

Insights into Saudi Female International Students: Transition Experiences

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ABSTRACT

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

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

INTRODUCTION

Recruitment of international students on American campuses has become part of many American higher academic institutions' internationalization plans (Pandit, 2013). Having international students help to prepare domestic students to become global citizens (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Therefore, the number of international students in the United States exceeded one million in the academic year 2018-2019 (Institute of International Education, 2019). These students arrive from cultural backgrounds that are, in most cases, different from the American culture which creates additional challenges for them (Pandit, 2013). The considerable increase of

Saudi international students on U.S. campuses in the last two decades created different challenges from their counterparts due to the vast cultural and religious differences. Arriving from a conservative country presents extra challenges for them, especially the female Saudi international students. Being labeled as terrorists, misunderstanding of Islam and the Arabs are among other difficulties (Arafah, 2018). Moreover, the terrorists attacks that occurred in different parts of the world increased hatred toward Muslims (Siemaszko, 2015).

The Institute of Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index asserted that terrorist attacks would not end even after 15 years of the "War on Terror" declared by former U.S. President George W. Bush (Friedman, 2016; The Global Terrorism Index, 2015).

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

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

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

International Students in the United States

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

2019 academic year (IIE, 2019). Saudi Arabia ranks fourth after China, India, and South Korea in the number of students sent to earn their higher education degrees in U.S. academic institutions (IIE, 2019).

Saudi International Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

Female International Students from Saudi Arabia

This research focuses on Saudi female international students who arrive from a country where most women do not enjoy freedom to travel and get higher education abroad (Le Renard, 2014). Recently, few changes occurred to the Saudi law that allowed women to drive, vote and be nominated of the Saudi parliament for the first time since the establishment of the Saudi Kingdom (BBC News, 2015). In 2017, the Saudi government sanctioned a decree that gave a permission to women to drive their own cars starting from June 2018. This law marks an end of oppression of Saudi women who experienced numerous social and cultural inequalities (BBC News, 2015).

Transition Theory

The transition theory introduced by Schlossberg (1983) elucidates the challenges adults encounter when moving out from their comfort zones where they need to adapt to a new environment. According to Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson (2006) there are two types of transition, anticipated such as moving to another country, having a baby, getting a new job and marriage. While the non-anticipated transition comprises consequences of car accidents, sickness and death. Building on Schlossberg’s theory, Goodman et al. identified situation, support, self, and strategies—also known as the Four S’s—to understand how adults experience transition and how they implement these resources to adjust to the new environment (Figure 1).

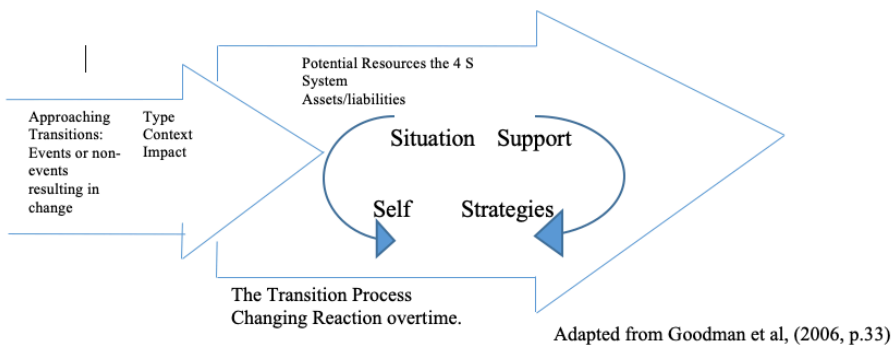


Figure 1: Schlossberg’s Transition Model Reflecting Individual Transition

Goodman et al. (2006) described *situation* as the time and place where the event occur. *Support* might be financial, social or psychological that help individuals adapt to the new phase of their lives. *Self* explains the impact of transition on the

individual's personality and beliefs. *Strategies* are the tools that an individual use to acclimatize to the new event, place, etc.

The application of the transition theory on the Saudi female international students projected to understand the impact of moving to the United States, the challenges they faced, and how they were able to succeed using Schlossberg's 4 Ss, situation, support, self and strategies (Al Remailh, 2016). In addition, the four coping resources that Goodman et al. (2006) implemented to understand the adult transition, can provide insight into the Saudi female transition experiences of the moving in, moving through, and moving on phases.

Saudi Female International Students' Transition

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

Stage One: Moving In

The first stage started from Saudi Arabia when these women decided to study in the United States. Their motivation to study abroad reflects their strength to prove themselves as successful women in their conservative society. These women arrived from different areas in Saudi Arabia where women do not enjoy several rights. However, their decision was supported by their family members, specifically males, who believed in their abilities to succeed. The support they received from their families was both psychological and financial.

Stage Two: Moving Through

Part One

This stage started when these women arrived in the United States for the first time in their lives. According to Pedersen (1995), this stage is the most challenging for international students when they feel happy and anxious at the same time. Happy because they achieved their dream to study abroad, and anxious about their lives and future in the foreign country. These mixed feelings might lead to lack of self-confidence (Ting-Toomey, 1999). However, they can reduce these feelings when they get support from their campus represented by the office of international students, and the association of international students that offer help and support to all international students (Shapiro et al.2014).

Part Two

In this part, Saudi female students are more acquainted with campus services and the academic programs that help them navigate several choices and facilities (Ting-Toomy, 1999). This stage usually starts during the second semester of their first academic year. Being aware of the campus culture helps them seek support from their professors, academic departments and friends. The support they receive usually has a positive impact on their self-confidence.

Moving On

The first semester of the second academic year marks a difference in these Saudi female students' lives. Most of them had the opportunity to travel to their home country, Saudi Arabia in summer. Their experiences and feelings during the summer vacation are different from when they first took the decision to study in the United States. Therefore, it is important to focus on the changes that happened to these students back home after spending one year in the United States.

According to Wayt (2012), it is a great achievement for college students to persist college life for the second year. The support these students receive from their campus and families is fundamental to their persistence. Ting-Toomy (1999) emphasized that international students in the second academic year become more independent and adaptable to both college and social lives.

Research Questions

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

- How do Saudi females navigate challenges in their home country as they make the decision to study and live in the United States?
- How do Saudi females cope with the transition to living and learning on a U.S. campus during the first 6 weeks?
- How do Saudi females meet the transition challenges regarding academic and social lives?

METHOD

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

group provided insight into their collective essence of experiences (Crowther et al. 2016).

Participants

The participants of this study were 10 sophomore Saudi female international students who volunteered to participate, comprising approximately 60% of the population of Saudi female sophomore students attending a Midwestern university campus. The university where I conducted my study is situated in the most diverse city in the Midwest (Kent & Frohich, 2015). I received Institutional Review Board approval before conducting the individual and the focus group interviews. The Saudi female students were from different areas in Saudi Arabia: the capital city Riyadh, Jeddah, the East, and the West areas. Nine participants studied health care-related majors, and one student studied political science. Four out of the 10 students participated in the focus group. All Saudi females in this research voluntarily participated without getting any incentives or extra credits.

Data Collection

The aim of the individual and the focus group interviews was to understand the transition experiences of these Saudi female students, the resources they used to cope with the various hardships they faced in the United States, and how they were successful to overcome many academic and cultural hindrances.

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

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

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

communicate in which they felt more comfortable to reveal their experiences. Later, I translated the interviews into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the Individual Interviews

The Saudi participants preferred to use Arabic in their individual and focus group interviews. The translation and transcribing were done immediately after each interview to stay focused and engaged. I adapted the three-cycle coding based on Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). I added line numbers to each interview transcript to refer easily to the students' quotes. The transcripts were all in an Excel sheet to make it easier to number the lines, elicit quotes, and refer to the appropriate data. I added the students' pseudonyms to maintain the privacy of their interviews. Then, the excel sheet was divided into sections based on the stages that these students experienced starting from making the decision to study in the United States, until the second semester of their sophomore year. The coping resources, situation, self, support, and strategies were also added to understand how these students implemented them to overcome several challenges.

Analysis of the Focus Group Interview

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

Integration of Findings

After analyzing both the individual interviews and the focus group interview, the visual integration of findings helped me understand the phenomena, similarities, and differences between both results. Lambert and Loisel (2008) asserted that integration of individual interviews and focus group interview results guide the exploration of the phenomena that a research aims to investigate. For example, when I asked the females in the individual interviews about their American friends, they did not give a detailed account of the nature of the relationship with domestic students. They only mentioned that they met some of them in their classes. However, in the focus group, they gave more details about the nature of their friendships with American students. They were also able to identify American

students of different backgrounds. For example, one of the students mentioned that she had an American roommate from Latin America, another shared her experience with her African American friend, and a third one mentioned her White American friend.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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

All the Saudi females who participated in this study described primarily positive feelings about their experiences during the five stages of their transition to live and study in the United States. They agreed that life in the United States helped them become more mature, responsible, confident, and independent. Being in a free open society enhanced their self-esteem and self-confidence. Enjoying a large spectrum of freedom helped them become more appreciative to the American culture where women enjoy equal rights with males. Furthermore, during individual interviews, two students described their experiences in the United States as “positive culture shock.” Ghada, 23, Health Sciences, emphasized:

I am able to use the public transportations and go places wherever and whenever I want. In Saudi Arabia, we do not have public transportation, and if I want to go out, I have to get a permission from my father or brother. I cannot drive, and I cannot take a taxi by myself. Here, nobody treated me as a different person. They respected me as I am. For me it is a positive culture shock.

In contrast, previous research on international students at U.S. higher academic institutions highlighted the culture shock theory that most international students experience because of the several cultural and social differences from their home country and the United States (Davis, 2014; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Presbitero, 2016).

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

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

Almost all Saudi females who participated in this study expressed their desires to go back to Saudi Arabia upon graduation to create positive changes in their country. Freedom of mobility, independence, and successfully upholding several responsibilities in the United States augmented the Saudi females' sense of

competence. They indicated that they wanted to apply what they learned in the United States in their home country and to become part of the positive changes they believed they could help make happen in Saudi Arabia. They also wanted to inspire other Saudi females to seek their higher education in the United States and be part of the future changes.

The constant increase in the numbers of educated Saudi women is expected to create positive changes in Saudi Arabia in the future (Alferahy, 2016). Well educated women usually criticize the restrictions and laws that confine their freedom and regulate their activities.

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

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

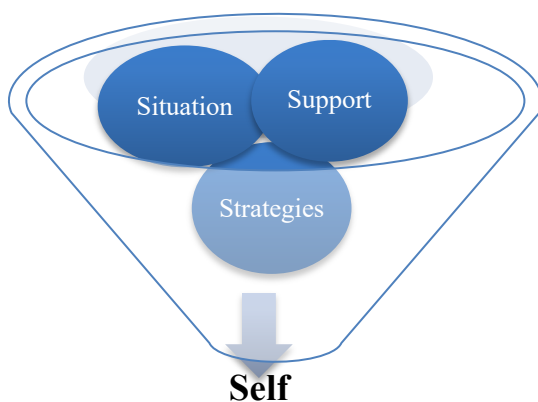


Figure 2: The Integration of the Four Coping Aspects of Transition

Therefore, as shown in Figure 2, these coping aspects were blended together as a metaphorical ice cream cone with three different flavored balls (situation, support, and strategies) that fostered the emerging of essence of a stronger self, or identity, as the result of their integration.

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

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

Campus support was inadequate to address the needs of first year Saudi females, so they sought support from other sources. All Saudi females who participated in this study conveyed that campus support upon arrival was almost absent as they did not know what to do and who to ask. Because all females I interviewed were able to succeed to their sophomore year, I was curious to understand the type of campus support they received that helped them persist. All girls indicated, however, that they received minimal campus support during their first few months at the Midwestern university. Instead, campus support created more complications for these students, such as when a couple of the participants were provided incorrect guidance by academic advising services. Manal, 22, Biomedical Engineering, stated:

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

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

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

Limitations of the Study

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

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of 10 sophomore Saudi female students who studied on a Midwest campus. They revealed through the individual and focus group interviews the tremendous positive changes they experienced while studying and living in the United States. The freedom of mobility and speech they enjoyed had a huge impact on their way of living and thinking. All participants mentioned their strong desire to transfer the positive American cultural attributes to their home country, and to encourage their peer females to travel to the United States to pursue their education. Moreover, all participants expressed their strong desire to go back to their home country where they can be active members in their society and work hard to better change the social and cultural situations. This study also revealed that Saudi women are strong and able to encounter several challenges and succeed in a foreign country that is extremely different from where they were born and raised.

Implications for Future Research

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

research is also needed about domestic students' perceptions of international students particularly, Muslim students.

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

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