

RELIGION, LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND CULTURE:  
CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SAUDI INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN  
HUMBOLDT COUNTY

By

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## ABSTRACT

### RELIGION, LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND CULTURE: CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SAUDI INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY

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The effects of culture shock on individuals living abroad are well known. Less well known, however, are the specific experiences, needs, and challenges of Saudi Arabian students studying internationally, especially in Western nations. In this study, I used qualitative research to explore the needs and difficulties of Saudi international students in Humboldt County and at Humboldt State University (HSU). Using semi-structured interviews with eight participants, diversified by gender and marital status, I provide a holistic view of HSU Saudi international students' experiences and challenges which could help to understand Saudi students' experiences abroad generally, and in Humboldt County specifically. I highlighted three major themes which emerged from the interviews: language and cultural challenges, discrimination and religious challenges, and gender challenges. The participants discussed similar and different issues compared to prior studies, as well as new points, such as the role the host family played on these students, the difficulties these students encountered when they interacted with members of another gender, and how cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. created some social and academic problems. It is important to understand these students'

experiences to ease their challenges and make their experiences in the U.S. more successful.

## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this thesis to:*

*My Parents Sahab and Fatimah*

*To my father, who passed away in the last semester of my BA, who also was always encouraging me to complete my education. To my mother, thank you for your constant prayers. Thank you for being so patient for the last three and one-half years until I completed my thesis. Mom, your support means a lot to me and it helped me to complete this study.*

*To my wife Fatimah*

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*To my beautiful daughter Siba*

*Thank you for your wonderful smile, love, hugs, and kisses that helped me to overcome all the difficulties I have faced. Without you, life would be meaningless. I love you Siba.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the total number of Saudis living in the United States was 125,513: that included 106,640 students and 18,873 companions to those students (Al-Shuwayer 2015). The population of Saudi international students in the U.S. is the fastest growing group among international students (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). Although the population of Saudi international students is large, few studies have focused exclusively on Saudi international students and investigated their unique experiences (Alhazmi 2010; Rundles 2013; Heyn 2013; Almotery 2014; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). While Saudi international students share some challenges with other international students including Arab and Muslim students, they may also encounter many unique challenges.

According to The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the U.S [SACM] (2006), after the horrific incident of 9/11, the number of Saudi international students in the U.S. declined significantly. This was due to restrictions on U.S visas for these students, and the students' fear of reprisal. In 2005, the number of Saudi international students in the U.S increased dramatically after King Abdullah and President George W. Bush made an agreement to establish a Saudi study abroad program funded by the Saudi government; this is called the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) (The Ministry of Higher Education 2006; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). Saudi international students of both genders have a unique position among other international students because they are supported academically and financially by the Saudi government under

supervision of SACM in the U.S (SACM 2006). These Saudi students, however, have a maximum timeframe of eighteen months to finish studying English and to receive an offer of admission from an American university. Additionally, the university and the major the student chooses must be accepted by SACM (Almotery 2014). Saudi students are limited to particular programs if they want the financial support of SACM, such as “...medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, medical sciences, engineering, computer specializations, accounting, finance, insurance, and marketing” (Ministry of Higher Education 2010 as cited in Heyn 2013:41). Even though these students have some advantages in comparison with other international students, they still face various challenges in the U.S, which I explore in this study.

The focus of this study was to explore the unique challenges facing Saudi international students who were studying or had studied at Humboldt State University (HSU), in Humboldt County, California. In general, these students were Arab, Muslim, and non-English speakers. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two female and six male HSU Saudi international students between the summer of 2017 and the spring of 2018.

With this study, I begin to address the literature gap that previous studies did not cover, such as the experiences of female Saudi international students, the impact of marital status on students’ success, and research by native Saudi researchers. Furthermore, I contribute to research on higher education, and studying abroad programs, and the field of culture shock and sociocultural studies. With this study, I provide a unique perspective on Saudi international students’ experiences and challenges as they

encountered them in the United States, as well as provide some guidance for future research. The purpose of this study was to explore the Saudi international students' experiences and their needs and challenges while studying abroad in Humboldt County by answering the following questions:

1. How does culture shock affect Saudi international students in Humboldt County?
2. What difficulties, challenges, and needs to Saudi international students encounter in Humboldt County?
3. How can the experiences of these students provide suggestions for Humboldt State University on how to better accommodate Saudi international students in the future?

This study has five key sections. In Chapter 1, I discussed culture shock as the theoretical foundation of this study, as well as an overview of the history and current state of culture shock studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, and linguistics. In Chapter 2, I detailed many challenges Saudi international students encountered after they arrived in the United States, such as language and communication, social integration, academic difficulties, cultural differences, gender issues, maintaining religious practices, and cultural adaptation. In the third chapter, I outlined the details of my research methodology, including the research setting, participants, interview guide, interview procedures, and data analysis. In Chapter 4, I presented my findings, where I highlighted three major themes that emerged from the interviews. In the final chapter I covered the conclusions and discussion, which shed light on the similarities and differences between this study's findings and the reviewed literature. I also articulated how this thesis has

contributed to the areas of study on Saudi international students in higher education and sociocultural studies. Finally, I reported the limitations I encountered in this study, and provided some suggestions for the future direction of research within this field.

## CHAPTER 1: CULTURE SHOCK: THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I detail the history and current state of culture shock studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, and linguistics as the theoretical foundation of this thesis. Then I review studies conducted about international students from many countries around the world while studying abroad in Western Countries. After that I detail the research that has been conducted on Saudi international students by both Saudi and non-Saudi researchers. These studies cover the language and communication difficulties, needs and support systems, social integration and cultural differences, and preconceptions of the host country. Saudi Arabian students are generally Arab, Muslim, and non-English speakers, all of which are dissimilar to the overall population in the United States, and are qualities that are regularly discriminated against. Finally, I explain the literature gap, detailing the areas where this study's research complements and furthers the available information on this important subject of studying international students in general and how culture shock affects their sojourn in the United States.

### *Culture Shock*

Culture shock as a social issue has been studied since the 1960's, and even earlier under different terminology. As Zhou et al. (2008) explained, these terms included selective migration from Neo-Darwinism (Wells 1907) and value differences from Social Psychology (Merton 1938). The term culture shock was first coined by Oberg (1960),

who viewed culture shock as a medical condition, and many definitions and characterizations of the phenomenon have since been debated by scholars of several disciplines (Lewthwaite 1996). This inconsistency has been a driving force for the standardization of terminology in the field of culture shock research (De Verthelyi 1995). Psychologists and Sociologists have identified varying subfields within culture shock research that pertain to their own academic research such as language and communication, social integration, academic difficulties, cultural adaptation, and cultural differences. Psychologists have often studied culture shock from the perspective of its effect on the individual's psychology, emotional state, and cognitive ability (Nathanson and Marcenko 1995). Ultimately, culture shock came to be viewed by these fields as a type of, "...contact-induced stress accompanied by skill deficits that can be managed and ameliorated" (Zhou et al. 2008:65).

As mentioned above, the field of culture shock research began as a study of a medical condition associated with people who find themselves in strange and new environments. Gradually this view has evolved to encompass people undergoing the psychological processes of stress, coping, and adjustment within new contexts (Nathanson and Marcenko 1995). The study of culture shock has become more of a social and psychological area, rather than medical. Researchers in culture shock studies began including the concept in psychology, to include affective, behavioral and cognitive (ABC) outcomes of culture shock. This organization of the field provides a one framework for an investigation into the phenomenon (Zhou et al. 2008).



### *The Current State of Culture Shock Research*

The current state of culture shock research is largely covered by the fields of psychology and sociology. Additionally, there is a linguistic aspect to the study of culture shock and adaptation to new language: linguistic analysis is beyond the scope of this study. Here I will discuss the contributions of sociological and psychological research to understanding international students, their support needs, their difficulties and challenges, and their changed cultural perceptions, as well as the process of cultural adaptation.

#### *Psychological studies*

Psychological studies have contributed enormously to the field of culture shock research (Nathanson and Marcenko 1995). By focusing on the ABC (affective, behavioral, and cognitive) aspects of culture shock, some researchers have tried to apply appropriate psychological themes to their research on the subfields mentioned above. At the same time, other researchers have built on these ideas and constructed their own psychological model to explain the cultural adaptation process. De Verthelyi (1995:388) highlighted the importance of differentiating "...the situational factors (physical, social, and political) from the more personal aspects (motives, preparedness for change, personality traits, and coping mechanisms) in order to evaluate the relative influence of each on the adaptation process." By separating situational factors from personal aspects De Verthelyi (1995) helped distinguish influences, both external and internal, that affect an individual's cultural adaptation ability. This type of psychological test can be quite

applicable for governments, organizations, and universities that are looking towards psychological evaluations as a criterion for sending students to school in foreign countries.

The importance of an individual's ability to adapt in a new culture is highlighted by authors Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) in a qualitative study of 25 female Saudi international students on their well-being in the United States. They found "...homesickness and isolation were experienced by 95% of the participants, with many international students lamenting how difficult it was to be alone in a foreign country" (2015:20). In another example of the importance of psychological studies on culture shock, Heyn (2013) argued that with the many challenges confronting Saudi students, those who were academically and socially successful developed strategies to help in this endeavor. A "primary motivator" was the desire to not let down their families nor the Saudi government, who had sponsored their education. Success strategies for Saudi students studying in the West included utilizing their psychological, sociocultural and academic strengths. Scholars have noted several individual-level characteristics that can predict success such as motivation, academic discipline, and organization (Heyn 2013) as well as self-esteem and the desire to master English (Rundles 2012).

Searle and Ward (1990) distinguished between the psychological and sociocultural aspects of cultural adjustment. The authors reviewed much of the existing literature on cross-cultural transitions and made the recommendation that the study of the effects of cross-cultural transitions should be separate in the literature, distinguishing between psychological and sociocultural aspects. Thus, the separation of the

psychological aspects of cultural adjustment from the sociocultural aspects is now a well-established aspect of culture shock studies. The following section will detail further and in more depth the sociocultural findings as they relate to culture shock studies.

### *Sociocultural studies*

In this area of research, there are two studies that specifically focus on Saudi international students in the United States. In Heyn's (2013) study, many participants expressed missing their home culture and family life, while additionally having to acclimate themselves to the extreme weather in the Midwest. Five of the nine participants also reported instances of racism and prejudice. One respondent stated, "when Jamel need anything 'from a black person like right away they give it to [him] more than a white person...black people talk to me more than white people" (Heyn, 2013:93). This indicated to Heyn (2013) that for some Saudi international students it was easier to approach and build relationships with non-white students. Many students reported independent living as a difficulty, as they had previously lived with their families in Saudi Arabia (Heyn 2013).

Rundles (2012) explored and measured the psychological adjustment of Saudi students in the U.S. based on three variables: self-esteem, self-support, and discrimination. The Adjustment Process findings showed many Saudis found life in the United States to be fairly problem-free; however, they did have some challenges adjusting to U.S. life. Language concerns, distance from Saudi Arabia and family, social and cultural differences, and new pedagogical styles are among the most common issues

Saudi students had to confront. Most confronted these problems through ignoring them, being patient through tribulation, and contacting family and friends. Of particular help were relationships with older and more experienced international students from the same country because newer students could use them as an important information source (Rundles 2012).

The Social Support findings support those of the Adjustment Process findings highlighting the importance of social support, especially during the beginning of the sojourn. The relationships between Saudi international students and American students were seen as vitally important to a good adjustment process in the United States. Additionally, the increased use of new communications technology to contact family members back home was seen as very positive for new students. Again, English language concerns seemed to be top of the list, with all students reporting their ability with the English language, and their confidence in using it, determined much of their sojourn. Interestingly, the Discrimination findings indicated that though some discriminatory acts were reported, most Saudi students did not view this as a reflection on their entire experience nor on the image of all Americans, rather, they saw that people are “good and bad everywhere” (Rundles 2012:112).

Rundles’s (2012) discussion of his findings highlighted the importance of social and family support especially during the initial adjustment process. Rundles (2012) agreed with past research about the importance of social support, both co-national and international, and that of family support. Rundles (2012) disagreed mostly with previous conclusions and assumptions about discrimination, as none of the Saudi students in his

study reported discrimination. The preconceptions that some students expressed before coming to the United States were often based on inaccurate media portrayals rather than real experiences. Finally, Rundles (2012) noted prior studies have generally looked at Arabs or people of Middle Eastern descent as a whole, and theorized the many cultural differences between countries, which indicated the need to be more specific in future research. He theorized the adjustment experiences of Saudi students would be different than those of other, more vigorously researched groups of international students. Previous research suggested that Saudi students may have distinct experiences concerning social support because of the many pronounced cultural differences (Rundles 2012).

While this thesis does not focus on international students outside of Saudi Arabia, a few differences between their experiences are important to note as regards the cultural differences to which Rundles (2012) refers. Although all international students face challenges of language, culture shock, academic differences, and social integration, some students face these challenges to different degrees based on various other factors (Lewthwaite 1996; Nathanson and Marcenko 1995). For example, it is very difficult to compare the experiences of students who have been raised in a religious society from those raised in a secular society. This is demonstrated by the comparison that Lewthwaite (1996) makes between students from Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, and Indonesia, while studying in New Zealand. In his study, almost all students expressed the same challenges with the language, academic differences, and social integration; however, while Thailand is officially a Buddhist country and cannot be considered completely secular (Mai 2015), only the Muslim students from Indonesia reported problems associated with a lack of

institutional support for their religious needs (Lewthwaite 1996). This demonstrates the importance of religion for the daily life of Muslim international students, but this is still only one of the major different challenges Saudi international students face.

In addition to these religious difficulties common to all Muslim international students, Saudi students also must maneuver through the culture shock of arriving in a non-gender segregated society. In two different studies (Alhazmi 2010; Vidyasagar and Rea 2004), one focused on males and another on females, the issue of gender-segregation and substantial financial support from the government for education was highlighted as being the most important differences for Saudi students as compared with other Muslim students studying abroad. As most Muslim societies are not gender-segregated in the way Saudi Arabia is (Vidyasagar and Rea 2004), this aspect in particular can be a very difficult part of the cultural adaptation process for Saudi international students (Alhazmi 2010). While integration in non-gender segregated societies represents one distinct challenge for Saudi international students, they also often have a major financial benefit in that their education is paid for by the Saudi government, thus financial concerns are not the same for Saudi students as other less well-financed students (Alhazmi 2010; Vidyasagar and Rea 2004). Thus, it is clear that not only do Saudi students have a unique experience incomparable to other international students, even other Muslim international students, and this experience comes with both challenges and benefits.

## CHAPTER 2: CHALLENGES FACING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Students arriving in the United States to study are sure to encounter many difficulties in their everyday lives beyond language proficiency and their academic studies. For students arriving from a very different culture or climate, this change can be very abrupt and uncomfortable. Saudi international students face many challenges including language and communication barriers, housing, financial stress, cultural differences and misunderstandings, loneliness and homesickness (Lewthwaite 1996; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). Many issues affect Saudi students from physical to academic to psychological. These issues can cause more academic problems than for native students, making the academic experience of international students potentially much more difficult than for native students (Lewthwaite 1996). The support mechanisms for these students may need to be even stronger and more well-established to provide help for these students when required. Each of these challenges are explained in more detail below.

### *Language and Communication*

It is well known that studying a new language is not easy, especially for Saudi international students (Alhazmi 2010; Verthelyi 1995; Mcdermott-Levy 2011, Heyn 2013). The language barrier of using English seemed to be the most prominent theme in current and historical research on culture shock (Heyn 2013; Alhazmi 2010). This is quite

clear when looking at the differences between international students who have a Latin-based written language and those who do not (Li and Hoi 2013). For example, writing in Arabic is right to left and writing in English is left to right. The characters are also completely different, forcing one to learn a whole new way to phoneticize words as one reads and writes; this experience cannot be compared with one in which the student has not had to learn a new written script (Saigh and Schmitt 2012; Silva 1993). Language and communication challenges include the inability to understand others and to express oneself clearly, which create fear and anxiety in the individuals, and inhibit social integration. Saudi students often see English as one of the most difficult “adjustment areas” of the entire cultural adaptation process (Alhazmi 2010:4). International students may also find it difficult to understand the American accents during the first couple months (Alhazmi 2010). Conversational English, as much as academic English, may be a problem for Saudi students, because of the rate of speech and slang vocabulary often used colloquially among American students (De Verthelyi 1995; Mcdermott-Levy 2011). In addition, international students often have differing ways of expressing themselves based on their former English education (Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Saigh and Schmitt 2012; Barnawi 2009). As a result, Saudi international students may limit their relationships and communication to only Saudi “co-nationals” (De Verthelyi 1995:399). This can have both positive and negative impacts for Saudi students and will be discussed further in the following section.

It takes time for a Saudi student to become confident in his or her English language abilities and to start building friendships with native speakers. Because of these



language challenges, many Saudi students report feeling “embarrassed and inadequate” in social and academic situations (Mcdermott-Levy 2011: 268). These feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment could also transfer into the classroom in the form of low-confidence during class discussions (Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Barnawi 2009). For all these reasons (personal, academic, and psychological) most Saudi international students reported English language acquisition to be one of the most difficult aspects of studying abroad.

### *Social Integration*

Adapting to the people and norms of a different society and culture is a difficult process. This process of "social integration" is understood as the depth of personal relationships international students are able to develop and maintain with native speakers (Lewthwaite 1996). Saudi international students have reported varying experiences with host-national students ranging from friendship to avoidance. Some found it was much easier to have personal friendship relations with “non-Caucasian” students (Mcdermott-Levy 2011:274). The role of race in international student relationships was interesting, but more research needs to be done on this subject. U.S. race relations can be a problem for many international students. Language proficiency may further exacerbate the challenges. Student inability or lack of confidence in English hinders them from initiating dialogue and conversation with the very individuals that could help them improve their English through regular social and academic interaction. Research has found interaction

between international students and host-nationals increases the international students' abilities and confidence in English (Rundles 2012; Heyn 2013; De Verthelyi 1995). This confidence in English then translates to a smoother period of social integration: the more international students interact and talk with Americans, the more their adaptation process becomes easier (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). This is a positive, self-perpetuating cycle that encourages these students to meet and interact with yet more host-nationals, thus improving their English substantially, and more effectively (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Social integration can be highly dependent on language acquisition, as noted above, and confidence in using this language in social interactions is a vital aspect of the cultural adaptation process.

### *Academic Difficulties*

The U.S. educational system is very different from the system in Saudi Arabia. There are differences in teaching methods, curriculum, and the expected relationship between the instructor/professor and the students. Saudi international students have faced some difficulties in adjusting to the new academic system because of differences in pedagogy (Alhazmi 2010; Barnawi 2009). In the United States the educational system follows sophisticated methods to encourage the students to be self-reliant, to read textbooks and journals by themselves, and the students do not expect the professors to teach them everything without any effort from themselves (Barnawi 2009; Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Al-Hattami 2014). However, in Saudi Arabia the educational system

generally follows the traditional way of teaching (e.g. behaviorism, rote memorization) in which the teacher explains just the textbook, gives the students some basic homework, and conducts some exams. For example, Saudi students may not know about how to have an academic discussion in their classes. This traditional way of teaching happens in many Saudi universities and schools and can negatively affect the transition into international universities or schools for Saudi students, who must adapt to a new style of teaching and interaction on top of other challenges (Barnawi 2009).

In addition to their language difficulties, the differences in education between Saudi Arabia and the United States makes the adjustment process and social integration that much more difficult, especially in their academic lives ((Barnawi 2009; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015; Al-Hattami 2014). Saudi international students often do not feel comfortable speaking in the class because they are afraid other students will not understand what they are saying, and at the same time they may be struggling with the transition from the Arabic to English form of writing, as mentioned above (Saigh and Schmitt 2012; Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Silva 1993). Some international students report feeling challenged to present their opinions because they do not have enough knowledge about some academic topics that are brought up in class discussion (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Similarly, questioning the teacher's lectures is not acceptable in the Saudi educational context, and is considered impolite behavior (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Thus, these new pedagogical methods in use in Western universities have been shocking for many Saudi international students. In one study, students reported some professors and students in the U.S. were hesitant to speak to hijabi-Muslim women because they

assumed hijabi women do not speak English (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Moreover, married Saudi international students face difficulties in spending time with their spouses and kids because of being busy with their classes during the day and their homework at night; this is a big challenge as Saudi students are accustomed to spending a lot of time with their families (Carty et al. 2007).

### *Cultural Differences*

Even though there are strong economic and political relationships between Saudi Arabia and the United States, there are many cultural differences between the two nations. These differences in culture often contribute to culture shock:

Saudi Arabia is more collectivistic, whereas the United States is more individualistic. Saudi Arabians accept and expect that power is distributed unequally within the family, institutions, and culture, whereas Americans accept and expect more equal power distribution. Saudi Arabia is a Muslim nation, and enforces gender segregation in public, including the covering of women in public places. The United States, however, has separation of church and state, and genders are integrated in all areas of public life (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Michael 1991 as cited in Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015:2).

As the authors explain, there are great differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States on many levels. Particularly salient are the extreme differences in gender structures and related organization of marriage and the family. Saudi Arabian international student experiences with rights and responsibilities linked to gender and marriage, explain much about their experience of culture shock and subsequent academic stress and difficulties.

### *Gender Issues*

Gender segregation is one of the most notable differences between Saudi Arabia and Western countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain. Specifically, in Saudi Arabia, schools and universities are gender segregated, and men and women have different rights (Nassif and Gunter 2008). Also, it is not acceptable to have a conversation with the opposite gender (Carty et al. 2007). One cannot understand the complexity of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia by just focusing on Saudi traditions, customs, and religious aspects, but we have to bring together, historical, political, economic, and social factors (Le Renard 2008). Also, one must look to the major impact of the media in Saudi Arabia, because it supports gender inequality through televised advertising; this advertising has been shown to marginalize women into solely “domestic roles” (Nassif and Gunter 2008:754). In Saudi Arabia females have their own space or "private sphere," whereas males dominate the "public sphere." Women are usually invisible in public places, which are mixed-gender but mostly male-dominated (Le Renard 2008).

Saudi international students have a unique experience because they are transitioning from a gender-segregated environment to a mixed-gender environment. For example, Alhazmi (2010), as a Ph.D. student in Australia, stated about his own experience, “I found coping with gender mixed environment one of the biggest problems I encountered at the beginning of my journey” (p. 2). The Saudi gender-segregated environment is based on a traditional perspective on gender in Saudi Arabia. The

majority of Saudis still believe in a traditional gender perspective (Moaddel 2006). This includes the belief men should work and bring money home for their families to care for them, and women should stay at home and care for the daily needs of their husbands and children, as well as cook, and clean the house (Alhazmi 2010).

While the official Wahhabi scholars of Saudi Arabia strongly endorse gender segregation as a basic Islamic teaching, other Muslim scholars and societies do not agree with the necessary link between gender segregation and Islam (Alhazmi 2010). This traditional perspective on gender comes from societies that “existed several hundred years ago” rather than a fundamental issue in Islam. Many Islamic contexts demonstrate this, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Morocco, and Tunisia where women have been Heads of State before many Western countries (Alhazmi 2010). The main goal of this idea “gender separation” is to protect women’s chastity and family honor, which Saudis call *Ired*. As a result, this traditional perspective on gender produces a type of male domination where women have no choice except to be subordinate (Marcus 2005; Kabasakal and Bodur 2002 as cited in Alhazmi 2010). For example, in this culture of male dominance, marriage for Saudi women is still more important than education (Moaddel 2006). Also, "The marriage contract itself is drawn up by the woman's male relatives, not by the woman herself" (Wynn 2008:2-3). Thus, the majority of Saudi women’s lives are often restricted. They cannot go anywhere without a guardian, and they cannot refuse getting married if their male relatives decide she should do so. Also, Saudi women cannot get divorced from their husbands without a clear reason, whereas

Saudi men can (Mishra 2007). These differences create difficulties between male and female Saudi international students when they study abroad.

For female Saudi international students, they could face some difficulties relating to physical contact with people in the U.S., as Muslim men and women generally do not have contact with strangers of the opposite sex. Everyday interactions such as shaking hands, hugging, or kissing, which are often seen as normal greetings in Western contexts, create challenges for Saudi students (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Female Saudi international students have reported the difficulty of simply talking and interacting with males (Al-Hattami 2014); many Saudi women grew up with a distorted image of males as “human wolves” who will attack/rape them whenever they get a chance (Alhazmi 2010:7). This perception of men as possible predators links to the concept of guardianship, which is prevalent in Saudi Arabia. For example, women must be accompanied by a male relative when they go outside.

To maintain this norm, many Saudi women have at least one member of their family with them while they study abroad. This may act as an advantage, helping them receive some social and emotional support through their transition and studies (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). This is a particularly interesting case as Saudi women are one of the only international student groups whose Ministry of Education requires them to travel with a guardian. As a comparison, in the case of Omani women studying abroad, travelling alone has been reported as a difficulty for these women. At the same time, travelling abroad and alone helped many of these Omani women to discover and exercise new responsibilities in their lives. They reported a kind of personal

freedom that allowed them to enjoy hanging out without guardianship; however, at the same time, they did not free themselves from traditional gender roles (Mcdermott-Levy 2011:276). When the female students are ready to return to their home countries, many report the process of re-entry to be more difficult than male students (De Verthelyi 1995). This return challenge may be due to the loss of freedoms these women experience during their period of reverse culture shock, as the life and role they lived in the West is quickly substituted for their traditional role in Saudi society.

For men, the experiences of travelling to another country can produce similar and different difficulties. In general, all Saudi men grow up in a gender-segregated environment like women. As such, Saudi males grew up with no contact with females except their close female family relatives (Alhazmi 2010). Men generally tended to be more successful in their academic lives in comparison with their female counterparts, as judged by grades and successful graduation rates; however, this was especially dependent on whether these men were married or not, where it was found that married students did better with their families living with them in the United States, and that those students with other family in the US did better overall as well (Carty et al. 2007). I will discuss this more below.

### *Marital Status and Student Success*

The issue of marital status and student success is not universally understood by authors, and there have been conflicting results from various studies. Some studies show



a benefit for married students and some show a benefit for single students. This has created a literature gap in studying the effect of marital status on study abroad experiences (De Verthelyi 1995; Carty et al. 2007; Al-Hattami 2014). In Saudi Arabian culture, married men have to be completely financially responsible for their wives and children. This responsibility can become an extra stress for Saudi international students, and it can be an obstacle to their academic success (Adelegan and Parks 1985 as cited in De Verthelyi 1995). While few studies have focused on the marital status of students, and even fewer on the feelings of the spouses, there have been some small studies. Generally, there is a lack of data about international student marital status and their spouses because of privacy concerns on the part of most educational institutions, thus many of the documented perspectives usually came from men (De Verthelyi 1995). This lack of data on the female student perspective is an area of study I hope to begin to explore, and understanding the experiences of female students and wives is a promising area for future research. Despite the lack of empirical research, there are some data that suggest that during the first few months of being abroad, the students' wives often experienced depression, which affected the husbands' studies (De Verthelyi 1995).

Single students often did better in their academic studies, possibly because of the ability to concentrate on themselves and their studies. This point, however, is not agreed upon by all researchers. For example, one study found married students did better with their families living with them in the U.S., and students with other family members in the U.S. did better overall (Carty et al. 2007). Moreover, married international students who

lived with their families during their sojourn in the U.S. earned higher overall GPAs in comparison with single international students (Carty et al. 2007).

For the majority of single male Saudi students, the difficulty of loneliness is often present. They experience emotional challenges that can include acculturative stress, depression, and homesickness (Wehrly 1988 as cited in De Verthelyi 1995). These feelings can affect the concentration of these students and eventually their academic studies as well. The hardest time for single international students is during U.S. holidays, because campus looks empty, and during Saudi holidays, because the great distance from their families makes visitation difficult (De Verthelyi 1995).

### *Maintaining Religious Practices*

Another challenge for Saudi international students is transitioning from a religious society to a secular society. These students, as Muslims, may have difficulty maintaining religious observances such as praying multiple times a day on a university campus, eating/finding Halal food (food that is permissible according to Muslim law) and celebrating the entire month of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting during daylight. This is all done far away from facilities, like mosques, and their families (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Muslim students have reported it was difficult to outwardly practice their religion on campus because there was a lack of support for crucial aspects of the faith, such as Islamic prayer time, by not providing adequate space and time within the university system (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). In addition, because of the restrictions on

food, many Muslim students reported they did not eat a lot of meat during their stay; instead they ate primarily vegetables or snacks (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). These options may be very limited on some campuses. Halal meat can be difficult to find in non-Muslim countries and its price is usually expensive, causing additional challenges for many Saudi international students. Female Muslim students, particularly women who cover their hair by wearing a hijab, faced a particular form of discrimination based on this outward religious observance. Mcdermott-Levy (2011) explained how some Muslim students in Australia felt discriminated against because of this style of dress that readily identifies them as Muslims. In this sense, Muslims women carry a much heavier public burden than men towards the possibility of experiencing discrimination.

#### *Mass Media and Preconceptions of the United States*

Prior perceptions about a country, place, or culture can heavily influence people's beliefs and expectations, and can eventually affect their sojourn. Nowadays, many people use the internet to search about anything and everything, and they may believe what they find without questioning it or looking for further evidence (McCombs 2014). The mass media plays a great role in influencing people, and people may not always filter what they see on the TV or on social media of their host countries (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Many international students have reported that they based their perceptions of the U.S. on common perspectives in their home country. These perceptions were often

shaped by family, friends, and media portrayals of the United States as violent, racist, and extremely wealthy (De Verthelyi 1995; Heyn 2013).

In general, it is well known that people around the world are influenced by the mass media, regardless of how trustworthy this media is actually is (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The influence of the mass media could be positive or negative. For example, the mass media, in both American and Saudi societies, influences people negatively by just focusing on the dark side of women's treatment. This makes American and Saudi women look down on each other for different reasons including perceived oppression, exploitation, subjugation, objectification, and immorality of the men in their own society (Mishra 2007). Mishra (2007) stated that in both American and Saudi societies, the main reason of representing women in this way is "disciplining the female body" (p. 273).

Saudi international students have reported some negative perceptions of Americans around discrimination and approachability, stating they thought before coming here, "It will be dangerous to get out in midnight because the [drunken] people will do something bad for us or something" (Heyn 2013:88). In contrast, Many Saudi international students simultaneously had the misperception that U.S. universities are full of well-educated people, good professors, and the latest in technology (Heyn 2013).

Due to these conflicting perceptions, many Muslim international students have reported dissatisfaction with U.S. media reports about Muslim society (Heyn 2013; Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Some Muslims, especially women, felt their Islamic garb or outward observances brought unwanted attention, and that much of the fear surrounding these aspects of life were because of false perceptions created by the media (MCdermott-

levy 2011). Muslim international students also reported, "...Americans often seem culturally ignorant, and may especially have wrong ideas about Saudi Arabia... [For example] Americans consider Arab women 'mistreated and in need of liberation,' due to dress regulations and gender segregation" (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015:20). Also, most Americans have no idea about the purpose of the hijab (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). Thus, they focus on what they perceive to be negative, rather than what Muslims themselves view as a positive. Finally, classroom displays of media-generated ignorance about Islam, its history, practice and people by fellow students and professors was reported as a particularly negative experience for many (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). The combination of all these factors contribute to Saudi international students' perceptions of the United States before and after their time of sojourn.

People may learn from their own experiences more than listening to other people's experiences. In general, Saudi international students came to the United States and started learning about many new topics so that their knowledge about subjects not often studied nor discussed in Saudi Arabia gradually increased through their exposure to these new ideas at school and in public (Heyn 2013; Al-Hattami 2014). As this knowledge is increasing, especially about cultural differences, their own experiences in everyday life of interacting with Americans led to changes in their perceptions. The female students also acknowledged they may have changed in their mindsets about many things after studying in the U.S., though their core Islamic values still held precedent (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). After years of studying in the U.S., many Saudi international students began to change their perspectives slightly, especially in regard to women's

position in society, and how to reconcile these differences with their own culture (Heyn 2013). Additionally, many Saudi international students found studying abroad in the U.S. developed their personal resilience and helped them gain sophisticated knowledge in their majors (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). For that reason, female Arab-Muslim students in particular report they gained much experience in the way of personal freedom and responsibility and enjoyed the ease of life this brought to many activities (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). The change in perceptions some of these Saudi international students experienced helped make the process of cultural adaptation much smoother. I will explain further in the next section some of the ways universities have helped students with their cultural adaptation process.

### *Cultural Adaptation*

Cultural adaptation could vary based on many aspects of an individual's personal, social, emotional, financial, and/or linguistic context. Culture adaptation is "... a process of learning and recovery... [And] all adjustment is a cyclical and recursive process of overcoming obstacles and solving problems" (Lewthwaite 1996:169-170). There are some difficulties encountered by Saudi international students while they are adapting to the new culture and many scholars have stated the hardest time for international students is the first couple of months (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015; Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Carty et al. 2007). Furthermore, a low level of ability to speak and understand English could make cultural adaptation harsh for Saudi international students, while

learning to communicate confidently in English could help students learn and adapt to the new social norms more quickly (Carty et al. 2007; Lewthwaite 1996). Coming from a religiously homogeneous society to a secular and diverse society could make the process of cultural adaptation for Saudi international students especially difficult (Mcdermott Levy 2011).

There are some factors that have helped international students to adjust to the new culture, such as their relationships with the people of the host country, and institutional supports (Lewthwaite 1996). Learning about the host country's culture and appropriate behavior can help Saudi international students to adjust easier (Lewthwaite 1996; Carty et al. 2007). The success of cultural adaptation processes for Saudi international students depended on their own cultural perceptions, and from which region of Saudi Arabia they came from in which Saudi international students who came from a more modernized area adjusted more successfully (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015).

### *Addressing the Literature Gap*

Even though one can find many different reasons that cause these various needs and difficulties that Saudi international students have encountered, the common reason for these difficulties was that studying abroad is a new experience for them; they had never been exposed to it before (Alhazmi 2010). This lack of familiarity caused academic, psychological, personal, and sociocultural problems for Saudi international students. While a few scholars have been able to explore many aspects of culture shock

and challenges facing Saudi international students, there is still a large research gap. This gap includes: the effects of recent changes that have occurred in the Saudi culture, female Saudi student experiences, marital status and its effect on student success, research by native Saudi scholars, studies utilizing quantitative data such as surveys, and creative, effective solutions that work well within the Saudi sojourn context (Alhazmi 2010). With this study, I hope to address some of the limitations previous studies have had, such as no female participants, having a non-native Saudi researcher, and ready-made solutions.



### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

My purpose with this study was to explore the experiences, needs and difficulties Saudi international students encountered in Humboldt County. To understand these experiences, I used semi-structured interviews with four groups of Saudi students: 1) Saudi students studying at Humboldt State University at the time of this research; 2) Saudi students who lived in Humboldt County and studied at HSU, and then transferred to another university; 3) Saudi students who studied at HSU and stopped their studying and to return to Saudi Arabia; and 4) Saudi students who graduated from Humboldt State University. I included these four groups to explore differences between current and past Saudi student experiences, as well as differences in experiences between students who were successful and those who were not.

To allow the Saudi students to tell their stories in their own words, I used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews, also known as semi-standardized interviews, are less formal than structured interviews. Participants are given the freedom to answer, not answer, or expand upon any related or unrelated topic without interruptions from the interviewer (Berg and Lune 2012). I put the interview questions together to try to understand the general experiences of Saudi students at HSU, and transitioning to Humboldt County, to find out the best ways to support the needs and reduce the challenges for future Saudi students.

Because of the differences in cultural norms between Saudi Arabian society and Western society, I used different approaches in interviewing male and female Saudi

students. For example, I could not talk directly with any female Saudi student, so I had to get help from my wife and the Center for International Programs (CIP). My wife spoke with a few female Saudi international students on my behalf to ask if they would be willing to do an interview; just one of them agreed. One CIP female faculty member helped act as an intermediary between myself and one current female Saudi international student. This study was approved by HSU's Institutional Review Board (IRB # 16-259). In this chapter, I will describe the research setting, recruitment, my interview guide, the interview process, and my data analysis. For each step, I will discuss the unique strategies I employed to work with the gender and cultural norms.

### *Research Setting*

Humboldt County is a beautiful redwood-covered, mountainous, and coastal region in Northern California located about four and seven hours from the major West Coast cities of San Francisco and Portland, respectively. Humboldt County is a rural county, with a population of 135,727 as of 2015, and its most populous city is Eureka with a population of 26,954 (US Census Bureau 2015). According to 2015 estimates from the US Census Bureau, Humboldt County's demographic makeup includes 75.7% White, 10.6% Hispanic, 4.7% Multiracial, 4.6% Native, 2.6% Asian, 1.1% Black, and 0.5% Other (DataUSA 2015).

One of the main features of Humboldt County for the academically-minded is Humboldt State University (HSU), located in Arcata (approximately seven miles from

Eureka). Arcata boasts a population of 17,964 as of 2016, and is a town largely influenced by the university, as many of HSU's students, staff and faculty live in Arcata (City of Arcata 2014). The HSU student population plays an important role in the development and makeup of this area.

Humboldt State University began as an institution for higher education in 1913 and it has seen many changes since this time. It began as an independent university, but eventually joined the California State University (CSU) system in 1972 (Humboldt State University 2018). The CSU system has 23 campuses, and is the largest, most diverse university system in the United States (California State University 2017). HSU is divided into three colleges: The College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; The College of Natural Resources and Sciences; and The College of Professional Studies. The University had a total student population of 8,347 as of Fall 2017, 69 of whom were international students (Humboldt State University 2018). Thus, international students make up only 0.8% of the total student population, compared with the 3.9% total foreigners that live in Arcata (US Census Bureau 2015). The overall racial demographics for the University as of Fall 2017 are as follows: 42.7% White, 33.7% Hispanic, 6.9% Multiracial, 1.1% Native, 2.9% Asian, and 3.3% Black (Humboldt State University 2017). During the time this study was being conducted, of all the foreign students, I estimate there to have been less than 20 students from Saudi Arabia studying at HSU; this is the research population for this study.

The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the U.S. (SACM) program gives Saudi students a maximum of one and one half years to finish studying English at a U.S.

institution like HSU, through their International English Language Institute (IELI). If the student completes all requirements and obtains a sufficient score on their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exams, they may be able to gain admission into the university to further their studies. Otherwise, the students must return to Saudi Arabia and keep looking for a university admission.

### *Recruitment*

To specifically explore the unique experiences of HSU Saudi students, I recruited participants for the study according to the following criteria: 1) they had Saudi Arabian nationality; 2) they had a full scholarship provided by the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the U.S.; 3) they were 18 years of age or older; 4) they were previously or currently enrolled at HSU; 5) they lived in Humboldt County at least 6 months; and 6) they were willing to share their experience voluntarily. Because I come from this community, I am considered as an “insider” researcher, which gives me some advantages such as understanding participant cultural norms, immediately having some trust of my participants, and the ability to let my participants express themselves in their native language (Bishop 2008).

Because of the small community of Saudi students, I used purposive sampling to recruit eight participants. I did this through my personal relationships with male Saudi students, my wife’s relationships with female Saudi students, and the Center for

International Programs (CIP) at HSU. I interviewed six male Saudi students and two female Saudi students (Table 3.1). To explore the impact of student gender and marital status on their experiences, I tried very hard to get both male and female, married and single, Saudi students in each category of the four categories mentioned above. This was important because, as I explained in the literature review, gender and marital status can heavily influence student experiences. Previous studies were limited by a lack of female respondents; I hoped this study would fill part of this gap by including women in the research. As a Saudi male, I could not find any female Saudi students by myself that would like to participate in this study: in our Saudi culture, it is not acceptable to have a chat in public with the opposite gender, which means it is impossible to conduct an interview with a Saudi female in a private room unless her guardian agrees. Not all Saudi female students have a guardian nor feel comfortable being interviewed by a male in person. Because of these obstacles, my wife and a staff member at the CIP helped me recruit female respondents. I also conducted the interviews electronically, so the participants (especially female students) would not have to be in the room with me. This also helped to include participants who used to live in Humboldt County, but moved away.

Table 3.4.1. Categorized participants

Categories	Single-Male	Married-Male	Single-Female	Married-Female
Lived in Humboldt County and graduated from HSU	1	-	-	-
Currently Living in Humboldt County and studying at HSU	2	-	1	-
Lived in Humboldt County and studied at HSU then transferred to another university	1	1	-	-
Lived in Humboldt County and studied at HSU then stopped and went back to Saudi Arabia	-	1	1	-
Total	6		2	

### *Interview Guide*

To develop my research questions, I began with several informal conversations with Saudi Students in Humboldt County. I asked them about my thesis to see if they had any suggestions in order to be sure I covered the most important issues from their perspectives. I then developed my interview guide and applied for IRB approval (IRB # 16-259). In my interview guide I included three sections of questions, covering background information and culture shock, difficulties and needs. Each respondent was also asked for suggestions related to their difficulties and needs (APPENDIX 2). The first section had six questions with various probes within each question, while the second and third sections had five and three questions respectively. The first three questions in

section one were a kind of warm-up to establish the background context of the participant. The last three questions of section one focuses on culture shock and the participants' feelings and experiences towards that. The second section moved to a discussion on difficulties the participants have faced and their personal suggestions. The final section included two questions about the student's needs and suggestions from their own perspective. Finally, the last question gave the participants an opportunity to talk about anything we missed, did not mention in the interview, or that they would like to talk more about.

#### *Interview Procedures*

In order to build the trust of my respondents and ensure their comfort, I conducted the interviews in Arabic, the native language of Saudi Arabia (Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Alhazmi 2010). I first translated each interview question I had originally written in English into Arabic, conducted the interviews in Arabic, and transcribed the interviews in Arabic.

#### *Data Analysis*

After I obtained all the interview data in Arabic, I transcribed all the interviews in Microsoft Word in Arabic. After transcribing I began my open-coding data analysis. Finally, I translated the important parts of the interview data to English again to work on them with my chair. To minimize the risks of translation error, I sent each important

quote in Arabic to a PhD colleague who has been in the United States more than eight years. He offered me suggestions on the translation, and I accepted the suggestions that made the English translations of the quotes more understandable for English-speaking audiences.

I used qualitative data analysis through the use of open coding to determine important themes from the interviews. Open-coding is a way “...to find meanings that are present in the text or supported by it” (Berg and Lune 2012: 365). It is important to note I did all of the thematic coding by hand, using different colored highlighters because the available qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose, Atlas.ti) did not support the Arabic language. I coded each interview individually trying to discover as many themes as possible. After obtaining over forty different themes, I extracted the most important quotes and condensed them into three themes: 1) Language and Cultural Challenges; 2) Discrimination Religious Challenges; and 3) Gender Challenges. Each of these themes I then divided into two to three underlying points. I will explain these themes and subthemes more in the next two chapters, Findings and Discussion.



## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore culture shock and challenges Saudi students, both male and female, have experienced in Humboldt County and at Humboldt State University (HSU). In order to tell the stories and experiences of Saudi students, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight current and former Saudi students, all of whom studied at HSU and lived in Humboldt County in addition to other differing biographical details (see Table 4.1). Between the summer of 2017 and the spring of 2018, I conducted eight interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to two hours, with an average interview time of 82.5 minutes. Six of the respondents were male, and two female. Two respondents were married at the time of the interview, and six were single (see Table 3.1). The mean age of respondents was 26 years-old with a range from 20 to 36 years-old. Six of the students were undergraduate students, and two were graduate students. Three are still living in Humboldt County, one graduated from HSU and was living in outside of Humboldt County, two live in another area of the United States, and two have returned to Saudi Arabia. As seen in Table 3.1., all participants, except one who transferred from another University to HSU, studied English at the International English Language Institute (IELI) at HSU, then they continued their studies at HSU. Two students did not continue; they returned to Saudi Arabia. Two participants transferred from HSU to elsewhere to continue their studies.

In my analysis of the interviews, I identified three major themes described by participants, reflecting some similarities and differences to what is known in the culture

shock literature. The first theme that emerged was *language and cultural challenges* participants faced in Humboldt County and at HSU. The participants reported difficulties in interacting and communicating with native speakers and understanding the new culture. The second theme was *discrimination and religious challenges*. The participants talked about missing the religious routine they used to have everyday in Saudi Arabia, and discussed their lived experiences with discrimination. The third theme was *gender challenges* encountered by the participants. The participants' experiences were impacted by their own gender, and the gender of the people with whom they interacted. In this chapter I will discuss the respondents' experiences in terms of the three themes.

Table 4.1: Biographical Information (Name, Graduate (MA/MS) or Undergraduate (UG) Student, Marital Status, Gender and Age) and Background for Study Participants.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Background</b>
<b>Rana, age 27</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MA student</li> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Female</li> </ul>	Came to Humboldt County twice with her brother as her guardian. She studied English at HSU's English Institute, but did not go on to attend classes. She returned to Saudi Arabia both times because of issues with her brother guardian. At interview time she was completing her MA in SA.
<b>Noura, age 20</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UG student</li> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Female</li> </ul>	Current HSU student. Came to the U.S. alone and stayed alone for more than one year. In the beginning, she studied English in another U.S. city then transferred to study college at HSU. At the time of the interview she had been in Humboldt County less than one year, and attended HSU for two semesters.
<b>Basim, age 28</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UG student</li> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Male</li> </ul>	Former student at HSU, graduated in May 2017. He has lived in Humboldt County for six years. At the time of the interview he was living in a U.S. city outside of Humboldt County.
<b>Jaber, age 36</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MA student</li> <li>• Married</li> <li>• Male</li> </ul>	Came to the U.S. with his family (wife and daughter), studied English for nine months in (IELI) at HSU, then went back to Saudi Arabia for vacation. When he came back to the U.S., his wife quickly became depressed. His family also applied pressure until he stopped his studies, and returned to Saudi Arabia, where he was for the interview.
<b>Diyaa, age 24</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UG student</li> <li>• Married</li> <li>• Male</li> </ul>	Lived ten months in another U.S. city before Humboldt County. He lived in Humboldt County for more than two years, during which time he finished studying English and attended HSU for several semesters, as well as married and had a baby. He transferred to another University for health reasons the Humboldt County area was not medically qualified to deal with, and some academic difficulties. At interview time, he was living in another U.S. state.
<b>Mohamed, age 23</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UG student</li> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Male</li> </ul>	Lived in Humboldt County for more than two years; during these years he finished studying English and studied at HSU for two semesters. Then he transferred to another university for personal issues. At the time of the interview he had been in another U.S. city for two semesters.
<b>Yasser, age 23</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UG student</li> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Male</li> </ul>	Current HSU student. Lived in Humboldt County for four years; during these years he finished studying English and studied at HSU for eight semesters. He will graduate in Spring 2018.
<b>Rayan, age 27</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UG student</li> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Male</li> </ul>	Current HSU student. Lived in Humboldt County for a total of four years; in two years he finished studying English and then studied at HSU for the last two years.

### *Language and Cultural Challenges*

The respondents in my study reported language and cultural difficulties in three aspects of their study abroad experience in Humboldt County. First, they experienced both types of challenges in their interactions with their host families. Second, they reported obstacles with language and culture in relation to their feelings of social integration into the local community. Last, they expressed difficulties with language and culture in their educational experiences. I will explore each in more detail below.

### *The Host Family*

Usually one of the perceived roles by international students of a host family in a foreign country is to help them understand the language and culture that surrounds them (Rodriguez and Chornet-Roses 2014). According to Rodriguez and Chornet-Roses (2014), preconceived notions or expectations about certain experiences can be examined using violation theory to see if student's expectations were met and/or exceeded (positive violation) or unmet (negative violation). This construct will be useful in identifying the extent to which this study's participants' expectations were met while living with their host families.

Host family and student agreements follow some general rules that consist of the rights and responsibilities of each party. The host family is required to provide a stable, clean, and private room, and it is an optional part of the contract to provide food such as two meals per day for extra compensation. The student is required to follow the

household rules and not disturb other members of the house. In this sense, while the host family experience is thought of as a type of family away from home for Saudi students, this often depends on the type of family they encounter. Some families see the relationship more as a tenant-landlord relationship than a familial relationship (Rodriguez and Chornet-Roses 2014).

Four of the single male Saudi students participants lived with a host family. Single female students did not live with host families because they are often accompanied by male guardians, as detailed in Chapter 2. Of the four single male students, Yasser and Diyaa both reported negative violation experiences, and Rayan had a positive violation experience. Mohamed lived with a host family, but did not reflect on the experience for this study. In the other three cases, the respondents discussed language and cultural challenges to adapting to life with a host family.

### *Language challenges*

Three of the respondents discussed language issues with his or her host family.

For example, Rayan explained:

*Honestly I came [to the US] with no English. Once [the host mother] told me that we're gonna go outside and have fun, and I didn't understand what she was saying until she put her hand on the table and did this [finger walking]. Then I knew what she was wanting.*

Rayan's experience with his host family was unique because few Saudi students in this study came to the U.S. without some level of English speaking ability. Because

Rayan's English was very poor he could not understand a simple sentence, such as "We're gonna go outside and have fun." In Rayan's case, the host family was supportive and helpful. Even though Rayan came to the US with almost no English skills, and therefore faced an uphill battle with communication, the host family helped him to overcome his language difficulties. As he stated, "[I got help] from the host family, they were helping me doing my homework and helping me understand some grammar." Rayan also discussed an awkward encounter with his host family, due to his English abilities:

*[The first week] was easy and I was so happy, but the difficulty I encountered was that I did not understand them [the host family] and couldn't speak [English]... One time I tried to hang out with the host family's son. But I was silent [the whole time because] I didn't understand what he was saying. ... After a period of time, I started to understand what they say. [One day] the host mother came to me and told me to go out with her son. I got that he didn't want me to go out with him [so] I said 'No I'm not gonna go because I'm waiting for someone', and I wasn't waiting for anyone, but I wanted to stay in the house, because he didn't want me to go [with him], you know? But I was hanging out with him [before that] just to learn English... When the host mother understood the situation... she started to go out with me... walking around and buying ice cream and chatting and talking with each other. She used to take me with her when she went shopping and telling me 'this is called a banana and this is called that' and teaching me, you know. After that she started to use a translation [app] when she spoke with me... after that, and step by step, I started to understand, and she started to talk with me very slow... word by word.*

Rayan was struggling to understand English, the language of the host family and the surrounding community, while adapting to living in a new area. Then, Rayan's English started to improve and he realized the host family's son didn't want to go out with him. To navigate the awkward situation, Rayan pretended to be waiting for someone

else to avoid feeling like he was a burden. So this feeling of not being welcomed made Rayan feel embarrassed and led him to be isolated. In Rayan's experience, the host mother stepped in and saved the situation, and became closer to Rayan. This close relationship helped Rayan to increase his confidence, and his English, further helped his confidence. In this case, a member of the host family was able to navigate the international student's language situation using a translation app and speaking very slowly with Rayan. Not all host families are willing or able to provide this level of language support, in addition to housing and food, or the other services they provide.

On the other hand, Diyaa and Yasser both reported having similar negative violation experiences with their host families, in terms of learning English. Diyaa reported living with several host families, and reported the same experience with all of them:

*The host family doesn't talk with you like you don't get any benefit from them. Also they don't provide good services like food and other services. Basically you don't meet them and you don't see them at all. So I was transitioning between families looking for something unique.*

Diyaa's host families were less helpful than Rayan's in this regard. Yasser's opinion about the host family aligned with that which Diyaa reported. The only difference between their experiences was that Yasser stayed with just one host family then moved out to live with a Saudi roommate. The host families did not sit and talk very often with either Diyaa or Yasser. Although we cannot understand the role of the host family completely without bringing in the host families experiences, which is beyond the scope of this project, it seems the host family has a strong effect on Saudi students'

experiences, including how they transition to living in an English-speaking area. These transition challenges are especially pronounced as Saudi students are also adapting to cultural differences between home and the United States. This also reflects how important the role of the host family is, and how it can impact Saudi students' lives in a negative or positive way.

### *Cultural challenges*

There are cultural differences on many levels between Saudi Arabia and the United States on many levels, as explained in the literature review. These differences can create misunderstandings between the host family and the Saudi students. One of these differences is that Saudi students come from a culture where people mostly live collectively and take care of each other. In general, not all Saudi students will have had previous experience with paying bills or managing their household before coming to the U.S. In contrast, it is more common for people in the U.S. to live individually and independently. Thus, clashes with these different lifestyles could become one of the difficulties Saudi students face. As Yasser explained:

*One of the difficulties [I faced] is the host family... I lived with them for a period of time, but it was a difficult thing and thank God I moved out. I asked them once, for example, to give me a ride to the bank to withdraw the rent and give it to them. [They said] 'no we don't want to waste gas, but you can walk if you want'. [Also] they were a little bit controlling, for example, they were saying 'do not open the window because the heater is on'. Also 'don't take a long shower'... this is too controlling, [and] this is why I moved out from there. Oh man, it was like a military school.*



For Saudi students, studying abroad or getting married is the time when they usually learn there are bills they have to pay. Yasser was not aware of how expensive electricity or water bills can be. Coming from Saudi Arabia, he may also be unaware of, or uninterested in, environmental issues such as global warming and saving water. For Saudi students studying at Humboldt State University, and in Humboldt County, they may not be aware of the environmental focus of the college or the area. Other challenges could be related to Saudi student preconceptions of their position within the host household: in Saudi Arabia, guests are treated in a very special manner, and many Saudi international students may expect this same type of special treatment as guests when they live with a host family. Because of this Saudi social norm, Yasser seemed to expect additional services, like driving, rather than just the contracted services with the host family, who is only required to provide him a clean room for sleeping, a couple of meals daily, and access to a washing machine for his clothes.

Both Diyaa and Yasser used the same example to illustrate problems with their host families: the host family did not give them a ride to the bank. This is related to the desert weather in Saudi Arabia and Saudi culture in which most Saudi students are not used to walking in their country, and they are used to driving their car to get everywhere, even if the distance is close (Garawi et al. 2015). So, when these students come to HSU and they cannot afford a car, they have to walk or take public transportation. This lack of a walking culture in Saudi Arabia causes some problems for students when they arrive in a location such as Humboldt County where walking, bike riding, and public transportation are strongly encouraged.

### *Social Integration*

As mentioned in Chapter 2, for the context of this study, social integration means the deepness of Saudi students' personal relationships with English speakers. While the deepness of relationships can be hard to measure quantitatively, these interviews provide some insight into the feelings of the participants regarding this issue.

### *Language challenges*

Learning English is one of the biggest difficulties encountered by Saudi students studying in the United States, as mentioned in Chapter 2. All participants in this study, except one, discussed having difficulties communicating with native speakers, especially in the beginning of their journey. The only participant who did not have any issues integrating with native speakers was Rana, because she was not able to go out and build relationships with Native speakers due to her guardianship. This will be discussed later in the results. Other than Rana, all participants confirmed having difficulties understanding Native speakers and expressing themselves clearly, as reported in previous studies of international students in the U.S. For example, when I asked Noura about the importance of being confident and fluent in English she said:

*Proficiency in English is very very very important especially in America, because interacting here [in the US] with people will help you to strengthen your language. But if there is no interaction and no acceptance to develop your language, when you get a chance to build relationships with American people it's gonna be very difficult because your language is not good enough. So from the*

*beginning, I very much encourage the [Saudi] students [to be] interested in developing their [English] language and break the habit that 'I wanna go [and stay close] with people who I know and who speak my native language and I will be just with my Arab friends because it's ok', this is something very good because you will feel a stronger sense of belonging, but there won't be any development of your language... [Integrating with Native speakers] could give you a chance to talk in front of people and this will help you, not only so that [American] people understand you, but you're also gonna have the ability to deliver your idea [to them] in very beautiful way, that is clear and understandable.*

In Noura's words, she reflected on how social integration is very important to improving Saudi students' English language skills. Also, she mentioned another important issue, to "*break the habit.*" As mentioned in Chapter 2, the difficulty of speaking English frequently leads Saudi students to limit their relationships just to Saudis or "co-nationals" and to avoid Native speakers (De Verthelyi 1995:399). As Noura said, even though spending most of her time with Saudi students gave her a good feeling of belonging, it was not a helpful way for her to improve her language skills. This may be the case for many Saudi students like Noura. Many participants in this study reported difficulties with both expressing themselves clearly and understanding the American accent, which went against their own linguistic expectations. For example, Jaber explained, "*[H]onestly I encountered a lot of difficulties because I thought my English was good, but I discovered it wasn't good... in the first place in communicating with people, and in the second place in studying.*" This point aligned with Rodriguez and Chornet-Roses's (2014) study that demonstrated when international students have negative violations of their expectations, even with their own language abilities, it can affect their ability to socially integrate. Finally, Noura pointed out another important

issue, which is how speaking and integrating with Native speakers can help Saudi students to be fluent, understandable, and able to express themselves clearly. Interacting with native speakers helps Saudi students improve their English skills, so that when they speak with other people, they will understand them, and be understood, more easily. This is especially important when trying to improve pronunciation and while learning U.S. accents. All of these improvements, through practice, help develop confidence in the Saudi student and this in turn helps them in their interaction with native speakers and in their academic lives.

### *Cultural challenges*

As mentioned above, and in the literature review, Saudi students often face difficulties in adjusting to the new culture because it is both a new experience for them and because of their English language barriers (Alhazmi 2010). Also, every society has its own social and cultural norms; knowing about some of these social and cultural norms in advance could help Saudi students to build successful friendships with native speakers once they arrive in their host country. For example, Basim reported:

*...while I was learning English I talked with many native people and I read [many] books, and I realized that native speakers cooperate or talk more with the person in front of him if the person knows simple things in English like proverbs and idioms... The beginning of the conversation or the ice-breaker could be an idiom about traffic, or another thing [could be] small things like common jokes... Our problem, we Saudis, is being shy and if someone talks with you on the bus [the conversation will be like] 'How are you? Good, how are you? Good', and that's it. Also, we don't try to go out and learn and socialize with native speakers, when this is the whole reason we came to America.*

As Basim observed, the more Saudi students understand U.S. culture, the better their chance of having more in depth conversations with native speakers, ideally leading to better social integration. Saudi students may find it helpful to break the habit of spending time, and conversing, with just Saudis. Instead, they could aid their transition into a new area by interacting with native speakers to know and understand the new culture. As Basim said, “*we came to America to blend in and to learn.*” While a Saudi student should not be expected to assimilate, or give up their cultural traditions, there are a few ways they could feel more integrated into the community, which may impact their enjoyment and stress related to their sojourn. Additionally, it may be important for Saudi students to learn some important common idioms and jokes so they can use them to start conversation with people everywhere as they navigate the local area, such as when they are taking buses, working at the university campus, and hanging out in coffee shops. Moreover, the participants felt their U.S. community did not care about their gender in terms of social integration. They also felt the way members of the new community interacted with them was helpful for their integration. For example, when I asked Rayan about studying in the U.S. he said:

*...they don't care if you're a male or a female... I mean it's normal seeing people open to each other. Like they don't say 'he is a foreigner' and 'we don't talk with foreigners', I mean it's normal to interact with anyone male or female, white or black. They don't have any problem with that... Also, when they speak with you as a foreigner, they speak with you [grammatically] correctly, not like us in Saudi Arabia speaking with foreigners [grammatically] incorrectly, so that the majority of foreigners in our country now speak incorrectly.*

Rayan liked being welcomed, regardless of his gender, because in Saudi Arabia there are some limitation or boundaries between men and women. He also liked that people tried to speak using grammatically correct English with him even though he was a foreigner. This is different from Saudi Arabia because there people often speak incorrect or lower-level Arabic with foreigners in order to accommodate their lack of knowledge of the language. Unfortunately, this often has the side effect of keeping these foreigners speaking this same level of Arabic rather than improving. This idea will be discussed later in the gender challenges theme. Still, we can see how social integration with native speakers helps Saudi students to understand U.S. culture, as well as improve their English, which is not the case in Saudi Arabia with foreign workers.

On the other hand, as explained in Chapter 1 and 2, some Saudi students found it difficult to have personal friendships with white students in particular (Heyn 2013; Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Rundles 2012). I found this point important because Rayan expressed he did not prefer having friendships with white Americans, generally. He expressed a preference for having relationships with people of color:

*[I have] interacted with white Americans and Mexican-Americans, and until now I am still integrating with Mexican-Americans because white Americans as you know only care about themselves... After a while of knowing Mexican-Americans I found they share some of our culture. So I became more inclined to Mexican-Americans than white Americans although white Americans are native speakers. I mean some Americans sit with you because you're a Saudi and you have money; [they] like to exploit you, like to become your friend just to get what you have in your pocket not to get to know you [as a person] you know? But Mexican-Americans are different. I mean [if] you hang out with him a couple of times, [after] you know him and he knows you, you invite him to hangout and he invites you to hangout, its done—he [will be] your homie. Like if you get in a trouble, he*

*will come to back you up. Also, blacks the same thing, if he sees you in trouble, he will come to back you up, but whites no, if he sees you in a trouble, he won't look at you and won't help back you up.*

Part of what Rayan said is related to what was mentioned above: the feeling of belonging. Some Saudi students, like Rayan, prefer having friendships with people who they perceive to share a similar culture and social norms. As there are many cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the U.S., these cultural differences can create fear in Saudi students and lead them to think they must have strong friendships to have “backup” in case of a dangerous situation, or to receive help in a time of need. Also, this could be related to negative stereotypes some people of color in the United States share about white people in the United States, such as them being unfriendly or unapproachable (Pew Research Center 2016).

Cultural differences can also lead to a misunderstanding, then to a problem. For example, Basim discussed a weird situation with one of his neighbors he attributed to cultural differences:

*Our way of talking and our voice tone, and our special body language...this is something that seems scary for them. I gave a presentation in class [at HSU] about Saudi Arabia... and I talked about our culture, and explained to them things, like [in our culture] if you see men holding hands it is considered as friendship. If you see a Saudi insists to invite you [to hang out], this is part of our culture and [if you have a Saudi friend you can] be expected to be invited for dinner anytime. [A]fter one week of coming here [to the U.S.] I started cooking and my English was poor... I was standing outside my house and I saw my next door neighbor. [I said] 'hi, how are you doing?' I was trying to get to know him, [then right away] I invited him to hang out, but as I told you our way of talking and our body language are different, and he got mad at me and started yelling at me, and I didn't know what he was saying! Maybe because I insisted, and after*

*that I have never invited any American except a few who I know and whom know me very well.*

Basim illustrated how the differences in the way of talking, voice tone, and body language between Saudis and Americans led him into an uncomfortable situation. Basim gave an explanation about why these differences made his neighbor angry: *“because this is something that seems scary for them.”* Basim did not know that it is not acceptable to invite someone you just met to dinner, and you should not insist when you invite someone to your house, even if you know him, because this is not as common in the U.S.

This uncomfortable situation is one of the things I identified that led Basim to feel both that he could not relate to white Americans, and that it was not worth trying again. This made his transition to living in Humboldt County more difficult and caused him to not invite anyone to dinner again, except his closest American friends.

### *Educational Experiences*

As with cultural differences, there are many differences between the education system in Saudi Arabia and in the U.S., as explained in the literature review. All participants liked many aspects about the teaching methods and students' lives in the U.S.. Basim summarized what he liked about the teaching methods he saw at Humboldt State University:

*Credibility, honesty, practical application for everything, professionalism, and the efforts [the professors do] to deliver information to students... and when [professors] explain to you something, they bring pictures and videos, not [like our professors in Saudi Arabia] just telling you the information and shut up... I*



*liked how professors support you when they realize you have an ambition, and I noticed that professors [here in the US] focus on all students' needs, student by student. Even if the class includes 30 or 40 students, they are available for you, and there are some who are not available like our [professors].*

There are many bright aspects of the international experience Saudi international students like about studying in the U.S. However, when Saudi students transition into international universities, they often encounter some difficulties adjusting to the new education system, such as language difficulties and social integration challenges (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). These difficulties are happening at the same time as they are transitioning to life with their host families or other housing situations.

### *Language challenges*

Six of the respondents discussed language difficulties in their transition to the teaching styles of Humboldt State University. For example, Basim explained:

*[one of the academic difficulties I encountered was] the difficulty of language as a barrier, but it is possible to break this barrier if the professor [is] supportive, I mean there are some professors who know that these [international students] want to study and the language isn't supposed to be a barrier for them.*

As Basim reflects in this point, several respondents noted the language difference itself may not be as much of a problem for Saudi international students as how the professors look at them and think about them. According to several respondents, help

from professors could ease the language difficulties for them; for example, teachers could provide more time on exams and projects for these students. Even beyond exams and projects, many participants encountered English language barriers at school when it came to regular course activities like writing a paper, conducting research, asking questions in class, and performing group work. For example, many participants encountered a difficult time speaking in class. As Yasser said:

*[I]t's difficult to deliver your idea [clearly] or for example the point that you didn't understand in the lesson. I mean when you try to explain to the professor you didn't understand this point, honestly it's difficult...in the middle of the class or after the class. And personally because it's not my [native] language, I feel like it's difficult to ask in the middle of the class because maybe I will stop the whole class for a while because my language is weak or maybe the professor won't understand me the first time so then I have to try again and again and maybe I will be embarrassed so that I try to avoid asking [questions] in the middle of the class. But maybe I can go to the [professor's] office hours and this is also difficult because when you go to the professor's office and try to explain I feel it's very difficult because it's a second language.*

Yasser encountered academic difficulties because he was not confident in his English language skills. Moreover, he considered talking with any professor alone during his/her office hours to also be difficult. Confidence in their English-speaking ability is very important for Saudi international students, especially in their academic lives, as this is the primary reason they are in the U.S. To be nervous about one's English speaking skills can cause a Saudi student to further isolate herself or himself, which will make it even more challenging to improve their English abilities, in turn making the academics even more difficult. As Basim said, *"The more English you have the easier everything*

*will be.*” Yasser’s reluctance to ask the professor for clarification, for fear of embarrassment, is similar to prior research on Saudi students. As discussed in the literature review, Saudi international students were often reluctant to speak in class because they were afraid professors and students would not be able to fully understand them (Saigh and Schmitt 2012; Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Silva 1993). The academic challenges discussed by the respondents could also be related to the transition from the traditional method of teaching in Saudi Arabia to the U.S. pedagogical strategies, especially at HSU, a teaching institution based on communicative classroom environments. As Rayan expressed:

*[I have faced some academic difficulties] like some assignments, like some projects we do, like some research projects because I don’t [even] know how to search and I need help... [I]n Saudi Arabia we didn’t learn what research means or how to do research. Even the writing; we don’t know how to write and what we used to do was writing descriptions about a tree or something like that... I think professors must know the international students in their classes... They should know them and help them because they face difficulties that are different than American students, like making it clear to the international students that they will help them if they encounter any difficulty.*

It is clear Saudi international students need additional support to be prepared for a rigorous academic life, as many of the respondents reported similar sentiments. It may be Saudi international students face more academic difficulties than students trained in the U.S. due to language barriers and strikingly different approach to teaching happening at the same time. Professors’ relationships and support can mean a lot for Saudi international students, as it could help increase their confidence in many ways. For the respondents in this study, they suggested encouraging Saudi students to engage in class

discussion more, and to remind international students to not hesitate to go to professors' office hours to ask about anything. Again, this is in stark contrast to the teaching methods of Saudi Arabia, so it may take multiple faculty and staff nudging Saudi students to feel comfortable speaking in class and speaking with faculty directly.

Another interesting discussion point for the respondents was the time given for taking exam. For several respondents, the exam time was far too short, and made some students feel they were set up for failure. With the language barrier, and subsequent stress, several respondents felt Saudi international students could use more time when they take their exams. Noura explained:

*I really hope that all Saudi students get more time on exams regardless if they need it or not because [the extra time] will help us to achieve academic excellence, and will help us reduce stress... [I]magine taking an exam that's not in not your language! Sometimes the questions in the exam come in a complicated way and you need more time to break down the question, understand it, then answer the question. [F]or students whose native language is English, they will answer better and get higher grades than Saudi students even if they don't study, although Saudi students study, say, 10 hours [more than American students]. [They get better grades even if they don't study] because this is their language and they will understand the exam questions, but for all Saudi students, we usually study English in just one year.*

In addition to the English difficulties, the time given to take exams is an extra pressure for Saudi international students. Also, the complexity of some questions could make it more difficult for Saudi international students, especially if they are usually not allowed to use translation apps on their phones during the exams. This can be compounded by cultural differences embedded in some exam questions. For example, if a

question were to refer to a U.S. social norm, custom, pop culture reference or idiom, an international student may not understand the reference. Language barriers interact with cultural challenges as Saudi students try to navigate the U.S. education system.

### *Cultural challenges*

Along with a language barrier, there is often a gap between Saudi international students and professors in the U.S. because of the cultural differences. I found this point very important, even though all participants did not discuss it directly. This gap could be causing Saudi international students more academic difficulties than their U.S.-trained peers, and other international students. Several participants reported feeling upset because when they encountered issues related to their culture, their professors did not necessarily understand their concerns. For example, Noura expressed feeling dissatisfied by her professors' lack of understanding the need for flexibility for cultural differences:

*In Saudi Arabia when something happens and you tell the professors what happened to you they will understand you, but here [in the US, they don't]... for example if you said you didn't finish the homework or you didn't attend [the class] because we had Eid, they would say you could celebrate the Eid and attend the class at the same day, I mean [they] won't understand what Eid means for us.*

Noura felt frustrated because her professors did not understand the importance of Eid as a crucial celebration in Saudi culture. This connects with the norm that Saudi students often put more value on their religious, cultural, and family events than other aspects of their lives, such as education and work. In contrast, raised in a more secular culture, people in the U.S. generally do not put the same value on religious, cultural, and family events as Saudi students. Different priorities can cause these kinds of

misunderstandings between Saudi students and U.S. professors, who may interpret these concerns as lack of academic ability or care for the Saudi students' education. In this study, many of the Saudi students reported they stayed in the U.S. to study during summer break. During that break, they had a big religious celebration called Eid al-Fitr, which comes at the end of the holy month Ramadan, and they did not attend some classes in order to celebrate this special day with their Saudi and Muslim friends. Thus, many respondents felt their professors would not understand how important this Eid is for Saudi students, and they were worried some professors may not excuse their absence. I will discuss this point more in the next theme: *Discrimination and Religious Challenges*.

### *Discrimination and Religious Challenges*

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Saudi Arabia is a Muslim nation and a fairly collectivistic country (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Michael 1991 as cited in Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). Transitioning from a collectivistic-religious society to an individualistic secular one is a primary challenge for Saudi international students to navigate. In this theme, I will explain some religious difficulties encountered by Saudi international students, such as nostalgia for a religious environment, finding and eating Halal food, and religion-based discrimination.

### *Nostalgia for Religious Routine and Environment*

Maintaining religious practices was very important to the participants. Almost all participants reported nostalgia for the religious environment, because they were surrounded by it since they were kids. Thus, this feeling could impact Saudi students' mental and emotional health as well as their academic performance. For example, when I asked Jaber about what he immediately missed from Saudi Arabia when he arrived in the U.S., he expressed he missed the calling for prayer, or Adhan:

*I missed many things, I mean America is a beautiful country for a vacation or having fun, but not for living. I mean one of the things that I missed [when I arrived in the U.S.] was a religious environment, [because] in our country we are used to hearing the Adhan five times every day... [so that] one of the things that I searched about [before I came to the U.S.] was where I'm going to pray. I mean psychological comfort has a [big] role [in our lives]. I have seen people saying that we adapted to America, but for me 'No' I came to finish my work [study] and go back home.*

For Jaber, who enjoyed two visits to the U.S. before moving to study, the U.S. is a good place for a short time such as vacation, but not for a long time, like studying for many years. As Jaber said, this is because of missing the Adhan, which all Saudis are used to hearing daily five times. This was so important to him that before he moved to Humboldt County, he did research to find the closest masjid (mosque) in Humboldt County so he would know where he was going to pray. Moreover, two other participants mentioned this point. Missing the sound of the Adhan caused homesickness and nostalgia for the religious environment for Jaber and other participants. Because of this these negative feelings, Jaber found studying in the U.S. very challenging. Moreover, he could not even begin to imagine how some Saudi students adapted to the U.S. environment,

which is not as religious as Saudi Arabia. Noura also agreed with this opinion, showing a similar sentiment among both male and female Saudi international students:

*The most beautiful thing in Saudi Arabia was that when we hear the Adhan [even] while we are sleeping, we get up to pray. But when I came here [to the U.S.] trying to use the alarm in my phone [to avoid missing the pray time] was difficult because sometimes prayer times come when you are in the class or at your work. This is difficult because we are accustomed that during Adhan time, everything [shops, restaurants, pharmacies, gas stations, etc.] gets closed, and everybody goes to [ the masjid] to pray, and after praying they get a 5 minute break, then you go back to your work. But here [in the U.S.] you are busy [working or studying] the whole time, no breaks. I mean if you were in Saudi Arabia and you heard the Adhan while you were busy with something, you're gonna know that you will stop everything after a couple of minutes and you will go to pray.*

During the first few months of living in the U.S., Saudi international students may enjoy the novelty and differences. Yet soon after they start to miss hearing the Adhan. Both Jaber and Noura attributed the importance of Adhan to emotional comfort, and taking a break from everything. Saudi international students are programmed to leave whatever they are working on when they hear Adhan, so they can go to pray. This leads us to another important point participants talked about, which was the importance of praying in the mosque. In Saudi Arabia, praying in the mosque is not just a religious ritual, but is also a spiritual and social ritual that structures balance and mindfulness into daily life, something that is all but absent from the structure and organization of American work, family, and school schedules. For Saudi students, who are already coping with many language and cultural adaptations, they may also feel cut off from these religious, spiritual, and social rituals, especially for the more pious students who are



used to praying five times a day in the mosque. This is perhaps why seven of the eight participants reported dissatisfaction with not having adequate space for praying inside campus, much like prior scholars have found. Furthermore, one of the difficulties encountered by Saudi students was the overlap between prayers times and classes times. For Saudi students to adhere to the proper prayer times, they have to risk interrupting or missing their courses, and may find it challenging to schedule group work time with non-Muslim students who are not beholden to the prayer schedule. Working and studying all day, with no breaks to pray, made studying abroad for Saudi students more challenging and another adaptation even other international students may not have to make.

*Challenges with Accessibility to Halal Food*

Participants also discussed challenges in Humboldt County with finding and eating halal food (food that is permissible according to Muslim law). As some prior scholars found, many Muslim students have reported the difficulty of finding and eating halal meat during their studying time in the United States, so they limit their food options to some vegetables or snacks (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). It is not easy to find halal food in a non-Muslim country like the United States, especially in rural areas like Humboldt County, as Noura discussed:

*There are many [Saudi] people like me, I don't eat [any meat] unless it's halal, which is hard. But I prepared myself that there are other options to eat like fish, shrimp, vegetables, and salads... [however] when I came [here in the U.S.] I was vegetarian the whole time, but when I saw halal food stores I was surprised. Because this is America, how come there would be halal food stores? I mean I didn't imagine having some halal options [in the U.S.].*

While she was able to find some halal options when she lived in a larger, more urban area of the U.S., she did not have the same dietary options in Humboldt County. It is very hard for Saudi students who only eat halal food, because the option is not available everywhere in the United States. Also, not all Saudi students are prepared to find other options, especially with the language barrier in the beginning of their journey. This also means additional expense of buying food as well as the need to know how to cook. Noura was prepared for not having the option of eating halal food, such that she was surprised when she found halal food in the U.S. This was the case in an urban area, but not necessarily an option in rural areas. Thus, it is going to be more difficult for other Saudi students who did not think, or did not know, about this point before coming to the U.S.. It is important to mention that eating halal is not a taste or preference, but mandated by Islam. For example, eating pork is strictly prohibited in Islam. Virtually all Muslims take this prohibition very seriously. For example, Diyaa had never thought about going back to Saudi Arabia except once:

*I got kicked out of the house at almost 9 or 9:30 pm, and the house was so far [from the city streets] and in the middle of forest. I took my baggage and I was wandering in the streets, I didn't know where to go. This happened because one [roommate] was living with us in the house... he bought a pizza and said it's from an Arabic restaurant [then he went upstairs]. I thought it's going to be halal for sure... so we ate, and after we were done eating the pizza he came down and was laughing and said 'what I brought for you was pork.' So, I beat him up, then the host mother kicked me out.*

Diyaa got in trouble, and put his future at risk, because one of his roommates tricked him into eating pork. Even though Diyaa's reaction was very harsh and risky,

because he could have lost his scholarship, he seemed happy and proud about what he had done. Diyaa maybe felt this way because eating pork is clearly prohibited in Islam and religion is the central pillar for the lives of most Muslims in general, and Saudis in particular. This led Diyaa to not accept his roommate joking around with something that is against Islamic law.

### *Experiences of Discrimination*

The literature review in this study pointed out that Saudi international students' experiences vary widely in regard to discrimination (Rundles 2012; Alhazmi 2010). In this study, two participants (Yasser and Ranaa) reported positive experiences overall in Humboldt County, and did not report facing any kind of discrimination in the U.S.. I found Rana's case interesting, because she was the only woman who wears the hijab that I interviewed. She did not report any kind of discrimination, as she said "... *No No, I didn't have any difficulties. On the contrary, people respected my religion and my beliefs, and I never faced difficulty.*" In contrast, Noura, who did not wear the hijab, reported that she experienced discrimination several times and discussed how some people in the U.S. treated her differently:

*There are many [American] people who have come to me and asked me, 'where are you from?' Or 'you look different, where are you from?' This is wrong, they are not supposed to ask me [these questions] ...when I tell them I'm from Saudi Arabia; some of them accept that, and there are some who start lashing [out] at you... and this is something that impacts you very [bad]... I mean [when] they treat you like this because you're coming from a place they don't like. It was very harsh... there are some, for example, when they know you are from Saudi Arabia,*

*'ohhh like you're a Muslim!!' 'Sure, you are a Muslim, ohhh do you want to change your religion?' I didn't say I wanna change my religion, I mean I didn't come to you and complain about my religion... I didn't come here to change my religion or something [else], I came here to study and this is my goal.*

Noura faced discrimination just because she looks different and because people in the U.S. have negative stereotypes about Islam generally, and Saudi Arabia specifically. This is especially the case when it comes to gender inequality. I found this point interesting because it was the opposite of the literature review; however, this result might be different if I had more women in the study. In the prior studies, hijabi women reported a kind of discrimination, and had a higher possibility of experiencing discrimination because of wearing the hijab (Mcdermott-Levy 2011). However, Noura reported a negative experience of discrimination even though she did not wear the hijab, and Rana who was not wearing hijab did not experience discrimination. Also, we can see how these negative experiences affected Noura in a very bad way. She expressed her frustration about being asked many times if she wanted to change her religion, and she stated her goal very clearly: *"I didn't come here to change my religion or something [else], I came here to study, and this is my goal"*. Even though Noura knows some kinds of questions are inappropriate, she never avoids saying she is from Saudi Arabia, as some Saudi students report. For example, Rayan avoided telling American people he is from Saudi Arabia:

*When you tell some of them [the American people] you're Saudi, they look at you differently, with prejudice against Islam [or] something like that... [so that] when someone asks me [where are you from?] I say from Egypt or any other country but I don't say I'm from Saudi Arabia. I was afraid of saying I'm from Saudi*

*Arabia and then have them do something [bad] to me or kill me, I mean this what I was afraid of.*

Rayan was afraid of revealing his nationality because he was afraid of getting killed. It seems apparent that he had been through some discriminatory acts when he was open about being from Saudi Arabia. When he avoided saying Saudi Arabia, and selected any other country, he would not be treated in the same way. This manipulation of facts was his strategy while adapting to the U.S. culture with limited language skills. After his English improved, he felt more confident saying he was from Saudi Arabia. Both Rayan and Noura encountered discrimination because they are Muslims, and specifically from Saudi Arabia.

Basim also discussed discomfort, based on his status as an Arab student:

*I felt like we are not welcomed as Arab [students] at the University. I hope that the Arab [students] get an opportunity to display themselves and their customs, traditions, society, morals, and culture, and to be official... I'd like to be, we the Arabs, included at the university in its events and celebrations like those for Native peoples, Blacks, Asians, and gay people. Why do all these people have the opportunity but we don't?*

Feeling excluded, and not welcomed or affirmed, was a big concern for Basim. This feeling could make some Saudi international students dissatisfied with their experiences as international students. To observe the university celebrating and supporting some minority and underrepresented groups, while at the same time excluding Saudi international students, felt like a form of discrimination for these students. When Basim said, *Why do all these people have the opportunity but we don't?*, he was indicating how some Saudi students felt marginalized. While this type of marginalization

was based on race, religion, or country of origin, other participants discussed marginalization based on gender. Students of both genders discussed discrimination, however; there were some different experiences based on gender. In the next theme I will explain some gender issues participants reported in the interviews.

### *Gender Challenges*

As explained in the prior literature, Saudi international students face many difficulties when they transition from a gender-segregated culture to a mixed-gender culture (Alhazmi 2010). This gender-segregated culture creates different challenges for male and female Saudi international students. In my interviews with Saudi students, two sub-themes related to gender emerged: difficulties related to the Saudi culture of male domination and guardianship, and difficulties dealing with members of other genders. In Saudi culture, there are strictly two genders: male and female; therefore, respondents did not discuss any other gender identities.

### *Male Domination and Guardianship*

As discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of guardianship is prevalent in Saudi Arabia so that the majority of female Saudi students must be accompanied by a male relative when they study abroad. The reason behind this idea is to protect women's chastity and family honor, which is endorsed by Wahhabi scholars in Saudi Arabia (Alhazmi 2010). Therefore, the idea of protecting chastity and honor produces a type of

male domination where men have total power and women have no choice except to be subordinate (Marcus 2005; Kabasakal and Bodur 2002 as cited in Alhazmi 2010).

In this study, I spoke with two female Saudi students, Noura and Rana. Noura was living alone, or without a guardian. In contrast, Rana came to Humboldt County twice with her guardian. I found it interesting that this idea of guardianship was an obstacle for Rana in that she was forced to go back because her guardian wanted to go back, and her family would not let her stay alone especially in a foreign country. This type of male domination prevented Rana from getting her master's degree from the U.S. and from HSU, where three of her female Saudi friends graduated. She was 25-years-old and she lived twice (for almost one and one-half years total) in the same area and college. She had already made some friends and had a furnished apartment. Still, her family did not accept letting her stay alone. As a result of the guardianship norm, at the time of the interview, Rana was completing her education in Saudi Arabia. She expressed frustration with her guardian brother, leading to her desire to quit school and return:

*[I felt very bad and wanted to return to Saudi Arabia] because my brother was with me, and [it was] the first time for us to be together away from home. I was always seeing behaviors from him and such, and they seemed to me to be incorrect. This was the worst thing that made me want to return to Saudi Arabia and to be done with it, I couldn't bear it anymore... I told you my brother had many problems with me, because we essentially don't get along, so we always have had a lot of problems. He was hanging out all night [with his friends]. The situation was so bad for me. He used to come home so late at night. So, I was like no I want to return [to Saudi Arabia], I mean we are a religious society, you know what I mean!! Because of this, I wanted to return.*

The idea of guardianship, as mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2), could be considered an advantage for female Saudi students because they would receive some social and emotional support from the guardian as they adapted to the new culture (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). However, Rana's relationship with her brother (the guardian) was the opposite. With Rana, her brother/guardian was not a supportive companion; instead he was an extra source of pressure for her. This led her to often consider quitting her education and returning to Saudi Arabia. Also, in Rana's case, her brother was an extra source of frustration because as a male he had absolute freedom to do whatever he wanted to do. While he was able to stay out late with friends, she had to stay in the house and could not go to anywhere without her brother's permission. The tension between Rana and her brother perhaps indicates that her brother/guardian was practicing his power over his sister in a Western country, despite living where the idea of gender equality is celebrated. Also, it demonstrates the pervasiveness of male dominance in the Saudi social structure. Even if students go to study abroad in Western countries, gendered family power dynamics are often reproduced.

### *Dealing with Members of Another Gender*

One of the most distinguishing differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States is gender segregation. Schools and universities in Saudi Arabia are gender segregated. Saudi males usually do not interact with non-relative females, except as customers or employees in stores. As explained in Chapter 2, females are more used to



interacting with males, because when they go outside of their homes, the majority of public places are dominated by males.

In this study, two of the male Saudi students (Mohamed and Rayan) talked about their difficulties with interacting with women. One female Saudi student (Noura) talked about not feeling comfortable having a male roommate in her house. It is important to understand that in Saudi Arabia, it is not acceptable to have even a conversation outside of one's gender in many social settings (Carty et al. 2007). For Saudi men, they spend much of their time outside the house, away from women. They work and interact with men all day. In the evening they hang out with their male friends. Interacting with women can therefore be stressful or create nervousness. This is illustrated in how Mohamed and Rayan described their experiences with women. When I asked Mohamed why he did not like studying in the U.S., he replied:

*Because our customs are different from that of the people here [in the U.S.], they do not lead a Muslim life, and I'm more religious, I think studying in Saudi Arabia [is better] because it's religious. Studying in Saudi Arabia was much better I don't like mixing between genders. I like to be more religious... What annoys me is... Oh how do I explain it? I don't like dealing with women, because in their (Western) [society] you have to deal with women, [but] in our religion, I mean in our [Saudi] society we are used to not deal with women... This is something that could be due to too much shyness, or shyness and religiosity. It is difficult for me, even when I have a presentation, [and] I'm one of the people who like presentations and I like presenting in front of others. But if there are some women [in the class] I feel like it's difficult, difficult for me, why?! I don't know, but maybe because we are used to studying in Saudi Arabia with [just] males and without females.*

When I asked Rayan about his experiences at HSU, he stated he faced personal difficulties related to gendered interactions:

*Like if [a female] comes to talk with me... how to say it? Being shy, like I can't, it's something innate, like I [always] try to talk to her just to let her go...even if I sit with her like face-to-face for example, you're going to see me being silent... I become very shy... This is part of me; I don't talk so much, I mean sometimes if I sit with a female you're gonna find me sweating, so I have to get up. Even if I go to the restroom and get back...I can't sit down and keep talking, but if we are going to sit together to do something [and focus on it] like homework or something...that's ok [because I'm going to be] finishing my work and leave.*

In these two cases, both Mohamed and Rayan felt shy and nervous when they dealt with women. In Saudi Arabia, when they did interact with women, the women were fully covered up with an *Abayah*, or the religious body cover. Those interactions were rare, as Saudi women rarely inhabit public places, and usually do not talk with men without a clear purpose. In the U.S., women talk with men everywhere, sometimes smile at men, and they do not wear an *Abayah* to completely cover up their bodies. Mohamed attributed the difficulty of dealing with women to religion and the gender-segregation of the education system in Saudi Arabia. And as a result of this difficulty, Mohamed faced challenges with giving a presentation in front of his classmates, even though he expressed that he liked giving presentations. Thus, gendered interactions are not just interpersonally challenging, but could also be an academic challenge. It could negatively impact his grades because usually giving an oral presentation is a common requirement for all college students in the U.S..

Noura, however, talked about her fear of being forced to live with a male roommate. When I asked Noura about her living situation, she reported:

*... I didn't like the dorm because [it] was surprising for me [that it was mixed]. As you know in our country we have our own privacy; I mean we have boundaries [between gender]. But when I came here [San Jose] I found that living in the dorm was one of the requirements. But I tried telling them that I can't... I don't want to live in the dorm, and thank God things went good and I lived alone there... And here in Humboldt [HSU] the Center for International Programs helped me thank God to find a house with a roommate, and one of the things I asked for was that the roommate had to be a female because it would be easier of course, and thank God even though it wasn't easy in the beginning, but thank God it went smooth.*

The gender desegregation of university housing was surprising for Noura. It is clear that Noura, like many Saudi women, was used to the complete privacy of women in Saudi Arabia. It was hard for Noura to consider sharing her personal space with a man, as this felt as if she would lose her privacy, and the normal boundaries between men and women. It is also important to realize that “privacy” for Noura means to be away from men, which would differ from most Western women’s definition of “privacy”. Noura’s privacy was important to her, because alone or with women she can wear or do whatever makes her comfortable; this would not have been possible with a male in her living space. Even though her family allowed her to study in the U.S. without a guardian, it is likely she would not have been permitted to share housing with a man. They may not allow her to live with a male non-relative because the perception in Saudi Arabia is that to have a male and female in a private place could lead to problems like sexual assault or

harassment. Again, there is concern in Saudi culture with protecting women's chastity and her family's honor.

Although the literature review showed that female Saudi international students reported difficulties interacting with males, the two female Saudi students I interviewed did not mention having difficulties dealing with males while studying in the U.S.. This could be because these students limit their relationships to just females, and go out of their way to avoid interacting or making friends with males. They deal with males only when it is necessary, like asking a male classmate direct questions about an assignment, or asking a male employee about a product in a store.

The themes presented here are those that I found to be most reported by participants and most meaningful for their future academic success as Saudi international students. The following Discussion section will expound upon these results and specifically relate them back to the studies presented in the Literature Review section of this thesis to understand how this thesis has contributed to the current research available on this topic. The Discussion will also include information about what these results mean for Saudi international students, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future studies.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I used culture shock as a theoretical framework to explore the needs and difficulties Saudi international students encountered in Humboldt County, and at Humboldt State University (HSU). I also used semi-structured interviews to give the participants the opportunity to tell their stories as they like, and to describe their experiences and challenges they encountered, as well as express their suggestions for universities and researchers. In this study, participants described their personal experiences and how they dealt with, or are still dealing with, many challenges faced by them. I found three major themes, as discussed in Chapter 4, that were described by participants: language and cultural challenges, discrimination and religious challenges, and gender challenges. These findings have shown some similarities and differences to the reviewed literature. In this section, I will expound upon the similarities and differences between my findings and the previous literature and illustrate how this thesis has contributed to this particular area of research. Then, I will outline the limitations I encountered in this study. Finally, I will provide suggestions for possible future directions for research within this field.

Participants in this study reported some similar difficulties that aligned with prior studies, as reviewed in Chapter 2. As mentioned in the Introduction, even though the official Saudi study abroad program (SACM) started in 2005 and has developed and changed with time, I found interacting and communicating with native speakers was still a challenge for many Saudi international students. This social challenge is related to the

difficulty of speaking English in general. Specifically, Saudi international students had unrealistic expectations in thinking their English language was good enough to be understood by native speakers. This language barrier still exists partly because Saudi students come from a country where everything is in Arabic (e.g. TV shows, social media apps, the educational system), and where speaking English is not encouraged. Students studying abroad in the U.S. from other countries may have been exposed to more American and/or British culture, but generally, Saudi students have not. Additionally, cultural differences play an important role as they make the Saudi students' adaptation process more likely to be difficult. Saudi students need to keep a balance between their relationships with native speakers and other Arab and Saudi students. Arab and Saudi students often become a support network for Saudi international students and help these students to have a sense of belonging and avoid getting homesick. Native speakers may help Saudi international students improve their English skills and understand the U.S. culture. Both relationships are ultimately important for Saudi international students.

The literature showed some Saudi students reported difficulty building personal friendships with white students in the U.S. (Heyn 2013; Mcdermott-Levy 2011; Rundles 2012). In this study, I found just one participant, Rayan, who reported this point. This could be related to the small number of participants in this study; with a larger sample size it is probable, based on the literature, that I would have encountered other instances of discrimination. It is also possible that Rayan's experience was unique due to his extremely low English level as compared with other Saudi participants in this study. This may have caused him to experience cultural and linguistic misunderstandings, which

could have negatively impacted his impression of white people that has lasted throughout his time living and studying in Humboldt County.

Although Saudi Arabia has been developing technologically, economically, and culturally in many aspects during recent years through new business investments, study abroad programs, and newfound freedoms for women, the gap between the educational system in Saudi Arabia and the United States still exists. My findings were similar to the prior studies on this point. Saudi international students are still facing some educational difficulties such as asking questions in the class, writing papers, and conducting proper research. On the other hand, I found that Saudi international students liked many things about being a student in the United States. In addition, most participants considered the academic difficulties as necessary challenges, and not as barriers. Confronting these challenges helped students feel satisfied with themselves as they achieved their goals.

I found a few interesting points the previous literature did not mention. One of these points was how cultural differences, and the lack of understanding U.S. professors have about Saudi culture, created some challenges for Saudi international students to be academically successful. I also found the role of the host family to be an important issue that several students discussed. In my findings, I covered two overlapping points, language and cultural challenges, that clarified how the host family plays such an important role in Saudi international students' lives in the United States. These findings were slightly different than predicted by Rodriguez and Chornet-Roses (2014). As mentioned in the findings about the role of the host family in the previous chapter, their study of American students studying in Luxembourg, found students with the lowest

second language (L2) abilities had the most negative violation of their expectations, while students with higher L2 abilities experienced more positive violations. Though it was difficult to probe the importance of host families given my small sample size, this issue should be researched more in the future.

In the second theme of my findings, discrimination and religious challenges, I found Saudi international students are still facing some difficulties when they transfer from a religious country to a secular country. It may be that religion, Islam specifically, is still a top priority for Saudi international students. My findings correspond with the prior literature, but I also found some new points that could help us deepen the understanding of Saudi international student experiences. In Chapter 4, I explained how several students missed hearing the Adhan (call for prayer), and how this was an essential issue for Saudi students, causing participants of both genders to feel homesick. This was the case even though some Saudis may think hearing Adhan is more important for men than women, as women are used to praying in their home whereas men pray in the Masjid or mosque. Several participants expressed their frustration about missing the daily religious routine that they used to have in Saudi Arabia. In the second theme, I also clarified how praying, for Saudi international students, is considered to be a break time from everything such as work or studying. The importance of these regular prayer breaks could be explored in future studies. One point of disagreement between the literature and my findings was about who is more likely to experience discrimination. In previous studies, women who wear a hijab were more likely to be discriminated against. My findings showed the opposite; one hijabi woman reported she never experienced discrimination, and one non-



hijabi woman went through discriminatory experiences. This may have been a product of the small sample size, or unique to the relatively liberal politics of Humboldt County. Further research could explore this further, perhaps comparing experiences in urban versus rural locations, or relative to the politics of the area. It may be that the discrimination experienced by some Arab-Muslim women is more about their perceived ethnic background, or religion, than the hijab itself. Related, I found some Saudi students were dissatisfied with their experiences as international students at HSU for their limited definition of “diversity.” For these students, because the University includes and supports some minority groups at the same time it excludes and marginalizes Saudi international students, from the students’ perspectives. These students felt they were experiencing discrimination.

In the third theme, gender challenges, I found that transitioning from the gender segregated culture of Saudi Arabia to the mixed gender culture of the U.S. is still one of the biggest challenges that Saudi international students encounter. In my findings, I discussed how the concept of guardianship created a form of male domination that supports gender inequality where “women still remain dependent upon a masculine provider and protector” (DeLong-Bas 2013:651). Thus, some Saudi male students (or the guardians) are still following the same social structure they grew up with when they come to the U.S. This practice negatively affects female Saudi students and their social integration. My findings under this theme show guardians are not always as supportive as the previous literature mentioned. In this theme, I also described why Saudi male students found dealing with women to be difficult, and how this difficulty negatively impacted

them in many ways, especially in their academic lives. I covered how the boundaries between males and females in Saudi Arabia became one of the difficulties that only Saudi female students encountered. Previous studies indicated dealing with members of another gender was one of the difficulties female Saudi students encountered, but the findings in this study showed a different result. Female Saudi students did not report having difficulties dealing with males. Although we cannot generalize these findings, they do provide insight into the challenges that Saudi international students face in the United States.

### *Limitations*

I faced several limitations with this study. First, as a male Saudi student, it was difficult for me to recruit female participants due to the strict gender norms of our culture. I was only able to interview two females, and only after I got help from my wife and a female faculty member. The small number of female respondents could also be due to the research setting, which was a remote, rural area. This could have impacted my results by not providing an equal voice for both genders, this could have led to disparities in my results. Second, I also faced hard times when I conducted the interviews, because some participants did not take the scheduling for the interview seriously. This meant that my starting time for interviews was almost never punctual, and I was forced to reschedule various interviews for this reason. This may have been due to cultural norms; in Saudi Arabia, appointment times are not necessarily concrete, as they are in the U.S. These time conflicts impacted my original timeline for collecting all of the interview data and thus

postponed my thematic coding and eventual writing. Third, it was at times difficult to record interviews in a disturbance-free space, as some of my participants had friends or family around them during the interview. This caused some of my participants to be distracted and perhaps to withhold certain information because they did not want to talk about some of these issues in front of others. Additionally, because of the time difference between Saudi Arabia and the United States I had to do one interview at midnight. These time differences impacted my ability to focus during some interviews because they had to be arranged for around midnight; with my wife and daughter sleeping at this time, it was very difficult to use speaker phone and speak loudly and clearly enough for a good interview recording. Finally, I could not find a qualitative software that supports the Arabic language to analyze my data. I was forced to do the whole process of the thematic coding by hand. This was a barrier to the research because I had a difficult time determining the best way to code so many themes; it took me nearly a week to distill over forty original themes down to three.

### *Suggestions for Future Studies*

In this section, I provide guidance for the study of Saudi international students studying in the United States. I include thoughts on future directions for the research, as well as suggestions for the logistics of how to conduct research with this unique population for future researchers.

Future research could study the effects on students studying abroad of the many changes that have occurred in Saudi Arabia over the past few years. For example, women

are now officially allowed to drive, and there are new laws permitting diverse entertainments for all citizens (e.g. movie theatres, music concerts). Moreover, scholars may need to study the new policies that the Saudi government recently applied to the scholarship program, and how these policies have affected Saudi international students on many levels, especially their academic lives. Researchers should also study the role of the host family and how the dynamic relationship between the host families and Saudi students impact their experiences with studying abroad. In the present study, it turned out the host family had a big impact on Saudi international students' lives; such housing situations could be a positive or negative influence on Saudi student experiences. It may be helpful to bring in the host families' perspectives in future studies to get a better understanding of these issues, and support both the Saudi international students and the host families to have healthy relationships in the future. Along with the perspectives of the host families, future research should consider probing the professors' experiences working with and teaching Saudi international students. This would help achieve a more holistic view of Saudi international students' experiences in the United States.

Specific research in the future might also focus on the effect of the guardianship concept on Saudi female students in particular. This would help clarify why some female students face problems with their guardians while studying abroad, which can lead to the abandonment of their studies. Finally, the literature review indicated dealing with members of another gender was one of the difficulties that female Saudi students encountered, but the findings in this study showed a different result; female Saudi students did not report having difficulties dealing with males, while Saudi males did

report having difficulty interacting with females. Future research should attempt to clarify this result through a larger sample size of both genders of Saudi international students.

In terms of suggestions for study abroad scholars, future research into the experiences of Saudi international students could benefit from a research team that includes both a woman and a man. It would be most helpful if both members of the research team are Saudi, to help understand the cultural references of the interviews. A Saudi female member of the research team could cover the female-specific aspects of recruitment and conducting the interviews and probing into the personal experiences of Saudi female international students. We also need Saudi female students to cover married people from both genders; because of our culture and social norms, it is easy for a female to interview a male whether single or married, but not the other way around. Also, because of the gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, it may be that female participants will be more honest and open with Saudi female researchers than with a male researcher. This means that Saudi female researchers could be successful in obtaining more accurate response data not only from females, but also from males, making for more comprehensive future studies.

In addition, especially for non-Saudi future researchers working with Saudi students, they may need to build into their strategies the flexibility to be ready for any changes that could occur right before, or during the interview, even if the participant has already scheduled the interview. The study design should include extra time in case, at the last moment, the participant needs to reschedule the interview. For example, the research team might select interview times when it is possible to conduct the interview

within several hours after the interview is supposed to take place, in case the start time gets pushed back. The team should also be patient with moving appointment times.

If a researcher wants to conduct their research in Arabic, while studying in the United States, they may have to find their own way to analyze their data. It is unlikely they will be able to get language-specific assistance unless their research chair or colleagues also speak Arabic. For the interviews, the researcher can choose to perform them in the participant's native language then analyze the interviews, find the common themes, then select the best quotes to be translated or they could conduct the interviews in English from the beginning. Both methods have positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects of interviewing in the native language of the participants included the ability of participants to express themselves clearly and as they like, while also giving me the ability to interpret the subtleties of language like tone, rate of speech, nervousness or confidence, and personal feelings. The principal negative aspect of conducting the interviews in Arabic was the difficulty in properly translating the selected quotes in the Data Results Chapter. This forced me to find a bilingual PhD colleague, Ahmed Alowfi, who could revise and edit my translations as needed. I chose to conduct the interviews in Arabic because I felt that my research participants would be more open, more detailed, and could express themselves better in their own native language. This created much more labor, as I had to translate the interviews, and work with Arabic-speaking colleagues to ensure my translations were sufficient.

This study has focused on Saudi international students' challenges and experiences in Humboldt County while studying at Humboldt State University (HSU).

This was a qualitative study of eight participants using semi-structured interview questions. The findings included three themes: (1) language and cultural challenges, (2) discrimination and religious challenges, and (3) gender challenges. This study attempted to contribute to the fields of culture shock, higher education, studying abroad, and sociocultural studies. Even given the limitation and barriers of this research, it is worthwhile to understand the experiences of Saudi international students studying in the U.S., especially in rural areas. As the SACM program continues to grow and be refined, it will be helpful to understand how students are navigating the gender, culture and religious challenges of their educational sojourns.

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

### A Study of Saudi Students in Humboldt County

#### Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in an interview about your experiences as a Saudi student in Humboldt County. This research is part of my placement project for Humboldt State University. I anticipate that our interview will take about 30-45 minutes.

In the interview, I will ask you questions about your personal experiences with culture shock, unmet needs in Humboldt County, and the struggles or challenges that you may have faced.

Your participation is voluntary and without risk. You may discontinue participation at any time. However, you may find benefits in talking about and reflecting on your experiences. Although there will not be any compensation, your contributions may benefit other Saudi students who still in Humboldt County and who will come to Humboldt County in the future. You may also find benefits from the opportunity to talk about and reflect on your own experiences.

Your answers to all questions are completely confidential. I will transcribe our interview and destroy the original digital audio recording within 30 days. Upon your request, I can remove any identifying information like real names, true events, or identifying locations. My records linking your transcription with your contact information will be kept in a secure location separate from the transcripts. By Dec 8, 2017, I will transfer electronic transcript files and this consent form to the Department of Sociology for secure 3-year storage and destroy all paper and electronic files in my possession related to this project.

In the analysis and reporting of any information linked to this project, all identifying information will be removed. If I use any quotations from your interview, I may change some information so that your identity will not be revealed. If using a quotation could compromise your privacy, I will not use that quotation.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me: Dafer Alqarni, at [da1369@humboldt.edu](mailto:da1369@humboldt.edu) or my instructor, Meredith Williams, Professor of Sociology, at [mw1167@humboldt.edu](mailto:mw1167@humboldt.edu)

You may also share any concerns about this evaluation with the Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Dr. Ethan Gahtan, at [eg51@humboldt.edu](mailto:eg51@humboldt.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, report them to the Humboldt State University Dean of Research, Dr. Rhea Williamson, at [Rhea.Williamson@humboldt.edu](mailto:Rhea.Williamson@humboldt.edu).

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your experiences.

\*\*\*

I am at least 18 years old. I understand the above and consent to participate in this research.

Print Name:

Signature:

Date:

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

A Study of Saudi Students in Humboldt County

Interview Guide (English)

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION & CULTURE SHOCK

- 1. Tell me a little about yourself?**
  - a. Probe: age; educational level; how long have you been in the USA? with who do you live?
- 2. How did you get here at HSU?**
  - a. Probe: experiences; people, your family/friends; why here
- 3. Did you know anyone in Humboldt County or HSU before you came here?**
  - a. Probe: what did they say about Humboldt County or HSU? influence on decisions
- 4. Tell me about your first week's experience in Humboldt. What was it like?**
  - a. Probe: what were your expectations before coming to study in US?
  - b. What has the reality been so far? same/differences
  - c. What did you immediately miss from your country when you arrived in the US?
  - d. What were your first impressions of the first Americans you met?
- 5. How many times have you felt that you want to stop everything and go back to KSA?**
  - a. Could you tell me more about the worst one?
  - b. How long were you struggling with it? (hours/days)
  - c. How did you pass it?
  - d. Did you get any emotional support?
  - e. From who?
  - f. Do you think this strategy will work with everybody? If not, why?
- 6. How important is English language proficiency for you to pass the culture shock?**

### DIFFICULTIES & SUGGESTIONS

- 1. What do you need to feel safe and comfortable in Humboldt?**
- 2. Are there some difficulties that you are confronting here at HSU? What are they?**
  - a. Probe: Academic; social; personal



b. How did you deal with them?

- 3. What do you wish HSU would do to help you overcome these difficulties?**
- 4. What do you like the most about studying in the United States?**
- 5. What do you not like about studying in the United States?**

#### **NEEDS & SUGGESTIONS**

- 1. What does HSU need to do to make Saudi students more satisfied?**
- 2. If a friend or one of your family members was thinking to come here to study and they asked you about HSU and Arcata, what would you say to them?**
  - a. Probe: would you say the same thing regardless their gender? If yes, why?
- 3. Is there anything we missed or that you would like to talk more about?**