improve its pre-departure orientations for students who are about to leave the country to study abroad. It is recommended to concentrate these orientations by providing students with more information about the differences between the Canadian and Saudi Arabian educational systems and the learning culture. Also, it is recommended to prepare the students with some skills to cope with possible stress caused by being away from their families and friends, cultural differences, and academic challenges.

Furthermore, this study has implications for the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in Canada as it supervises the students during their study in Canada. The shared data of this study can be utilized to enhance the experience of Saudi Arabian international students or other international students in Canada. It is recommended to provide the students with further information about Canadian culture and educational system after they arrive to Canada. It is also recommended to provide the Canadian universities, colleges, and English language schools with some information

about the Saudi Arabian culture, educational system, as well as the linguistic differences. So, this might help Canadian institution to prepare better support for Saudi Arabian international student's population.

Finally, the findings of this study can be also beneficial to higher education institutes, professors, and English language schools' professionals. Learning about the experience of Saudi Arabian international Students in Canada may help them to understand the challenges faced this population of international students. Some findings of this study such as homesickness, language challenges, and academic challenges may apply to many international students from different countries around the world. However, other findings such as the cultural and religious differences, as well as the huge difference between Arabic and English may apply only to Saudi Arabian international students. Such differences are critical; and hence, understanding of these differences may lead to eliminating misinterpretation of some behaviors and reactions when interacting with Saudi Arabian students. Having an idea about these challenges may help professionals to provide International students in general and Saudi Arabian international students with better learning environment and support services during their study in Canada.

Recommendations

This study addressed the lack of research on Saudi Arabian international students in general and in Canada in particular which opens wide doors for further research on this topic. Therefore, additional research on Saudi Arabian international students is needed. Future research may include female Saudi Arabian international students. This may lead to more information and different findings which may eventually lead to fully understanding of the lived experience of Saudi Arabian international students. In addition, future research may use larger samples of Saudi Arabian international students from different universities, and mixed methods of both

qualitative and quantitative approaches which might capture more information. It is also possible for future research to include the perspectives of the participants' spouses and professors to obtain deeper understanding. This research may be enhanced by adding more questions to explore the perceptions of the participants about Canada in general and Canadian education in particular before and after their arrival to Canada in order to obtain comparative data. Another recommendation for future research is to include the positive experience of Saudi Arabian international students in Canada along with the challenges in order to capture a full image of their lived experience. Finally, the researcher hopes that this study will be an introduction for further research that will contribute in expanding the literature of Saudi Arabian international students especially in Canada, and lead to better of their lived experience.

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