SAUDI STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

Suliman Al Musaiteer

August, 2015
SAUDI STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Suliman Al Musaiteer

Thesis

Approved:          Accepted:

Advisor
Dr. Huey-li Li

Interim Department Chair
Dr. Peg L. McCann

Committee Member/Methodologist
Dr. Kathleen D. Clark

Interim Dean of the College
Dr. Susan G. Clark

Committee Member
Dr. Wondimu Ahmed

Interim Dean of the Graduate School
Dr. Chand Midha

Date
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to inquire into Saudi students’ experience of intercultural communication in the U.S. Specifically, the study focused on factors that encourage and discourage Saudi students’ communication with American people. The researcher utilized the semi-structured interview to collect the data from three Saudi male students. The theoretical framework employed in this study was the Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory introduced by William B. Gudykunst. The study indicated that Saudi students were more engaged in interacting with American people when they benefited from such interaction. The study also showed that Saudi students were more motivated to communicate with American people who respected their culture and religion. At the same time, Saudi students were disinclined to engage in inter-cultural communication when they felt that their identity was threatened. Moreover, Saudi students felt discouraged when their communication with Americans distracted them from their priorities and goals. In addition, the study revealed that the negative stereotypes of both Saudi and American people blocked the interaction between them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could have never completed this academic journey on my own without the support of the upcoming individuals; I also owe nearly everyone in my life a debt of gratitude for the patience they showed while learning and writing up my thesis.

Foremost, I thank my God, for without Him absolutely none of this would have been possible. In my trials and tribulations, long nights, and doubtfulness, He assured me and reminded me that I can do all things with His support. I am forever grateful for your grace and mercy.

I also thank my parents who raised me and encourage me to be ambitious and follow my goals and passions, even if they were away from me, their constant encouraging words are not forgotten.

Special recognition and sincere appreciation is given to my lovely wife for her patience and endurance to my professional and academic aspirations whole-heartedly.

To my thesis advisor, Professor Huey-Li Li, I express my extreme gratitude for your guidance, advice, time, and your dedication. I thank you deeply for your patience with me during this process. You motivated me to be the best that I could be. You never settled for anything less, and in the process you helped me grow.

I also thank my previous thesis advisor, Doctor Suzanne Mac Donald, to accept to be my thesis advisor in the first place.

Thank you, to my thesis committee, Professor Kathleen D. Clark and Professor Wondimu Ahmed. I would like to extend my sincerest thanks and appreciation for
agreeing to serve on my thesis committee. Thank you for your time, dedication, and valuable input; you are greatly valued and appreciated. I also specially thank Professor Kathleen D. Clark for guiding me through the data analysis process and listening actively to me and trying to facilitate me to clarify my thoughts while conducting the study.

I am also in debt forever to my government for granting me a full tuition scholarship. Without it, I will not be able to obtain my degree.

Participants of this study, I thank you for sharing your wonderful stories. Without you, this study would not have been impossible-- thank you for your time and trust!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................................... 4
- Purpose of Study .......................................................................................................................... 7
- Research Questions and Design .................................................................................................. 7
- Significance of the Study ............................................................................................................. 9

### II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- International Education and Globalization .............................................................................. 11
- Saudi Students in the U.S. .......................................................................................................... 18
- Intercultural Communication ..................................................................................................... 30
- Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory .................................................................................. 38
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 42

### III. METHODOLOGY

- Research Design ....................................................................................................................... 44
- Selection of Participants .............................................................................................................. 45
- Data Collection ......................................................................................................................... 46
- The Interview Protocol ............................................................................................................. 47
Interview Procedures ........................................................................................................ 49

Data Analysis .................................................................................................................... 50

IV. FINDINGS .................................................................................................................. 53

Theme 1- Detecting Mutual Interests .............................................................................. 54

Theme 2- Identifying What Attracts Americans to Communicate ............................... 56

Theme 3- What Encourage Saudi Students to Communicate with Americans ......... 62

Theme 4- What Discourages Saudi Students from Communicating with Americans .................................................................................................................. 69

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 74

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .......................................................................... 76

Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 76

Limitations and Future Research .................................................................................... 81

Recommendations ............................................................................................................. 82

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................. 85

APPENDICES .................................................................................................................. 98

APPENDIX A. NOTICE OF APPROVAL .................................................................. 99

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT ..................................................................... 100

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .................................................................... 102
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United States has attracted the majority of international students since World War II. In 2001, the number of students holding F-1 Visas was 110,000. That number increased to 524,000 students in 2012 (Ruiz, 2014). According to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, there were 2,145,375 international students in July 2014 (Student Exchange Visitor Program, 2014). The majority of international students came from China (25%), India (15%), South Korea (10%) and Saudi Arabia (5%) (Ruiz, 2014). According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA), the international students and their families supported and created 340 thousands jobs; additionally, they contributed around 26.8 billion dollars to the American economy (NAFSA, 2014).

In the U.S., higher education institutions are committed to diversifying their student population. The domestic students in these institutions have the opportunity to interact with international students from all over the world. Intercultural communication enables domestic students to raise cross-cultural awareness and develop multicultural competence, which will help them with career development in the global age (Rai, 2002). The diversification of the student population will enable domestic students to be world citizens by understanding international trends and issues beyond their country and local community (Yıldırım, 2014).
Moreover, many talented international students do not have adequate access to well-equipped labs with advanced technology and learning resources in their home countries. Inviting and accepting these students is beneficial for the U.S. and the rest of the world because they have the opportunity to make greater contribution toward the advancement of science and technology. In addition, the international students who study in the U.S. usually develop a deeper understanding of American culture and values (Peacock, 2009). They are able to bridge cultural gaps that may exist between their home countries and the U.S. (Jardine, 1990).

There are several reasons that attract international students to enroll in American higher education institutions. Altbach, Kelly and Lulat (1985) divided the reasons into push—those from the students’ country—and pull factors—those from the host country. The push factors are: 1) a scholarship to study abroad, 2) the weakness of the education, 3) discrimination, 4) the paucity of research resources and facilities, and 5) lack of opportunity to study in a local university. The pull factors are: 1) an abundance of scholarships for international students, 2) independence, 3) better quality of education, and 4) an increased number of educational and research resources.

Kung (2007) interviewed 18 international students about the benefits and the advantages of studying in the U.S. The participants mentioned that studying abroad helped them to 1) become more confident in socializing with people from different cultures, 2) learn more about American culture, 3) be able to speak English fluently, 4) have American and international friends, 5) have a better job, 6) develop themselves personally and professionally, and 7) gain intercultural competence.
The Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been aware of the advancements of U.S higher education (Al-Khedaire, 1978). Therefore, the Saudi government has supported thousands of students to study in the U.S. The first Saudi students came to the U.S. in the 1950s. ARAMCO (Arabian-American Oil) sent those students to obtain engineering and medical degrees (Smith, 2003). Since then, the Saudi government has continued to send students to the U.S. until they peaked at 30,000 students in the 1990s. Unfortunately, the number of Saudi students drastically decreased to 5,800 students after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The number declined further to 3,500 students (Smith, 2003) after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. This decline negatively impacted both countries. The Saudi government missed out on the advanced STEM education of the U.S. that Saudi Arabia needed to improve their infrastructure. The American government lost a large portion of the international students (Smith, 2003). In 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and President George Bush met to reinforce the Saudi-U.S. relations (Taylor & Albasri, 2014) and issued the following joint statement:

Finally, the United States and Saudi Arabia agree that our future relations must rest on a foundation of broad cooperation. We must work to expand dialogue, understanding, and interactions between our citizens. This will include programs designed to (1) increase the number of young Saudi students to travel and study in the United States; (2) increase our military exchange programs so that more Saudi officers visit the United States for military education and training; and (3) increase the number of Americans traveling to work and study in the Kingdom. The United States recognizes we must exert great efforts to overcome obstacles facing Saudi businessmen and students who wish to enter the United States and we pledge to our Saudi friends that we will take on this effort. (U.S. Department of State, 2005)

In fall 2005, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (hereinafter KASP) was established to support Saudi students’ pursuing advanced education aboard and the number of Saudi students in the U.S. increased rapidly. According to the Institute of
International Education (2014), the number of Saudi students was 3,448 students in 2005, which doubled the next year reaching 7,886 students. Now there are 111,000 students contributing more than 22.7 billion dollars to the U.S. economy (Naffee, 2014).

According to the Ministry of Higher Education, the goals of KASP are: “1) to build up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment, 2) to raise and develop the level of professionalism among Saudis, 3) to exchange scientific, educational and cultural experience with countries worldwide” (n.d.), and “4) mutual understanding” (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission to the U.S, 2012, p 1).

Statement of the Problem

One of the goals of King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) is to facilitate the Saudi students’ developing intercultural competence and mutual understanding between Saudi students and the host nations (Saudi Arabia Cultural Commission, 2012). Saudi students reported that learning English, understanding American people and culture, and having American friends encouraged them to study in the U.S. (Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Razek, 2012; Shaw, 2010). Therefore, communication with domestic students is crucial to fulfill the purposes of the scholarship and students. Salter and Teger (1975) stated, “Only the type of contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in change in attitude” (p. 213). Alreshoud and Koeske (1997) found that Arab students’ interaction with American people generated a mutual positive attitude. Moreover, the communication between American students and international students enhanced their understanding of different cultures (Hall, 2013). Therefore, the intercultural communication between Saudi students and American people is crucial for both countries because their understanding of each other will increase. The more they
communicate with each other, the more they understand each other, which will reduce the conflicts. There were other benefits of communication with local people as well. It helped international students to adjust to the new culture and avoid loneliness (Hofer, 2009; Jammaz, 1972; Shaw, 2010; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Zimmermann, 1995).

Furthermore, Kim (1994) confirmed, “Adaptation occurs through the communication interface between the stranger and the host milieu—just as the natives acquire their capacity to function in their society through communicative interactions throughout their lives” (p. 394). Thus, the communication with the people from the host nation assists the international students to adapt to the culture in their host nations. In addition, the satisfaction of the international students increased when their communication with Americans increased (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Zimmermann, 1995). Last but not least, the sense of belonging among international students was positively correlated with their interactions with domestic students (Glass and Westmont, 2014; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). As the sense of belonging increased, the international students’ academic achievement increased, while the perceived discrimination decreased (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Although the benefits of communication between international and domestic students are tremendous, researchers have noted that the interaction between American students and international students, especially students from the Middle East has been very limited (Trice, 2004). Several qualitative studies indicated that Saudi students rarely talked with American students (Al Murshidi, 2014; Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997; Hall, 2013; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Razek, 2012; Shaw, 2010).
The majority of the articles about Saudi students were conducted between the years 1970 and 2000 (Akhtarkhavari, 1994; Alfauzan, 1992; Al-Ghamdi, 1985; Al-Harthi, 1987; Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Khedaire, 1978; Al-nusair, 2000; Al-Shedokhi, 1986; Al-Shehry, 1989; El-Banyan, 1974; Jammaz, 1972; Mustafa, 1985; Oweidat, 1981; Rasheed, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996). Many changes have occurred since these studies were published. Among these changes, as a result of the 9/11 tragedy, the inter-cultural communication between Saudi and American students was especially affected. Fifteen out of nineteen of the hijackers responsible for the 9/11 tragedy were Saudis.

Consequently, the way that Americans perceive and treat Saudi students was dramatically different than before 9/11. Some Saudi students experienced discrimination, alienation, and fear (Ghaffari, 2009). Some Saudi students did not complete their studies and left the country immediately after the tragedy, and others changed how they looked, such as women removing their head scarves and men shaving their beards (McMurtrie et al., 2001).

Recent studies have focused on success strategies and Saudi students’ perceptions about Saudi education and American education (Heyn, 2013; Shaw, 2010), homestay issues (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009), the Saudi students’ experiences in a mixed gender education (Alhazmi, 2010), oral communication such as presentation and speaking (Al Murshidi, 2013). Hofer’s study (2009) employed a mixed method to explore the adjustment problems. The participants expressed their desire to have American friends. Hall’s article examined academic difficulties and how studying in America changed the students’ values (2013). Lastly, Razek (2012) reported that the reasons that Saudi students rarely contacted with American people were food restrictions, religious, gender,
and alienation. None of these articles examined the interpersonal communication between American people and Saudi students in-depth. Little attention was paid to the benefits of the communication with American students. Therefore, research is needed to explore the reasons that prevent or encourage the intercultural communication between Saudi students and American people.

**Purpose of Study**

In recognition of the dearth of literature regarding the lack of communications between Saudi and American students, this study investigates the Saudi students’ perceptions of their intercultural communication with American students. It seeks to identify the factors that encourage the Saudi students to communicate with American people and the impediments to Saudi students’ engagement in intercultural communication. In addition, this study aims to inquire into the Saudi students’ recommendations on how the university and classroom should foster inter-cultural interactions.

**Research Questions and Design**

One main research question was proposed, and three sub-questions were derived from the main question:

Research question (RQ): What are the Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication in the U.S.?

Sub-Questions:

1. What are the Saudi students’ perceptions of intercultural communication?
2. What are the factors that encourage Saudi students to initiate a conversation with American people?
3. What are the barriers that discourage Saudi students to initiate a conversation with American people?

To gain a better understanding of Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication, I conducted a qualitative research study to inquire into the Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication. Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with three Saudi students who have been studying in the American universities for at least two years. Two of the participants are graduate students; one is majoring in education, and the other is majoring in science. The third participant is an undergraduate student whose major is engineering. The researchers were purposefully selected in order to explore different perspectives on the issue (Creswell, 2006).

The theoretical framework employed in this study was the Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory. The theory mainly focused on how the strangers reacted when they communicated with host national people. The situation was unfamiliar to the strangers; therefore, they would be anxious and uncertain of what they supposed to do. However, if their uncertainty and anxiety level within the maximum and minimum threshold, the strangers would communicate effectively (Gudykunst, 2005).

I provided the participant with detailed information about the following: the purposes and methods of the study, the risks and benefits of the study, his/her right to stop at any time, and the confidentiality of his/her information. I requested the participants' permission to record the interview on my iPad, and I secured the recording with a password to keep the records confidential (Groenewald, 2004). Then, I started my interview by asking the subjects about demographic information, marital status, and level of education. Then, I asked them several open-ended questions that I structured
beforehand (see appendix B), and I added more questions if necessary.

The interview questions were open-ended to let the participant speak freely about their experience. The interview allowed access to an in-depth understanding of the participant’s experiences of inter-cultural communication. The face-to-face conversation assisted in observing the feelings and expressions of the participant. I was able to gather more data about the issue and to ask for clarification (Call, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Groenewald, 2004).

The interviews were held at the university library. I reserved a study room on the second floor because it is more quiet and private. I used a semi-structured interview to collect my data from the participants. Then I applied a thematic analysis to analyze the data. The thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After I transcribed the data, I followed the following six steps to analyze the data: 1) familiarizing myself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Significance of the Study

The generalizability of the study is very limited. The participants do not represent all Saudi students in the U.S. Above all, the study only focused on the Saudi male students; therefore, the female students were not represented in the study. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the study shed light on the Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication in the U.S. Attending to the participants’ experiences, the faculty in the U.S. can gain a better understanding of their Saudi students and develop culturally responsive teaching. More specifically, the faculty’s gaining a better
understanding of the Saudi students’ experience could enable them to attend to the Saudi students’ needs in order to engage both Saudi and American students in intercultural communication. The study could also provide advisors insight about the Saudi students’ difficulties and expectations, so that they can help these students overcome their hurdles and meet their expectations. In particular, the study could help the international offices in the higher education institutions learn about the Saudi students’ desires and difficulties in order to design and establish social activities that are appealing and beneficial for these students. There are approximately 111,000 Saudi students in American universities. King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) was extended until 2020 (Saudi Arabia Cultural Commission, n.d.). Therefore, working on making the Saudi students’ experience fruitful should be a goal for the American institutions because of the mutual benefits such as Saudi students being a great resource for American institutions economically and culturally.

In addition, it is beneficial for the Saudi Arabia Cultural Commission (SACM) and Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia to attend to Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication so they will be able to design an effective preparatory orientation to prepare the prospective Saudi students to make needed cultural adjustments in the U.S.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter is divided into four sections: international education and globalization in higher education, Saudi students’ experiences in the U.S., the international students’ experiences in intercultural communication, and an overview of the Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory. In the first section, I will provide an overview of the history of international education, the rationales of internationalization of higher education, and the issues of international educations. In the second section, I will review relevant research literature concerning the Saudi students’ learning experiences in the U.S. In the third section, I will review research literature concerning the international students’ perceptions of communicating with domestic people. Specifically, I will concentrate on the benefits and obstacles of intercultural communication. Finally, I explain the key concepts of the Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory that will guide my inquiry into Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication.

International Education and Globalization

Globalization is the economic, political, social, scientific, and technological factors that force higher education to be more integrated internationally (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). The internationalizing of the educational institutions has been given different terms such as international education,
global education, cross-cultural education, multicultural education, and comparative education (Knight & de Wit, 1995). The policies, procedures, and programs that the governments, academic institutions, and even the individuals establish to cope with globalization are called internationalization (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Globalization facilitates the communication between the governments, organizations, and institutions all over the world and the exchange of the research, technology, and labor. The English language has emerged as a lingua franca in this global age. Consequently, it is necessary for students in non-English speaking countries to master the English language. In addition, there is a need for the laborers who have the knowledge and skills to work and communicate effectively in the globalized world (Altbach & Knight, 2007). To Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009), “globalization and its effects are beyond the control of any one actor or set of actors” (p. 23). However, the internationalization of higher education can be controlled to handle and reap the benefits of globalization. The societies and institutions can establish strategies and policies to prepare their students and citizens to cope with the globalization’s effects and to take advantage of its benefits. Accordingly, many higher institutions recruit international students and faculties, send their students to study abroad, exchange students with foreign institutions, open branches overseas, and provide international and comparative perspectives through changing curriculum and engaging the international students in their classroom (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

Knight and de Wit (1995) divided the history of internationalization into three eras: the Middle Ages and Renaissance era, the 18th century and World War II era, and the World War II to the present day era. In the Middle Ages in Europe, the Latin
language was the lingua franca, and students called pilgrims were traveling from place to place to gain new knowledge and new experiences and obtain manuscripts and books. When they returned to their home, the pilgrims not only acquired new knowledge but also gained a better understanding of the habits and customs in the countries they visited.

Three features emerged in the second era. First, the system of higher education had been exported from the colonial courtiers to their colonies. The system of higher educations had been exported from the British Empire to North American, Indian, African, and Caribbean countries. Second, there was an exchange of philosophies and information through conferences, seminars, and regional publications. Third, the students and scholars’ mobility between institutions internationally had been noticed. There were several wealthy students and qualified students who went to the top universities in the world (Knight & de Wit, 1995).

In the present era, the cooperation between the institutions was obvious. The Institution of International Education (IIE) and British Council were established in 1919 and 1934 respectively to increase cooperation. After World War II, the United States and Soviet Union were the dominant countries. For this reason, they made efforts to endorse international education in order to gain better understanding of the World and maintain their influence on the other countries. However, after the Soviet Union collapsed, the incentives of internationalization of higher education were mainly economic in nature, such as promoting international cooperation and exchange among the higher institutions (Knight & de Wit, 1995).

The rationales behind the internationalization of higher education vary from political rationales to economic rationales and from social rationales to academic
rationales. First, there are political rationales. Several countries like the U.S. and the United Kingdom offer scholarship to the prospective leaders in other countries. When these students become leaders in their countries, they are expected to be more sympathetic toward the politics system and culture in the host countries. It is “a form of diplomatic investment in political relations” (de Wit, 2002, p. 85). National security is also an important reason of internationalization of higher education. The students or the scholars who spent parts of their lives studying in the host countries would develop a favorable attitude toward the host countries. They would not have a hostile feeling about the host nation and people (de Wit, 2002; Lambert, 1993). The mutual understanding between the host nations and the foreign students would increase, as well as their flexibility and tolerance (Hilal & Denman, 2013). There are several developing countries, such as Saudi Arabia, that are looking for technical assistance. For this reason, they recruit experts to help them build higher institutions and establish training programs (de Wit, 2002). They even provide scholarships for thousands of students to acquire the technological knowledge that their countries need, as is the case in Saudi Arabia (SACM, 2012).

Second, there are economic rationales. The developed countries compete with each other economically. Each country races to attract as many international students as they can because these students will help the host country in research and economic development. In addition, some of these students might become decision makers for private or public sectors in their countries. Because of their appreciation of the education they received in the host countries, they would be inclined to consider these countries for the future investment (de Wit, 2002). Thus, recruiting the international students will
expand the commercial opportunities, networks and relationships (Sison & Brennan, 2012). Due to the globalization, the world has now become one village because of the advancement in the transportation and technology that facilitate the mobility and communication, so the major companies would like to expand their profits by opening branches oversea. The multinational companies need employees who have global and intercultural competence (de Wit, 2002). There is a need for specialists in each particular international domain, including international relations, international economics, and world trade. Furthermore, international training for business executives is imperative. The ability to communicate and understand intercultural relations is an asset in this era (Lambert, 1993). In addition, some of the trained international students might become future workers in the host country (Sison & Brennan, 2012).

While there has been a high demand for higher education, many countries do not have adequate facilities for higher education. This is why these nations let their students study abroad. Because of limited resources for their research (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2002), the faculty in these countries also goes abroad to conduct their research. Moreover, the internationalization of higher education has financial profits for the institutions through the tuitions. The institutions deliberately charge international students higher tuition and additional fees. In Australia, “the export of knowledge and recruitment of international students have become the number-one export product” (de Wit, 2002, p. 92).

Third, there is cultural and social rationale. The universities are considered cultural transmitters. In the U.S., the international students will learn more about American culture and values, which will help them to erase their prejudices and
stereotypes about American people and culture, and develop a favorable attitude (de Wit, 2002). Through the diversification of higher education, American students will learn to be global citizens. The global citizen is the person who knows about his/her traditions, thinks and acts globally, and empathizes with people and culture different from his/her own (Haigh, 2014). The American universities do not want their students to be parochial and consider their country to be a center of the world; for this reason, these universities encourage their students to study abroad and recruit international students to study on their campuses (de Wit, 2002; Lambert, 1993).

Fourth, there are academic rationales. International students will add an international dimension to research and teaching. They will help the “academic community” to be open-minded and critical thinkers because the world is not the center of the researchers’ society. The issues are complex, and the exchange of ideas will reveal more ways to see the issues under study from different angles. The internationalization of higher education will help expand the academia horizontally and vertically because there will be many students and scholars from all over the world. Each one has a different culture and different ways of seeing things. In addition, the host national students and scholars will deepen their understanding of their own culture because they need to explain their culture to their international peers (de Wit, 2002). Furthermore, the internationalization will encourage the institutions to cooperate because the internationalization of higher education requires vast resources that are difficult for one institution to have.

Therefore, one can notice the development in the electronic databases and communications that facilitate the exchange of research (de Wit, 2002). The competition
between institutions to recruit international students and faculty and to improve their services and instructional practices to be more appealing for international students is imperative and beneficial because they will increase the quality of the education and research. It also helps to establish international academic standards, so that the universities compete to achieve a higher ranking (de Wit, 2002).

The internationalization of higher education has a huge impact on international students as well. In a study conducted in the UK (Gill, 2007), the participants revealed that they developed intercultural competence through academic study and exposure to different cultural and social perspectives. Their way of thinking and seeing other values and norms was changed after they came to the UK. In addition, their self-identity changed through interacting with British students. More specifically; they have become more assertive because they did the household chores, planned for trips, and found a job in the campus to provide for themselves financially (Gill, 2007). In another study conducted in the U.S. (Wan, 1996), two international students from China indicate that studying in the U.S. provided them with new perspectives to see things. The way that Americans saw and did things were different from the Chinese people, so they learned new things every day. They also indicated that obtaining the degree from the U.S. would enable them to find more prestigious jobs. The two participants revealed that the main goal of coming to the U.S. was to develop academically and professionally (Wan, 1996). Kung (2007) interviewed 18 international students about their studying experience in the U.S. The participants declared several benefits that they gained from coming to the U.S. They stated that their self-confidence increased because they studied with American students who were assertive and not shy, so the participants learned to speak up and say
what they thought. They learned to be more autonomous in their thinking and behavior. The participants also showed that they were more open-minded and tried to be patient and understand others’ perspectives.

As discussed above, the internationalized of higher education has remarkable impacts on the host country politically, economically, socially, culturally, and academically. However, the benefits of internationalization of higher education will not be reaped if the international students are not engaging with the host country’s community. One way of engaging these foreign students with the community is through communication with local people. However, the existing research literature has not fully inquired into the international students’ experiences of intercultural communication. As a result, it is not clear how higher education institutions could facilitate international students’ engagement in intercultural communication.

Saudi Students in the U.S.

The earliest study about the adjustment problems that Saudi student encountered was Jammaz’s study. It was conducted in 1972. The researcher distributed a questionnaire to 400 students, and only 345 students replied. He found that older students were much more adjusted than younger students while the married students were less adjusted than unmarried students. Additionally, students specializing in science and engineering were more adjusted than those who were majoring in humanities and social studies. There was a low correlation between the length of time in the U.S. and the Saudi students’ level of adjustment. He also reported that many students stated that they had difficulty with English. Specifically, 24 percent of the participants admitted having difficulty in talking in seminars or discussion; 37 percent of the participants had difficulty
in writing essays; 27 percent of the participants had difficulty in comprehending references, textbooks, journals; and over 33 percent of the participants mentioned that taking and organizing notes was difficult. Moreover, Jammaz (1972) found a positive correlation between Saudi students' socialization with Americans and the degree of adjustment. The more Saudi student interacted and communicated with Americans, the more they were adjusted. In addition, he reported that the academic achievement had a positive association with the level of adjustment among the Saudi students.

Al-Khedaire’s study (1978) examined the Saudi students’ cultural perceptions and attitude toward American culture and people. He divided his participants into three groups: group A (N = 82) was for the students who newly arrived to the U.S., group B (N = 84) consisted of the students who had been in the U.S. for three years, and group C (N = 92) was composed of the students who had been in the U.S. for five years or more. The study indicated that group A had difficulties understanding the American culture and people considerably more than group B and group C. However, there was no significant difference among the three groups in their attitude toward the American culture. In addition, the study revealed that students specializing in science possessed richer cultural perceptions than students majoring in social sciences and humanities, and the graduates were more understanding of the culture than the undergraduates. Furthermore, the students studying in a small college or university had more positive attitudes toward the U.S. than the students studying in a big college or university. Lastly, the study showed that there were no significant differences between married and unmarried students and students of different socioeconomic status in their cultural perceptions and attitudes toward American culture and people (Al-Khedaire, 1978).
There were four studies (Al-Shedokhi, 1986; Al-Shehry, 1989; Hofer, 2009; Shabeeb, 1996) that employed Michigan International Student Problem Inventory (MISPI), which was developed by John Porter in 1962 and revised in 1972, and aimed to identify international students’ problems. Al-Shedokhi’s study surveyed 379 male and 51 female Saudi students attending colleges and universities in the U.S. He found that financial aid and then academic records, living-dining and admission selection were the most problems that Saudi Students encountered, and the problems they least encountered were student activities, health services, and interactions with the opposite sex. The study also found that students at doctorate level had fewer problems than students at master level, and student at master level had fewer problems than undergraduate students. Furthermore, a student who attended a pre-departure orientation program had fewer problems than a student who did not attend a pre-departure orientation program. The study revealed that students majoring in humanities were more concerned with their English language proficiency that students majoring in science (Al-Shedokhi, 1986).

Al-Shehry’s work (1989) was similar to Al-Shedokhi’ work (1986), except that Al-Shehry focused on Saudi graduate students. There were 354 students who returned the survey. The study indicated that the most concerned problems of Saudi students were English proficiency, financial aid, and academic records while the problems of least concern were admission and health services. It also showed that the students who lived in college housing were more concerned with English use and financial aid than the students who lived in a private house or apartment. Moreover, the students who did not attend a pre-departure orientation program and did not learn English before they came to the U.S. had problems with their English proficiency, academic records, and admission.
Additionally, the study mentioned that students who lived in small cities had fewer problems in the areas of health services (Al-Shehry, 1989).

Hofer (2009) also used Michigan International Student Problem Inventory (MISPI) survey, but she added five open-ended questions at the end of the survey to allow the Saudi students to express their opinions and feelings about the problems that they faced. The study was held in the state of Missouri, and only 81 students responded to her survey. Hofer found that the most challenging problems that Saudi students experienced were living-dining, English use, financial aid, and social-personal problems, and the least challenging problems were orientation service, student activity, and religious service. The students indicated that they suffered from the weather changing, the bathroom facilities, and the taste of food in America. In addition, they mentioned that none of the Americans invited them to their home. Half of the participants reported that they felt homesick. The study also revealed that the male students had more adjustment problems than female students, and younger students had more social-personal problems than older students. In addition, the length of stay in the U.S. had a positive impact on the students’ English proficiency and dining-living issues. Moreover, the study confirmed that the students attending small institutions were less concerned with English than students attending large institutions (Hofer, 2009).

In the qualitative part of Hofer’s study, 54 out of 81 students stated that the most helpful activities that the university organized were the activities that facilitated making friends with people from other nations. In addition, 24 students admitted that the events that the university arranged that gave the students the opportunity to educate other students and the community about their cultures and vice versa were really useful. Also,
they mentioned that they wanted to have Native English speakers as their conversation partners so they could improve their English. The students declared that they wanted more field trips, sport activities, activities to share culture, activities to make friends, and a place to pray. When the researchers asked the participants to give general comments, most of the participants expressed their satisfaction with studying in the U.S. They mentioned how they like American culture and people, and they also said that the experience helped them to be more organized, independent, and self-consciousness (Hofer, 2009). The Saudi students that participate in Hofer’s study (2009), in general, had fewer adjustment problems than the Saudi students who participated in the previous studies using the same questionnaire (Al-Shedokhi, 1986; Al-Shehry, 1989; Shabeeb, 1996).

Al-nusair’s study (2000) explored how the Saudi students think about their college experience, college environment, and educational gains, and explored the relationship between those three variables. Two hundreds and seventy-eight Saudi students randomly received the questionnaire; only 62 percent of the sample responded to the questionnaire. The study revealed that the Saudi students were more engaged in the following activities: “library experience, experiences with faculty, course learning, science and qualitative experiences, topics in conversations, and information in conversations” (p. 71), and they were less engaged in the following activities: “writing experiences; art, music, and theater; personal experiences; student acquaintances; clubs and organizations; and campus facilities” (p. 71). Furthermore, the study confirmed that the satisfaction with the college experience had a positive correlation with the educational gains, and it also assured that the more quality effort and time Saudi students invested in
the college activities, the more satisfaction students attained, and the more educational
gains students obtained. Moreover, the researcher recommended the international offices
in the universities to increase the social activities that enhanced the interaction between
American and Saudi students because these activities lessened the homesickness,
alienation, and the discrimination that Saudi students might encounter (Al-nusair, 2000).

Shaw’s study (2009) sought to explore the Saudi students’ experience in the
United Sates. Shaw focused on the success strategies that Saudi students developed to
attain their academic goals. Shaw was also interested in the differences that Saudi
students perceived between American and Saudi learning environments. The study
employed qualitative case study and photo-elicitation research methods to answer the
research questions. The participants were 25 Saudi students, and most of them were
males. Seventy-six percent of the participants were undergraduate students. 11 students
majored in engineering; 6 students majored in science; 5 students majored in pharmacy,
and 3 students majored in business, psychology, and fine art (Shaw, 2009).

When the Saudi students were asked to define the successful student, they said a
person who sets goals, manages his/her time well, and works hard to accomplish what
he/she was looking for. The Saudi students were also asked to talk about their
relationship with their teachers’ in Saudi Arabia and in the U.S. The participants
mentioned that their relationship with their Saudi teachers was mostly positive. Some of
them said the teachers were respected and treated as their fathers, while other participants
mentioned that they treated their Saudi teachers as friends. On the contrary, some
participants reported that their teacher thought they were above the other students. In the
U.S., the participants indicated that their teachers were friendly, open, and reachable (Shaw, 2009).

The Saudi students revealed that they came to the U.S. to gain a degree, to be educated, to be proficient in English, to become independent and to learn American culture. When the participants were asked about their perceptions before they came to the U.S., they expected America to be unsafe because of the gangsters, unfriendly people, and well-developed country. However, their expectations had changed. They noticed how people are friendly and respect each other. They also saw that the U.S. was different from what was portrayed in the movies. The researcher requested the participants to indicate easy and difficult things to do in the U.S.. The participants reported that the easiest things were listening/speaking, taking notes, and studying, whereas the difficult things were writing/reading, English grammar, food, communication, and making friends (Shaw, 2009).

The Saudi students’ perceptions of success strategies were: time management, persistence, studying hard, making American friends/ sharing notes, exploiting campus resources, being in a natural environment and joining study group. Furthermore, the participants compare Saudi education with American education. They stated that the relationship between teacher and students and the quality of teaching in the U.S. were better than in Saudi Arabia. In the United Stated, the grades did not depend on one exam, and the class-size was smaller than in Saudi Arabia. They also described that the library and the technology in the classrooms of universities such as Oregon State University were more developed than in Saudi Arabia (Shaw, 2009).
Lastly, the participants indicated that they rarely interacted with American students, and they mostly interacted with other Saudi students. In addition, some of the Saudi students reported that they encountered discrimination due to their nationality, ethnicity and religion. Furthermore, although most of Saudi students perceived American people as friendly, they reported that some American people outside the campus were racist and the Saudi students felt ignored (Shaw, 2009).

Heyn’s study (2013) sought to explore the male Saudi students’ experiences in American universities. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview to collect data from the nine male participants. Five patterns emerged from the data: the Saudi students’ perceptions about the U.S. before and after they come, their experiences of living and studying in the U.S., the success strategies that participants used, their experiences for seeking and receiving social support, and the impact of their experiences on their culture and belief. Before the participants came to the U.S., some of them anticipated that the educational system in the U.S. was strong and provided quality learning, and they also perceived American people to be friendly. In contrast, other participants reported that they were afraid of racism and discrimination against their race and religion. In addition, one of the biggest difficulties that Saudi students encountered was the language proficiency. They reported that they felt inadequate and embarrassed. Furthermore, the participants declared that they missed their family and home. They also faced prejudice. Furthermore, their studying in the United Stated changed their perceptions about women and other cultures, in particular American culture; they are now more accepting of women’s roles and more respectful and understanding for other cultures.
Hall’s study (2013) aimed to investigate the impacts of the Saudi students’ experiences studying in the U.S. on their perceptions and belief system and to determine if these changes were aligned with the goals of King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). Twelve male Saudi students were interviewed. Five patterns were identified in this study, and each pattern had between 3 to 4 themes. The researcher found that there were three factors that pushed the Saudi students to come to the United States: the prestige of American universities, one of their family members or friends studied in the U.S., and the policies of the KASP that encouraged the students to come to the U.S. Moreover, due to the lack of English skills, Saudi students stayed together and helped each other out.

Studying abroad also compels Saudi students to interact with a group of people (e.g., women and Shiites) whom they usually did not interact with in Saudi Arabia. The participants reported that it was their first time to interact with women from Saudi Arabia besides their families, and they also mentioned it was their first contact with people out of their doctrine. These interactions led them to change their perceptions about other groups and genders inside Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the researcher indicated that the participants mentioned that they concealed some of their beliefs and ideologies that they acquired from the U.S. because they were afraid that their families would reject them. Therefore, when they went back to Saudi Arabia or saw a member of a family in the U.S., they would hide their changes. Furthermore, the participants indicated that they faced academic difficulties, especially in the amount of reading and writing that the professors required them to do because they believed that the educational system in Saudi Arabia did not prepare them well.
Al Morshedi’s study (2011) sought to examine the academic and cultural challenges that Saudi and Emirati students encountered in the U.S. and how they coped with these challenges. The researcher employed a mixed method to collect the data. The participants were 219 for the quantitative part, and six for the qualitative part. The survey mentioned that 64.7% of the participants stated that their language proficiency did not prevent them from participating in the classroom, and the big challenge that the subjects encountered was the writing. They tried to improve their writing skills by taking writing classes and going to the writing center.

In the interview, the participants elaborated more about the academic and cultural obstacles that they faced. The most profound academic challenges for the participants were lack of preparation from the home region schools, the difficulties of admission requirements in the U.S., and the linguistic difficulties such as writing, presentation, accent, and so forth. They also stated that the U.S. teachers’ expectations were different from the teachers’ expectations in their country. There were also cultural differences that the participants experienced. In the participants’ culture, the woman’s role is to take care of the house, such as cooking and cleaning while the man’s role is to provide for the household, and do what the family needs.

Therefore, when Saudis came to the U.S., their roles changed. The male students had to cook and clean by themselves, and the female students had to take care of their business outside the house. In addition, the participants declared that they did not have sufficient knowledge about the host culture; they did not understand some jokes, and they did not understand some part of the conversation because of the cultural context. The female participants mentioned that they avoided communicating with men because they
were not used to it. The Saudi students applied some strategies in order to overcome these obstacles. They went to orientations and preparation programs that helped them to understand the American culture and language, and to learn more about the law in the U.S. They also tried to improve their English skills by taking writing classes, going to the writing center, and reading more about their major to expand their vocabulary. In addition, they tried to interact with American students and be friendly to them because they would help them to adjust academically, socially, and culturally. Moreover, they went to their teachers and their friends from the same region to seek support.

Abdel Razek’s study (2012) was aimed to explore the Saudi students’ educational experiences, the challenges that they faced, and the support system that help them to cope with the challenges. In his study, Abdel Razek interviewed 11 Saudi students, one professor, and one administrator. The researcher mentioned that the Saudi students defined their success by obtaining the degrees that they had earned. Only a few of them saw success in their experience as a whole and how they learned more about other culture beside the degree. In addition, the study revealed that Saudi students really cared about what others thought about them, and they were eager to polish the image of them and their country and religion. Saudi students also thought of themselves as a group, not as individuals.

Abdel Rezak (2012) reported several transition challenges. These challenges influenced students’ performance, adaptation, and success. The participants mentioned that they experienced many stereotypes about their religion, race and country. One of the participants said, “After a while, I started to limit my talk about both Islam and Saudi Arabia unless it is really a necessary talk that is needed for the discussion” (p.100). In
addition, the way of teaching, the amount of the assignments, and the teachers’ expectations were some of the challenges that Saudi students went through. The social integration with American people was encountered with many barriers like religion, alienation, gender, and dietary restrictions. The Saudi students did not drink alcohol and eat pork, and the female students wore the Hijab.

These restrictions prevented them from the participation in social events because they thought they were not welcome and felt judged. The study mentioned that Saudi students sought help from their classmates, teachers, and their Saudi friends to overcome the academic difficulties. Moreover, the Saudi students blamed the media of creating stereotypes and discrimination about their culture and country, and this made them feel depression, anger, and stereotype threat. When they heard or faced these stereotypes, they tried to explain the untold stories about the events that the media depicted. Lastly, the participants gave thorough recommendations for the universities, administrators, professors, and counselors to help the students to adjust and succeed (Abdel Razek, 2012).

The literature about the Saudi students in U.S. universities informed us that the biggest challenge that the Saudi students encountered was the lack of English proficiency. In addition, the Saudi students felt homesickness and alienation. They were not completely adjusted to the host society, either academically or culturally. While the Saudi students desired to interact and be friends with American people, the interaction was limited. After reviewing a huge amount of research literature about Saudi students, I could not find a single research article that focuses on the Saudi students’ experience of their engagement in intercultural communication with American people. Clearly, there is
a need to explore the factors that encourage or prevent intercultural communication between Saudi students and American students.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is the interaction between two people or more from different cultures (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004). The communication between domestic students and international students is considered intercultural communication. The intercultural communication has positive outcomes for both international students and students in the host nations. One of the profound impacts is to help international students adjust to the host nations. Several studies confirmed that developing social ties with domestic people assisted international students to acculturate and adjust to the host culture (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; T. Toyokawa & N. Toyokawa, 2002). The more local friends the international students had, the more they adjusted to the new culture (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Their adjustment to the host society was increased by the frequency of interacting with local people (Zimmermann, 1995). Their homesickness decreased as well.

The international students’ academic and social satisfaction is positively associated with the intercultural communication with host national people. A study conducted in Hawaii reported that the international students who had a high ratio of local friends were more satisfied and happy (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011). In addition, their satisfaction of their communication skills was increased (Zimmermann, 1995). Furthermore, a study held in a mid-western university in the U.S. found that the international students’ academic and social satisfaction was positively correlated with interacting with American students (Perrucci & Hu, 1995).
In addition, communicating with host national people will enhance the international students’ sense of belongingness and social connectedness. Glass and Westmont (2014) distributed a survey to 1,398 international students and 17,230 domestic students. They found that sense of belonging was positively correlated with intercultural communication. Another study in Australia also found that the sense of connectedness increased when the interacting with Australian students increased (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2006). Hurtado and Carter anticipated that joining an ethnic or race organization or gathering did not help the students to feel sense of belonging, instead these gatherings would eliminate the diversity because the intercultural communication would be limited.

Several studies also found that the intercultural communication increased the cultural knowledge of the partner. In a study conducted in Australia, international students from Asia developed their cultural knowledge through interacting with domestic students. To a large extent, international students acquire more cultural knowledge when they make more communication with local people (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Furthermore, a university in Australia established a multicultural program called “bus excursion” that guided the international students to take a trip for one day. The participants in this program pointed out that their interest in local culture increased, and they were more confident to start a conversation with domestic people (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf & Kashima, 2009). Another university in Australia provided a program called “community connection,” in which the domestic students reported that their awareness of their partners’ culture improved; they developed intercultural competence; and they sympathized more with their international students’ difficulties. The international
students also developed their cultural knowledge about the host country. They learned different ways of thinking and doing things. Their language proficiency improved. Their attitudes toward Australian people and culture changed positively (Gresham & Clayton, 2011). In New Zealand, they have the same program with the same purpose called “buddy project.” The domestic students indicated that they learned a lot of information about their partners’ cultures, and they also learned more about the challenges that international students encountered academically, socially, and culturally. The stereotype that they had about their partner was scattered. Additionally, the local students confirmed that their capacity for intercultural communication was improved, and the program provided them with a practical experience. On the other side, the international students mentioned that they developed their English skills, and their knowledge about New Zealand increased (Campbell, 2012).

These programs that attempt to connect the international students with host national students proved to have positive impact on the international and domestic students. The international students’ self-confidence to initiate a conversation with domestic people increased (Gresham & Clayton, 2011; Nesdale & Todd, 2000; Woodsa, Poropatb, Barkera, Hillsb, Hibbinsa & Borbics, 2013). In addition, the cultural empathy for both international and local students increased. The participants were willing to empathize and understand what others did or thought (Campbell, 2012; Gresham & Clayton, 2011; Woodsa et al., 2013).

Despite the benefits of intercultural communication, there are several barriers that prevent people from effective communication, or even initiating the communication in the first place. Four hundreds and fifty-four international students participated in a study
held in ten universities in the U.S. The international students from Europe and English speaking countries had more American friends and were more satisfied with intercultural communication than their counterparts from the Asian countries because of the similarity between the Europeans and Americans in their culture and physical appearance. In addition, the Asian languages had different structure from English language, which make it difficult to acquire by the Asian people. Therefore, their thick accent and lack of English proficiency barred their interaction with Americans, and even the Americans stayed away from the international students who had weak language skills. The study also pointed out that the lack of time and different values and interests that the international students had limited their communication with domestic students. In addition, the domestic students were sometimes not interested in interacting with international students and did not want to develop a deep relationship. Furthermore, the research indicated that the host region environment had an impact on the formation of friendships and satisfaction. The students who attended a university in a non metropolitan area were more satisfied and had more American friends (Gareis, 2012).

In another study conducted in Australia, the researchers utilized a mix method approach. Three hundreds and forty one international students were surveyed, and 20 international students were interviewed. The researchers found that the language competence had a positive correlation with the number of domestic friends and a negative correlation with the depression and anxiety, while the racial discrimination had a negative correlation with anxiety, loneliness, and depression. The more those students participated in the local events, the lower the level of depression, loneliness, and anxiety. In the qualitative section of the study, the participants assured that the lack of language
proficiency and perceived discrimination were two of the communication barriers. They also reported that the cultural differences between them and domestic students constrained their interaction with host national students because their understanding of the Australian culture, norms, customs, and traditions was limited. In addition, the participants mentioned that the domestic students’ lack or misunderstanding of the international students’ culture blocked the conversation or avoided talking with international students. The international students also stated that they were afraid of shame, awkwardness, discomfort, and fear when they communicated with local students. Last but not least, the differences in religious beliefs and practices also discouraged international students and domestic students from communicating or socializing with others. For example, one of the participants said,

I am Muslim, I don’t drink, I don’t go to clubs, so I am away from those parties with a lot of drinking. For me, it is not possible to enjoy everything which local people enjoy. For Muslims, it is not easy to make friends with local people. Some people, especially teenagers are not friendly with you (Yue & Lê, 2013).

Hinchcliff-Pelias and Greer interviewed 64 students from 20 nations to describe the communication barriers that participants had when they communicated interculturally. Two themes emerged from the data: “Self inadequacies and Other’s inadequacies.” The participants revealed that the lack of language competence and knowledge about the host culture took away from their communication with the students of host nations. They also stated that they did not want to put themselves in an intense and uncomfortable situation. In addition, the participants pointed out that the domestic students’ lack of interest to learn more about other cultures, their culture insensitivity, and the stereotype that they had for international students and their culture made the communication difficult. Sometimes the domestic students did not have time to talk with
international students. In addition, the study found that the ethnocentrism was one of the significant barriers. This happened from both sides of the students: the international and the domestic students. Moreover, the participants assured that the media played a central role of blocking the conversation between the international and local students by depicting some culture negatively. Lastly, the physical appearance was also mentioned by the participants as a barrier. One of the participants articulated his disappointment,

What intercultural communication? I would like to get to know some of the other students here from different countries, but they only want to be with their own people...the Americans hang out with other Americans, the Spanish with other Spanish, the Italians with the Italians, and so forth. (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004, p. 14).

Several studies confirmed that the ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension -- the anxiety of communicating with people from a different culture—were correlated negatively with the intercultural willingness to communicate (Harrison, 2011; Lin & Rancer, 2003; Neuliep & Ryan, 1998).

One of the profound factors that help to facilitate the intercultural communication is the adequate language competence. Several research articles confirmed that the language proficiency had a tremendous impact on communication (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Harrison, 2011; Trice, 2004; Ying, 2002). In addition, the cultural knowledge—knowing the customs, norms, values, and tradition of the host culture—is also another facilitator of intercultural communication (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Ying, 2002; Yue & Lê, 2013).

A qualitative study held in Australia aimed to explore the difficulties that international Asian students encountered when they formed intercultural friendship. Four themes emerged from the data: the frequency of contact, the self-discloser, the shared
similarity, and the receptivity of other cultures. First, the study found that some of the places that the international students went to were better than others because they would have more opportunities to face domestic students and interact with them. The participants also indicated that when they spent time with their friends, sometimes their friends brought other friends, which was opportunity to get to know different people. Second, the self-disclosure is the ability and willingness to communicate with people from different cultures. Therefore, the language competence was a vital part of the self-disclosure because without the language skills, the person would not be able to interact. Third, the participants indicated that individual similarities like hobbies, personality, values, and age facilitated the intercultural friendship. Fourth, the study revealed that the domestic student who was more receptive to other nations was easy to talk to because he/she was more empathetic and more interested in learning about other cultures (Kudo & Simkin, 2010).

Personality has a pivotal impact on the intercultural communication, either negative or positive. A study held in the United Kingdom sought to examine the impact of personality and prior experiences on intercultural communication. The researcher employed the Five Factor Model of personality traits as a conceptual framework. The Five personality traits were Conscientiousness (self-discipline and diligence), Agreeableness (altruism, empathy, and trust), Neuroticism (prone to anxiety and negative emotion), Openness (comfort with new experiences and positivity towards change), and Extraversion (high levels of personal activity, outgoing, and self-confidence). There were several variables in this study. Five of these variables were the five personality traits
while the remainders were ethnocentrism, cultural intelligence—the person’s ability to adapt to the new culture effectively, language ability, international orientation and multicultural upbringing. The participants were 755 students from three universities. The study revealed that there was a negative correlation between the ethnocentrism and all other variables, except the neuroticism, while cultural intelligence was positively associated with all the variables. The researcher indicated that the strong impact on the intercultural communication from the personality traits were agreeableness and openness (Harrison, 2011).

Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) sought to explore the components of the intercultural communication competence (ICC). Thirty-seven participants from 15 nations were interviewed. The researchers found that prior experience, empathy, global orientation, listening skills, knowledge, and motivation—making effort and showing interest in learning about other cultures—were the components of ICC (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Trice (2004) added that attending cultural events in the host country helped the international students to communicate more with domestic students and develop friendships.

Despite the communication barriers, the benefits of intercultural communication between the international students and domestic students are worth overcoming the obstacles that students have. It had been proven that communicating and being friends with domestic people increased the satisfaction, adjustment, and cultural understanding and decreased the homesickness, alienation, and stereotype. Those benefits triggered our interest to delve into the issue. Thus, this study aimed to explore the Saudi students’ experience in intercultural communication with American people. Specifically, it aims to
identify the factor that encourages or discourages Saudi students’ communication with American people.

Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory

In this study, I utilized the Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory to guide my inquiry into Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication. The Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory developed by William Gudykunst, focuses on strangers’ intercultural adjustment. Gudykunst started his theory by defining the terminology used in the theory. He defined a stranger as an individual who lives in a culture that has different norms, traditions, and values, so he/ she is close physically, but detached emotionally, socially, and culturally. Uncertainty is a “cognitive phenomenon” that affects the way the individual sees host nationals. Predictive uncertainty is the “inability to predict host nationals’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behavior” while explanatory uncertainty “involves the uncertainty we have about explaining host nationals’ behavior, attitudes, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs (2005, p. 421). Individuals who are strangers to a host culture experience more uncertainty about communicating than they would in their own culture. Gudykunst explains that there are maximum and minimum thresholds for uncertainty so that when an individual’s uncertainty is between the maximum and minimum thresholds, it means that he/she can predict host nationals’ behavior, and he/she can interact and adjust effectively to the host culture. However, if the uncertainty exceeds the maximum thresholds, the host nationals’ behavior will be unpredictable, and then it will be difficult for the person to communicate and adjust to the host culture. In addition, when the thresholds of the stranger’s uncertainty are lower than the minimum threshold of uncertainty, he/she will be overconfidence and bored, and
he/she will be more likely to misinterpret the messages of members of the host cultures’, which will hinder communication (Gudykunst, 2005).

Gudykunst identified *anxiety* as the affective equivalent of uncertainty, and defined it as a sense of disequilibrium stemming from “feeling uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen when we interact with host nationals” (p. 422). As with uncertainty, there were maximum and minimum thresholds for anxiety as well. When the anxiety is within the maximum and minimum threshold, the individual will feel comfortable to communicate effectively with host nationals. Conversely, when the anxiety level is higher than the maximum thresholds of anxiety, the person will feel tense, worried, and apprehensive about the communication and adjustment to the host culture. He/she is afraid of rejection, so he/she will avoid interacting with host nationals. Furthermore, when the anxiety level is lower than the minimum thresholds of anxiety, the individual will be unmotivated to interact or adjust to the new culture (Gudykunst, 2005).

According to Gudykunst (2005), *intercultural adjustment* is “a process involving feeling comfortable in the host culture, as well as communicating effectively and engaging in socially appropriate behavior with host nationals” (p. 425). So, when a person communicates with host nationals the same way he/she communicates with the people from his/her culture, the communication will not be effective and behavior will not be appropriate; as a result, the adjustment to the new culture will not fully succeed.

Gudykunst proposed that the basic causes of adjusting to intercultural communication involved managing anxiety and uncertainty so they are within the maximum and minimum thresholds, and thus the intercultural communication would be effective. However, There were what Gudykunst called “superficial causes” that
influenced the anxiety and uncertainty. Gudykunst categorized the superficial causes into eight categories: “self-concept, motivation, reaction to the host nationals, social categorization, situational processes, connections with the host nationals, ethical interactions, and conditions in host culture” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 427).

*Self-concept*, which is the way one sees oneself, has an impact on the anxiety and uncertainty level of the stranger. There were several variables that Gudykunst indicated positively affected anxiety and uncertainty levels, such as personal identity, cultural identity, self-esteem, and collective self-esteem (Gudykunst, 2005).

Furthermore, according to Gudykunst (2005), there are three motivations for strangers to communicate with host nationals: the need for inclusion, the confidence of predicting the host cultural behavior, and the sustenance of self-conception. A stranger would be more motivated to communicate with host nationals when he/she needs to be included in the group, and also when he/she is able to predict the host nationals’ behaviors. In addition, the stranger feels more secure when his/her self-concept is confirmed by the host nationals; the host nationals accept who she/he is.

Gudykunst (2005) mentioned that the way a stranger reacts to host nationals also influences uncertainty and anxiety. When the stranger has rigid attitudes toward the host nationals, his/her level of anxiety and uncertainty will increase. However, when the stranger is more tolerant and has empathy, the anxiety and uncertainty will decrease.

In addition, when the stranger categorizes the host nationals that means he/she “forms expectations for their behaviors” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 434). Therefore, the more accurate knowledge that stranger has about the host nationals’ culture, the more positive expectations the stranger forms. Moreover, the more the stranger perceives cultural
similarities between his/her culture and the host culture, the lower the levels of his/her anxiety and uncertainty. Individual similarity between the stranger and the host nationals will decrease the anxiety and uncertainty as well (Gudykunst, 2005).

As a result, Gudykunst (2005) explains that connection with the host nationals will also positively influence the anxiety and uncertainty level of the stranger therefore, the quantity and the quality of interaction with host nationals, and also the attraction to the host nationals will decrease the strangers’ anxiety and uncertainty. Also, social networks and support that the stranger receives from the host nationals will decrease the anxiety and uncertainty level of the stranger. Additionally, the stranger needs to have ethical interactions with the host nationals to communicate effectively. The stranger should respect the dignity of the host nationals and their culture, so that the host nationals will reciprocate.

Finally, sometimes the conditions in the host culture help to lower the anxiety and uncertainty level of the stranger. When the host culture is receptive and does not discriminate against the stranger, strangers will be less anxious and uncertain. In addition, pluralism in the host culture is an indication of receptivity toward strangers (Gudykunst, 2005).

Gudykunst stated three to eight axioms for each category for a total of 47 axioms. The axioms are propositions that link the variables with each other. As mentioned above, anxiety and uncertainty are the basic causes affecting intercultural adjustment, so the axioms connect the basic causes with the superficial causes listed in the categories reviewed above. The axioms also provide detailed predictive and explanatory statements about the ways that strangers will communicate effectively or ineffectively with members
of the host culture or nation, including the boundary conditions of maximum or minimum anxiety and uncertainty. These axioms will help to identify different factors that encourage or discourage international students, in particular Saudi students, when initiating communication with Americans.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the positive outcomes of the internationalization of higher education were enormous. However, the internationalization of higher education is not an easy process. As was noted from the literature, the greatest difficulties that international students experienced that affected their adjustment and satisfaction were lack of English proficiency, loneliness, academic achievement, discrimination, and alienation. Several studies confirmed that the intercultural communication and friendship with domestic people lessened discrimination, alienation, and homesickness; and positively influenced the satisfaction, adjustment, academic achievement, and language proficiency. It also enhanced the cultural understanding and empathy between international and domestic students.

KASP has provided about 111,000 Saudi students with full scholarships to support pursuing advanced education in the U.S. and increase the mutual understanding between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. These two goals of the scholarship could not be accomplished if there was no communication between Saudi students and American people. While the existing research literature about Saudi students attends to the limited interaction between Saudi students and Americans (Al Murshidi, 2014; Razek, 2012; Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997; Shaw, 2010; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Hall, 2013), researchers in general have not examined the critical factors that shape the Saudi
students’ experiences of intercultural communication. In view of the paucity of research literature on the Saudi students’ learning experiences, this qualitative study aimed to offer an in-depth inquiry into the Saudi students’ voices on their own experiences of intercultural communication in the U.S. It is my belief that concerned educators must listen to the Saudi students’ voices in order to gain a better understanding of the critical factors that shape the intercultural communication between the Saudi students and Americans.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I first provide the rationale of choosing a qualitative approach for the research design and explain selection of research participants. Next, I indicate the instrument that was used to collect the data, how the interview protocol was created, and how data was collected. Finally, I explain the data analysis process.

Research design

The purpose of the study is to explore Saudi students’ experiences of intercultural communication with American people. Specifically, the researcher would like to learn more about the factors that encourage or discourage the Saudi students from communicating with American people. A constructivist approach was taken because I am interested in the participants’ perspectives and experiences. In order to see the problem through the participants’ eyes (Creswell, 2014), I adopted a qualitative research design. Harding (2013) summarized the characteristics of a qualitative method into three characteristics: naturalism, a holistic approach, and participants’ meanings. First, unlike the quantitative method where the participants receive a survey that does not represent all of their experiences, the qualitative method enables the researchers to meet and contact the participants in naturalistic settings. There is no need for a lab or an artificial setting to conduct the study. The researcher can observe the subjects’ behaviors and hear their experiences directly from them (Creswell, 2014). Second, the qualitative approach
provides the researcher with freedom to dig deep into the relevant issues and see different aspects and perspectives about the phenomena. In this way, the researcher can develop a complex and thick description about the problem (Creswell, 2014; Harding, 2013). Third, the researcher is enabled to see problems and other aspects of the phenomenon through the participants’ eyes. The surveys, the questionnaire, and even the experimental designs of quantitative inquiry do not completely provide the researchers with the subjects’ views. They may actually depict the researchers’ perspectives or the perspectives of the survey designers because the participants do not have the chance to talk about what really matters to them (Harding, 2013).

In this study, the participants met with the researcher in a natural and neutral setting where the participants felt secure. Even though the researcher designed questions beforehand, it did not mean that the participants would be interrupted. They actually talked and told their experiences expansively until they were out of ideas about the topic, or they were asked for clarification. The researcher designed open-ended questions, and these questions were general and broad questions, so that the participants felt free to talk about anything on their mind.

Selection of Participants

To gain a better understanding of Saudi students’ experiences of inter-cultural communication, I set one criterion of the suitable participant, which was that the participant should be a student residing in the U.S. for two years or more. The rationale behind this criterion is that the student’s proficiency in English can enable him/her to communicate with American people. I only interviewed three participants, which would be sufficient because I was able to interview the participants in a reasonable time to
provide thick data about the phenomenon (Call, Gall, & Borg, 2010). After I identified the criterion for participants, I called by phone three of my acquaintances who met my criterion to participate in my study, and they agreed. Two of the participants were graduate students; one was majoring in education, and the other was majoring in science. The third participants was an undergraduate student whose major was engineering. The researcher purposefully selected the sample to show different perspectives on the issue (Creswell, 2006).

Data collection

As a constructionist researcher who yearns to see the issues from the participants’ point of view, an open-ended interview was a suitable instrument to collect rich data from the participants (Creswell, 2014). The two major features of the interview are flexibility and adaptability. The researcher can adapt interview questions to any situation, and also has the option to ask further questions. The interview enables the researcher to ask for clarification and more explanation, and it also allows for the researcher to ask probing questions to deepen his/her understanding for the issue (Robinson, 2011). The interview is an appropriate choice to examine participants’ motivations and perceptions (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

There are three kinds of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Harding, 2013). In this study, I employed the semi-structured interview because it is suitable for novice researchers. This involved designing a structure that guided me in the interview. I prepared some open-ended questions and probes before the interview took place. As a novice researcher, it would have been difficult for me to interview the participants without preparing questions because I could forget to ask about
important aspects of the issues. In addition, it was not appropriate to exactly follow the questions that I prepared because in this case I would be concerned about asking the questions more than the participants’ experiences. Therefore, I prepared some open-ended questions and some probes before the interview took place in order to guide me through the interview. However, I let the participants talk about their experience until they stopped or got off track; this was when I intervened with my questions. Nonetheless, when the participant did not know what to say, I used the probes in order to trigger their mind to talk more (Harding, 2013).

The Interview Protocol

I divided the main research question into three sub-questions: the first question is about the Saudi students’ perception of the intercultural communication, the second question concentrates on the factors that encourage Saudi students to communicate with Americans, and the last one focuses on the communication barriers. I designed my interview questions according to these sub-questions. I divided my interview questions into five sections: questions that collect general information about the participants (ice-breaker questions), questions to elicit responses to the first, second and third sub-questions, and then questions about possible recommendations that participants might offer for the future practices of the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM), university, departments, and classroom instructors.

I asked the participants general and open-ended questions, so that they could speak freely and say what was important to them, instead of my dictating to them what to say. However, sometimes a participant seemed stuck on one idea or two, or did not recall all of what he experienced because of time constraints. At this point, the participants were
prompts using questions derived from the axioms of AUM theory. (For specific prompts based on the axioms, see Part 3 (SQ2) a, b, c, d, and e; and Part 4 (SQ3) a, b, c, d, and e of the Interview Protocol in APPENDIX C).

Even though all seven of the conceptual categories of AUM theory reviewed earlier (self-concept, motivation to interact, reactions to strangers, social categorization of strangers, situational processes, connections with strangers, and ethical interactions) (Gudykunst, 2005) were considered during analysis, nine axioms from the 47 in the categories were chosen as most relevant to addressing the research questions. These nine concentrated on interpersonal communication, and they closely matched factors mentioned often by international students in the literature when they talked about their experiences with intercultural communication. The axioms guiding prompts include:

Axiom 5: An increase in perceived threats to our social identities when interacting with strangers will produce an increase in our anxiety and a decrease in our confidence in predicting their behavior (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 294).

Axiom 7: An increase in our need to sustain our self-conceptions when interacting with strangers will produce an increase in our anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 295).

Axiom 11: An increase in the rigidity of our attitudes toward strangers will produce an increase in our anxiety and a decrease in our ability to predict their behavior accurately (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 297).

Axiom 17: An increase in the personal similarities we perceive between strangers and ourselves will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our ability to predict their behavior accurately (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 299).

Axiom 21: An increase in our positive expectations for strangers’ behavior will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 300).

Axiom 27: An increase in our attraction to strangers will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 302).
Axiom 36: an increase in our knowledge of strangers’ language and/or dialects will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our ability to predict their behavior accurately (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 306).

Axiom 42: An increase in host national’s discrimination toward strangers will produce an increase in the anxiety strangers’ experience (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 309).

The prompt questions were not asked unless a participant did not give details about the issue or did not mention information relevant to addressing the research questions. The prompts were asked to help participants recall some experience, or at least give participants an opportunity to voice their opinions about experiences related to these concepts. So, when I asked about communication barriers, and a participant did not say much, I asked about an opinion of this barrier. The prompt served to trigger something in the participant’s mind, which caused him to share what he experienced. For example, one of my participants had not said much about communication barriers, but when I asked him about what he thought about stereotypes, he told me, “Stereotype is everywhere. There is stereotype in Saudi Arabia, there is a stereotype in the US, so do not believe anything said about anybody until you hear from that person and see if that person does that stuff.”

Interview Procedures

First, a room was reserved for interviews in a remote and quiet part of the university library. Each participant was scheduled and interviewed on different dates. Each time the participant came, I thanked them for participating in my study. Then I provided the participant with detailed information about the purposes and methods of the study, the risks and benefits of the study, his/her right to stop any time, and the confidentiality of his/her information. I requested and received each participant’s
permission to record the interview (Groenewald, 2004). I also told the participants that the interview would last for one hour and a half, and that I might ask for a follow-up interview if needed. After that, I gave him the informed consent to read and sign (see APPENDIX B).

I started my interview by asking the participants about demographic information, marital status, and level of education. Afterward, I asked them about their experiences and expectations before and after they came to the U.S. After that, I asked them a few questions about their perception of intercultural communication, and then about the factors that encourage and discourage them from communicating with American people. I made sure that they understood my questions, and I did not interrupt them unless it was necessary, for example, if they got off the topic or did not understand my questions. I used the prompting questions when they were needed, such as when a participant was stuck and did not know what to say, or if he did not mention important issues and aspects relevant to the research questions.

When the interviews were complete, they were transferred from the interview recording device to my laptop where they were by a password. Later, I transcribed the interview on a sheet of paper, and then I typed them in a secure document as well. Because one of the participants was interviewed in Arabic, I transcribed his interview, and then I translated the script that I needed. To validate my transcription, I showed what I wrote to my participants to make sure that I understood what they said.

Data analysis

I applied thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke,
After I transcribed the data, I followed six steps: 1- familiarizing yourself with your data, 2- generating initial codes, 3- searching for themes, 4- reviewing themes, 5- defining and naming themes, and 6- producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I described each one in detail. The first step was familiarizing myself with the data. Because I transcribed all of the interviews by myself, and then typed the transcription from my notebook to my laptop, it gave me a chance to immerse myself in the data.

After knowing what the interviews were about, I moved to the next step which was coding the data. According to Harding (2013), there are three kinds of codes: summarizing the targeted data, selecting the important and representative word in the data, or interpreting the data by writing a word that define the action or the speech. I used these codes according to the data that I wanted to code. So, when I noticed something interesting in the interview’s script, but could not find an underlying word, or I could not reduce the data into one word, I summarized it. I went back and forth many times to code the interviews until I was certain that I did not leave out any data that might be useful.

The third step was looking for themes. In this step, I extracted the codes from the raw data to a separate paper, so that I would not be distracted. Then, I grouped the similar codes under a potential theme. After I finished putting the codes under a theme, I classified similar themes into a major theme, resulting in three themes, and under each theme several sub-themes. Afterwards, I created a table, and divided the table into three columns: the first column was for the theme, the second was for the sub-theme, and the last column was for the codes. The goal of the tables was to be more concentrated on the data and to not waste my time looking for the codes all over again.
The fourth step was revising the themes. In this stage, I created a codebook. I wrote in the codebook the potential themes and sub-themes, definitions for these themes, and examples from the interviews for each theme. Creating the codebook helped me to identified the strongest themes, which had many examples that supported them, and remove what was not quite a theme because there was insufficient data to support it. In addition, the codebook assisted me in merging two tentative themes into one (Tracy, 2013).

In the fifth step, I finalized my findings by defining and naming the themes. As Tracy (2013) suggested, I established a loose analysis outline. In the beginning of this outline, I wrote about the issues that drove me to this study and what the research questions were. Indicating these two items in the beginning of the outline helped me focus on understand the issue, so that I did not lose sight of the study’s focus while studying the details. Next, I wrote the themes and sub-themes, and I defined them. Furthermore, under each one of the themes and sub-themes, I put the most representative exampler from the data. After I did this and was satisfied with my themes, I related these themes and sub-themes to the previous literature before writing the findings.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the themes and the sub-themes that emerged from analysis of the data obtained from three in-depth interviews. Each theme and sub-theme has been defined and linked to the concepts and axioms from AUM theory if they were found relevant. Illustrative and descriptive quotations taken from the interview transcripts help to elaborate and explicate the themes and sub-themes. Where relevant, a connection is made with the findings of previous literature.

Four main themes and twelve sub-themes emerged from the data:

Theme 1- Detecting mutual interests.

Theme 2- Identifying what attracts Americans to communicate with you.

Americans seem attracted to a person who:

Sub-theme 2.1- Shows self-confidence in their language and themselves.

Sub-theme 2.2- Shows and receives empathy.

Sub-theme 2.3- Does interesting things.

Sub-theme 2.4- Shows hospitality.

Theme 3- What encourages Saudi students to communicate with Americans:

Sub-theme 3.1- Benefiting academically.

Sub-theme 3.2- Acquiring practical skills to facilitate life in and outside the U.S.

Sub-theme 3.3- Improving their language skills.
Sub-theme 3.4: Increasing their host cultural awareness.

Sub-theme 3.5: Encountering an American who understands and respects their culture and religion.

Theme 4: Saudi students are discouraged to communicate with Americans when:

Sub-theme 4.1: They have negative stereotypes about Americans and vice versa.

Sub-theme 4.2: Their identity was jeopardized.

Sub-theme 4.3: They feel that they are distracted from their priority.

Theme 1: Detecting mutual interests

The participants in this study report looking at what they have in common with American people or what activities they both like to do. In AUM theory, Gudykunst (2005a) indicated that perceiving personal similarity would decrease the anxiety and uncertainty level of an international student to a stranger who is a member of the host culture. Thus, the person would be encouraged to communicate with a stranger because they can partly predict what will happen next. Therefore, a common interest is very important between a Saudi student and his/her American counterpart. Without common interests, the conversation will stop immediately because there is nothing to talk about.

For example Bader says,

Last time, I met one of my friends in the class. I saw him wearing a cap that has a Summit sign, a company that modifies cars and sells car parts. I start a conversation with him: “Oh, are you working in Summit? He said, “I just got the cap from them. I just bought a compressor for my car”. Then I asked him,” What kind of car do you have?” He mentioned the kind of his car. I am very interested in the classic car. So, I start the conversation easily with him, and after that we become friends.
When Bader noticed that his classmate was wearing a cap that carried a company well known for selling and modifying cars, he knew this would trigger the conversation between them because there was something that they both cared about. Bader and his classmate had the same hobby of modifying classic cars. This hobby was the gateway of developing a friendship with each other.

Sometimes there is another thing that both interlocutors are interested in, such as religion. Bader indicated that he is a religious person, so when he met religious people, the conversation went smoothly with them, such as his experience with his religious lab partner. Bader said:

I found religious people are very interesting because they have the same thing that we have in our Islamic culture. They are proud of their religion and what they believe. Sometime they talk about their prophets and the religious things; you can find same threads. We have the same things. We have too many things in common like believing in God… She is brilliant, so when we talk about prophets and the culture things that they have, I found so many stuff we share together.

Because Ali is a big fan of sports, he looked for American people with a common interest, and tried to engage himself with them. He found that American people like playing and watching basketball and football, so he started playing and watching these sports. He said,

I think to get to know people is to share their interests, usually sports. Personally basketball got me to know other people. Once I know certain people who like to play basketball, I found from their friends who like to play rugby. Then I join to those people who play rugby… You can play basketball and be good it, and people will like you, and you know they want to know your name. The basketball tournament and football tournament are interest the American people the most… When I played basketball in the gym, we usually engage in a conversation about which team wins this championship. You see a lot of interest of what your opinion is, or who is the best player? You will see a lot of people interest in what you think.
Sports provided Ali with an opportunity to communicate more with American people, and because he had a vast knowledge of sports, he was introduced to other people who were interested in a particular sport such as rugby.

Bader also understood that the kind of activity that someone liked would attract him/her to be acquainted with American people who liked doing the same activity. Bader indicated,

For me, I like to smoke hookah, so I go to the hookah place and spend some time with people over there and talk to them. That is my activity. I found it very helpful to speak with other people.

There were several studies confirmed that mutual interests between international students and American people enhanced the communication between them. Gareis (2012) demonstrated that the different interests that international students had from domestic students limited the conversation between them. In addition, another study held in Australia mentioned that individual similarities between international students and host national students like hobbies, personality, values, and the age similarity were factors facilitating intercultural communication and friendship (Kudo & Simkin, 2010).

Theme 2: Identifying what attracts Americans to communicate with you

When the person is able to identify what aspects and features that he/she has that attract people to interact with him/her, he/she will be able to use these favorable things to enhance his/her communication with the people with whom he/she would like to talk. Every culture and individual has their own desirable attributes. Finding the main attributes that attract American people will help Saudi students to enhance communication with them.
Sub-theme 2.1: American people are attracted to a person who shows self-confidence in their language and themselves. In AUM theory, Gudykunst mentioned that when language and dialect proficiency increase, anxiety and uncertainty will decrease. As a result, an individual will be more competent to communicate interculturally because he/she will be able to understand what has been said (Gudykunst, 2005a). Therefore, the self-confidence in one’s language and oneself are important to communicate interculturally with other people. As Bader declared,

The self-confidence is a strong thing, which is play major role in making a conversation with other people. If you are confident about your language and deliver your idea and explain your idea to him properly, this will help you to begin talking with [an] American. But, if you do not have the confidence, even if you have the language, you cannot make a friendship or a conversation.

In addition, Ahmed agreed with Bader by explaining,

My self-confidence in myself and my language sometimes prevent me from talking with American people because I know I will not be able to keep up with him, so when he says, “how are you doing?” and I could not respond to what he says to me, he goes and leaves me.

All of the participants stated that they started the conversation with the American people. They did not wait for the American people to do it. This showed self-confidence. However, there was a hardship that Bader and Ali thought it was very important to keep the conversation going, which was telling and understanding the jokes. Bader said,

If you speak English with American accent, and you know their jokes, they start a conversation with you. The American people like to make a joke when they talk. So, when I go to the Wal-Mart, and I just pass someone, and he talks about something, if I can understand that joke and respond on it at the same time, then I can start a conversation with him. But if I could not understand the joke and what he is saying, this makes him stop the conversation with me.

Bader emphasized understanding jokes while Ali put an emphasis on telling the jokes by saying,
You have to have a sense of humor. You have to be funny. You have to crack a joke. People love funny people. Sometimes I try to crack a joke here and there, and people love it. They usually love you and try to surround themselves around you. They talk with you more because they think you are more relaxed, not tight enough like they think of you when they first saw you.

The reason that led Ali to emphasize telling the jokes, instead of just understanding the jokes is because his English language use is proficient. However, both of them recognized the importance of jokes in maintaining the conversation. To Ali and Bader, American people like to communicate with relaxed people who laugh and tell jokes and avoid interacting “serious” people who are disinclined to tell jokes.

A study conducted with Saudi and Emirati students revealed that they were unable to understand American jokes because their language proficiency was low and the jokes were usually related to American culture. The participants indicated that not understanding the jokes prevented them from socializing with American students (Al Murshidi, 2014a). There were many studies that negatively associated lack of or low language proficiency with communicating effectively with host national people (Gareis, 2012; Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Harrison, 2011; Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Trice, 2004; Ying, 2002; Yue & Lê, 2013).

Sub-theme 2.2: American people are attracted to a person who shows and receives empathy, a person who tries to understand what you are going through. In AUM theory, Gudykunst speculated that the individual’s anxiety decreases when his ability to empathize with other people increases, and the uncertainty will decrease. Therefore, the person will be more confident communicating with people from a different culture (Gudykunst, 2005a). People tend to like a person who empathizes with their problems. They will open their heart and mind to him/her because they think of this individual as a
reliable and good person. In addition, when a person is in trouble, or he/she encounters difficulties, people will empathize with him/her and try to help him/her. This is a gateway that any person can use to maximize his/her communication with American people. As Ahmed mentioned,

I can start talking with [an] American through his suffering. I ask him about how difficult the job that he is doing, and how he is able to combine between his work and study, and then I mentioned how his relationship with his partner. You will see that you are talking for three hours because you touch what matters to him. I remembered when I was in Orlando, Florida, I heard a guy talking about the tax while I was out of Wal-Mart. I went toward to him and talked to him about the tax. He kept talking with me for a half hour because I knew that he had problems with his tax. He talked to me about the history of the tax in the U.S., and I mentioned to him that we did not have taxes in my country. American people do not mind to talk about their problems.

Ahmed is brilliant in using this technique. He kept telling how people opened up and started talking with him when he paid attention to their problems, and he also revealed his weaknesses to Americans, so they could sympathize with him. Ahmed understood what encouraged the Americans to talk with him and took advantage of it.

Ali used the same technique as well. He stated,

I usually start my conversation by asking about how they are, and then I ask them what they are doing here. If they are in the library, they usually say that they have homework. Then I ask them what the homework is. I try to keep the conversation about them. Keep them interested by answering the question.

Notice when Ali said, “keep the conversation about them” that this was what kept people interested in interacting with him. Ali also mentioned that offering help to them in the supermarket or in the university’s library helped him to talk with American people.

Several studies confirmed that cultural empathy increased when the frequency of intercultural communication increased (Campbell, 2012; Gresham & Clayton, 2011;
Woods, et al., 2013). According to Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005), empathy is a vital component of intercultural communication competence.

Sub-theme 2.3: American people are attracted to a person who does interesting things. When a person has skills and is good at something, he/she usually attracts American people to communicate with him/her. In AUM theory, Gudykunst (2005a) anticipated that when a person is attracted to another person who is a complete stranger to him/her, his/her anxiety and uncertainty would decrease accordingly. As a consequence, the confidence to approach a person and talk will increase. The interesting person who has skills in sports, music, or in the class will attract people to interact with him/her and to become a friend. No one will go to a person who is bored and lazy. Ali illustrated this point by saying,

If they saw me at the gym, and I played soccer and did good, they usually come to ask me where I start playing, when I start playing, and how did I play that good? In class, if I have a good question or had a good joke, or I did something that they like, they think it is very likeable about me; they will come and ask me about it. Also, another thing is the more American friends you have, the more others will attract to you because they think if that many people like you, and then there are something interested them about you… if I play a basketball at the gym, and I did good that day, people will come and say hi. Ask me about where I live, what my major is, and other things. I think in the right time and the right place people will come to talk to you, and it depends on where you see them, or how they see you as a person. If you are playing basketball, and you are not good or score, and do nothing, then no one will think of you, but if you score and say something funny, people will think of you as more relaxed, and is not a type of person who will reject me when I talk with them.

So, Ali noticed that American people talked to him when he was good at something; he noticed this when he was playing basketball and when he was in the classroom. He mentioned, “I took a Middle Eastern class, and usually American students come seek for help because I know about that class”. It seemed that American people
were more interested in interacting with a person who was successful at something such as sport or study.

Bader realized the importance of being interesting if he wanted to communicate with American people. Therefore, he managed to sit outside his apartment and smoke hookah. He says,

I used to smoke hookah near to the pool in my previous apartment. During the time, I just cook my tea and prepare my hookah. There are American people who smoke hookah sit with me and chat with me. We start a conversation about the hookah and how it is made, and they start smoking hookah with me, and I explain what I can do and how to cook food. Then they ask me if I can cook for them. So, I invite them to go with me to my apartment. We just cook food during that night, and it was a good night.

When American people saw Bader sit outside near the swimming pool and noticed that he had tea and was smoking a hookah, there was something interesting about Bader, so therefore they came and sat with him. One thing attracted another; they found themselves in a middle of a conversation.

Sub-theme 2.4: American people are attracted to a person who shows hospitality by inviting them to have a drink or a meal and show his/her culture. According to Langmead (2014), inviting people to share food can start a conversation because it provides a context for the conversation. Now there is a topic that people can talk about, which is food. They can start talking about food, and then go deeper in their interaction. It is common in Saudi culture to invite a person with whom one wants to be friend to share a meal. You might meet a person at a party, and if you would like to be a friend with him, you would invite him to your home or maybe a restaurant and deepen your relationship with him. Because this is a Saudi tradition to invite people for a meal, all of the participants shared their stories about that. For example, Ahmed told a story about his
friendship with a nun, “We [he and his wife] used to have a relationship with a nun, and we invited her to our house. We sit, talked, and cooked a Kapsah, a traditional Saudi meal, for her.” He also mentioned that when he was in the library, and he brought with him dates and coffee, he offered American people a cup of coffee and dates. This generated the conversation between them. In addition, Ali asserted that hospitality is another technique of communicating with Americans,

> If you see them in the park, you may invite them over to drink coffee. Sometime if you invite them, they will feel special; they will feel like you are interested in what they think and who are they. Make them feel that way is really important.

Bader also shared a story about this topic,

> The neighborhood plays a central role in that. Sometimes I like to sit in the garage and make some tea, so when I met my neighbor, I ask him to join me to get a tea. I show him my culture and show him how we cook the tea, and what we eat with the tea.

As the participants mentioned, hospitality is a way of letting people be comfortable around the host and encouraging them to talk with him/her. People will feel special, and they will look at the host favorably because he/she invited them to share something good.

**Theme 3: What encourages Saudi students to communicate with Americans**

There are various features that attract Saudi students to communicate with Americans, academic, linguistic, or social. Sometimes some Saudi students do not want to communicate with Americans. However, knowing what encourages Saudi students to communicate with Americans is beneficial in order to find American people who would be suitable for him/her.

Sub-theme 3.1: A Saudi student is encouraged to communicate with Americans when it benefits him academically. One of the primary reasons that Saudi students come
to the U.S. is to earn advanced academic degrees for getting better jobs and salaries. Therefore, when Saudi students realize that communication with American students will enhance their understanding of their academic courses and improve their achievement, they will seek out opportunities. For instance, Ali stated,

From my experience, when I meet with my American group, they usually start to get things done and move on in their daily life. When I meet with the people from my country, we like to get off the topic a lot. You know they get food, drink coffee together, talk about other things, and try to stay away from the school. They try to mix fun with the school. Interacting with American students helps you to be more serious about the school. Surrounding yourself with them in the school will help you to get better grades and understand the subject you are studying.

So, Ali noticed that socializing and studying with American students would help him in his academic pursuits. He learned to concentrate on his homework and understand the subject better. He contrasted his experience of studying with Saudi friends and American friends. He found that his Saudi friends were wasting their time and hovering around without doing much work on their assignments while the American friends worked hard to finish as soon as possible, and they enjoyed the rest of the day. Furthermore, being friends with American students will help the Saudi students to catch up with their professors by reading their American friends’ notes. As Bader declared, “I am a very bad note taker, so I cannot take notes during the class, but I found that American students would give you their notes easily.”

There were other studies that also found that Saudi students were communicating with American students for academic purposes. For example, Shaw’s 2009 study about Saudi students’ experience in the U.S. and their success strategies indicated that Saudi students attempted to create a study group with American students to improve their English and to help them understand the writing assignments and classroom materials.
Additionally, in Al Murshidi’s study (2014b), Saudi and Emirati students confirmed that they asked American students for support. They also asked them to help them in writing assignments. Additionally, they expressed their desire to work with American students in-group assignments.

Sub-theme 3.2: A Saudi student is encouraged to communicate with Americans when it helps him/her to acquire skills that facilitate his/her life in and outside the U.S. As one noted, the U.S. is the greatest country in the world, and it would not be the greatest country unless its citizens worked hard and managed their time and resources well. Saudi students were eager to come to the U.S. to earn advanced degrees and acquire skills that would help them to get a good job and better life (Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009). The participants mentioned that they learned life and job skills from American people. For instance, Ali indicated,

When I first came here, I did have a job. When you had a job, you will need to cope with the way of life. So, you have to organize your time and surround it what is more important than the others. So, you have to look at your job’s schedule, and you have to look at your homework, so that you can put a time for your family. I learned it from them. Now I organize my time better than when I first came here.

The skills, such as time management and prioritizing tasks, which Ali learned from American people, would help him while he is studying in the U.S. and also assist him in his future life and job. In addition, Bader talked about how friendship with American people got him out of troubles. He said,

Last semester, I rent a car from a Priceline website, and I paid for the insurance company. When I returned the car, the rental office company asked me to pay for the damage that happened in the car. Since I do not know anything about the policies, I ask one of my American friends. We filled the form for that policy by his language, and they just cover every thing. Before that they asked me to pay 2500 dollars, which is too much. So, if you know American people, because they know about the policies and rules, they can help you to get out of the problems or of the issues.
Ahmed also listed some benefits that he got when he communicating with American people,

Get engaging with American people will help you when you want to travel because they will tell you about where are the best and beautiful places and how is the people in that city. They also teach you about the American law and what should you do when the police officer pull you over.

For these reasons and more, mingling with host national people will facilitate one’s life and stay in the host country, and help one to learn the good skills that the host people possess. A study was conducted in New Zealand about the benefits and barriers that domestic students encountered when they communicated with international students. The domestic students reported that they learned new ways of life and lifestyle. They were exposed to different perspectives and experiences (Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011). Saudi students indicated that coming to the U.S. and knowing American people helped them to be more organized, independent, and self-conscious (Hofer, 2009). They learned to balance their life and take care of themselves (Heyn, 2013).

Sub-theme 3.3: Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with Americans to improve their language skills. All of the participants declared that the main reason to communicate with American people was to improve their English skills; they want to enhance their speaking, listening, and understanding. Bader indicated that socializing with American people helped him learn conversational, colloquial English when he said,

One of the benefits that you benefit of being a friend with Americans is to gain the slang language, and you will improve your listening and speaking. When I graduated from my master, my language was academic, so I can write and read, and I can speak little bit, but when I come here, I try to go outside, go with American people and hang around, so that I can I improve my speaking and listening, especially for the native speaker. You know when the professor speaks like general English, most people will understand, but when you go outside, sometime they speak slang words, so you cannot understand them. So, you have
to get involved with them to know what they ask, what they need, or what they want.

Bader’s quotation emphasizes the importance of socializing and communicating with American people in order to improve English proficiency. Several studies confirmed that communicating with host national people would enhance the international students’ language proficiency (Campbell, 2012; Gresham & Clayton, 2011). In addition, Saudi students expressed their desire to be with Americans to improve their English (Hall, 2013; Hofer, 2009).

Sub-theme 3.4: Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with Americans to raise their host cultural awareness. One of the reasons Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with American people is to deepen their knowledge about the host culture. The participants would like to know what Americans like and dislike, how they treat each other, and how they think. The more knowledge they have about the host culture, the more their cross-cultural journey will be fruitful and peaceful. As Ahmed says,

I am not interested in knowing American people and their culture for the sake of knowing, except for improving my English and knowing what the appropriate and accurate thing to say in front of them in order not to do wrong against them. I want to know how to treat the professors, the taxi drivers, and the waitress properly. Every place in the U.S. has its own culture. I want to know what is appropriate culturally to protect myself, so my interests lead me to know the culture. I want to know the commonalties in the American society in order to treat them properly.

Ahmed realized that his awareness of the culture’s norms and traditions would make his stay in the U.S. more secure and peaceful because it helped him stay away from creating cultural conflicts. Ali and Bader wanted to learn more about the American culture because they were fond of it. As Ali mentioned,

I was interested in learning about how American people think. I was interested in how people live, how people eat, how they’ve got things done, and what they are
doing in their daily activities. You know American people are very organized. The good things I try to look into it, and the bad things I try to stay away from. Ali was fascinated with the American culture. He wanted to know more about American people and culture, and also he attempted to obtain the beneficial features and stayed away from the useless ones.

Gresham and Clayton (2011) evaluated a program called “community connection” that paired domestic Australian students with international students to develop friendships. They sought to examine the impact of this program on the participants. Thirty domestic students and thirty international students participated in the study. The international students stated that they learned more about Australian culture and how they live and think. They also understood the cultural differences. On the other hand, domestic students declared that their awareness of other cultures increased. In another study, Saudi and Emirati students mentioned that they learned different ways of thinking and different cultures and customs through daily interaction with the domestic people. Their attitude toward the West was favorably changed after interacting with western people (Hilal & Denman, 2013).

Sub-theme 3.5: Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with Americans when they encounter an American person who understands and respects their culture and religion. In AUM theory, Gudykunst (2005b) stated that when a person perceives that the host national people’s receptivity is high toward strangers, the person’s anxiety would be lowered. Therefore, Saudi students would be more likely to speak with American people who try to respect and understand the Saudi culture. For example, Ahmed shared his story about a woman, who understood and respected his culture,
There was a woman who mingled with Saudi students extensively, and she was really helpful and understanding because she knew the Saudi culture. She was trying to learn Arabic language. This woman when I ask her to help me, I found her there, and even when I did not asked her and saw me in the library, she will go toward me and ask me if I need help.

It was easy and more encouraging for Ahmed to interact with this woman because she was aware and respectful of his culture. Ahmed also mentioned his story with the American man who socialized with the international students more often. He said, “This man respects my principles and welcomes the diversity. When we discuss about an issue, and he knows that I need to pray, he will stop until I finish my prayer.” Ahmed realized that educated people who also socialize with people from different cultures are more respectful. On the other hand, Ali and Bader thought that American people in general were kind and considerate. Bader stated, “My father was here in 70s, so he encouraged me to get my degree from the U.S. because he knows that American people are very friendly, and you can talk to them easily.” The perception that Bader already had about the American people encouraged him to communicate with Americans more. Other studies also confirmed that Saudi students considered American people to be respectful of other cultures (Al Murshidi, 2014b; Heyn, 2013).

In contrast, a lack of understanding of Saudi culture on the part of a host national can be discouraging to a Saudi student from communicating interculturally. In a study conducted in Australia, international students mentioned that domestic students lack of understanding of the international students’ culture blocked the conversation (Yue & Lê, 2013), while another study revealed that a domestic student who is more receptive to other nations is easy to talk to because he/she is more empathetic and interested in learning about other cultures (Kudo & Simkin, 2010).
Theme 4: What discourages Saudi students from communicating with Americans

Sometimes Saudi students are not willing to interact with American people for various reasons. Perhaps he/she has a bad experience, or he/she encounters a prejudice. Sometimes they do not want to interact with Americans because they are rigid about their religion.

Sub-theme 4.1: Saudi students are discouraged from communicating with Americans when they have negative stereotypes about American people and vice versa. The prejudice and stereotypes that Saudi students and American people may have about each other can limit the interaction between them because each party is afraid of the other and hates each other. Ahmed came to America with the stereotypes about American people that they are materialistic and individualistic, and afraid of Middle Eastern people. These stereotypes actually affected his communication with American people, so when an American friend asked him for a favor such as borrowing his car or money, he immediately associated this with the stereotypes that he already had. Furthermore, the media play a central role in creating these stereotypes as Ahmed indicates in the following quotation,

> When I first came to the U.S., I did not talk with black people because the media depicted them as criminals and dumb. Now I changed a little bit, but it still did not feel comfortable talking with Blacks because I found that some Americans are cautious when they deal with the Black people. One of my friends mocked about the Black people. He told me once that because of American Law, he dealt and talked with Blacks. If there were no law protecting them, he would not have talked to them. Instead, he would kick them off the country.

Before Ahmed came to the U.S., he did not know anything about the U.S. and American people, except what he saw in the movies. Therefore, some of this misleading information stayed longer because they had been sustained by a few Americans.
Similarly, sometimes Americans have a stereotype about Saudi students. For example, Ahmed noticed the American people were more comfortable talking with him when he was alone, but when he had his wife, who wore a Hijab, they were less comfortable and tried to avoid him and his wife.

There were several studies that reported the discrimination that international students encountered. Lee and Rice (2013) explored international students’ experiences with discrimination. They found that white students who came from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand experienced less discrimination than the students who came from the Middle East, Latin America, India, and Asia. Several international students reported verbal negative stereotypes about their country, culture, and race. In Heyn’s study (2013), Saudi students reported that some American people looked nervous and uncomfortable when they were near Saudi students. Some American students did not want to be in a Saudi group. Having negative stereotypes is negatively correlated with effective intercultural communication (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Yue & Le, 2013).

Sub-theme 4.2: Saudi students were discouraged from communicating with Americans when their identity was jeopardized. In AUM theory, Gudykunst confirmed that the anxiety and uncertainty would increase when the person’s social identity was threatened (Gudykunst, 2005a). For Saudi students, their religion is their social identity, so when someone offends their religion or reflects negatively on their faith, they will reject or avoid that person. For example, Bader stated,

If a person says something bad about my religion, background, or he tries to discriminates me and offend me, absolutely I am going to avoid them after I explain to him what he said is very wrong and offended me and my people in my culture. If he does not understand me or mean to do it, I will avoid him.
As Bader clearly stated that he would avoid the person who offended his religion because his religion shapes who he is, so if anything bad said toward his religion, he would consider this insult as if it had been directed toward him. Not only Bader felt this way, but all of the participants did. Ali shared his feelings in this matter,

If someone likes to talk about girls, sex, and music every time I talk with him, I usually do not try to talk with him ever again because this is out of my comfort zone. I do not talk to him about what he did last night, or who’s that girl. That happens to me a lot when I first came here to the U.S., the students know that in Saudi Arabia, women wear a hijab. So, when I talked with a guy, he will ask me what I think of that girl; this is out of my comfort zone. This guy makes me a little anxious. This is not respectful for me.

Islam forbids sex outside marriage, and also some of the interpretations of Islam consider listening to music a sin, as well as touching women outside the circle of one’s relatives.

Therefore, Ali was not comfortable around the people who talked about this topic.

Another incident happened to Ahmed with his teacher in the ESL center.

I do not listen to music due to my religious belief, and there was a teacher in the English institution played the music in the beginning of his class. I told him if you wanted to play music tell me, so I could get out of the class until it finishes because it is forbidden in my religion. Unfortunately, this teacher started mocking me, and he said, “We would celebrate in hell you and me.” Therefore, I avoided talking and participating in this class because I did not want to hurt myself.

The story of Ahmed was really powerful, and it portrayed the strong feeling and belief that Saudi students had about their religion. Ahmed said that he was hurt. There was another story about Ahmed when he told his American friend about some of his beliefs and how this friend reacted,

I told my friend that I do not like to socialize with women, and he kept insisting, so I told him that my religion prevented me. He said to me the religion is an old-fashion, and we now in twenty-first century. Afterward, this guy stopped answering my calls and avoiding me since then.
Ali also said that he did not like talking about religion. He shared his story about a classmate that he had in one of the classrooms.

If they do not respect your religion, they will not respect you. The respect is another big thing. If someone likes to talk and debate about the difference between the Islam and Christianity, I will try to avoid this person because you can tell by the way he talks to you. He annoys you and tries to convince you, especially when he throws false accusations, and he is lying. That another thing you do not want to encounter.

Ali said in a clear and loud voice that if a person does not respect your religion, he does not respect you. This is what religion means to Saudi students. That is why Saudi students sometimes do not like going to parties or social events. In some of these events, wine would be served, and women and men mingle with each other, so they are afraid of breaking their faith. Bader expressed the difficulties that he faced when he wanted to make friends with Americans,

Since I am married, I found it very difficult to make a friendship with the female because of my culture. I can’t talk with the girls, and it is very hard to find a man who wants to go with another man. If you go with American friend who is a man, most of the people give some rumors about you in bad words. It will be easier to start a conversation with a female, but since I am married and have different culture, it is going to be difficult for me.

Bader mentioned the difficulty of making a friend with a male American because he was afraid of people thinking of him as homosexual. He experienced that talking with a female was much easier than talking with male, but he could not do it because of his religion. Ali also had expressed the challenges that he faced when he was socializing with American friends. He stated,

Once you get to know them more, the wall of being respectful is going to break, so they try to make you try things you are forbidden to do because they think you will be left out from their group. So, they will try to make you drink, and they try to help you out with drugs and weed. Where I live there are a lot of people smoke weed, so when you hang out with them, you start to think I want to do it once in order not to feel left out. I know some people from my culture do these things, so
they hang out more until they forget what their culture is, and their family is broken now. There should a wall of respect to the culture.

In the literature, I found two studies that mentioned how religious restrictions sometimes prevented people from communicating with host national people. Razek in his 2012 study indicated that Saudi students did not socialize with American students because of their religious restrictions in food and clothes. Saudis’ religion prevents them from drinking alcohol and eating pork, and women are obligated to cover their whole body. Therefore, it is difficult for them to mingle with people who do not understand their religion. Furthermore, in the study by Yue and Le (2013), one participant indicated how his religion kept him from socializing with local students.

Sub-theme 4.3: Saudi students are discouraged from communicating with Americans when they feel that they are distracted from their priorities. The top priority that Saudi students have while they are in the U.S. is their academic achievement (Hall, 2013; Shaw, 2009). Therefore, when anything distracts and contradicts this goal, they diminish it. For example, Ali said, “I avoid interacting people who do not focus on their education because they could distract me from studying.” Even though Ali liked playing sports, he would not socialize with people who put more emphasis on sports than academic work. Bader also expressed how his studies limited the time that he spent with American friends,

One of my friends in my previous institution kept asking me to go out and hang out, but my language was not good, and I have a lot of things to do. I was too busy doing my master research, and my kids kept me busy.

Note that Bader added to academic responsibilities his duties toward his family so his time was split between school and family. In Gareis’s study (2012), international
students pointed out that they did not have sufficient time to socialize with host national students for these reasons.

Conclusion

Four themes and twelve sub-themes emerged from the data. The first theme was identifying a mutual interest. The participants reported that they would search for a common interest that excited them and the American person that they would like to talk with. It might be a hobby, activity, or belief.

The second theme was detecting what attracted American people to communicate with them. The Saudi students reported that American people were eager to communicate with them when the Saudi students showed their self-confidence in their language proficiency and themselves. Also, American people are attracted to someone who sympathizes with their problems. In addition, American people appear to be interested in communicating with Saudi students who are skillful in sports or do well in a class because this shows how smart and exciting this person is. Furthermore, when Saudi students showed hospitality by inviting American people for a drink or food, American people were more excited about communicating with them.

The third theme was about the reasons that pushed the Saudi students to communicate with Americans. Five sub-themes were extracted from this theme. The Saudi students were more inclined to interact with American people when they benefited from their counterparts academically, such as receiving help to understand course material or get their notes. The participants also reported that communicating with American people helped them to improve their English skills and learn the American accent. They also learned more about American culture. In addition, the participants
indicated that they gained skills that facilitated their living in the U.S. and their lives in general; they learned how to manage their time and get things done, and they also deepened their practical understanding of American law. Last but not least, Saudi students indicated that they were more motivated to communicate with American people who respected their culture and religion, who understood their religion and traditions, and who encouraged them to practice their religion without judging them.

The fourth theme was about barriers that discourage Saudi students from communicating with Americans. This theme was comprised of three sub-themes. The Saudi students would not engage in intercultural communication when they felt that their identity was threatened, such as when Americans offended their religion or undermined their principles. Moreover, Saudi students felt discouraged from communicating with Americans when such communication distracted them from their priorities and goals; when the Saudi students felt that communicating with Americans will distract them from their academic goals or their family, they will cease it. The study also revealed that the negative stereotypes that Saudi students or American people had about each other would block the interaction between them. For instance, when the Saudi students had negative stereotypes about African American people, their willingness to communicate with them was low, which was also the case when the male Saudi students encountered American people who were afraid and unwilling to communicate with them because their wives wear the hijab.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I will first examine the implications of my study. Next, I will make recommendations on how higher education institutions could facilitate inter-cultural communication between international students and American students.

Discussion

In the light of the research questions about how Saudi students experienced intercultural communication in the USA, what factors encouraged and discouraged them when seeking to initiate communication with Americans, I found that the Saudi students’ perceptions about intercultural communication were positive in general. They understood the importance of the intercultural communication. They saw its impact on developing their life and language skills. It also improved their academic achievement and helped them to acquire the cultural knowledge of the host culture.

The Saudi students also found ways to manage their anxiety and uncertainty. They identified the factors that helped them to communicate with American people such as finding a similar interest, showing empathy and hospitality to American people, and being interesting. All of these factors (in addition to finding what attracted the Saudi students to communicate with Americans) helped the Saudi students to manage their anxiety and uncertainty to be within the minimum and maximum boundary conditions.
The Saudi students were more confident and less anxious when they knew what they wanted and what Americans yearned for.

Sometimes the Saudi students’ confidence disappeared, and their uncertainty and anxiety levels were aroused beyond the maximum thresholds when they encountered communication barriers like negative stereotypes or the threat of losing their identity. In these cases, Saudi students were less motivated to interact with American people.

In general, I was surprised about the positivity of my participants’ experience. I thought their experience with communicating with Americans would be more negative and that they would discuss the barriers rather than the motivators. The reason behind this perception is the literature that I found, which mainly indicated the difficulties and challenges, rarely mentioning the success (Gareis, 2012; Harrison, 2011; Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Lin & Rancer, 2003; Neuliep & Ryan, 1998; Yue & Lê, 2013). In addition, as an international student, I have not been successful in engaging in intercultural communication with American people. Furthermore, Ali’s and Bader’s experiences in general were more positive than Ahmed’s experiences. Their attitudes toward American people and culture were more favorable than Ahmed’s attitude. It seems to me that their fathers’ prior experiences with American people during 1980s-1990s might have helped them make faster cultural adjustments than Ahmed. In addition, Ali came to the U.S. in 2008, and Bader came in 2010 while Ahmed came later in 2012. Al-Khedaire’s study (1978) confirmed the positive relationship between the length of stay and the cultural perceptions. Furthermore, Ahmed’s major is education whereas Bader specializes in science, and Ali specialized in engineering. Jammaz (1972) found that students who were majoring in science and engineering were more adjusted than the
students who were majoring in humanities. Additionally, the students specializing in humanities were more concerned with their English language proficiency than students majoring in science (Al-Shedokhi, 1986).

The theme of identifying a common interest was mentioned several times in the interviews. The mutual interest might be sports, shared similar values, or smoking hookah, according to the participants. For example, Bader noticed that his friend in the lab was a devoted Christian, so when he talked about religion, he found that his friend was interested in this topic even though their religions were different. Ali, for instance, came from a country that is not famous for playing basketball or football, but when he saw that Americans liked playing these sports, he tried to be good at them, and this helped him to become more involved with Americans. This is consistent with previous studies (Gareis, 2012; Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Kudo & Simkin, 2010). For these reasons, it is crucial for the international students who would like to make friends with American people to identify what interests them.

The participants mentioned four factors that attracted American people to communicate with them: self-confidence, empathy, being interesting, and hospitality. Self-confidence in oneself is critical because without such confidence, the person would not have the courage to start the conversation, even though his/her English proficiency skills are high. Therefore, if the international students would like to improve their English skills through conversations with Americans, they need to have confidence in themselves, because when their English skills have improved, American people will be more likely to communicate with them. For example, Ali explained how his courage helped him to develop his English and get to know American people,
The language and the way you speak may extend the conversation more than if you only know a few words. When I first came here, the conversation usually took a minute and two. As I go on and learn more words and learn how to speak it, the conversation last for five minutes, and so on.

If Ali had shied away from the opportunities and not talked with American people, his English would not have improved as dramatically.

That empathy was such an important factor is a surprising finding. Empathy is revealed in Ahmed’s quotation when he said, “I try to show my weakness, and that I am ignorant about this thing, or I might show that my language proficiency is low. When I did this I find this person is happy to help me.” The way that Ahmed asked for help was fascinating to me because it helped him to get what he wanted, which was conversing with American people. I did not find any other report of an international student in the literature who applied this technique.

Furthermore, one of the things that encouraged American people to interact with Saudi students was when the students were doing interesting things such as being good at sports or achieving high marks in a class. For this reason, it is significant for international students to be more active inside and outside the classroom if they are serious about making friends with Americans. They have to show the Americans that they are interesting people, and communicating with them will be fun and exciting. The literature did not reveal this factor, although there were articles about intimacy and attraction between men and women, which may be related.

While I was analyzing the data, I found that the phrase “invite them” was repeated many times. It seems that hospitality is a common approach of Saudi students when talking with American people. They want this person to get the message that they really care about him/her and would like to be friends. I could not find an article about the
intercultural communication or friendship that mentioned this concept. It would be interesting to do further research about the cultural concept of hospitality in Saudi Arabia and how it is practiced by Saudi students in America since it seems to have an effect on intercultural communication.

The third theme was about the factors that encouraged Saudi students to interact with American people to help with academics. Some prior studies indicated that international students communicated with American students for academic purposes (Al Murshidi, 2014b; Shaw, 2009). However, I think there is a need for more research about this, and how communicating with American people enriched the international students’ academic experience. Furthermore, the participants indicated how communicating with American people helped them to attain life and business skills. There were several studies that mentioned the impacts of studying abroad on personal growth such as being more independent and assertive (Gill, 2007; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Kung 2007; Wan, 1996).

All of the participants reported that they communicated with American people to increase their cultural awareness of American culture, although Ali and Bader were interested in learning more about American culture before they came to the U.S. since they were fond of it, while Ahmed was not interested in American culture until after he came to the U.S. In spite of the different interests, all of the participants agreed that knowing American culture would facilitate their life in the U.S. and let them engage more fully with members of the local American community.

The fourth theme focused on communication barriers. The fear of losing their identity was obvious in Ahmed and Ali’s interviews. They thought that immersing
themselves within American culture would lead to abandoning their culture and religion. Therefore, they became limited in their communication with Americans. In addition, because the Saudi students considered religion a social identity that they had to maintain, they seemed to avoid any communication that threatened or contradicted their religious practices and beliefs.

The commitment that Saudi students have to their country and religion is obvious in the literature (Abdel Razek, 2012; Heyn, 2013). Similarly, when their religion or country was offended, the participants in this research would try to correct the misunderstanding that a person had. For instance, Bader said,

If a person says something bad about my religion, background, or he tries to discriminates me and offend me, absolutely I am going to avoid them after I explain to him what he said is very wrong and offended me and my people in my culture. If he does not understand me or mean to do it, I will avoid him.

Also, Ahmed told a story about a classmate who thought that every Saudi had his own oil field. He said, “I explain to her that in Saudi Arabia, we had poor and middle class like every country, and we are not filthy rich.” The Saudi students thought of themselves as ambassadors for their country, so they tried to be good examples their culture.

Limitations and Future Research

The study was conducted within a time constraint so therefore the sample size was small; also, the researcher was not able to triangulate the data. In addition, the study only focused on the male Saudi students who have been in the U.S. for at least three years. For future research, it would be more representative and accurate if the researcher had a larger sample, so that the study would demonstrate more diverse perspectives and description about the issue. In addition, it would be interesting to inquire about the female Saudi students’ experience, especially women who wear hijab. Moreover, all of the
participants have been in the United States for three years or more. Would the Saudi students who have been in the U.S. for two years or less have different and more challenging experiences? Another way to explore intercultural communication phenomena would be to include American students as participants so their experiences in communicating with Saudi students could be compared and contrasted.

Lastly, this study uses qualitative research methods to gain deeper understanding of this phenomenon. AUM theory has been tested quantitatively, though not with Saudi students, and applying quantitative research methods to a larger sample would provide insight into whether the themes identified here have more generalizability. Also, another relevant intercultural communication theory that could be used to explore this phenomenon using either qualitative or quantitative research methods is Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (Kassing, 1997). Kassing proposed that a person who is willing to communicate with people from his/her own culture would not necessarily be willing to communicate interculturally (Kassing, 1997). It would be fascinating to inquire about the Saudi students’ intercultural willingness to communicate.

Recommendations

For future practices, there are various recommendations for Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) (sacm.org), American universities and departments, and instructors based on the findings of this research. SACM should establish a mandatory pre-departure orientation for Saudi students who plan to study abroad. In this orientation, Saudi students have workshops and presentations about American culture and people. They learn American customs, traditions, and values. In addition, there is a vast literature about intercultural communication that Saudi students should be provided with, an
overview of intercultural communication and tips, and techniques for communicating effectively with people from different cultures, especially host national people. The Saudi students should learn to be more open-minded and not to be swayed by stereotypes.

Moreover, higher education institutions in the US should make more effort to facilitate intercultural communication. The participants praised the activities that international offices did in their universities, but they said the activities were inadequate. According to Bader, the international day where the international students showcase their cultures should be every week instead of each semester; each week a different country/culture could be highlighted. Ahmed also suggested that the university should establish a one-credit course that international students must take in their first semester in the university. In this course, the international students would learn practical information about American culture. Furthermore, Ali pointed out an interesting way of getting the international students, especially the Saudi students more engaged with the American people and culture,

Mandate the Saudi students to live in a dorm for at least one semester, and they should be roommate with American students to learn more about culture. Those roommates should be selective and taught what to do, how to do, what you expect, and respectful to the boundaries of the person’s culture and religion.

All of the participants emphasized that universities should sponsor trips and activities that could bond international and American students together.

English as a Second Language centers also plays a central role of helping the Saudi students to communicate with host national people. For example, Bader mentioned an activity that the English institution at his university encouraged him to do,

When I was in the ESL, I did a research about obesity. So, they give me a survey to send it to the American people, and try to collect data from them. That is a
good idea to encourage the students to go outside the class and talk with Americans and gain confidence.

Most of the ESL programs have a conversation partner program where the students have a chance to talk with native English speakers. It is critical for the ESL programs at universities to attract as many American students as they can to cover international students’ needs for interacting with American people. The program should also consider the international students’ need to be involved in the American society and develop friendships with American students. Therefore, creating a cohort for students in the beginning of their studies in the program that includes both international and host national students will help them to get along with each other because they will meet each other in most of their classes. In addition, Ali mentioned what his college did to make an effort to let the students get to know each other,

In the Engineering College, we have a class every fall where they gather all the students for that department. They divided them into 25 teams. They usually try not to put the Saudi students in one team. The teams do a big project. Last year, we made a chocolate pudding and sell them. We work together for the whole semester. The class is mandatory.

This activity will help the Saudi students socialize and get to know American people.

Ahmed suggested, “The departments, especially the education departments, [should] design a course where the students know about each other’s culture. It should be fun and full of extracurricular activities and discussion.” Instructors should be more aware of their responsibility of helping the international students develop their confidence in communicating with American people. They should pair international students with American friends in class projects and assignments. They should also assign seats for the students to facilitate the mixing of international students with the
American students. Lastly, they should design a syllabus that engages the international students in discussing topics that matter to the international students.
REFERENCES


dissertation). Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.


Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission (2012). Retrieved from:
http://www.sacm.org/ArabicSACM/pdf/Posters_Sacm_schlorship.pdf


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

April 13, 2015

Suffian Al-Mosbat
47 Lightning Lane
Kirk, Ohio 44240

From: Sharon Mosharty, IRR Administrator

To: IRB Number 20130045 “A Case Study of Interpersonal Communication between Students and Adolescents”

Thank you for submitting your Exemption Request for this referenced study. Your request was approved on April 13, 2015. The protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and meets the following exempt category for exemptions:

☐ Exemption 1 – Research conducted in established or community accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.

☐ Exemption 2 – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.

☐ Exemption 3 – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, and subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.

☐ Exemption 4 – Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.

☐ Exemption 5 – Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise improve public programs or services.

☐ Exemption 6 – Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study’s design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or induce activities that are not within the exempted exception category, please contact me to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another Exemption Request. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of the letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Cc: S. MacDonald, Advisor
Cc: Valerie Galloway – IRB Chair

Approved: letter form is enclosed
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
College of Education
Akron, OH 44325-4208
(330) 972.7773 Office
(330) 972.2452 Fax

Informed Consent

A case study of intercultural communication between Saudi students and Americans

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Suliman Al musaiteer, a master student in the department of Educational Foundations & Leadership at the University of Akron.

The purpose of this research is to explore the Saudi students' experiences, who are studying in the American universities, with communicating with American people. The researcher would like to identify the factors that encourage the Saudi students to begin a conversation with American people and the impediments of starting the conversation in particular. You are selected because you met the research criterion, which is an adult Saudi student who are studying in one of the American universities for at least two years. There are three participants in the study. The participants will be interviewed, and the interview will last for one hour and a half. The participants will ask to respond on the researcher’s questions, and the participants will be given a sufficient time to reflect on these questions. The researcher may ask the participants for a follow-up interview.

There are no known risks or benefits from participating in this study. You may refuse to participate in this study or withdraw from this study at any time. Your participation is voluntary.

No identifying information will be collected, and your interview recording will be protected by password information—no one knows except the researcher. The recording will be disposed after the researcher analyzes it. You will be given a pseudonym.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Suliman Al musaiteer on (484) 557-9692. This project has been reviewed by the University of Akron Institution
Review Board (IRB). If you have any question about your rights as a research participant, you may call the IRB at (330) 972-7666.

This informed consent statement will be read aloud to you before the interview, and you will read it and sign it.

Name: ____________________________________________________.
Date: ______________________.
Signature: _________________________.
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

RESEARCH QUESTIONS (RQ): What are the Saudi students’ experiences who are studying in the American universities with communicating with American strangers?

Sub Questions:

1. What are the Saudi students’ perceptions about intercultural conversation?
2. What are the factors that encourage Saudi students to initiate a conversation with American people?
3. What are the barriers that discourage Saudi students to initiate a conversation with American people?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

These questions were designed to gather qualitative data from Saudi students studying in American universities to discuss their experiences with communicating with American strangers.

The questions are related to the factors that help or prevent Saudi students from initiating a conversation with Americans.

Key:
RQ = Research Question
SQ 1 = Research Question #1
SQ 2 = Research Question #2
SQ 3 = Research Question #3

**Introduction:**

I will remind the participants of the purpose of the study, and there is no obligation to answer all the questions. His name and identity will be concealed. I will ask for his permission to record the interview and require from him to sign the consent form.

**Part 1: Preliminary Information:** in this part, I will ask the participants about their perceptions and expectations about the U.S. and the people.

1. How long have you been in the U.S.?
2. Could you please tell me about what did you hope to gain from an American education?
3. Can you describe your perception about the U.S. and American people before you came to the U.S?
4. Does your perception change now? In what aspects does it change?

**Part 2 (SQ 1): Intercultural Communication Experience:** in this section, my questions will be concentrated on the Saudi students previous’ experiences of communicating with American people and their perceptions of the benefits of communication with Americans.

1. Are you interested in learning about American culture and getting to know
American people? What leads you to say that?

2. Tell me about your experience with meeting and getting to know American people?

3. Have you had a positive experience getting to know an American person? If yes, describe your experience, but if no, what happened?

4. How often do you interact with American people?

5. Do you have American friends? Describe your friendship with them.

6. Are there benefits of being a friend with American? Could you elaborate more?

7. Are there disadvantages of being friends with an American? Could you explain further?

Part 3 (SQ 2): helping factors of initiating a conversation with American:

1. In your opinion, what are the factors that help you to communicate with American people? Be more specific

   a- Self-confidence?

   b- Language?

   c- Perceived similarities between you and the person?

   d- Positive expectation?

   e- Attraction?

2. Could you please tell me about the reasons that let the American people to speak with you? Give an example?
Part 4 (SQ 3): Communication Barriers of initiating a conversation with Americans:

1. Describe for me the communication barriers that you have encountered when you initiate a conversation with American? Give some examples?
   
a- Shyness?
b- Discrimination?
c- Lost identity?
d- Rigidity?
e- Stereotype?

2. What are the reasons that prevent American people from communicating with you?

Part 5: Accommodations and Suggestions:

1. Has your university provided activities to engage students like you in intercultural communication? Have they been effective?

2. What are your suggestions for the university to promote the communication with American people?