

**Saudi Women's Understanding of the Stereotypes They Experience
at Flinders University**

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Dedication

To Mohammad,

My husband and my partner in this journey,

and

to my three little angels, Lamar, Yazan, and Rawad

who taught me how to love unconditionally.

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Summary

This study aims to explore Saudi women students' social experiences during their study at Flinders University and their understanding of those experiences. The study sought to determine the extent to which Saudi women experience stereotyping at Flinders University; how such stereotyping has influenced their social life and study; how they consider their experiences differ from those of other women students; and what resilience strategy they employ to respond to their experiences. The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological study design, where responses from seven Saudi women undertaking postgraduate or undergraduate programs at the university were analysed in order to contribute to the research on this subject. Eight themes emerged from the interviews with the women students, which were identified as relevant to the aims of the study. The study found that the majority of the subjects had largely positive experiences within the university, although there were a few times when they felt they were subject to stereotyping. In their social experiences the women all had some encounters with racism, discrimination, taunting, or Islamophobia, and several struggled with finding acceptable housing. Emotions of homesickness, loneliness, depression and feelings of being an outsider presented challenges to the participants in the research. All of the women interviewed had developed coping strategies to overcome obstacles, which included adopting a positive attitude, emphasising the positive, using their friendship networks, doing things with other international students, ignoring insults and keeping busy with their studies. All seven women expressed a strong identification with their religion, which gave them purpose and strength to focus on their academic goals. Recommendations are included, which may be useful to the university in increasing its support of international Muslim students.

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Definition of Terms

The following terms have been used throughout the thesis with the meaning that is given here.

Unless otherwise indicated the following definitions have been taken from the Oxford dictionary (2019).

Saudi women: females of Saudi Arabian origin

Stereotype: A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

Discrimination: The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.

Muslim: A follower of the religion of Islam.

Culture: The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.

Islamophobia: term began to be used to signal rejection of and discrimination against the resident Muslim population in the 'West' (Allen, 2005).

Dislike of or prejudice against Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force.

Hijab or veil: A scarf or veil worn by some Muslim women over the head in public (Gole & Göle, 1996) and (T. F. Ruby, 2006).

The terms hijab and veil used are used in this study synonymously, as both referring to a length of material used by many Muslim women for covering their hair. In this study, the hijab is taken as the headscarf.

of my dress, religion, culture, country of origin, or a combination of all of these factors. I wanted to explore the commonality of such experiences among other women students, to understand their impact and how to build resilience to deal with them.

Despite the significant increase in the number of Saudi women enrolled in Australian universities, very little research has been done to document their experiences and how they bridge cultural differences (Macias, 2016). Female Saudi students have particular needs that are best addressed by analysing their lived experiences. They hail from an Islamic background and one that has a unique culture and practices. The findings of this study will enhance the educational experiences of international students in general and Saudi women in particular. The findings may also assist educational providers in Australia to develop more relevant orientation programs and find other ways to deliver intercultural education programs.

Since this research focuses on Saudi women studying at Flinders University, it is important that relevant background information of Saudi Arabia regarding its religion, culture, and the role of the women in the Saudi Arabian context be included. (Lippman, 2004). It is crucial to note that Saudi as a nation claims Islam as its main religion (Hofer, 2009). According to Hofer (2009) “The Islamic religion is firmly rooted in Saudi Arabia, and the Quran serves as the unifying force in the country and is therefore, designated as its constitution” (p,18).

Purpose of the Study

There is little research on the experiences that female students of Saudi nationality go through when studying abroad. By the same token, there are no studies on the experiences of female Saudi students studying at Flinders University. Given the fact that contemporary policy has led to an increase in the number of female Saudi students studying at Flinders University, it is of interest to study their experiences of stereotyping, and their general experiences of studying in the host institution. There is also a need to determine if the trend of stereotyping is increasing with rising numbers of female Saudi students enrolled at Flinders University.

Aims of the Study

1. To investigate the degree to which Saudi women feel that they experience stereotyping at Flinders University.
2. To determine how these women feel that stereotypical experiences have influenced their social and study life.

3. To determine to what degree these women consider their experiences different from the experiences of other women students.

Significance of the Study

Australia has the highest population per capita of students from other nations in the world. Approximately 29% of Australian students in universities are international students. Despite the financial crisis of 2008–2009, international students have continually chosen Australia over other countries as their study destination of choice (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). Challenges facing Saudi women arise from certain views commonly associated with the Islamic religion, to which they are affiliated. Specifically, the international phenomenon of terrorism has worsened the experiences of Saudi women choosing to study at Flinders University. Typically, the Muslim community is perceived as synonymous with terror and war: ‘Muslims are terrorists, especially girls with scarves’ (quoted by Mansouri & Trembath, 2005).

Research questions

This qualitative study aims at documenting and analysing the perceptions of Saudi women students living and studying at Flinders university.

The study will seek answers to the following research questions;

1. To what extent do Saudi women studying at Flinders University experience stereotyping?
2. How have the stereotypical experienced by Saudi women affected their social and study life?
3. To what extent do the Saudi women consider their experiences different from the experiences of other women students studying at Flinders University?

Theoretical Framework

The lens through which this research was viewed and conducted relates to several concepts. Identify formation and development is important in terms of the population that was studied and their life stage. Considering religion and culture, especially as it pertains to Saudi Arabia is central to understanding the context of the participant university students. Stereotyping, discrimination and Islamophobia are core framework concepts by which the lived experiences of the participants were understood and interpreted.

Summary

Chapter One introduces the study by discussing its purpose and what makes it significant. The research questions are determined, and an overview of the theoretical framework that influenced the study is presented.

CHAPTER TWO: **Review of Literature**

This literature review has been conducted to identify key research studies on the stereotyped views facing Muslim women globally and in Australian universities. This will support the present study's exploration of the experiences of Saudi women studying in Australia and will highlight key gaps in knowledge. This review includes background information on the culture and religion of Saudi Arabia, theoretical perspectives on the issue of stereotyping, especially in the context of Saudi women studying in international locations.

Saudi Religion and Culture

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Islamic nation. As noted by the study of Gannon & Pillai (2013), the nation is considered to be the birthplace of Islam and as such, the practice of any faith other than Islam is prohibited. Islamic beliefs also play a major role in defining how politics and gender roles in the country are enacted. According to Pharaon (2004), Islam underpins all aspects and factors of life in the entire country. The king serves as both the political and religious leader in the country. This fact is extremely important to understanding that when talking about Saudi female students, religion serves as the main essence of their culture and driver of their daily lifestyles.

Culture is a concept with many definitions as seen by many different scholars. As defined by "Sir Edward Burnett Tylor" (2000) culture is a complex whole that entails knowledge, art, morals, belief and customs among other human endeavours (Marsella, Dubanoski, Hamada, & Morse, 2000)

Another definition of culture is by Avrush states that cultures consist of patterns, which may be explicit or implicit, and that represent behaviour acquired and passed on through symbols, all of which add up to the achievements of human beings throughout history (Murray, 2000). He added that culture consists of both traditional ideas and the values attached to them. Other scholars have argued that culture is partly a product of action and partly a conditional element of future action (Bram, 1953). According to Alder, (1997), culture is a derivative of experiences, which are devised, organised learned by members of a community (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012) . Also, culture is a programming structuring of the mind that differentiates one group from another (Hofstede & culture, 2011).

Yet another definition says that culture is a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviour common to a group of individuals, but unique to each person and communicated from generation

to generation (Matsumoto et al., 1996). According to Hong (2009), culture is the network of knowledge that consists of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with others, in addition to substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world. This last definition relates closely to the culture of Saudi Arabia, where the common value of Islam, that all knowledge stems from religion, is shared because of the collectivist nature of the culture.

The Islamic faith values knowledge as an extremely important value in everyday life. Islamic teachings instruct that knowledge is a gift given by Allah, which leads humans towards humility and peace. On the other hand, ignorance and lack of education lead to extremism. The concept of culture will act as an essential part of this research study because the study aims at identifying and assessing the cultural shocks that Saudi female university students experience while living and studying in Australia.

The Saudi Arabian culture is derived from ancient traditions and customs. It is socially and legally allowed to enforce certain restrictions regarding the dress code and general behaviour of women in public. For instance, until recently women were not allowed by law to drive in Saudi Arabia. Gender segregation is also practised and remains a common feature of present day Saudi culture (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013).

Muslim Women

When looking at Muslim women in general, their role in society is mainly dictated by religion. Outsiders may see Saudi women as oppressed because of the religious requirements that women must follow, in contrast with the comparative freedom allowed to their male counterparts. However, Gannon and Pillai (2013), point out that Saudi women do not perceive their role in society as oppressed or negative in any way; rather, they see restrictions as a way to give them greater security. To them, the act of being covered and being separated from men reduces the probability of physical harm and harassment and helps them to maintain their piety. It is possible that the role of Muslim women in society has been misinterpreted over the years by observers in western society. A study by Spencer (2002) points out that Muhammad did create areas of women's rights; for example, passages in the Quran gave women rights to inheritance and divorce long before western cultures did the same.

And yet it is still possible to argue against the treatment that Saudi women receive based on how they themselves interpret situations. Macias argued that some people have understood the Quran in a literal manner, to be marginalising women, although that was not the case

(Macias, 2016). Over the years education has been regarded as a corrective factor that may slowly change how Saudi society understands the role of women. A better understanding of the experiences of women Saudi students who are passing through Flinders University may contribute to a broader discussion around international educational opportunities and encounters.

One of the major contemporary contributors to negative impressions of Muslims and Islam is the media (Navarro, 2010). Normally, the press undermines Islam and Muslims by presenting Islamic culture as regressive. In particular, the headscarf, or hijab, donned by Muslim women has perhaps come to symbolise repression (Meer & Modood, 2009). Over the past decade, the coverage of Muslims in western media has increased, despite their still being a minority group. This change has been attributed to the growth of the Muslim population in the US and the association of terrorism with the Islamic religion (Haddad and Smith (2002).

According to a study by Selod (2015), Muslims face pervasive racism. He found that Americans are discriminated against and scrutinised at a greater degree if they are identified as Muslims. Without religious markers, it is easier for Muslim Americans to pass as a non-Muslim and hence avoid heightened scrutiny or discrimination (Selod, 2015). Thus, women wearing the hijab experience negative scrutiny and association with terrorism due to the visibility of the scarf (Badr, 2004). When compared to women not wearing it, Muslim women wearing the hijab were more likely to be questioned by random strangers about their American values (Selod, 2015). A woman wearing a hijab faces more prejudice than a man with a beard, leading to a rise in discrimination cases, especially after September 11 (Sekhon, 2003). Women wearing a hijab are targets for verbal as well as physical assaults by mere association of the hijab with terrorism. A study by Navarro Cainkar (2002) found that the media plays a vital role in the racial profiling of Muslim women, as it reinforces the generalisation of the Muslim woman to a stereotyped image.

The Hijab and Religion

This section deals specifically with studies on Muslim women and the veil. Women's rights and freedoms vary among Arab countries. For example, in Saudi Arabia when women are in public they are required to cover their entire bodies (with a long robe (abaya)) and to wear headscarves to cover their hair (Al-Ma'Seb, 2006). By providing nuanced analyses of Muslim women's experiences of the veil, several studies (Hoodfar, 1992, 2003; McDonough, Ruby, 2006) have challenged the western colonialist construction of veiled women as oppressed and subjugated by

Islamic patriarchy. As such, these studies have highlighted the significance of women's resistance and agency by calling into question the one-dimensional treatment of veiling as a symbol of Islamic oppression. Hoodfar (2003) has suggested examining veiling in a broader framework that considers individual freedom of choice. In her opinion, considering such a framework enables one to view a veiled Muslim woman as an active agent, rather than a passive subject. In fact, in her study, Hoodfar emphasised the voluntary nature of the veiling practice, as well as its multiple meanings, from the varied perspectives of Muslim women who have voiced their narratives in the study.

Abu-Lughod (1998) discusses the practice of veiling among many Muslim women in the Middle East and believes that the trend toward veiling among these women is as much a symbol of modernity as demonstrated by the upper- and middle-class Muslim women who took off their veil in the name of modernity about a century ago. In addition, Hoodfar (1992) highlighted the Oriental and colonial image of veiled Muslim women commonly presented in western societies, emphasising the need to seriously consider the actual lived experiences of Muslim women. She discussed veiling as a 'complex, dynamic, and changing cultural practice' and also argued that the "assumption that veiling is a static practice which symbolises the oppressive nature of patriarchy in Muslim societies has prevented social scientists and western feminists from examining Muslim women's accounts of their lives, hence perpetuating the racist stereotypes which are ultimately in the service of patriarchy in both societies" (p. 5).

A study by Bullock (2002) highlighted the discrimination that many veiled Muslim women experience in Toronto 'based upon the way they dress' (p. 84). She believed that erasing the voices of Muslim women from the dominant discourses about the meaning of the hijab is similar to excluding women's perspectives and voices from the mainstream discourses — the same factor that has stimulated the emergence of different waves of feminism. Bullock discusses the oppressive nature of the veil in the eyes of many non-Muslim people. According to Bullock, there are three different approaches to the study of veiled Muslim women. She believes that the first approach, which is 'the most simplistic and unsophisticated view of the veil is "the pop-culture view"'. The underlying assumption of this view is that Muslim women are oppressed by Islamic patriarchy, and the veil is a symbol of that. Bullock (2002) argues that this view has 'an unconscious adherence to liberalism and modernization theory'. The second view, which is more sophisticated, is the liberal feminists' view of the veil. Some feminists in this group try to listen

to the voices of veiled Muslim women, while others do not. Nonetheless, all feminists firmly believe in the oppressive nature of the veil (Bullock, 2002).

Bullock's third approach to the study of the veil is the 'contextual approach'. This approach considers the influence of popular media in shaping public opinions about Muslims. The politics surrounding the construction of Muslim women's identities in western societies has been the subject of several studies. Such studies have discussed the effects of popular media in building and shaping public opinion about Muslim women and their identity in western societies (Khosrojerdi, 2015). These studies discussed how the popular media projects a distorted picture of veiled Muslim women as oppressed and passive (Bilge, 2010; Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Khiabany & Williamson, 2008). In their study of some novels on Muslim girls and their lives in the Middle East, Sensoy and Marshal (2010) pointed out that they were mostly written by non-Muslim women after the events of September 11. The authors argued that these young adult novels serve as de facto legitimisation for the US-led incursions in the region as a project of women's emancipation. According to Sensoy and Marshal (2010), negative, reductive stereotypes about Muslim women are prevalent in western societies. These include stereotypes that see Muslim women as veiled, nameless, silent, and in need of rescue by the West. Another study was conducted by Horwedel (2006) to discuss the American media and the role it plays in portraying a distorted picture of Islam and Muslims and perpetuating misconceptions about them. The foregoing literature suggests that the hijab has been the major discriminating factor for Muslim women in the international context because to many western people, the veil is a potent symbol of oppression.

Perspectives on Identity and Stereotypes

In a survey conducted by Kassissieh (2005), findings indicated that identity formation is one of the major tasks of adolescence. Recently, the ways in which migration affects the process of identity formation has attracted substantial research (Kassissieh, 2005). The new era youth of Muslim-American origins are coming of age in the context of ongoing social and political tensions as the Muslim population grows in the US. According to Kassissieh (2005), the hijab is identified as a powerful visual symbol for identifying Muslims; it thus holds very different meanings for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Different trends have been recorded, where some women are fighting for their right to wear the hijab, whereas others are fighting for their right not to wear the hijab — all depending

on the political climate in the places they live. Kassissieh (2005) notes that Muslim-American women's decision making concerning the veil is a journey towards the experience of being a Muslim woman in America. The study goes on to examine the ways through which adolescent Muslim-American girls born of immigrant parents perceive the role of the hijab in their lives and how this also affects their attitudes towards a Muslim identity. The study notes that these adolescent Muslim-American women have developed their identity uniquely, dynamically, personally, and distinctly, based on both individual and community contexts.

Saudi women have developed effective methods for maintaining their strengths even as they regularly experience Islamophobia living in American society Kassissieh (2005). As Kassissieh notes in her study, the responses and life stories reflect a process of exclusive self-definition that is described by the current theories of identity development. Her study concludes by identifying the ways in which minority youth employ the use of peers, cultural symbols and individual creativity in growing and developing within a society characterised by discrimination and racism.

Similarly, a study by Dimandja (2017), indicated that Muslim international students studying in American universities are constantly experiencing personal growth. This is despite the fact that these students face serious challenges related to their race, religion and gender identity. The study goes to note that how they meet these challenges influences the academic and social experiences of these students and their overall integration on campus. Dimandja (2017) indicates that despite the uniqueness of their experiences, there has been little research focused on Muslim students. Her study focused on understanding the lived experiences of Muslim international students studying on American campuses. She explores the ethnic, religious and gender experiences of these students and also the influences impacting their academic and social integration. She examines the concept of Islamophobia to deconstruct how the Muslim students perceived and experienced their lives on university campuses (Dimandja, 2017),

Dimandja found that the students experienced a range of problems. The major ones were classroom challenges related to linguistic limitations and their evaluation by other students based on their academic performance or racial identity. As noted in the study, the expression of Muslim identity via wearing of the hijab often resulted in exclusion and a feeling of resistance. Micro-aggressions, partiality, or resentment (of others) if absent from campus for religious obligations

were everyday experiences for these students. Across the board, the students felt intimidated, discriminated against, marginalised and fearful.

On a similar note, Cole and Ahmadi, (2003) explored the perceptions and experiences of women who veiled on campuses in the Midwest of the US. That study indicated that, although there was an increase recorded in the number of international students, few studies had been carried out to examine the experiences of Muslim students — specifically Muslim women who wear the hijab — studying within university settings and how this may influence their development, both academically and socially. Therefore Cole and Ahmadi, (2003), carried out their study to provide an understanding of the college experience and perceptions of Muslim women wearing the hijab. In the process they sought to understand the reasons for wearing the veil, to document the women's views on the college environment and whether or not their experiences on campus influenced any decision to continue wearing the hijab.

The findings from that study suggest that the wearing of the hijab is influenced by parental expectations, peer pressure, and religious obligations. However, it is also noted that the wearing of the hijab acts as an outward sign of Muslim identity. In the Muslim context, the veil signifies modesty and pure interpersonal behaviour. Cole and Ahmadi (2003) note that misconceptions about Muslim women are prevalent in the US campus community. Most people greatly misunderstand the hijab and tend to perceive it as a symbol of women's inferiority to men. This is primarily due to a lack of information and understanding by the general population.

The gender gap index is a measure of disparity between men and women in four areas: health, economy, politics, and education. If a gender imbalance favours women, it is taken to not affect this index. In a study conducted by Omair (2017) the nature of stereotypes regarding Saudi women in contemporary Saudi Arabia was investigated. The study noted that the Global Gender Gap has recorded extremely high levels of inequality between women and men in Saudi Arabia. However there exists little knowledge about how women within Saudi Arabian society regard this perceived inequality. As indicated by Omair (2017) there are numerous factors in the history of Saudi Arabia which has led Saudi society towards the formation of restrictive gender stereotypes that are at times harmful to women but there is a shortage of research discussing gender stereotypes within Saudi Arabian society (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010). Consequently, there is limited data regarding the views held by men and women in Saudi Arabia about the relative social position of women in the country. The study goes on to indicate that there are numerous

stereotyped associations linked with Saudi women: for example, they are thought to be virtuous, submissive, isolated and less competent.

Also, Omair (2017) notes that there have been many studies by western scholars on the gender stereotypes held about Saudi women and effects of these on them. However, the findings of these studies tend to be very different from how Saudi society thinks of women. From a global perspective, the Saudi culture and religion may appear to privilege men over women. As the Islamic religion is considered the backbone of Saudi Arabia's culture, it is naturally seen to contribute to the stereotyped image that Saudi women may be facing. One debate behind this has been the issue of the veil, which Saudi women are required to adopt. However, as Omair (2017) notes, the other side of the coin is that religion in Saudi culture has always worked in the interests of women by ensuring that they are protected at all times against physical threats and attacks from men.

From a global perspective, Omair (2017) also refers to a common belief that all Saudi women in foreign countries, Australia included, must be 'refugees' fleeing oppression. Omair refutes this notion, pointing out that many Saudi women have gone to foreign countries for educational purposes and through scholarship programs provided by the Saudi government. Other concerns have been raised about the possibility that Saudi women could be terrorists, basing this belief on the fact that they are Muslim and Muslims have been significantly linked to terrorist attacks. Omair feels this argument is entirely false because many Muslims are not terrorists at all and it is unfair to accuse all people from a given society based on the wrongs done by a few people.

Stereotypes Associated with Saudi Women at University

According to Dey (2012), even though studies on the experiences of college students have progressed in the last few years — studies that address identity development in a range of different populations — a gap still exists in studies about Muslim-American college students and how their experiences in university influence their development as young adults. It was noted that the number of Muslim students studying abroad is increasing. However, there still seems to be a level of hostility, stereotyping, and prejudice against the Muslim population in America and around the world, which has created a negative atmosphere in higher education institutions and hinders the ability of universities to fully meet the needs of Muslim-American students. (Taylor et al., 2014).

Currently Saudi Arabian women are being recognised for their achievements in roles not usually associated with women. For instance, studies have acknowledged recent developments by women such as Dr. Thoraya Ahmed for being the very first woman to chair a mainstream United Nations organisation, and another respected woman is Hayat Sindi, who invented a multipurpose probe referred to as 'Mars'. Hanley (2001) acknowledges that there is a popular and widely embraced stereotype of Saudi women as being invisible members of their society, due to limitation of mobility or being unable to have dealings with men outside their family. The study reports that it is felt that the Saudi Arabian society attempts to impede the development of women in a society highly dominated by men. However Hanley (2001) pointed out that Dr. Thoraya Ahmed refutes this view of Saudi Arabian women, claiming that the personalities of Saudi women are as varied as their families. Hanley (2001) conducted a visit to two schools, where she explored the issue of whether Saudi women had the capacity to attain any goal they desired. Hanley (2001) visited Riyadh's Institute of Public Administration where Dr. Hanan is the general director of the women's department. The researchers observed that the women's department shares a single auditorium with the men at the institute. It is evident that the IPA is a nurturing ground for future managers and leaders. Throughout this study, the author is quite clear that indeed women play a significant role and do not fit the usual stereotypes associated with them.

Other similar studies have been carried out to deconstruct the stereotypes that Saudi women have been subjected to in western discourse. A survey by Alwazzan and Rees, (2016), indicated that research from within western contexts suggests that there are considerable inequalities amongst men and women medical educators in the workplace. Alwazzan and Rees (2016) performed individual interviews, however, where the participants expressed their positive views and experiences around career progression, leadership, and non-gendered workplace cultures. A study performed by Yakaboski, Perez-Velez and Almutairi (2018) explored the experiences and interactions of Saudi graduate students with American faculty, staff and students. Despite the positive experiences noted from the responses recorded, there were still some negative interactions, including incidents related to direct and indirect discrimination, the lack of cultural and religious understanding, and pervasive gender stereotypes for Muslim women who veil.

alongside men. The general community regards Saudi women as being very unusual, as the article indicates. In general, Abedalthagafi suggests that Saudi women are made to feel left out and are often subjected to gender-based stereotypes from staff and other students in international education environments. The author concludes that stereotyping occurs unconsciously, and that women from Saudi Arabia need to ready themselves to face it.

Reviewing the studies discussed, the available literature generally points to the experiences of Muslim women in international university settings but there is a literature gap in the area of documenting the experiences and stereotypes that Saudi women face in Australian universities. As mentioned earlier, Saudi as a nation is substantially identified by its adherence to the religion of Islam: its tenets form the country's supporting structure and its teachings inform all significant national decisions. The available literature suggests that the hijab has been the most overt driver of discrimination for Muslim women in the international context, because to many western people, the veil is a tangible symbol of oppression. There is a need for more literature and research to provide deeper insights around the use of the veil and its connection with Islamophobia. Ultimately, we need to eliminate the stereotypes associated with Saudi women studying in Australia.

Summary

Chapter Two examined the literature that provided relevant background to this research, especially as it relates to current Saudi culture the Islamic faith, female Muslim women and international students in Australia.

A phenomenological study follows the process of first addressing the current phenomenon, selecting participants willing to be part of the study, collecting data for the study through observation and interviews, and then analysing the collected data to identify the themes that bring meaning to the phenomenon (Donalek, 2004). This particular study takes the form of ‘descriptive phenomenology’, which Creswell defines as ‘the study of personal experience’, being an investigation that requires a ‘description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation’ (Creswell, 1998).

Study Setting and Sample Population

The study was carried out at Flinders University in South Australia. The samples were selected through purposeful sampling techniques. The target population for the study included seven postgraduate or undergraduate Saudi women students studying at Flinders University. These students were required to narrate in great detail their experiences at the university. The women were all followers of the Islamic faith. Six of the seven habitually wore the hijab.

Inclusion Criteria

The researcher interviewed seven participants who were selected based on the criteria sampling approach. The criteria that were used in the selection of the participants was as follows:

- The participant had to be a female Muslim student from Saudi Arabia.
- She must be taking an undergraduate or graduate program at Flinders University.
- She must be over 18 years old.
- She must have good comprehension of the English language and be willing to answer the posed questions in English.
- She should agree to participate in the study by sharing her experiences.

Recruitment of Participants

Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Appendix A). To recruit seven participants, a flyer was placed around the university asking for participants and explaining eligibility requirements to participate in the study (Appendix B). The flyers were posted after ethics approval had been obtained. On responding to the flyer, students were sent an information sheet about the research project and invited to an interview.

Seven female Islamic students responded to the flyers about the project and agreed to be participants in this study. The seven students have been given pseudo names and are described in the following table.

Table 1: Demographic Data on the Study Participants

Participant	Name	Level of study	Marital status	Time in Australia	Wearing the hijab
1	Rana	PhD	Married	9 months	No
2	Maha	Masters	Single	Since 2015	Yes
3	Hana	PhD	Married	Nearly 3 years	Yes
4	Yasmeen	Masters	Married	2 years	Yes
5	Mariam	Masters	Married	2 years	Yes
6	Ola	Undergraduate	Single	6 years	Yes
7	Renad	Undergraduate	Single	4 years	Yes

Each of the seven participants signed a consent form (Appendix C), completed the whole interview, and none asked to end the conversation, to terminate early or appeared to be disturbed by the discussion. Initially, all participants were hesitant to report unpleasant experiences and they all began the interview by stating that they were happy and that everything was fine. Gradually, as the questions became more specific in terms of asking about negative experiences, other perspectives started to emerge. Of the seven study participants, five of them only described negative experiences after I had asked more general questions about their lives.

In the course of the interview, it was emphasised that their identity would be confidential and their privacy would not be violated; nor would any of the information collected via audio tape be disseminated to the general public. This assurance was also outlined on the information sheet they all received (Appendix D). The interviewer needed to gain the women's confidence and support each woman as she discussed more personal and emotional experiences. Only one woman was on the verge of tears but several women showed strong feelings. The researcher responded empathetically, maintaining eye contact, and she provided opportunities for each

woman to pause or take a break if necessary. Every one of the seven women asked to continue because they wanted to tell their story and have it documented. All of the participants seemed appreciative of the chance to be interviewed and share their experiences of their lives in Australia — both positive and negative. Several wanted to be informed about the results of the study and several continued talking after the tape recorder was switched off.

Data Collection

While collecting data for this study, a semi-structured interview guide was used. As noted by Moustakas, (1994), it is imperative to begin phenomenological interviews with conversations that will help create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants to express their experiences completely. The researcher took at least ten minutes at the beginning of the interview to engage with the respondents to help gain their confidence. This was also important in determining whether some of the sensitive questions might not be appropriate for some respondents. The interviews were carried out privately in a quiet room at the Oasis Centre or a study room at the university to ensure the anonymity of the participants and so that they felt as comfortable as possible when responding to the questions.

After ensuring the participant felt comfortable, the following questions were introduced into the conversation and the interviewees were given time to think and respond. The questions that were asked were as follows:

- Tell me about your experience here as a student? What it is like to be a student here?
- Do you enjoy your classes? How accommodating are the facilities at Flinders University for you as a Muslim woman?
- Have you had any experiences that have influenced your ability to study or have impacted your social life?
- Tell me about the experiences that have influenced your study and social life?
- What do you think about your study experiences whilst at Flinders University?
- Is there anything that would make it different for you compared to other female students?
- How do you feel about wearing religious coverings in Australia?
- Did wearing the hijab affect your ability to study or feel welcome at university?
- Did you find it easy to make friends at university?

- How would you describe interactions with people you encounter in public spaces i.e. shops, banks, doctors?
- Have you ever had or felt any negative experiences as a Muslim woman?
- Have you had any good experiences?
- As a Muslim woman have you ever felt uncomfortable whilst on campus?
- Have you ever felt invisible?

The interviews took approximately one hour and were recorded and then transcribed for analysis using the verbatim format (Appendix D). The researcher also collected further data through observation and note-taking during the interview. Secondary data obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics was useful in forming a template for the study. Data from the university database helped in verifying the demographics of the study participants.

Ethical Considerations

To avoid subjective bias, the researcher was careful to adopt an objective approach to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. This precaution was important considering that the researcher herself is a Saudi woman and therefore could fit in to either role: the researcher or the researched.

Ethical approval was granted for this study by Flinders University Ethics Committee (Appendix A). Participants were well informed about the study prior to taking part by filling out the participant information sheet (Appendix C) and providing consent (Appendix B). The participants were assured that their anonymity would be protected by giving each of them a pseudonym. There was no conflict of interest between the researcher and the participants.

Data Analysis

As indicated by (Merriam, Kim, & practice, 2012), a phenomenological study provides three processes for analysing data: reduction, horizontal variation and imaginative variation. Merriam et al. (2012) further indicates that use of reduction in a phenomenological study mainly involves going back to the essence of the experience to create an understanding of the structure or meaning. Moustakas (1994) also defines this process by indicating that phenomenological reduction is a process where each recorded experience is taken to be its own identity, allowing for the description of the underlying meanings and essences textually. Horizontal variation assigns all the data with equal value during the primary analysis phase. Moustakas (1994) adds

that imaginative variation involves the analysing of data through different perspectives to create new structural meaning.

This study used three levels of phenomenological analysis. The researcher first transcribed the recorded interviews to identify important information and exclude any verbal pauses. Then the researcher created axial themes, which, as noted by Ryan and Bernard (2003), are the most crucial part of the qualitative analysis. The themes were developed by first identifying the main themes and subsequently narrowing them down to those regarded as the most important and those that were supported by relevant data.

In the reduction phase, the researcher reviewed the responses provided by each participant separately and determined how these responses were related to stereotypes that female Saudi international students face in the global setting, as reported in previous literature. This phase was instrumental in extracting the essential qualities of the experience and in including the researcher's observations. In the horizontal stage, the responses of the participants were categorised and coded to relate to each participant. In the imaginative phase, meanings were suggested through the use of imagination, literature references and interpretation.

In analysing the recording of each participant it became clear that the comments included many aspects. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and considered carefully in its own right. Gradually, after all the interviews had been examined, it was possible to extract subject matter or themes that were recurrent across the interviews. In some cases, everyone mentioned a specific theme and in other cases themes were discussed by some but not all of the women. However, the themes that were identified were mentioned by at least four of the seven women. In this way, the possible themes were narrowed down to those considered most important (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The themes will be presented and discussed in the following chapter.

Summary

Chapter Three discussed the methodology and methods used for this study. A qualitative design approach was adopted in the collection and the analysis of the data. This chapter described and discussed the recruitment of participants, the sample population, and ethical considerations.

4. Negotiating life in a Western society & culture	X	X	X	X			
5. Resulting emotions from living in Australia	X	X		X		X	X
6. Impact of public events (Positive experiences & Negative experiences)		X	X		X	X	X
7. Use of support services (At least one)	X						
8. Coping strategies	X			X		X	X
9. Perceived reasons for negative stereotyping	X	X		X	X	X	

Illustrations and Amplification of the Themes

Theme 1: The hijab and its significance.

All of the participants mentioned the hijab as a major factor in their social encounters. Three participants noted public reactions when wearing the hijab in different ways — either covering the whole face except the eyes (called the niqab) — or the more common way to wear it, which is just to cover the head, but leaving the face exposed. Participant 2 (Maha) told of her experiences when she first arrived in Australia and she was covering her face, specifically her mouth and nose. ‘I encountered some problem because I covered my face, especially when in a restaurant. They were just staring at me’. (Maha). She experienced more negative reactions compared to when she started covering her head only.

Participant 1 (Rana) gave several examples of her encounters.

‘I remember one of my friends got on the bus and people were making fun of her because she was wearing her hijab and because she was sitting in the area reserved for elderly people because she was getting off just two stops later. They were making fun of her saying “Are you old?” “Are you disabled?” stuff like that, so I think yeah, she felt very offended. She didn’t unfortunately do anything; she just felt that it wasn’t worth complaining about it’. (Rana)

‘If you’re just wearing normal jeans and a t-shirt you’ll probably fit in with everyone and nobody will actually give you even a second look but if you’re looking different in your hijab, I’d say people actually look at you differently as though you are invisible.

I'm a shy person so sometimes it's very difficult for me to make friends with new people especially when I feel I'm not welcome but how can I say that sometimes I feel different but not unwelcome you know what I mean'. (Ola)

Theme 7: Use of support services.

Most of the students who were interviewed did not use the campus support services, which were defined as, Flinders Counselling Services, Oasis, the female gym and the Saudi Club.

Interestingly, all participants mentioned that they were aware of these services on campus. One participant, (Rana) knew about all these services and used three of them.

'One useful thing from the university was the counselling services so I did go and book an appointment and have a chat with some people there. They actually give you some kind of motivation and they make you at ease feeling that things are going to get better and actually they did get better'. (Rana)

Theme 8: Coping strategies.

Much of international study can be an exciting experience but the inability to cope with the new environment can also be **very difficult** for some students. Common challenges that international participants said they faced included language barriers, problems with finances, a new learning environment as well as accommodation rejections. When the student's culture is completely different from that of the host environment, these problems can easily be magnified. Many participants adopted a positive attitude to overcome these challenges and their responses indicated various coping strategies for dealing with negative stereotypes as seen in the following comments.

'To keep myself really busy with uni from the time I enter until I leave — I come in the morning at ten and I leave by five or six so most of my time is occupied here at uni. I feel when I go home — I feel yeah, it was a positive day'. (Rana)

'It's very comfortable for me, yeah, it's very comfortable [the hijab]. Yeah, there are some people who don't accept that, but it doesn't matter. This is my religion and they have to accept it'. (Yasmeen)

the women reported gaining strength from their religion ('This is my religion and they have to accept it'). ('There are lots of faculties, just as if there was a big mosque; so when I want to pray I can find a very comfortable place and quiet.')

The strong support that all the women found in their religious beliefs was an obvious source of strength and frequently emerged as a central pillar to get them through their studies, as also noted by Nasir and Al-Amin (2006). Concentrating on the central role that religion plays in students' identities, in their study, Nasir and Al-Amin called for college administrators to acquire sensitivity to this important aspect of Muslim students' identities and to create more welcoming learning environments for them (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006).

This is perhaps one of the major implications of the findings from this study. The academic aspiration of the women students was the primary driving force in their lives and they faced adversity with a quiet determination to stay focused on completing their studies and not to be overcome with emotions that might side-track them from achieving academic success. Their identity as devout Muslim women gave them an added strength and purpose to overcome any challenges that might affect them or prevent them from achieving their goals. Kassissieh (2005) noted that Saudi women had developed effective methods for maintaining their strengths, even as they might more than likely experience Islamophobia in American society. The respondents' life stories in her study reflected a process of exclusive self-definition that is described by the current theories of identity development. She describes the way friends, cultural symbols and individual creativity contribute to growing and developing amidst discrimination and racism from society. Similarly, a study by (Dimandja, 2017) suggested that Muslim international students studying in American universities are constantly experiencing growth, despite the fact that they faced several serious challenges related to their race, religion and gender identity. The study recognised the religious and gendered prejudice these students faced as a significant influence that impacted on their academic and social integration.

Summary

This study paid special attention to the stereotypes faced by Saudi women students at Flinders University; how these students perceived these stereotypes, as well as the strategies that they employed to survive and thrive in an Australian university. It has highlighted the stereotypes associated with Islamic culture, and the norm of marginalising Saudi women by virtue of their religion and culture, especially in the wearing of a hijab. By exploring social issues faced by

Saudi women students studying in Flinders University, this study aimed at providing insight into the unique social experiences of a group of Saudi women students. These experiences reflected considerable discrimination and prejudice incurred by the visibility of women wearing cultural and religious dress.

The theoretical lens for understanding and interpreting the responses and comments of the participants in this study were helpful in several ways. Firstly, the life stage of the women participants was important since they were all in the process of gaining the knowledge that would shape their future careers through a university education. They faced experiences linked to stereotyping, discrimination and Islamophobia, but due to their steady focus on their studies at this stage of life they were able to overcome their feelings of hurt and humiliation. Religion and culture, especially as it pertains to Saudi Arabia, were central in providing the strength and strategies that were used to deal with their negative social experiences. This was especially reinforced by each woman's strong identity as a Muslim woman.

By understanding the experiences of these Saudi women students, host institutions can make informed decisions on where to make improvements to provide a better campus experience for international students. These improvements need to be not only to improve infrastructure but also to facilitate intercultural acceptance, thereby creating a positive climate for the sharing of cultural knowledge. As Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti (2013) have argued, a positive climate on campus is vital for all marginalised groups because as much as students' experiences have to do with their academic engagement, other external factors, such as having supportive staff, were crucial in each student's perception of the university experience (Housee, 2011).

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations to counter the harmful effects of stereotyped views on Muslim women studying at Flinders University.

- The university might consider offering information and awareness sessions for their general student population to educate them towards treating women wearing the hijab respectfully. This could dilute any possibility that merely by wearing a hijab, Saudi women might be tagged as 'terrorists' by others in the academic community.

- Flinders University could create ‘culturally safe zones’ where Saudi women students can feel protected from discrimination while still experiencing the overall campus culture.
- Special orientation workshops could be offered early in the first semester of study to help Saudi women students adjust to their new learning environment.
- Saudi women students themselves (those more advanced in their courses and established in Australia) could assist with these workshops.
- In preparing Saudi women to attend university in Australia, more attention could be paid to the potential negative experiences they might have to face during their time in this country.
- The Saudi Club could be encouraged to disseminate information about the support services at the university and how helpful they can be when students are in need of support.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted on one campus at one university in Australia and included a small number of women students who were from Saudi Arabia. Although the responses of the participants were extremely interesting and valid in their own right, it is not possible to generalise from this small group of women to a broader population. The study did allow for an in-depth and personal exchange between the researcher and each participant, which the researcher was able to report and share. This exploratory study contributed to an understanding of some Muslim women’s experiences while studying in Australia, but the findings relate only to this population and not to the whole population of Muslim women students in Australia.

Future Research

This preliminary study could be used as a basis for further inquiry into stereotyping of Muslims who are living and studying in Australia. Since the participant population in this study was small, expanding the scope of the research would provide an opportunity to see if the results would be similar when conducted with a greater number of participants. Male students could also be included in continuing research so that their experiences could be compared to the women who were interviewed, to see if the less visible identification of males (as Muslims) by their dress would make a difference to how they were treated. The strategies that males used to deal with

and respond to stereotypes directed at them could also be compared to those of women. Future research could focus on investigating the long-term effects of experiencing stereotyped assumptions and could evaluate the success of coping strategies over the longer term.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee

APPROVAL NOTICE

No.:	Project	8202	
Title:	Project	Saudi women's understanding of stereotypes they experience at Flinders University	
	Principal Researcher:	Mrs Nouf Barasayn	
	Email:	bara0056@flinders.edu.au	
Date:	Approval	15 March 2019	Ethics Approval Expiry Date: 31 July 2020

The above proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

1. Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.
- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.
- the SBREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 'INSERT PROJECT No. here following approval'). For more information

Interview Questions

- Tell me about your experience here as a student? Or what it is like to be a student here?
- Do you enjoy your classes?
- How accommodating are the facilities at Flinders University for you as a Muslim woman?
- Have you had any experiences that have influenced your ability to study or have impacted your social life?

Tell me about those

Experiences that have influenced your study and social life?

- What do you think about your study experiences whilst at Flinders University?
- Is there anything that would make it different for you compared to other female students?
- How do you feel about wearing religious coverings in Australia?
- Did wearing the hijab affect your ability to study or feel welcome at university?
- Did you find it easy to make friends at university?
- How would you describe interactions with people you encounter in public spaces i.e. shops, banks, doctors?

Have you ever had or felt any negative experiences as a Muslim woman?

Have you had good experiences?

As a Muslim women have you ever felt uncomfortable whilst on campus?

Have you ever felt invisible?

I, the researcher certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name.....

Researcher's signature.....**Date**.....

NB: Two signed copies should be obtained.

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number **INSERT PROJECT No. here following approval**). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project please contact the Executive Officer on (08) 8201 3116 or human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au*

How do I agree to participate?

Participation is voluntary. You may answer ‘no comment’ or refuse to answer any questions, and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate please read and sign the form and send it back to me at bara0056@flinders.edu.au or bring it with you to the interview.

Recognition of contribution time costs

Monetary compensation of any sort (direct or indirect) is not going to be provided in exchange of your participation or time.

How will I receive feedback?

On project completion, the final report of the project will be given to all participants via email.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: INSERT PROJECT No. here following approval). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project only, the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on (08) 8201 3116, by fax on (08) 8201 2035, or by email to human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au