DISCERNING IDENTITY: A GROUNDED THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM AND FORMER MUSLIM STUDENTS’ SHIFTS IN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY AT TWO MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITIES

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Committee:
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Russell Mills
ABSTRACT

Bruce Collet, Advisor

This study examines the shifts of international Muslim students’ religious and/or cultural identity as they studied at one of two Midwestern universities. This study uses an inductive approach to analyze interview data for the purpose of answering the central question: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing in regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? And, the following sub-questions are addressed: What is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? What are the implications of these shifts? Using a grounded theory approach, these questions are answered using inductively arrived at axial categories, which include independence, exposure, and questioning, and a central category of discernment. The categories resulted from the participants’ data, and help understand what shifts international Muslim students are experiencing. Additionally, these categories help to understand what is contributing to these shifts, and what the implications of these shifts are.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with international Muslim and former Muslim students who were studying, or had studied at one of the two chosen universities. These participants were selected as a result of their status as international students, in addition to their Muslim or former Muslim identities.

The results of the study revealed that many of the participants did experience a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity while studying at one of the two Midwestern universities. Furthermore, the results showed that many of the participants’ shifts in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, were a result of studying at one of the two universities. The participants who experienced a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity appeared to all share in a similar
process, which led them to their shift. In this process, the participants had to consider what the implications of their shift were, especially with regard to their home culture.

This study shows that some international Muslim students may experience a unique shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity as a result of studying at one of the two universities. This study also shows what contributes to these students’ shifts, and what the implications of their shifts are, especially as they relate to their home culture.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And most of all, thank you Leigh Ann. My words will never do justice to what you mean to me, and to the impact you have had, and continue to have on my life. You reflect the image of the creator, and I am thankful that because of you, I get to share in his glory. You are the plumb line for which all beauty is measured. I love you.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Higher education is an important time in many individuals’ formation of their spiritual, religious, and cultural identity (Astin, Astin, & Lindeholm, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009; Fowler, 1981; Erikson, 1963; Nash, 2001; Kim, 2012). In the 2011/2012 school year, 56,664 students (undergraduates and graduates) from the Middle East studied in United States. In the 2012/2013 school year, 71,170 students from the Middle East studied in the U.S. (Open Doors Data, 2013). Many of students coming from the Middle East identify as Muslim (Pew Forum, 2013). The majority of literature on spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation has been conducted in the U.S., looking at American students, and generally students who identify as Christian (Nash, 2001).

For international Muslim students it can be presumed that spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation is also occurring, yet, little research has been done on their spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation in the context of American higher education. Significant research has been done on international students’ experiences regarding culture shock and acculturative stress (Orberg, 1960; Adler, 1975; Bochner, 1982; Berry, 2005; Kim, 2012; Bang & Montgomery, 2013) in which culture, spirituality, and/or religion play a role in such processes, but little research has been done on international students’ spiritual and religious identity formation that may also be occurring simultaneously with their cultural identity formation as understood through culture shock and acculturative stress. Additionally, for many international Muslim and former Muslim students, a shift in religious and/or cultural identity may be deemed illegal depending upon their countries apostasy laws, and therefore, the implications of a shift in their religious and/or cultural identity may negatively impact their livelihood. As more international Muslim students come to the U.S. to study higher education, I believe the more
imperative it is to better understand their religious and cultural identity formation within an American higher education context, while also seeking to understand what the implications of their shifts in religious and cultural identity may be.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand what shifts international Muslim students are experiencing with regard to their Muslim and/or cultural identity. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to understand what is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in religious and/or cultural identity, and to understand what the implications of these shifts are, especially as it relates to their home country. Many Middle Eastern and North African countries have laws prohibiting blasphemy and apostasy (Pew Research, 2012). These laws are important when considering what types of shifts international Muslim students may experience regarding their Muslim and/or cultural identity. The central question of this study is: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing in regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? And sub-questions: What is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? What are the implications of these shifts?

**Significance of the Study**

Significant research has been done on higher education’s impact on students’ spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation. Yet, as mentioned, the majority of this research looks at American students who typically come from an American Christian home. Little research has been done on students with minority religious and/or cultural identities, and even less has been done on international students’ spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation. At a time when the number of international Muslim students coming to the U.S. to study continues to
increase, I believe it is important to understand what these students’ religious and cultural identity formation looks like here in the U.S., what factors are informing it, and what the implications of this formation process and its results are. Furthermore, I believe that his study, while providing insight into what shifts international Muslim students are experiencing with regard to their religious and/or cultural identity, can also provide recommendations on how to better serve and support international Muslim students in their identity formation process.

**Researcher’s Background**

I grew up in a relatively conservative and legalistic Christian home, in which many things not considered Christian were prohibited, including secular music, rated R movies, alcohol, premarital sex, and the like. During my transition from high school to college, I began dating a girl who did not share my religious beliefs. As a result of this, I became conflicted with my religion and began to question it, yet, at the same time, I still maintained it through religious engagement, attending church and praying. However, my freshman year I had a professor that impacted my Christian identity significantly. He was an agnostic who challenged my faith, which brought forth a religious struggle followed by religious skepticism and ultimately a loss of my Christian identity. The end of my sophomore year however, I came back to Christianity, however, it looked much different from the Christianity I had grown up with. My renewed Christian identity was not impacted by a professor, or coursework, but by a community of students who I developed a relationship with. Simultaneously as I was developing these friendships I was going through a difficult break-up from the girl I had begun dating prior to attending college. This break-up was a relatively traumatic event, which catapulted me into a time of identity confusion and negotiation. My beliefs, which initially at the time, were not situated in Christianity, did not sustain me in this time of difficulty, and rather than isolate
myself I sought comfort in the interpersonal intimacy I received from a new community of friends. These students, who became my friends, broke the stigma that I had put on members of my former religious community during my time away from my religion. I had come to believe that members of my former Christian community were what I deemed to be ignorant and narrow-minded. Their doctrine conflicted with my relationships and behaviors, and therefore my identity. My interactions with these students, however, were anything but reflective of this stigma.

These students, although having a Christian identity, simultaneously experienced religious struggle, which they referred to as “wrestling and testing.” They questioned their beliefs and tenants of Christianity, for the purpose of further understanding the validity of Christianity as situated in a pluralistic world, which the university had facilitated. They had an ecumenical worldview, “which is a measure of pluralistic competence that reflects having an interest in diverse worldviews, accepting others, and believing in human interconnectedness” while at the same time holding committed traditionalists’ orthodoxy of their religion (Bryant, 2011, p. 461). Through their scholarship, they held that their orthodoxy in Christianity and ecumenical worldview coexisted without contradiction. I came to understand this through religious engagement, reading the Bible and works of theology and attending a campus church. As a result, my religious skepticism decreased, and although my religious struggle increased, so did my religious engagement and religious commitment.

Furthermore, during my junior year of college, I studied abroad in Madrid, Spain. As an international student, I experienced acculturative stress, which resulted in a strengthening of my faith as I clung closer to it for meaning and comfort. I grew further in religious commitment, however my behaviors and attitudes became more aligned, to a certain extent, with the Spaniards.
and other international and American students that I engaged with, who for the most part, identified themselves as atheists. Although I would testify that I grew stronger in my faith while studying abroad, my new behaviors and attitudes would likely resemble, especially in my home culture, as a weakening of my faith. Experiencing a growth in faith, while simultaneously a weakening of what I will refer to as culture while studying abroad, is a prominent theme throughout this study.

**Organization of Thesis**

The organization of the thesis chapters is as follows.

Chapter I: Introduction, provides an overview for the study by including its purpose and significance, in addition to the central research question, and sub-questions, and organization of the thesis.

Chapter II: Literature Review, provides a review of existing literature pertaining to spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation in higher education, international student identity development, international education as a business, the practice of Islam on a university campus, Muslim student organizations, and profiles and demographics of the participants’ countries of origin. This chapter looks at this varied literature to provide a foundation for the study, and at times, help provide insight into the results.

Chapter III: Methodology, outlines the methods used for conducting this grounded theory study. The chapter provides my rationale for using a qualitative methodology and grounded theory design. It follows with my participant and site selection, profiles of the participants, data collection methods and procedures. A review of my measures to ensure validity is included, as well as the limitations to the study.
Chapter IV: Results, presents the findings of the research. The findings are organized by emergent themes, and provide verbatim quotes from the participants discussing their experiences regarding shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, as well as the contributions to, and implications of their shifts, in the event they experienced a shift.

Chapter V: Discussion, provides a discussion and analysis of the participants’ experiences regarding their shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, using three axial categories, independence, exposure, and questioning, followed by the central category of discernment. The chapter also looks at the implications of the participants’ shifts, specifically with regard to their home country. Additionally, the chapter provides an inductive framework detailing the process of the participants’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity.

Chapter VI: Conclusion, concludes the study with a review of the findings. Additionally, it includes recommendations for practice, regarding universities’ role in supporting international Muslim students, and future research, regarding ways the study could be improved upon.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to cultural and religious identity formation of higher education students, international student identity development, international Muslim students studying in the U.S., Muslim identity in an American university context, the business of international education, and information regarding apostasy and blasphemy laws in the participants’ home countries. The literature will focus on similar research that has been conducted on the topic of cultural and spiritual identity formation in a higher education context. In addition, it will provide important information regarding international Muslim students’ experiences in higher education in the U.S., and important facts about the countries from where many international Muslim students, and specifically the participants in this study, are coming from. This literature was selected to provide a general understanding of the nature these topics, and will be used as an introduction to the central question: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing in regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? And sub-questions: What is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or religious identity? What are the implications of these shifts?

Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommend that, in the case of grounded theory, no literature review is needed since, in a grounded theory study, it would be impossible to know what will emerge from the data. Nonetheless, this literature review is used, as mentioned, to provide a general understanding of some of the nuances present in the subject of this study that may inform parts of the study’s analysis.

It is important to note that this study, in seeking to understand international Muslim students’ shifts as they relate to their Muslim and/or cultural identity, must define what a shift is. In the context of this study, a shift may include a strengthening, weakening, or loss of one’s
Muslim and/or cultural identity. An example of a weakening or loss of cultural identity may include an individual who comes from a conservative culture and undergoes a liberalization of their identity so that it no longer aligns with the conservativeness of their home culture. In the case of this study, cultural identity is defined as an individual’s identity as influenced by belonging to a group or culture (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). In the case of this study, the group of influence will be the participants’ home countries.

Lastly, it is important to note that although many theoretical frameworks for understanding both religious and cultural identity formation are provided in this literature review, they in no way comprise the theoretical framework for which to understand the data in this study. Again, the purpose of this literature review is to provide a foundation for the study, and a general understanding of some of the nuances to be encountered in this study.

**International Muslim Students Studying in the U.S.**

In the 2012/2013 school year, 819,644 international students (undergraduates and graduates) attended higher education institutions in the U.S. Of these 819,644 students, 71,170 of them were from the Middle East. In 2011/2012, 56,664 students from the Middle East studied in the United States (Open Doors Report, 2013), an increase of 25.6 percent, and more than double the percentage of East Asian international students (Open Doors, 2013). This dramatic increase of international Middle Eastern students, according to the Institute of International Education (2013), has been a trend since the 2006-2007 school year. Of the countries sending students to study in the U.S., Saudi Arabia sent the most for the 2012-2013 school year with 44,566 students, a 30.5 percentage increase from the previous year. Oman had

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1 Countries comprising the Middle East are: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, U.A.E., Yemen (Open Doors Data, 2013).
the largest percentage increase from the 2011-2012 school year to the 2012-2013 school year with an 82.2 percentage increase, followed by Kuwait with a 37.4 percentage increase, Iraq with a 32.8 percentage increase, and Yemen with a 31.2 percentage increase (Open Doors, 2013). These increases are due to a number of reasons, including better schools, greater recruiting, and full scholarships provided by countries of citizenship (Redden, 2013). Open Doors Data (2013) provided information regarding fields of study for India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, finding that for India, Iran, and Turkey, Engineering was the most popular field, whereas for Saudi Arabia it was Intensive English. Regarding other countries of interest to this study, no information was provided regarding what their students were studying.

California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois accepted the most international students for the 2012-2013 school year, and a significant portion of these students were from the Middle East (Open Doors Report, 2013). Of the countries that make up the Middle East and Northern Africa, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Palestine territories, Kuwait, and Libya have populations that are approximately 95 percent Muslim (Pew Research, 2009A). Other countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa consist of majority Muslim populations. These countries include Syria at 92 percent, Bahrain at 81 percent, and the United Arab Emirates at 76 percent (Pew Research, 2009A). Turkey is 98 percent Muslim, and Iran is 99.7 percent Muslim (Pew Research, 2009B). As a result of such statistics, it can be assumed that the majority of students studying in the U.S. from the Middle East and Northern Africa identify as Muslim.
Table 1: Research Participant Country Profiles (including U.S.)

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<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Dominant Religion</th>
<th>State Religion</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Apostasy/ Blasphemy Laws</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Constitutional Monarchy</td>
<td>1,281,332</td>
<td>Islam (70.3%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Federal Republic</td>
<td>1,220,800,359</td>
<td>Hindu (79.5%)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Theocratic Republic</td>
<td>79,853,900</td>
<td>Islam (99.5%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Parliamentary Democracy</td>
<td>31,858,481</td>
<td>Islam (99%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Constitutional Monarchy</td>
<td>6,482,081</td>
<td>Islam (97.2%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
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<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Monarchy</td>
<td>26,939,583</td>
<td>Islam (93%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>87.2%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Republican Parliamentary Democracy</td>
<td>80,694,485</td>
<td>Islam (98%)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>U.A.E.</td>
<td>Federation with specified powers delegated to the UAE federal government and other powers reserved to member Emirates</td>
<td>5,473,972</td>
<td>Islam (76.9%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Constitution-based federal republic; strong democratic tradition</td>
<td>316,668,567</td>
<td>Christianity (78.3%)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Republic</td>
<td>25,408,288</td>
<td>Islam (99.1%)</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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International Education as a Business

The motivations behind international education are changing (Lee & Rice, 2007). For a long time international education was motivated by diplomacy, intercultural exchange, and, more recently, globalism (Lee & Rice, 2007). The economic impact that economies have witnessed and benefited from as a result of international education has informed, arguably, a new motivation with regards to international education: economic stimulus (Lee & Rice, 2007). Due to the economic motivation of international education, international students have come to be understood as “customers’ and ‘consumers”, which has resulted in “increased recruitment of

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2 Information provided by Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2013).
3 Information provided by Index Mundi (2013).
international students for revenue” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 383). The majority of international students pay full tuition (Lee & Rice, 2007). Understanding international students as a monetary gain has, perhaps, resulted in higher education institutions providing little consideration for international students’ experiences once they have enrolled and gone through orientation (Lee & Rice, 2007). The most popular programs recruiting international students are Business Management and Engineering programs, which make up over 40 percent of the international students recruited, followed by Math and Computer Science (Open Doors Data, 2013).

In the 2009-2010 school year, international students contributed $18.8 billion to the U.S. economy, and in the 2011-2012 school year, their contribution was $21.8 billion (O’Connell, 2012). In the 2012-2013 school year, international students contributed $24 billion to the U.S. economy. Additionally, international students supported 313,000 jobs in the U.S. (Open Doors Report, 2013; O’Connell, 2013). International students also pay more tuition than domestic students- up to three times as much in states like Washington (Lewin, 2012). As of 2013, in the state of Washington, a bill proposed by Washington state senators, Andy Hill (R), Rodney Tom (D), and Barbara Bailey (D), sought a 20 percent increase in tuition for international students to generate revenue and further help subsidize Washington state students’ tuition expenses (Redden, 2013). For the 2012/2013 school year, 64 percent of students reported their primary source of funding for schooling in the U.S. as either personal and family funds, while 21 percent reported their primary source of funding as their U.S. college or university (Donovan, 2013; Open Doors Report, 2013). Additional funding was reported as coming from their home country government or universities and other sources (Donovan, 2013; Open Doors Report, 2013).
Acculturation, Culture Shock, and the International Student Identity Model

The challenges international students face when transitioning to a new culture and environment are widely considered a result of acculturative stress (Brown & Aktas, 2011). Acculturation may be defined as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Stresses international students face may come from new and uncomfortable experiences surrounding their new physical environment which includes food, housing, transportation, weather, and their new cultural environment, which includes language barriers, social interactions, and implicit social norms and behaviors (Kim, 2012). Other stresses may arise from academic pressure, financial hardship, and homesickness (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Four dimensions for identifying people in the acculturation process are: integrationists: individuals who interact with other cultural groups while valuing and maintain their own; separatists: individuals who do not interact with other cultural groups; assimilationists: individuals who interact with other cultural groups at the expense of maintaining their own culture; and marginalized individuals who neither maintain their own culture or interact with other cultural groups (Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Bochner (1982) identified four psychological responses to acculturation: passing, chauvinists, marginal, and mediating (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Those considered passing, are individuals who embrace their host cultural at the expense of their home culture, while those considered chauvinists reject their host culture while glorifying their home culture (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). Marginal individuals do not embrace their home culture or host culture, while mediating individuals incorporate both host and home cultures to create a new culture.
An initial problem often regarding acculturative stress is that of culture shock (Bang & Montgomery, 2013; Brown & Aktas, 2011).

Culture shock can be understood as an anxiety that results from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, and their substitution by other cues that are strange (Brown & Aktas, 2011, p. 340). Oberg (1960) said culture shock induces two reactions: rejection of the new host culture, and regression regarding one’s home culture. The latter is understood as “irrational glorification of everything from one’s own culture” (Kim, 2012, p. 105). Oberg (1960) understood culture shock as having four stages: the honeymoon stage; the crisis or culture shock stage; the adjustment or recovery stage, and the adaptation stage. These stages form a U-curve of transitional experience beginning with an initial positive experience, leading to a crisis, a recovery from the crisis, and, ultimately, an ability to adapt to one’s new culture successfully (Kim, 2012). Adler (1975) further expanded Oberg’s four-stage theory to include a fifth stage, as well as acknowledge that an individual may oscillate between stages. Adler’s (1975) additional stage is independence. In the independence stage, individuals come to a place of acceptance and understanding of their host culture and are able to move forward with “further cultural transitions” (Kim, 2012, p. 106). Kim (2012) expanded upon Oberg and Adler’s stage theory further by adding a sixth stage, and, to a degree, redefining the other stages. Kim (2012) refers to these as “phases” rather than stages. Kim (2012) refers to this as the International Student Identity (ISI) Model, taking into account the phases of international students’ psychosocial identity rather than the stages experienced with regards to culture shock. The phases are: Pre-Exposure – Inheriting Self, Exposure – Opening Self, Enclosure – Securing Self, Emergence – Disclosing Self, Integration – Internalizing Self, Internationalization – Globalizing
Self (Kim, 2012). Kim (2012) notes that the phases are not rigidly sequential, and that they build upon one another, “leading to greater stability and integration” (p. 108).

In the first phase, Pre-Exposure – Inheriting Self, students prepare for their studies abroad by researching various institutions, meeting their requirements for study, and learning about the culture and language (Kim, 2012). In this phase students may feel isolated from their parents and peers as they prepare to sojourn to a new country, and they may experience the beginnings of cultural conflicts between their home and host cultures (Kim, 2012). The second phase, Exposure – Opening Self is characterized by students’ arrival to their new host country and exposure, often in unforeseen ways, to the host culture (Kim, 2012). In this phase, students, because of their anticipation for the unexpected, begin to diverge from their parents’ direct influence, and open themselves up to various aspects of the host culture (Kim, 2012). However, students still find themselves with a sense of connectedness to their home culture, and their self as situated in their home culture (Kim, 2012). In the third phase, Enclosure – Securing Self, students begin to withdraw from the host culture and community and socialize only with those who are similar to them with regards to language, culture, and religion (Kim, 2012). In this phase, students may intensely focus on their studies as validation for not acculturating to their host culture (Kim, 2012). They may become concerned that their peers and professors might falsely contribute a lack of academic competency to them as a result of their limited language proficiency (Kim, 2012). Students will begin to identify more with their home culture and seek similar companions through groups comprising of members that share their own culture, religion, and language (Kim, 2012). These groups may be found in religious communities or international student organizations (Kim, 2012). The Emergence – Disclosing Self phase is characterized by a time of reconciling new and old conceptions of students’ identities (Kim, 2012). In this phase,
while students still appreciate “the values of tradition and family”, they also examine “other
legitimate ways of thinking and being through exposure to the pluralistic views of their
multicultural surroundings” (Kim, 2012, p. 110). Students find themselves actively dealing with
these identity conflicts by seeking out resolutions (Kim, 2012). Integration – Internalizing Self
occurs when students are able to “overcome challenges, resolve their identity conflicts, and
successfully reconstruct their identities” (Kim, 2012, p. 110). These students are able to come to
this phase through critical reflection on who they were, who they are, and who they desire to be
(Kim, 2012). These students embrace multicultural values while not adhering to one major
culture as the source of their identity (Kim, 2012). The last phase, Internationalization –
Globalizing Self, happens when students “have fully developed the value of pluralism and
diversity in multiple aspects” (Kim, 2012, p. 110), including “ethnicity, race, gender, nationality,
culture, religion, sexual orientation, political ideology, moral values, behavioral patterns, and
social class” (Kim, 2012, p. 110). These students are inclusive of all people, and view everyone
as “internationalized citizens in a global society” (Kim, 2012, p. 110). Kim (2012) found in her
study, that few students reach phase five, Integration – Internalizing Self, and none that she
interviewed reached the final phase of Internationalization – Globalizing Self.

The Public Practice of Islam

Practicing Islam can be just as much of an external process as an internal one. For
Muslims, the Five Pillars of Islam are understood as physical manifestations of a spiritual
commitment. The Five Pillars are Shahadah: profession of faith; Salah: offering of five daily
prayers, facing Makkah (Mecca), at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening; Zakat:
almsgiving, or offering of 2.5 percent of an individual’s net worth in order to provide for the
welfare of the community; Sawm: fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; Hajj: An
individual’s pilgrimage to Mecca, or a pilgrimage of one on behalf of the individual. Within a higher education context, the practice of Islam is “at once intensely personal and painfully public” (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010, p. 22). Additionally, although not considered pillars, practices such as the wearing of hijab or chador, abstention from drinking, consuming pork, pre-marital sex and, in many cases, dating and interactions with members of the opposite sex, also contribute to the public nature of the practice of Islam. As a result, many Muslims experience discrimination, informed by the pervading stereotypes of Muslims, especially in the context of a post-9/11 America (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010; Steele, 2008).

Muslims become vulnerable to negative stereotypes such as being viewed as “terrorists” or, in the case of Muslim women, as “oppressed” (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010). Therefore, many international Muslim students become highly self-conscious and hesitant to practice Islam on college campuses for fear of discrimination (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010). Additionally, many college campuses do not provide space, especially with regards to prayer, for Muslim students, and, therefore, if a Muslim student decides to pray, it often has to happen very publicly, which can create fears of judgment by other non-Muslim students (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010). While discrimination can have overt negative influences over the social and emotional state of many international Muslim students, these influences can and do spill over into Muslim students’ academic performance, which can further negatively impact Muslim students, creating a cycle of despair and fear (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010). Muslim students experiencing discrimination may be faced with the choice to abandon, or perhaps liberalize their faith for fear of judgment. The manifestations of this may be a lessening or refusal of offering five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, abstaining from drinking, pork, dating, and specifically, in the case of Muslim women, not wearing hijab or chador (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010). In such cases, Muslim students may find
that their social and cultural capital increases with students and professors of the dominant culture, but often this occurs at the expense of the social and cultural capital they have with their family, Muslim peers, and, in some cases, their home country citizenship, and, consequently, their livelihood. To help counter the discrimination Muslim students face, Nasir and Al-Amin (2010) recommend that universities take five measures to make their campuses more “identity-safe” for Muslim students. These measures include: (1) Thriving Muslim student groups; (2) Faculty that is knowledgeable and sensitive to Islam; (3) A larger student community that is knowledgeable and sensitive to Islam; (4) Access to private spaces on campus for prayer; (5) University-provided halal meals, and special meal times for Ramadan.

**Muslim Students Association (MSA) and University Accommodations**

The states accepting the most international students are home to some of the first public and private colleges and universities making formal accommodations for international and domestic Muslim students (Hamdani, 2012). These accommodations include providing prayer rooms and halal meals (Hamdani, 2012). The national student organization, Muslim Students Association (MSA), has been a leading force behind many of these accommodations. MSA has more than 600 chapters on numerous public and private college and universities, and has provided guidelines on how Muslim students can obtain such accommodations (Hamdani, 2012; Mubarak, 2007). MSA was founded in 1963 in the U.S. and Canada to help support Muslims in their religious learning during their years in higher education in efforts to empower Muslim students to work towards the betterment of Muslim societies upon their return to their home country (Mubarak, 2007). The mission of MSA shifted in 1965, when the focus became the integration of international Muslim students into American societies for the purpose of leading fledgling Muslim American communities (Mubarak, 2007). Today, MSA has become the
representative of Islam on American college campuses by “providing a platform for Muslim students to share their common beliefs and practices” (Mubarak, 2007, p. 2). Many Muslims join MSA seeking to better understand Islam, meet other Muslims, and “come to terms with their identity as American Muslims” (Mubarak, 2007, p. 2). Coming to terms with one’s religious identity is an experience a majority of college students have (Nash, 2001; Smith & Snell, 2009; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Hill, 2011).

Apostasy Laws

Merriam-Webster’s defines apostasy as the “renunciation of a religious faith.” There are 20 countries throughout the world that have laws prohibiting apostasy (Pew Research, 2012). Out of those, 13 are in the Middle East and Northern Africa and include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Egypt, and Bahrain (Pew Research, 2012). Five of the 20 countries are located in Asia and include Iran, Afghanistan, and Malaysia (Pew Research, 2012). The additional four countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa (Pew Research, 2012). There are no European or American countries that prohibit apostasy. In countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, apostasy is punishable by death (Economist, 2012). However, even in countries like Lebanon and Turkey, where laws regarding apostasy are quite lenient, “religious authorities and social attitudes can be harsh, with vigilantes inflicting beatings or beheadings” (Economist, 2012, p. 67). Former Muslims also experience persecution in non-Muslim lands. This occurs to such an extent that many do not share their beliefs publicly for fear of harassment from extremists. In many Muslim countries, former Muslims meet on social media websites like Facebook, but must use pseudonyms to protect themselves from persecution (Economist, 2012).
There is a gap in research when it comes to the impact of higher education on students’ religious and spiritual lives (Nash, 2001; Smith & Snell, 2009; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Hill, 2011). The little research that has been conducted on the subject has been performed mostly at religiously affiliated universities (Astin, et al, 2011; Hill, 2009). Furthermore, even less qualitative research has been done to probe students’ own perceptions of how higher education has impacted their religious and spiritual lives, and to explore what facets of higher education (e.g. coursework, social interactions with professors and peers, student organizations, guest lectures, school trips) impact students’ religious and spiritual lives (Hill, 2011). Nonetheless, the college experience occurs for most students during a time period (ages of 18 – 23) when they are undergoing considerable developmental changes. Amidst these changes, students are seeking to understand their identity, and, in doing so, give their lives meaning and purpose (Brown, 2012).

To understand identity in this context, Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages have been used, specifically Identity vs. Identity Confusion and Intimacy vs. Isolation, which both occur at the time of most students’ undergraduate coursework (Atalay, 2007).

For some students, a religious identity provides the meaning and purpose they seek in their life. In the context of higher education, this identity may be something they bring with them, as part of their cultural background, or, it may be something that they arrive at, absent of their cultural background.

Much of the work that has been done with regard to higher education and its role in shaping students’ religious identities has not focused specifically on religion but, rather, on spirituality (Astin, et al, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009). Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) frame spirituality as “the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come
from, our beliefs about why we are here – the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life – and our sense of connectedness to one another and to the world around us” (p. 4).

This meaning and purpose may be rooted in one’s religion, but Astin, et al differentiate spirituality and religion, defining religion as “…adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity or being that is believed to have created and govern the world” (p. 5). They further define religion as having a membership or community component to it, unlike spirituality.

Smith and Snell (2009) categorize people according to what they call, *The Six Major Religious Types* (p. 166). The six types are, *Committed Traditionalists; Selective Adherents; Spiritually Open; Religiously Indifferent; Religiously Disconnected; and Irreligious* (Smith & Snell, 2009). Nash (2001) categorized students into what he called six *Religio-Spiritual Narratives*: orthodoxy, wounded belief, mainline, activism, exploration, and secular humanism. The *Orthodoxy Narrative* encompassed students who believe in an absolute *Truth* that derived from a sacred text, institution, movement, or prophet (Nash, 2001). Smith and Snell (2009) found amongst emerging adults (ages 18 – 23) that *Committed Traditionalists*, or students with *orthodoxy narratives*, are a minority, making up only 15 percent of all emerging adults. It should be noted that both of these studies were conducted in the U.S., and in no way speak for the spiritual and religious make-up of students in other countries.

Erikson’s (1963) *Identity vs. Identity Confusion* is the stage in which “the adolescent enthusiastically tries to find an identity that he/she can espouse; and, thus, the first identity crisis emerges, if he/she is not successful” (Atalay, 2007, p. 20). Erikson (1963) referred to this as a young person’s “search for wholeness” or “a sense of an inner-identity. The young person, in order to experience the *wholeness*, must feel a progressive continuity… between that which he
conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him” (as cited in Atalay, 2007, p. 20). For a young person with a religious identity, wholeness is experienced in their religion, which informs their identity. If they were brought up in that religion, it may be that they situated their identity in that religion because of its accessibility to provide meaning and purpose through its power to socially and personally connect them with their family, friends, and community. A young person who enters into higher education may experience either a reinforcement of their religious identity if they find themselves within a community that shares their religious identity, or they may find themselves experiencing an identity crises if they are not part of a community that shares their religious identity. Even if they do belong to a community that shares their religious identity, in a higher education context, students are exposed to other students who have beliefs, cultures, and worldviews different from their own. Erikson’s Intimacy vs. Isolation stage becomes a pivotal time when young people, undergraduate students in this case, who engage in interpersonal intimacy (social relationships) with others may encounter identity reinforcement or identity questioning (crises), based upon the beliefs and worldviews of those whom they engage with socially. Additionally, if a student isolates him or herself from either those she shares a religious identity with, or those whom she doesn’t, she is susceptible to experiencing either identity reinforcement or identity questioning.

In summary, relationships play an enormous role in a young person’s identity formation. Fowler (1981) expounded upon this, specifically as it pertained to faith.

Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith are chronologically categorized into six stages: Undifferentiated (knowledge and language), Intuitive-Projective (grasp of spiritual truths), Mythic-Literal (discernment of reality and fantasy), Synthetic-Conventional (contradiction in belief and authority structures), Individuative-Reflective (personal ownership of beliefs),
Conjunctive (acceptance of ambiguities), Universalizing (actualization of noblest faith qualities).

For purposes of this study, I will focus on Fowler’s (1981) third stage, known as *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*, and his fourth stage, known as *Individuative-Reflective Faith*. *Synthetic-Conventional Faith* typically occurs between the ages of thirteen and can last until the early twenties (Fowler, 1981). Within this stage, a young person may begin to challenge what they perceive as authoritarian doctrine, institutions, and adherents that they have grown up with. They begin to realize that their faith may not actually be *theirs*, but the authorities (institutional, parental) that have forced it upon them. They may experience a sudden disillusionment with regards to the faith that they have been brought up in that informs a new found skepticism and potential disbelief (Brown, 2012). They may not necessarily openly dispute their faith, but they may attempt to hold to different paradigms like faith and secularism simultaneously for the purposes of appeasing, say, *religious* parents and *secular* friends (Brown, 2012). Students entering university are often considered to be in this stage (Fowler, 1981).

Typically occurring during one’s twenties until late thirties or longer, is the *Individuative-Reflective Faith* stage. In this stage, young people, in this case, college students, experience a *spiritual upheaval* (Fowler, 1981). The spiritual upheaval is characterized by a time of inner-contradiction and conflict, that may be triggered by one’s encounter with beliefs different than their own from people that they admire and respect, or, it may facilitated by a traumatic event that causes them to question the existence of their faith (Brown, 2012). It is in this stage students may find themselves vacillating between their old religious identity and a new identity found in something other than their former faith. For many students, this may be where a religious identity becomes a more general spiritual, or in some cases, irreligious identity. Taking on a spiritual identity allows students the freedom to explore the contradictions and conflicts they
may be experiencing as a result of their former religious identity. It also permits students to hold on to parts of their former religion they find relevant and forgo the parts that they find irrelevant as it pertains to their desired life trajectory. Lastly, it provides a freedom from doctrine they perceive as authoritarian that may potentially marginalize their peers, and perhaps themselves. For these reasons and others, the majority of students consider themselves to have a spiritual identity rather than a religious identity (Astin, et al, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009).

Exposure to college often challenges religious students’ beliefs as students come into contact with other religions, beliefs, and philosophies (Astin, et al, 2011). Astin, et al defined this challenge as Religious Struggle, understood as “the extent to which the student feels unsettled about religious matters… feels distant from God, or has questioned her/his religious beliefs” (p. 21-22). Within a student’s Religious Struggle what Astin, et al refer to as Religious Skepticism (p. 21) may surface. They define Religious Skepticism as “reflecting beliefs such as ‘the universe arose by chance’ and ‘in the future, science will be able to explain everything,’ and disbelief in the notion of life after death” (p. 21). Religious Skepticism and Struggle fall under what the authors consider the Measures of Religiousness (p. 21). Three other measures of religiousness that Astin, et al use that will inform this study are Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, and Religious/Social Conservatism (p. 21). Religious Commitment is “students’ self-rating on ‘religiousness’ as well as the degree to which the student seeks to follow religious teachings in everyday life, finds religion to be personally helpful, and gains personal strength by trusting in a higher power” (Astin, et al, 2011, p. 21). Religious Engagement is “the behavioral counterpart to Religious Commitment… reflecting behaviors such as attending religious services, praying, engaging in religious singing/chanting, and reading sacred texts” (Astin, et al, 2011, p. 21). Religious/Social Conservatism is the degree to which students are opposed to
things such as “casual sex and abortion, a belief that people who don’t believe in God will be punished, and a propensity to use prayer as a means of seeking forgiveness. It also involves a commitment to proselytize and an inclination to see God as a father figure” (Astin, et al, 2011, p. 21). Astin, et al found in their data that while levels of Religious Commitment for students during their higher education remain unchanged for the most part, Religious/Social Conservatism and Religious Engagement decline significantly. Furthermore, they found that a decline in Religious/Social Conservatism appeared to directly contribute to students’ decline in Religious Engagement. The authors additionally found a correlation between declines in Religious/Social Conservatism and Religious Engagement and an increase in Religious Skepticism. However, from their research, they found Religious Skepticism and Religious Struggle to be two distinct phenomena, especially with regards to their relationship to Religious/Social Conservatism and Religious Engagement. Religious Struggle showed to increase with an increase in Religious Engagement, but not a decrease in Religious Engagement (Astin, et al, 2011). They concluded that students “heavily engaged in Religious Struggle are often highly religious” (Astin, et al, p. 113). Additionally, the authors found that the most powerful factor informing Religious Skepticism was the lack of Religious Engagement. Students who did not pray or attend religious services had an increase in Religious Skepticism, while students who attended campus religious organizations had a decrease in Religious Skepticism (Astin, et al, 2011).

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, I believe it is necessary to define some key terms that are important to help better understand the study’s thesis. These terms include culture, religion, conservative, moderate, and liberal.
Culture may be understood as the “knowledge, beliefs, values, skills, and behaviors of a social group” (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006, p. 4). Culture may also be understood as a “unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, pursue happiness and well-being, and derive meaning” (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008, p. 12). It should be noted that there is not one all-encompassing definition of culture in either psychology or anthropology (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). In the context of this study, culture will be understood according to Pai, Adler, and Shadiow’s (2006) definition of culture, however added to it will also be traditions. While traditions may be implied within a definition of culture, I believe it is important to explicitly note this as many of the participants in this study described their culture in terms of its traditions. This definition of culture will be used to understand what this study refers to as cultural identity.

Religion may be defined as “…adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity or being that is believed to have created and govern the world” (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011, p. 5). Religion can be defined further by the membership or community component to it (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). It should be noted that religion, in the context of this study is distinguished from spirituality, which may be defined as “the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here – the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life – and our sense of connectedness to one another and to the world around us” (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 2011, p. 4). I believe it is important to distinguish spirituality and religion because they are often understood synonymously. Astin, Astin, & Lindholm (2011) distinguish between the two further, finding religion to be an expression of spirituality, or informing spirituality. For purposes of this study, I will use Astin,
Astin, and Lindholm’s (2011) definition of religion as it pertains to religious identity, and work with assumption that similar to spirituality, students find meaning and purpose in their religious identity.

Conservative is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “Holding to traditional attitudes and values and cautious about change or innovation, typically in relation to politics or religion.” This definition provides the best definition for what the participants understood as conservative and will be how conservative is defined in this study. Oxford Dictionaries defines moderate as “(Of a person, party, or policy); not radical or excessively right- or left-wing.” This definition is the best fit for what is understood as moderate in this study. Liberal is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “Open to new behavior or opinions and willing to discard traditional values.” This definition best explains the participants’ understanding of liberal and the deemed liberal shifts that occurred in the participants regarding their religious and/or cultural identity.

**Summary**

From the literature reviewed above, it can be argued that participation in higher education can be a highly important and influential time in a young adult’s spiritual, religious, and/or cultural identity formation. It appears that the facets of higher education, specifically in the U.S., such as age range, independence, exposure, critical thinking capacities, and so forth, facilitate the need for many students to question and troubleshoot their identity, especially as it relates to the culture and/or religion they grew up with. The majority of the literature presented in this chapter has heavily focused on American Christian individuals. Little research has been done specifically looking at American higher education’s impact on international students’ spiritual, religious, and/or cultural identity formation, and even less has been done specifically focusing on international Muslim students. There are many variables that are unaccounted for in the present
literature with regard to international Muslim students’ religious and/or cultural identity formation. As a result, I find it imperative to focus on international Muslim students’ experiences regarding shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity while studying at a Midwestern university. Furthermore, I believe it is important to elucidate what is specifically contributing to these students’ shifts, and what the implications of these shifts are.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Overview

Using a qualitative research design and grounded theory approach, this study inductively explores the nature of twelve international Muslim students, and whether they experience shifts in their religious identity, perceptions of Islam, and/or their home culture while they are studying at a Midwestern university. In researching whether these international Muslim students do experience shifts, this study also examines, in the case that a shift has occurred, what has contributed to that shift, and, what the implications of such a shift may be, particularly in their home country. For those participants where no shift has occurred, this study, although not devoting the same amount of attention as those participants who have experienced a shift, does examine why such participants have not experienced a shift while studying in the U.S. International Muslim students who have experienced a shift may help provide insight to the unique challenges and issues that international Muslim students experience while studying in the U.S. Additionally, for those students who are impacted by their time studying in the U.S. enough to result in a shift in their religious identity, and/or perceptions of Islam and their home culture, they may be able to provide significant insight into what these shifts mean for them as Muslims, as citizens, and as members of their familial and societal communities.

Through open, axial, and selective coding, grounded theory allows for the data to guide the study and generate theories rather than using a predetermined theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This is important as similar studies have not been conducted before regarding this topic situated in this context, and, therefore, the literature, and other established theoretical frameworks, may not be able to fully account for what the data in this study brings forth. This chapter will provide my rationale for choosing a qualitative methodology, grounded theory
design, participant and site selection, data collection and procedures, data analysis procedures, and validity criteria. The central question is: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing while studying at two Midwestern universities as it relates to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? The sub-questions are: What is contributing to international Muslim students shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? What are the implications of international Muslim students shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? For those students who do not experience shifts in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, why might that be the case?

**Research Design and Rationale**

This study employs a qualitative methodology for the purposes of yielding thick rich data to help illuminate international Muslim students’ shifts as they relate to their Muslim and/or cultural identity while studying at one of two Midwestern universities. Furthermore, the thick rich data that a qualitative methodology provides will also help elucidate what is contributing to students’ shifts, and what the implications of their shifts are. The participants experienced various types and degrees of shifts as it pertained to their Muslim and/or cultural identity. There were also various factors that contributed to their shifts. Additionally, the implications of the participants’ shifts varied depending upon certain factors.

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

The qualitative tradition fits my research questions, and the purpose of this study, better than a quantitative tradition since I am not seeking to quantify or generalize my findings. Qualitative research also allows me to showcase the importance and authority of individual voice. Creswell (2013) believes that qualitative research, aside from adding to the existing literature, also “can give voice to under-represented groups, probe a deep understanding of a central phenomenon, and… the generation of theory” (p.131). In this study, I seek to give
international Muslim students voice, while probing for a deeper understanding of the shifts that international Muslim students experience in relation to their Muslim and/or cultural identity, and, in the process, generate a theory for understanding why students might be experiencing these shifts and what the implications of these shifts are. I find it is often too easy to explain people’s beliefs and behaviors away by using frameworks, theories, and stages established by great scholars and researchers such as Erikson, Fowler, Kim, and the like (see Chapter II). As a consequence, there is a risk of missing out on the wealth of data coming from one individual who has a life, although similar to an extent as others, still separate from all those lives which share age, origin, language, religion, and so forth. Additionally, I personally find that in the elevation of the individual voice, qualitative research provides a dignity to the individual that counters the temptation to objectify participants for the purposes of my study, and views the participants less as a means to an end, but, rather, an end in and of themselves.

**Rationale for Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is used when a theory is not available to help understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Where there may be other literature and theoretical frameworks that are able to account for the phenomenology to an extent, the theoretical frameworks may be unable to address certain variables that inform the phenomenology. In the case of international Muslim students, there is little literature that speaks directly to the phenomenon of their potential shifts in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, and additionally the contributions to, and implications of their shifts. However, there is extensive literature on international students acculturation experience (Orberg, 1960; Adler, 1975; Kim, 2012), which does account, to an extent, for the phenomenon. Additionally, there is also extensive literature on higher education students’ religious and spiritual identity formation (Erikson, 1963; Fowler, 1981; Smith & Snell, 2009;
Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Brown, 2012). This literature is also able to provide an account, to an extent, of the phenomenon of international students shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, and the contributions to, and implications of their shifts. Yet, none of this literature specifically focuses on Islam, or students’ nationalities and how that may inform the phenomenon. To use the existing literature to fully account for the phenomenon would be disingenuous and vulnerable to misrepresenting the data.

A characteristic that is necessary for this study is my own ability, as a researcher, to remain flexible and open to whatever the data may bring forth. Flexibility and openness are important characteristics of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because the phenomenon is complex, it is important to not take the meanings derived for granted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using only pre-existing theoretical frameworks to analyze the data can lead to taking the data for granted and forcing it to align with the existing literature rather than allowing it speak for itself.

**Participant Selection and Site**

The data collected for this study was done using semi-structured interviews that helped to yield the thick rich description necessary to illuminate how international Muslim students’ experiences studying at one of two Midwestern universities have contributed to their shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, and perceptions of Islam and their home culture. The interviews also elucidated the impact that the participants’ shifts have had on their perspectives regarding their home country and culture, as well as the U.S. and American culture, factors that have contributed to these shifts, and what the implications of these shifts are.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>1st time in U.S</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Plan to Return Home</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Studying with friends/family</th>
<th>Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Sunni-Muslim</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>GFSU</td>
<td>Economics – Undergrad</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Upper-middle class</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>International Education – Graduate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conservative Shia Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Computer Engineering – Undergrad</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Bahrain, Jordan, Iraq</td>
<td>GFSU</td>
<td>Economics – Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>U.A.E</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Intervention Specialist – Undergrad</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>GFSU</td>
<td>Biomedical Engineering – Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Shia Muslim</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Human Development – Undergrad</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conservative Shia Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Biology – Undergrad</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Liberal Sunni and Shia Muslim</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neda</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Chemistry – Graduate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samanta</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>Communication Sciences – Graduate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Liberal Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>GFSU</td>
<td>Biochemistry – Undergrad</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>GFSU</td>
<td>Biochemistry – Graduate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Conservative Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling. I sought out international Muslim students who had either experienced a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, or a shift in their perception of Islam and their home culture while studying at Cardinal State University or Gold Finch State University, both situated in the Midwest. These universities were chosen for their ease of access and because they both had international Muslim student populations. The universities, although both situated in the U.S., varied greatly regarding their setting, domestic and international student population, endowment, and culture as understood by the students.

Table 3: University Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Total Student Population</th>
<th>Int. Student Population</th>
<th>Population of surrounding city</th>
<th>U.S. News Ranking</th>
<th>Research I Institution</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Endowment</th>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>% of Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>21,500</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>29,600</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$166,185,615</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>1.59 (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFSU</td>
<td>31,065</td>
<td>3,759</td>
<td>70,133</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$981,104,000</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>.24 (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I sent out a flyer to gatekeepers, including directors of organizations that served international students, fellow Muslim colleagues, and colleagues who had done research regarding spirituality and higher education. The flyers detailed the type of participant I was seeking in addition to the various components of the study. Utilizing the above gatekeepers, I was provided with the email addresses of potential participants. I used email to reach out to potential participants and schedule interviews. I was also able to gain participants through snowball sampling. Some of the participants connected me, through email, with peers they thought would be interested in participating in the study. The participants were enthusiastic to reach out to their international Muslim peers as they felt that the topics discussed in the interview were relevant, and a few participants commented on the processing actually being therapeutic.
In total, there were twelve participants: five from Gold Finch State University and seven from Cardinal State University. Two of the students from Cardinal State University had recently graduated, but could still speak to the research topics. All of the participants spoke English to an extent that they were comfortable enough to participate in the interview. Although the degrees of English fluency varied between each participant, there were no participants who were unable to answer all of the interview questions. With three of the participants, all from Gold Finch State University, I asked some follow-up questions through email. Below are more in-depth participant profiles by university.

**Cardinal State University: Participant profiles**

**Frank**

The son of an Imam, Frank grew up in a conservative middle class family in Saudi Arabia. He came to Cardinal State University to study electronics and computer engineering, and is in his final semester. He is 24 years old and lives with his sister and brother-in-law who are also students at CSU. At the interview, he wore a bracelet with a marijuana leaf graphic on it, which he bought traveling through the island of Ibiza in Spain over the past summer. He is a Sunni Muslim who intends to stay in the U.S. for his graduate schooling.

**Elaine**

Elaine is a 36 year-old graduate student at Cardinal State University, where she is getting her masters degree in cross-cultural and international education. She is a former professor and sociologist in her home country of Iran. This is her first time in the U.S. Although she grew up in a conservative Shia Muslim middle class home, she became an atheist when she was 27 while studying at university in Iran. Although she became an atheist in Iran, she was inhibited from making this known as a result of apostasy laws in Iran, which restrict any individual born a
Muslim to convert to another religion or no religion. To mask her atheism, she wore hijab. However she did not practice the Five Pillars of Islam, and, consequently, was prevented from receiving any promotions at the university where she taught and conducted research. Elaine intends to stay in the U.S. for her PhD in sociology. However, after obtaining her PhD, Elaine plans on returning to Iran to teach and do research at the university where she was previously employed. Elaine does not wear hijab in the U.S.

**Martin**

Martin is a 29 year-old undergraduate student who is majoring in human development. Originally born in Iran, Martin grew up in Saudi Arabia and identifies himself as a Saudi. Martin’s father is a sheik of a 10,000-person Muslim Shia tribe in northeast Saudi Arabia, near the Iranian border. Martin grew up what he considers to be a strict, conservative home. He has been studying at CSU since 2009. He came here with his cousins, whom he used to live with, but after some financial hardships, no longer lives with. Martin is also divorced from his ex-wife who he married in Saudi Arabia. According to Martin, many of his peers consider him a gifted singer. He has studied music in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and is currently collaborating with a musician at CSU. Although Martin considers music, and specifically singing, to be his passion, singing is not allowed in his faith. He hopes to change this in the future when he returns to Saudi Arabia by creating a new style of music that includes a mix of Arabic and English lyrics. He sang for me during the interview. This is Martin’s first time in the U.S.

**Neda**

Neda is a PhD student in Turkey, and is currently finishing up her year at CSU as a visiting researcher in the chemistry department. She is 36 years old and identifies as a Sunni Muslim. She grew up on a farm in Turkey in a middle class family and attended university in
Istanbul for her undergraduate degree. This is her first time in the U.S. Her English is not as strong as the other participants. She is single and does not have any friends at CSU. Neda also wears hijab.

**Lana**

Growing up in a conservative Sunni Muslim home in the United Arab Emirates, Lana was not allowed to go anywhere without her parent’s permission, even as an adult. It was her parent’s who gave her permission to attend Cardinal State University for Lana’s undergraduate degree in deaf and hard-of-hearing intervention specialist. This is her first time in the U.S. Lana is single, and came to CSU with two other girls whom she met through an education organization in the U.A.E. Although Lana wears an abaya in the U.A.E., she wears only hijab in the U.S.

**Moses**

A recent graduate of Cardinal State University, Moses is a 23 year-old educational aide, working in Chicago, IL. Moses graduated from CSU with a degree in biology. Originally from Iraq, Moses came to the U.S. with his family in 2001 as refugee. Between his departure from Iraq and his arrival to the U.S. Moses also lived in Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, and Thailand. He grew up in a middle-class Sunni Muslim household, but now identifies as an atheist. At one point during his undergraduate education, Moses became a Christian, however he soon returned to atheism after finding the faith to be too “wishy washy.” His interview was conducted over the phone.

**Samantha**

Samantha recently graduated from CSU with her PhD in communication sciences and disorders. Originally from Calcutta, India, studying at CSU was Samantha’s first time in the U.S. She identifies as a Sunni Muslim. Samantha grew up in a progressive and lenient home
with her father working as professor and her mother as a homemaker. She has never worn hijab. Samantha is 24 years old, single, and is currently working as an adjunct professor. Her interview was also conducted over the phone.

**Gold Finch State University: Participant profiles**

**Tania**

Tania is a first year student in the biochemistry PhD program at Gold Finch State University. This is her first time in the U.S. Tania grew up in a middle class Saudi Arabian family, where she learned English in high school. She identifies as a Sunni Muslim, but does not wear hijab. She believes the hijab is part of Saudi culture, but not part of Islam. She came to this conclusion while studying at GFSU. To the interview, she wore a t-shirt that read *Coexist*. Instead of using letters to write the word, religious symbols were used, such as a crescent moon and star, peace sign, cross, and Star of David. Once she completes her PhD, she intends to return to Saudi Arabia where she already has a position as a professor at a university.

**Matthew**

Recently married, Matthew, along with his wife, came from Jordan. They came to the U.S. for Matthew’s PhD in biomedical engineering at GFSU. Matthew grew up in a middle class home, and spent two months in the Midwest as an exchange student during high school. He identifies as a Sunni Muslim, but does not consider himself conservative, although he does practice the Five Pillars of Islam. During the time of the interview he was fasting for Ramadan, but was planning on breaking his fast for an upcoming conference. Matthew intends to initially stay in the U.S. after finishing his program because the U.S. feels more like his home than Jordan. He attributes this to the openness and diversity of the U.S. and its culture.
**Samuel**

Although Samuel spent the first three years of his life in the U.S., he spent his formative years in Yemen and Jordan. With his U.S. citizenship, Samuel followed his brother to Gold Finch State University where he is currently a senior majoring in both biochemistry and microbiology. He was born in the U.S. as a result of his father’s PhD work here. His father is now a professor in Yemen, which has provided a middle class life for Samuel and his family. He attended an American institute, where he learned English and was exposed to American culture in Yemen. At the instituted he met Adam, whom he encouraged to apply to GFSU. Although growing up in what he regards as a conservative Islamic home, Samuel identifies as a moderate liberal Sunni Muslim. Samuel intends to stay in the U.S. for graduate school.

**Adam**

Although a U.S. citizen, Adam’s first time in the U.S. was in 2009 when he began his undergraduate degree in economics at Gold Finch State University. Adam’s father moved to the U.S. as 16 year old and returned to Yemen at the age of 50. His father obtained U.S. citizenship, and, as a result, Adam and his brothers were also granted citizenship. Adam grew up in Yemen in an affluent home, and attended an American institute where he learned English and American culture, and where he met Samuel. He initially began his undergraduate degree in New York City, but decided to transfer to GFSU upon the recommendation of his close friend, Samuel. Although Adam grew up in a Sunni Muslim home, he says his family did not become religious until he was older. Adam credits this shift to his older brother who became very religious while attending medical school in Egypt. Adam identifies as a Sunni Muslim, who appreciates the liberalness of GFSU. He intends to stay in the U.S. after graduation, as he believes he is indebted to the country for the education it has given him.
Helen

Helen is a sophomore studying accounting at Gold Finch State University. Born in Iraq, Helen spent the majority of her adolescence in Jordan, but identifies as a being from Bahrain, as that is where she spent the previous three years, which she considers her most formative. In the U.S. she lives with her older siblings. Her parents plan on joining her and her siblings in the coming months to reside in the U.S. permanently. Helen wears hijab, but believes the hijab to be part of Arabic culture rather than Islam. She came to the U.S. in 2011.

Data Collection and Procedures

Interviewing is the primary method for data collection in grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). My interview questions were constructed open-endedly around the participants’ experiences studying at one of the two universities that may have informed a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity. The research question and sub-questions guided my interview questions so that I was able to extract the data necessary to answer them. I developed an interview guide, specifically in the event that participants did not express experiencing any shifts regarding their Muslim and/or cultural identity. This allowed for me, as the researcher, to be flexible and open in the interviews, and with the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I began analyzing the data in the initial interview, and continued to immerse myself in the data, which is of the utmost importance for grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I conducted the interviews face-to-face and over the phone. They were recorded using a digital recorder. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and ranged between thirty to sixty minutes, with one interview going ninety minutes. Because of the sensitive nature of religious identity, and specifically Islam in a post 9/11 America, in addition to the apostasy laws that are enforced in many of the participants’ home countries, I conducted the interviews in more secluded areas,
including private offices, conference rooms, and even participants’ homes. This privacy, I believed, helped yield thick rich data, to certain extent for some of the participants. I found this especially to be the case with the interviews conducted at participants’ homes.

Additionally, as mentioned, two interviews were conducted over the phone. During the face-to-face interviews I took down margin notes of the participants’ verbal and non-verbal responses, behaviors, dress, and peripheral happenings occurring during the process to help offer insights that the digital recorder may have not taken into account. Additionally, in some cases, their dress informed the questions I ask. For example, one female participant did not wear hijab while also wearing a shirt that read COEXIST.

The interview questions were open-ended, which were conducive for yielding the thick rich data necessary to illuminate the participants’ shifts in identity and perception (Creswell, 2013). Below is a sampling of the interview questions. A complete interview schedule is found in Appendix A.

1) How would you describe your religious background? Your family’s religious background?

2) What did it mean for you to be Muslim in your home country?

3) What does it mean for you to be Muslim at ______ University?

4) During your time in the U.S., have you experienced a shift in your identity as a Muslim? This can include a strengthening, weakening, or loss altogether of your identity as a Muslim.

5) What has influenced your shift in your Muslim identity?

After collecting the data, I transcribed the interviews verbatim. As noted above, I combed through the data for emergent themes, using the grounded theory coding approaches of
open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I developed categories to help identify emerging themes. For further clarity, I used member checks to assure the participants’ intention in their wording. This was done through email. I also triangulated some of the data with a colleague of mine who was Muslim, and is currently an international student. She provided various insights to areas of the data that I struggled to fully grasp. Additionally, the emergent theories are also triangulated with relevant literature. In contrast to a case study, which uses the literature review to analyze the data, and thus it is the data that is often a response to the literature, the literature in the case of grounded theory, is a response to the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The literature in grounded theory reinforces the emergent theory, in addition to providing necessary and relevant socio-cultural and historic information.

Data Analysis

I employed Strauss and Corbin (1998) three steps to grounded theory’s coding process, beginning with open coding, followed by axial coding, and ending with selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) also provide an optional fourth step regarding a visual portrait, which is a visualization of the emergent themes and their relation to a central theme. This is also known as conditional matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Taking this fourth step, I was able to make ties between emergent themes and the central theme, and further elucidate the various contextual relationships impacting the central phenomenon. Open coding pertains to the researcher’s position to allow the properties, and categories and subcategories to surface without any preconceived intention to find certain properties and categories on part of the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It allows for numerous possibilities for properties and categories to arise, again, inductively from the data. It is through this process of open coding that data guides rather than limits (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
After I completed open coding I moved to axial coding. Here I formed the properties of the data into themes. In this step, I identified a central phenomenon, explored its causal conditions, developed specific strategies for understanding how the central phenomenon acts and interacts with other emergent themes, and then explained the consequences of the central phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In selective coding, I decided which components and categories would ultimately create the most cogent and accurate narrative that will encompass the data in its truest sense (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is through this step, that a theory emerged. After analyzing all of the data, I was able to confidently develop a theory not because of my hypothesis, but as a result of the data’s thesis. Again, this is crucial with regards to the subjects of this study, given the highly sensitive nature of the topic as it pertains to religious and cultural identity, and even greater, the implications of what a shift in religious and/or cultural identity, as well as, perceptions of Islam and a participant’s home culture means in light of the blasphemy and apostasy laws in the participants’ home countries. Additionally, because faith is a central component for many international Muslim students’ family and friends’ identity, those who shift in religious and/or cultural identity, as well as, perceptions of Islam, may face scrutiny and persecution from those closest to them. Therefore, it is important for me, as an outsider, to get out of the way of the data with any theoretical framework or preconceived notions, and to allow it to spring forth the participants’ views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies.

**Summarizing Data**

Employing a conditional matrix helped to identify the relationships among international Muslim students, on and off-campus culture, peers, social life, religious life, family, and host and home countries. The conditional matrix helped include and connect both macro and micro
consequences, and reveal where these consequences intersect and interact (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the relationships between macro and micro consequences are not linear, and they find that consequences maneuver within and through numerous areas and operate more like a “kaleidoscope that, with every turn of the frame, realigns the little pieces of colored glass to form a new picture.” I found this to be true in my analysis of the relationships between the emergent themes and central theme.

**Figure 1: Strauss & Corbin’s Conditional Matrix**

![Conditional Matrix Diagram](image)

**Validity**

Validation may be understood as a “judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research” (Angen, 2000, p. 387). Creswell (2013), provides eight strategies, including prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich, thick description, and external audits for ensuring the study’s validity (p. 250). Utilizing all of these strategies may not be
possible, specifically for this study. To help ensure the validity for this study, I utilized clarifying researcher bias, peer review, member checking, and rich, thick description.

**Researcher’s Bias**

My interest in this study stems from my own religious and cultural identity that occurred during my undergraduate education. As a result, I have a significant interest in spiritual identity formation and higher education. Divulging my bias allows for the reader to be able to understand how my background and perspectives inform the study, and provides the necessary accountability for helping ensure honesty in my methods, results, and analysis.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is considered one of the most crucial strategies for establishing integrity in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2013). All of the participants spoke English as a second language. At times during the transcribing process, it was difficult to understand certain words, and additionally meanings of certain statements. As a result, member checking was used via email, to ensure that I fully understood their meaning and intent. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to interview participants a second time, nor allow them to read through my preliminary analyses as Creswell (2013) recommends. For someone wanting to replicate the study, I would recommend that they do this if they have the time.

**Peer Review**

Peer review provides the necessary prodding and questioning that helps keep the researcher honest (Creswell, 2013). I was fortunate to have multiple peer reviewers in my thesis advisor, methodologist, and third committee member. All three of them provided necessary critiques, which helped hone the methodology and analysis.
Additionally, I used two peer reviewers, who helped with transcribing, and were familiar with some of the data. They helped synthesize themes, and disabuse me of my potential biases.

**Thick, Rich Data**

A description that captures copious, interconnected details comprises thick, rich data (Stake, 2010; Creswell, 2013). This data was collected in the interviews, and showcased in Chapter IV of this study, which presents the results. Chapter IV details in abundance the shifts the participants experienced in relation to their Muslim and/or cultural identity, as well as the contributions to, and implications of those shifts. The richness of these descriptions should be able to allow the reader to transfer information to another setting where it also may be applicable.

**Limitations**

I encountered some challenges in this study, but none greater than my own ineptitude. This includes my lack of knowledge of Islam and the Middle East, my inexperience as a researcher and interviewer, and unfortunate predilection for procrastination. Yet, despite my many weaknesses, I was blessed with a phenomenal committee who guided me, at times by the hand, through this process. Furthermore, I read literature to gain more of an understanding of Islam and the Middle East, and also the research process as a whole. While I am still a novice researcher, I tried to counter this as best I could through reviewing literature, and employing various validation strategies, which included surrounding myself with very very good people.

**Ethical Clearance**

This study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University on June 26, 2013 (see Appendix B). The documents included in the approved
application were the consent form, interview questions, research flyer, and sample interview script.

**Summary**

This chapter has detailed my methodology for this study. Using a qualitative methodology provided the thick, rich data necessary to understand if international Muslim students are experiencing a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, what these shifts consist of, and what the contributions to, and implications of these shifts are. A grounded theory design was the best fit for this study, as while there was some related literature, none of it fully accounted for important variables that in some cases informed the participants’ shifts, while also informing a significant part of their identity.

I purposely selected participants who identified either as international Muslim or former Muslim students. Through semi-structured interviews, guided by the research question and sub-questions, these participants provided rich data that, through open, axial, and selective coding, generated a theory regarding their shifts, and the contributions to, and implications of their shifts. Validity issues regarding this study were addressed through multiple strategies, as established by Creswell (2013), including clarifying researcher bias, member checking, peer review, and thick, rich data.

In its pursuit to generate theory inductively and objectively, free from researcher biases and established hypotheses, grounded theory will always, to a certain extent be compromised by the researcher. It is the inevitable consequence of an imperfect instrument (me) conducting what will always be an imperfect study. That said, grounded theory offers the best chance, in this case, for the me as researcher, to assuage my biases, and allow for the data to inductively generate theory that best represents the participants shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, the
contributions to, and implications of those shifts. My hope is that from this study, the reader will further understand the issues of identity and influence facing international Muslim students, and as a result, international student and scholar services at universities will consider providing orientation and services that specifically address these students’ issues, and help them reconcile their shifts, in the event they occur.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the research. The results are presented as themes that emerged from the thick, rich data provided in the participants interviews. This chapter includes substantial verbatim quotes from the participants to reveal, from their perspective, what international Muslim students experience with regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity while studying at one of two Midwestern universities. This study was informed by a central research question: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing in regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? Additionally, the sub-questions included: What is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? What are the implications of these shifts? To provide an exact account of the participants’ answers, and demonstrate that what it means to be Muslim in one country is often similar to what it means to be Muslim in another country. The beginning of this section looks at what it means to be Muslim in the participants’ home countries. While there are many similarities within the countries, there are also differences that are important to note. Following a look at the data by country, the data will be presented according to the following emergent themes: Independence, Exposure, Questioning, and Discernment.

Islam & Culture

Being Muslim, in the majority of Middle Eastern countries represented in this study, appears to mean citizenship. In this sense, citizenship is not simply defined by the legal status of belonging to a country, but the social status of belonging to a culture, a region, and a history (Lewis, 2002). Without their faith, many of the participants expressed it would be difficult to live in their home country. Additionally, many of the participants expressed that they themselves had difficulty discerning between their identity as a Muslim and their nationality. Many of the
participants viewed their Muslim identity and nationality as synonymous. This was revealed when I asked the participants the question, “What does it meant to be Muslim in your home country?”

**Middle East: Islam = Culture = Islam**

Growing up in Yemen, Adam and Samuel said that being Muslim was important. Without their Islamic faith, Adam and Samuel felt that it would be a significant challenge to live in such an overwhelmingly Muslim society. According to Adam,

> I would think if I was not a Muslim in Yemen it would have made my life a little bit difficult, because you would feel… you don’t belong… with all the traditions and cultures it would be a little bit difficult for someone to adapt who’s not a Muslim, but I thank God that I am a Muslim.

Samuel, also from Yemen, mentioned, with regards to living in Yemen,

> ...you are born Muslim. You love being a Muslim. For me, I do since I was a kid, I pray all the five prayers, but I never thought about it from what it means when I was Muslim. I was Muslim. Everyone is Muslim. You go. You pray to God.

Matthew spoke about the meaning of Islam in Jordan, and the Middle East by explaining the history of Islam and its influence on the culture. He said,

> Back in the Middle East we have the heart of religion (Islam) for 1400 years… and it’s become like culture. So most of our cultural behavior, or cultural things, they originally came from… the Islamic rules. So it’s kind of mixed, sometimes… if you ask me if my behavior or values, if they originally came from my culture or my religion… it’s hard to tell. I’m not sure…

Speaking about what it means to be Muslim from a legal perspective, Matthew said,
...some of the constitution legislation follow the Islamic laws because we have the Islamic constitution. Well, it’s not a constitution, but I would call it a constitution. So there are many (Islamic) things in our law, the official governmental law. It’s the case for many countries in the Middle East, because many are Islamic. Many people are conservative of their religion, so many of their laws follow the Islamic rules because people won’t accept anything besides that.

Matthew further detailed the implications of Islam’s direct influence on culture and law in Jordan and the Middle East, saying, “…as a Muslim, it’s kind of hard, living in a different culture. Not just the religion, but the culture…”

Helen who was born in Iraq, and grew up in Jordan and Bahrain, spoke to Islam’s impact on her upbringing, as well as her observations of life in a Islamic society, saying, “Man or woman, doesn’t matter. Your decisions are based on your religion… I was raised… in a Muslim society so everything that I did was… based on some kind of traditions and what should be done and what should not be done…”

Helen alluded to the omnipotence of people within an Islamic society as an unofficial governing force for monitoring behavior and determining rewards and consequences, saying, …it’s not about being afraid of God as much as being afraid of people and what they will say, which is kind of wrong because… our religion is about being afraid of God and doing what God has told you… the fear inside one’s person is… is… the fear of what people will say and what people will start talking about and gossiping about more than the fear of God.

Tania, from Saudi Arabia, also spoke to Islam’s significant impact on identity in her society, and all of the Middle East,
In my home country and all countries in Middle East, religion is part of our identity. It is difficult for a person to say... to define yourself without saying your religion... like always when we are in... Saudi Arabia, they equate religion with morality and with good dealing with people and behavior...

Speaking further to the synonymous nature of Islam and morality, Tania said, “Yes, it (Islam) is very important, and it is also related to how people deal with each other... if you know that this person is a good Muslim, and he’s practicing their religion, other people will trust him.” Using the example of marriage, Tania said, “…if you know that, for example like marriage, when this person is practicing their religion... their family will trust them to give them their daughter.”

Martin from Saudi Arabia, who’s father is a sheik, said specifically within his family and tribe, “…for us religion come first before anything. Without religion we don’t live.” In describing what it meant to be Muslim in Saudi Arabia, Martin said it means, “to go with the flow...to be Muslim. If you are not Muslim you will suffer. You will not go to some places and stuff like that. So you have to be Muslim. But for me I am Muslim since I was born so it wasn’t a big deal for me to be Muslim.” Although it was not a big deal for him to be Muslim, Martin did say that as a Shia Muslim, which is a minority (10 percent) in Saudi Arabia, his faith community is “always under pressure... There is discrimination not by color but by religion. For example, say there is an opportunity to sell this job, even if the Shiite has more experience and higher education, I don’t higher him.”

In Saudi Arabia, Islam for Frank meant attending every prayer at the mosque. He said, ...

...my father is Imam, he’s prayer, my father, and... we live like next to the mosque, basically like every... prayer has to go to the mosque, and everyone has to go to the
mosque back home. We have people... didn’t go to the mosque, but for a couple reasons, like if they got war... they don’t have to come to mosque, you can go to other mosque....

You cannot go to the mosque if you can’t walk.

Frank also talked specifically about what it meant to party as a Muslim in Saudi Arabia, ...there’s a different party back home. Party back home you go out with friends, talking, and smoking hookah... and watching games and stuff.... Sometimes we go to the beach.

We have relationships back too back home, but secretly. Because... our culture... doesn’t agree with relationships with the girls, but since I came here (CSU), I got a girlfriend...

Lana from the U.A.E. talked about Islam’s significance in her home country, saying,

What does it mean to be Muslim in Emirates? It means a lot actually. We are a Muslim country... I feel more about Islam when I was there... we adhere to the prayer time...

When I was in Emirates, I feel Ramadan. Everyone is fasting. Even foreign people, they don’t eat or drink in front of us in malls or anything. They respect us.

In Iran, Elaine, who became an atheist as a university student, talked about what it means to be Muslim by detailing the implications of what it means to not be Muslim, as well as not practicing Islam. She spoke about this specifically in the context of her profession as a university professor and researcher, saying,

Even if you were Muslim but don’t want to practice or show your practices, they didn’t let you improve in your job (i.e. promotion).... I know many people are Muslim but they don’t want to go pray in the time of office hours, and... they really lost many things.

Actually, people in many offices will show them (work superiors) they are practicing... just so people see them practicing. And that was a problem for me because absolutely I
didn’t say I’m not Muslim, but never in my office I did not fast... three times they (work superiors) reject this (promotion) because they told people that she never practice like prayer or I was not a good person for that office. They leave (at) my job but they never let me improve my position... I couldn’t get good money because after ten years of working in that institute, my work was really perfect, and they know this, and save me in that position, but I couldn’t be dean or head officer... they didn’t let me because I didn’t practice like they wanted.

In Iran, Elaine talked about two types of rights existing within Islam, saying,

...some people in Iran say there is two rights: One right belongs to God and another belongs to people. For example, a fast is a right of God because God is so kind that he or she can forgive you, but if you, for example, hurt other people, this is some things that God never forgive you. So they should be more sensitive about this issue and not the first.

Elaine provided insight into why this fear of people exists, specifically in Iran, especially in the case of non-Muslims (e.g. Christians, Jews, atheists) saying,

...if they want to evangelize (about their non-Muslim faith, or, secular philosophy) in public or encourage other people to come (to the faith/philosophy), absolutely no! This is illegal in Iran... For all religions... They can practice but not evangelize, encourage other people.

If people do evangelize in Iran, Elaine said, “They go to prison. For example, even me, according to their rule, I have to die and they want to kill me.” This is because Elaine identifies as an atheist. According to apostasy laws in Iran, it is illegal for any person born a Muslim to convert to a different faith or to leave faith altogether. Describing the extent of the law’s control
over citizens’ behavior, Elaine said that even the act of pre-marital sex results in “a very serious punishment.” Furthermore, Elaine talked about being forced to identify as a Muslim for her position at the university. In the religious identification box on her application, there is no box for atheism, and even if there were, she said,

*I have to just select Muslim. I cannot select another thing, but if I want to come back to Iran, absolutely, I do not say to government official that I am not Muslim. Even in my class when I was teaching, my students… asked me some things that I answered to them so professional… I censor myself because I know not only would I lose my job, but my life!*

While many of the participants talked about the impact of Islam’s influence on culture, none expressed the state’s role in regulating religious identity the way that Elaine did. Although it might arguably be evident that the state had a significant role in the regulation of religious identity in many of the participants’ countries, especially those which have a state religion, none of the other participants mentioned this explicitly the way that Elaine did. Also, none of the participants discussed the meaning of Islam through the lens of what it meant to be a non-Muslim in their home country like Elaine did. She was able to provide a better insight into this as a result of her experience living as a surreptitious atheist in Iran. Additionally, the consequences for being a non-Muslim in other Middle Eastern and Asian countries were not provided by the other participants. Some participants mentioned the difficulty of being a non-Muslim in their home country, but no specific consequences were mentioned.
India: Islam within Diversity

Samantha, who is from India, had a significantly different experience from the other participants since she grew up as a Muslim in India. She contributed this difference to India’s diversity, saying,

...India is very diverse as a country. There are a lot of languages; every state has a different language, and different religions... growing up, I’ve been involved in lots of different religions so I’ve not been very isolated... I was very open, and I think I’m very open to making friends and talking to people from different religions. It was the same in India, so I have a lot of non-Muslim friends.

Hijab, which according to the female participants from the Middle East plays a significant role in a female Muslim’s identity, was not an issue for Samantha growing up. She does not wear hijab and said, “A lot of people in India don’t wear hijab.” Samantha provided two anecdotes about how some of her Muslim colleagues at Cardinal State University, who are from the Middle East, were surprised and confused to learn that she was Muslim since she does not wear hijab.

The data revealed that participants’ Muslim identity and cultural identity were initially intertwined and often could be considered synonymous. Prior to studying at CSU and GFSU, many participants expressed that they were unable to distinguish between culture and religion. As revealed below, many participants, as result of studying in the U.S., began to differentiate between their Muslim and cultural identity. This occurred as a result of the participants’ independence from religious and cultural authorities, exposure to a new and liberal culture, and the ability to openly question this exposure. All of these things came as result of studying at CSU and GFSU. This phenomenon of the synonymous nature of Muslim and cultural identity is
not new as, since the birth Islam, Muslim’s identities have always first been in allegiance to Islam, and secondly, to dynasty (Lewis, 2002). What does appear to be new is international Muslim students’ ability to discern between this phenomenon of a religious and cultural identity. This appears to be a result of leaving their home countries and experiencing a new culture. The data below will reveal this further.

**Independence**

Many participants explained that the independence that they had as a result of studying abroad was a significant factor in their relationship with Islam and culture, both at home and in their new university setting. This section details the participants’ experiences with independence in at CSU and GFSU.

Since studying at GFSU, Adam still considers himself the same person that he was when he lived in Yemen. The only shift he said he’s undergone is feeling “a bit less conservative.” But this, he said, is not because he necessarily is less conservative, but “because it’s a little bit difficult for somebody to be conservative here in the U.S.” He attributes his shift to the fact that there is only one mosque in the area, and he does not have “the time to be there all the time.” However, Adam said that in Yemen,

> I would pray all the five prayers at the mosque, I would hang out there, they would have activities and stuff. The mosque here is less active, it’s a lot less active than I was used to, so it’s not something I chose to do, it was just something, I can’t have the control…. I still try to do activities through my religion... so I’m still attached to my faith, but the activities... they’re a lot less than they used to be when I was in Yemen, but we find some other activities.

Frank from Saudi Arabia discussed the impact of independence on his faith saying,
I came here and it was totally different. I do stuff by myself... I study by myself. I take care of all of my life, and nobody asks me where am I going, when are you going to come back... and these questions were being asked all the time back home. I got these calls from my mom... Since I came here I don’t call my mom for like a week, my dad for like two weeks, three weeks, even a month.

For Frank, what it means to be Muslim at CSU is similar to what it means in Saudi Arabia. However, his relationship with Islam has changed. Frank felt that his independence negatively affected his Muslim identity, as he said, “I’m not doing a lot of stuff like I’m supposed to do it for Islam… I’m doing bad stuff, even though other Muslim people do it too… Like I’m doing it (Islam) not complete.” Frank appeared to believe that the way he practiced Islam in Saudi Arabia should be the way he practices it at CSU. However, he does not do this, and, as a result, he appears to feel remorse. Frank, however, still attends mosque, although not as frequently due to limited access. He still prays five times a day, but at his home instead of the mosque. Even his social life has remained relatively the same. Frank told me that his social life at CSU consists of drinking alcohol, dating women, and smoking. This was also a part of his social life in Saudi Arabia. However, at CSU he is able to engage in these activities publicly. In Saudi Arabia, Frank was forced to keep his activities private, especially because his father is an Imam, and if Frank’s behavior was known, it could lead to detrimental effects on his and his family’s reputation. Although his mother, brother and sister know about his behavior, Frank said, regarding his father, “…I cannot tell that… because we respect, our culture respects the father a lot, and some stuff I cannot tell him that… if he says one word I have to do that word.” Frank’s independence from his father’s authority, as result of studying at CSU, has further impacted his relationship with Islam. Even though he participated in certain behaviors, such as
drinking, dating, and smoking in Saudi Arabia, he balanced it with attending mosque regularly and being in community with other Muslims, especially his father who is an Imam.

Lana discussed her independence as an opportunity to be an ambassador of Islam who could correct the stereotypes that Americans held of Muslims, saying, “To be Muslim in the U.S., …everyone has a different, or wrong idea about Islam, that they are terrorists or they are scary. I try to treat people how Islam teaches us to treat other people. I try to inform people that Islam is not scary.” She also discussed the difficulty of being Muslim in the U.S., not based her own experiences but based on her observations of other Muslim students at CSU who have embraced activities and behaviors that are not in accordance with Islam, such as going to clubs and dating. Lana was deeply impacted by these observations, saying, “They (Muslim students) are doing bad things… they are Muslim and they go to clubs. They have girlfriends. They are not allowed to do that… it really broke my heart.” When I asked where these students were from she said definitively, “Saudi Arabia.” I asked where why it was that she thought students from Saudi Arabia were engaging in this behavior, and according to her, “Since anything is not allowed in Saudi Arabia, they (students from Saudi Arabia) want to do it, and they have the chance here to do whatever they want.” This she said was not the case in U.A.E., where, specifically in Dubai, there are, “clubs and everything.”

Whereas many of the participants mentioned that independence provided them opportunities to try out aspects of their new cultural setting, Samantha said her independence provided her the opportunity to try Islamic practices, such as attending mosque, that she was not allowed to engage with in India. As a result, she said she had become stronger in her faith while studying at CSU. Regarding the strengthening of her faith as it pertained to attending mosque she said it has,
made me a much more knowledgeable about Islam. I didn’t know a lot of traditions about Islam or the things we do. The things that define my personality come from Islam, the things like being helpful to others and a positive influence in other peoples’ lives, these are the things that have shaped my personality... it’s made me stronger and my faith has increased in the last five years.

For Samantha, being Muslim at CSU meant she had the opportunity, unlike in India, to attend mosque, and even revolve her schedule around her attendance. Neda had an opposite experience to Samantha as a result of her independence. Whereas in Turkey she regularly attended mosque, at CSU she did not attend mosque, because, as she said, “To go to mosque, it is not obligation for Muslims, therefore, I didn’t want to go.”

Neda’s independence at CSU appeared to be framed in the negative connotation of isolation, rather than the positive connotation of freedom. Neda mentioned that she does not have any friends at CSU. She said, “…I am scared. I didn’t make any community… I am not myself now.” She also shared that she did not feel any different in her identity as a Muslim at CSU, saying, “…there is no difference except for environmental because here nobody… I don’t know what to say… there are so few Muslims so there are no mosques and they don’t serve halal food, and there is not something about Islam here.” Neda did mention that she has some acquaintances in her lab, with whom she had conversations about the differences and similarities between Islam and Christianity. Regarding her Christian colleague, she said, “…he ask me sometimes to shift my religion, because I am practicing five times, he found it’s very difficult… I tell him it’s difficult.”

Although Elaine from Iran does not personally identify as a Muslim, she was forced to identify as a Muslim in Iran as a consequence of the country’s apostasy laws. Elaine did not
Elaine also mentioned two friends from Iran who are currently PhD students at CSU, who engage in unsanctioned activities and behaviors at CSU but still consider themselves Muslim. She said, regarding her friend, “…she’s a Muslim, but she drinks alcohol, she eats pork, she does everything, but she believes she is Muslim.” Elaine goes on to talk about her other friend, saying, “he is trying to believe Muslim and never eats pork but he has girlfriend and sex without marriage.” Whereas the discourse in Iran might determine that such activities and behaviors are not in accordance with Islam, and even go so far as considering these activities and behaviors illegal according to its blasphemy laws, at CSU, these students have the independence to engage in these activities and, simultaneously identify as Muslim. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview these students Elaine referred to.

For Matthew, conforming to the rules of his home society in Jordan, was not practical at GFSU, especially if he wanted to have community. He used his independence at GFSU to seek out community in places where he would not otherwise do so if he were still in Jordan. He said regarding this,
When you’re alone you have nothing to do; you want to socialize. You want to be with people. You want to hang out. They (people back home) cannot imagine... It’s not because they’re conservative, it’s more like they don’t understand what’s going on overseas... So I go to bars, but I do not drink.

For Matthew, even though he considers himself a “flexible person,” his personal choice to not engage in certain liberal practices, such as drinking, is a reflection of the impact of growing up in a conservative Muslim home and society in Jordan. He says,

...my culture and religion doesn’t allow me to do these things (e.g. drinking, dating). Not because anyone is watching me here. I’m by myself. It’s... because I was raised up, this is what I think, what I believe. This is our culture. You can’t go out like that. Some people do it, but for me... I don’t know. The way you were raised up... it’s hard to change that when you mature.

Despite the impact his upbringing had in preventing him from engaging in certain activities while studying at GFSU, Matthew also credits Islam with allowing him to adapt as necessary to the current culture he is living in. He says, “Even how you dress or behave… that would be different… the culture you’re in. Our religion gives us the okay, the green light to change that… to be similar to culture.” Matthew provided an example of Islam’s flexibility within a foreign culture by breaking of Ramadan for an upcoming conference he was going to attend. According to Matthew, “Fasting is to do with your people, not to make you tired… so you can’t do your daily things… If you’re traveling out of your home, even if you’re just traveling 50 miles, it’s okay to not fast.” With regards to the liberal and accommodating culture of GFSU and the surrounding city, Matthew says, “…it’s a very liberal city. I like this town. You know they respect everybody.”
The independence that the participants gain as a result of studying abroad provides an opportunity to make decisions and come to conclusions free from the influence of their family, peers, and society, which they all, aside from Samantha, considered to be conservative. Helen contrasted the participants’ independence at CSU and GFSU, by expressing that, in the Middle East, thinking and behavior are often dictated by the fear of people, which she believes is what Islam has become. Helen expressed that the fear of people inhibits independence, exposure, and questioning because instead of allowing one to decide what is best for them, it is the people who tell someone, “What should be done and what should not be done.” The fear of these people, especially the discourse they are able to create, appears to prevent people from searching out their own truths. Instead, she explains, people conform to the group’s wishes.

**Exposure**

Most of the participants stated in their interviews that they had been exposed to new ways of thinking and behaving during their time at one of the two universities. For many participants, especially those who studied at Gold Finch State University (GFSU), this exposure was a welcomed experience, and the participants often claimed it informed their shift in Muslim and/or cultural identity. Much of the exposure described in the interviews was highly contextualized to the participants’ particular university, specifically in the case of GFSU. This section will look at the results by focusing on the participants experience with their particular university, and the emergent themes that were generated by their experience as they relate to larger theme of exposure.

**Liberal Exposure**

Some of the participants, especially those studying at GFSU, perceived the university and surrounding city as a safe and accommodating place to be a Muslim. Many of the participants
praised GFSU and the city it is situated in for its liberal and open culture. Although the liberal and open culture of GFSU and the surrounding city allows for behaviors that are in contrast to the tenants of the Islamic faith, such as the consumption of alcohol, pre-marital sex, and homosexuality, it is the liberal and open culture of the university and surrounding city that allow Muslims to practice their faith free from discrimination and/or pressure to conform to a certain lifestyle. Interestingly, a liberal culture such as GFSU’s is able to accommodate conservative cultures and religions, such as Islam. Additionally, some of the participants from GFSU expressed that had GFSU’s culture been more conservative, it would have been more difficult to be Muslim. According to these participants, liberal culture facilitates conservative culture and religion, but conservative culture does not necessarily facilitate another conservative culture. Adam from Yemen spoke about his appreciation for GFSU’s liberal culture, and the consequences for him as Muslim, if GFSU was not liberal, saying,

People here, it’s a liberal city, which is awesome... I mean I think if it was a different city it might be a little bit difficult for a Muslim to live in... people here are a lot more liberal, they know a lot about everybody around the world and... they’re really accepting of everybody. I’m thankful. That’s why I love “GFSU,” because everybody’s accepting and you can just chill with anybody.

Adam did, however, speak to the demands of living in a liberal context, saying,

...when you want to live here in a liberal city you have to be a little bit more liberal than you used to be. For example... in Yemen, none of my friends drink, so when I go out with them nobody drinks at the table... now I have friends who drink, so when we go out they drink, and I’m not used to it, but I accept it because they’re my friends and it’s their
For Adam, becoming more liberal at GFSU is part of a necessary adaptation in order to gain community with some domestic and non-Muslim students. Adam believes this adaptation is sanctioned by his faith as he says, “Islam teaches us to accept everybody and to learn from everybody.” According to Adam, although he cannot drink as a Muslim, he can accept others who embrace such practices. Matthew from Jordan also echoed this position on acceptance of certain liberal practices without embracing them. He says,

...going to bars and to drink, or, sleep with some girls... we can’t do all these things.

Which here, it is like normal. At least for a college town, right? Like a party-town where people are all open minded and nice... I’ve been with some friends to the bars... many times. But when I go there I don’t feel this is my place. I go because I want to hang with friends and meet people.

Samuel praised GFSU and the surrounding city for its openness and diversity, which, he too agreed, made it easier for him to maintain his Muslim faith. He described the culture as awesome as a result of, among other things, being able to “wear my clothes and eat my food” as he did in Yemen.

Tania from Saudi Arabia, credited GFSU’s liberal and open culture with her belief that religion doesn’t play “any role in dealing with people because the respect is the most important thing in dealing with people…” She contrasts this with culture in Saudi Arabia where religion is the most important thing because “it’s related to good behavior.” She goes on to say, “It’s not like only the good people should be Muslim, but back at my home country, because Islam is the only religion, for Muslims… when they know that this person is practicing their religion they can
trust that they will be honest and trustworthy.” Tania discussed culture adaptation not as a characteristic of Islam, but as a characteristic of human beings in general. She credits this with part of the reason why she has been able to maintain her faith. Tania also praised GFSU for its gender equality, and expressed that she would like to see more gender equality in Saudi Arabia.

Helen from Bahrain praised GFSU for its diversity and acceptance saying, “The good thing at GFSU is they are not racist… I have not had a situation where people were expressing bad words toward me or looking at me in a weird look. I get the weird looks sometimes but not always. People are much more friendly here than in other states.” As a result of her exposure to GFSU’s liberal culture, Helen spoke at length of her desire to dress as other women, particularly non-Muslim women dressed, and specifically as it pertained to not wearing hijab. Regarding this she said, “Why can’t I just wear it (hijab) one day and not wear it one day? It’s just like wearing a type of clothes. One time you would wear your pajamas to class and one time you would go dressed up.” Helen also has been exposed to male/female relationships since studying at FGSU, which has forced her to question why she can not even be in a group setting with males in Bahrain. Tania has also been exposed to male/female relationships since studying at GFSU, and also shared a similar perspective to Helen’s, regarding male/female relationships in Saudi Arabia.

Since studying in the U.S., Moses has been exposed to science and psychology to a degree that he was not exposed to in Iraq. He said that neither science nor psychology were subjects one could necessarily study in Iraq, especially to the degree one is able to in the U.S. He said in his high school’s science and psychology classes in the U.S., he was exposed to people like Karl Jung, “and different scientists from MIT.” Moses expressed ambivalence about his exposure, to which he referred to as the, “scientific perspective”. On one hand, he praised it
for providing him with a new perspective that has informed his academic and professional pursuits, but, on the other hand, he lamented it, saying it “took religion away from me.” Not all of the participants considered their exposure to a new and liberal culture at CSU and GFSU positive.

When Martin first arrived to CSU, he had three roommates, two from the U.S., and one he only identified as a “Sunni.” His two American roommates exposed him to a university culture that was in stark contrast to what he had grown up with in Saudi Arabia. He expressed this in terms of how his roommates decorated the apartment, saying, “…here is the battle. I give them the room in the apartment that is all decorated by… beer cans and whores and wine. Oh my God! This is totally against me. This is not me.” He further explained the dichotomy of Saudi Arabian vs. American culture, and how it almost became too much to resist, saying, “…for me, we have a really strict code… I cannot sit down with it (alcohol, women, wine) and now I am living in a house full of that… it’s a big change, and affects me… oh man, how should I fight this battle? It’s not battle, it’s something to use… it’s empty now but they’re going to buy another one, so it’s just endless.” Martin’s exposure to behaviors such as drinking alcohol, smoking, and dating provided more conflict than resolution regarding his identity. This is a much different outcome from those experienced by many of the participants, specifically those who studied at GFSU.

In his interview Frank said, for him, being exposed to people who did not believe in any religion upset him because he could not understand what they were living for. He said, “…if you didn’t believe any religion, what’s the point of you and the life?” Frank also mentioned that he had been exposed to racism, something he did not experience in Saudi Arabia, while studying at CSU. He mentioned a time when he attended a church at CSU where two men told him that
Islam is a “terrorist religion.” Frank also discussed a situation with the police he had at CSU, in which he felt the police were discriminating against him because of his appearance and his English. He did not go into detail about the situation, nor did he say the police said anything to him. He described it as “their eyes saying to me, you’re not from here.” While Frank did not discuss what this meant for him as a Muslim, from this situation he described, it is arguable that, for him, being a Muslim at CSU could mean feeling prejudiced and discriminated against. Frank was the only participant to mention feeling discriminated against at CSU.

The participants’ exposure to the culture at CSU and GFSU triggered both positive and negative reactions. These reactions caused many participants to question how this new culture could be reconciled with their Muslim and/or cultural identity, and whether or not such reconciliation was even possible.

**Questioning**

Most of the participants expressed that they experienced, and continue to experience, periods of questioning whether the new culture they have been exposed to as result of studying at CSU and GFSU can be adopted in accordance with their Muslim and/or cultural identity. Many of the participants framed this time of questioning as a pursuit for a deeper understanding of what it means to be Muslim. This section will detail the participants’ experiences of questioning and how their questioning has informed their Muslim and/or cultural identity.

Growing up in Yemen, Samuel considered himself a devout Muslim, saying his prayers, fasting, and spending summers attending Koran camp. However, it was not until Samuel studied at GFSU that he began to realize that he had never questioned why he did such things. Since studying at GFSU, Samuel said his identity as Muslim shifted from one of practice and duty to one of philosophy. He said, “…I never thought about it from what it means to be Muslim. I was
Muslim. Everyone is Muslim. You go… You pray to God, so it’s not that philosophical.” As a result of Samuel’s philosophical prodding of Islam while studying at GFSU, his faith has grown stronger. His philosophical approach has confirmed the importance of the restrictions within Islam, including drinking and pre-marital sex. He believes that, because he is living in a culture at GFSU where he is exposed to drinking and pre-martial sex, he sees the consequences of it and understands why Islam doesn’t allow him to engage in those activities. Again, Samuel’s philosophical understanding of Islam has contributed to, what he considers, a strengthening of his faith.

Helen’s exposure has led her to question fasting, Islamic practices regarding loaning money, and even parts of Hadiths (sayings of the prophet Muhammad). Regarding fasting, Helen said,

We’ve been doing it for so long and I have not been questioning anything about it but now I am saying... if it’s for the purpose of cleaning your body and feeling for the poor... it’s way different than the ages they used to live in when it used to clean their bodies... I wake up at 3:00 A.M. or 3:30 A.M. and then I can’t go back to sleep until 5:00 A.M. and have to get up at 7:00 A.M. and I have two hours of sleep and eating in the middle of the night... which is not good... which is like those people who wake up in the middle of the night and have chips underneath their bed and start eating... the kind of bad habit that would make your body not cleansed... the complete opposite thing... You are eating too late. You are not cleaning your body. I cannot function during the day. I feel tired. I feel headache... I just feel like it’s not right.

Regarding loaning money Helen said,
We have one of the things that says don’t get a loan from the bank because of the interest rate… I started wondering… we have this thing called Islamic bank that will give you a loan that will buy it and sell it for you for a higher price, which is kind of the same thing (in America). It’s buying a car for $5,000 and selling it to you for $9,000, and if you take a loan from a different bank, it’s going to cost you, at the end of the period, $9,000.

Because they’re calling it Islamic… The explanation of these things is just nonsense.

Regarding the veracity of Hadiths, Helen said,

...we also go by stories of the people who were around the prophet. There are some stories that are almost personal, like there should be at least three or four people in the room to be able to know all these details, and yet, we do know these details... I don’t know... did this story really happen?

Similar to what Samuel described as the philosophical level, and what Helen referred to as questioning, Martin’s questioning, as result of his exposure, made him so disenchanted with Islam that he began to feel like he was, “Against religion. Against values. Against everything.”

Martin also experienced a personal traumatic event: he ran out of money. Many of Martin’s cousins were also studying at CSU at this time, but would not come to his aid. Instead, Martin received support from an American roommate who provided him food and money. This changed Martin’s perspective of Americans, and specifically his cousins. He began to question behaviors like drinking and smoking, and whether they were necessarily bad, as those his roommates, who he considered to be good, were engaged in them. His questioning led him further away from Islam and deeper into a depression that facilitated more drinking, smoking, and dating. He told me that his drinking specifically was because he “wanted to challenge God.”
Martin’s questioning also led him to attend a local Christian church. He said he attended because, “I was wondering what the Christian was doing and how are they close to my heart.” However, he said he quickly left after discovering that the bible made no mention of the prophet Muhammad.

Elaine has been an atheist for ten years. She became an atheist at university in Iran as a result of her studies in anthropology and sociology, and her personal ontological pursuit for truth. She described her time at university as a time of significant questioning due to her exposure to works by Charles Darwin. She said most of his works are illegal in Iran, yet she was able to obtain through private libraries. Additionally, the works of the French anthropologist, Edgar Moran, heavily influenced Elaine’s questioning. According to Elaine, Moran’s works were highly antagonistic towards Islam, as well as all religions. She said, “he say for example, religion, and god is illusion, something we created.” While works of Charles Darwin are illegal in Iran, Edgar Moran’s works are not. Elaine said this is, “because this government (Iranian) is not only dictator, but is so stupid, some of them really don’t know what books are saying.”

Elaine has questioned Islam and the Iranian government since she was at university. As a sociologist, Elaine now shares a similar perspective with Edgar Moran who regards God as something created by man. Her questioning of Islam has evolved into critiques of Islam, specifically the Five Pillars of Islam (requirements), which she believes are too difficult, gender inequality, which she believes is wrong, and also her view of Muhammad. Elaine has, according to her, a “catastrophic idea about Muhammad for Islam. He was really sick man, especially in sexual relationships.” Elaine brought this up because she said there was an article recently written about Muhammad and child marriage. Regarding this, she said, “…in Islamic countries, we have a problem with child marriage. Because most crazy people in Yemen, in Saudi Arabia,
Muhammad lived with girls who were age six, so that is something we can do because the prophet do.” Two years ago, Elaine gave an interview regarding the issue of child marriage. She did not speak critically of the prophet but did discuss in the context of children’s rights. In Iran, Elaine said girls at the age of nine are able to marry. She said that it is uncommon to marry a nine year old but not illegal. Many girls, according to Elaine, are married off by their fathers between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

Elaine’s questioning of the Iranian government has also evolved into a critique, which appeared to be harsher than her critique of Islam. The government and the laws stemming from it have been a source of strife for Elaine, as mentioned earlier, costing her promotions and raises because she did not practice Islam accordingly. She also takes issues with the Iranian government’s apostasy laws, which make it illegal for her to be an atheist. According to Elaine, this applies to all born Muslims who convert to another religion, or no religion, in addition to any non-Muslim who evangelizes his or her beliefs. When I asked Elaine what happens to those Muslims who do convert, or the non-Muslims who evangelize, she said, “They go to prison.” Speaking about herself as an atheist in Iran, she said, “...even me, according to their rule, I have to die, and they want to kill me.”

Elaine did not mention that she has undergone any questioning regarding her atheist identity. However, she has begun to question whether or not people at CSU are more religious than people in Iran, saying,

...people in this country are religious, not in this country but in this part, in this city, are religious. More than some in Iran... these people are religious like Middle Eastern people but a little different. For example, they don’t have hijab but... they have some
gathering for religious ideas and education. They go to church maybe more than Iranian people go to mosque.

Elaine found this to be interesting, “amazing actually.” She said prior to coming to CSU to study, she did not like Americans, specifically Christian Americans as much as she came to while studying at CSU. She blamed this dislike, to a certain extent on the discourse in Iran, which refers to the U.S. as Satan. Elaine said,

I respect some Muslim people in Iran. I really respect some Christians, and I like some things that’s called God... when they want others to convert to Christianity because they think this is good because to them Jesus is symbol... and they want people to believe in peace. I couldn’t believe in that, but I really respect them, and they’ve changed my perspective in this, and I can understand why American government need this religion.

Religion in the United States is complicit in America, liberation, literature. People are not so deep about their religions, and maybe because of mass media, because... this is very big country, and their idea didn’t change between people so fast here like in Europe. And the... nature is really wide. They need... God because there are many natural catastrophes here and people sometimes are lonely and so they need... strong things like God. But I think that the people in power... really use this issue.

The questioning Elaine has experienced as result of studying at CSU has had more to do with understanding her new culture, not necessarily as it relates to her identity, but as it relates to religion in Iran. Because Elaine was exposed to new ways of thinking during her time at university in Iran as a student and as a sociologist, her questioning of Islam and Iranian culture occurred prior to her studying at CSU.
Moses expressed that we went through a time of questioning as result of being exposed to science and psychology. He said, “…I kind of got away from the whole God thing because I began questioning from a scientific perspective.” For Moses, Islam and the scientific perspective were incompatible. The perceived dichotomy of Islam vs. science forced him to question what was truth and what was not. Additionally, during the time of his questioning as result of his exposure to science, Moses said that his sister was diagnosed with cancer. This appeared to further impact his questioning. Regarding this he said,

> It (questioning) happened because of my sister too. Because she had cancer, and I was very angry asking why did God... you know I prayed every day, and did everything well, and I was pretty much... I was a very strict Muslim. I never lied, cheated, drank alcohol, ate pork, and I was like why would someone do that to my sister? And this idea of a loving God kind of... disappeared. At first, it was anger, then it was like, okay... I was trying to look for a purpose and thought what if there is no purpose and things just happen? Not because somebody is bad or good but because things happen. It broke that connection.

Moses became an atheist and entered CSU as one. During his time at CSU he met the director of an on-campus Christian organization. The director invited him to attend an event, and Moses took him up on the offer. Moses continued to attend events, again questioning whether God did exist, but now, this time as the Christian God. Through his relationship with the director and his attendance at the organization’s events, Moses became a Christian, “for a few months.” Again, it was his continued questioning once he became a Christian that resulted in his becoming an atheist again. About his conversion to Christianity he said,
... I was like... let’s give it (Christianity) a try. Again, it was my curiosity. I kept asking questions and I didn’t get answers. I would get wishy-washy answers, and I was like, oh, I was an atheist for a reason. I still talked to the people and respected them, but went back into my old self.

When I asked him why Christianity initially resonated with him, he said,

...knowing that there is an entity that will always love you no matter what. I like that idea. And... it wasn’t about being judged on what you have, like what car you drive, or money you have, it was just how good of a person you are. It was a personal relationship, and bond.

Although Moses had spent part of his adolescence in Chicago, he said that it was not until he attended CSU that he was exposed to Christianity.

As a result of the participants’ exposure to a new culture, many of the participants questioned whether this new culture could be reconciled with their Muslim and/or cultural identity. For many of the participants, the time of questioning they experienced prompted their need for discernment of not only the new culture residing at CSU and GFSU, but a discernment of their own culture that stems from Islam. For many of the participants who were able to discern between their culture and their faith, a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity seemed to occur.

**Discernment: Islam & Culture**

Many participants’ expressed in their interview that during their study at one of the two universities they have come to realize that ways of thinking and behaving that were considered to be religious in their home country were not religious but, instead, cultural. As mentioned earlier, in their home country they were unable to discern this due to a lack of perspective and diversity.
As a result of studying at one of the two universities and the exposure to not only liberal ways of thinking and behaving, but also other Muslims, both international and domestic, they have been able to differentiate between what is Islam and what is culture. This section details those particular shifts that the participants experienced regarding what they came to understand as cultural, rather than religious.

**Social Issues: Gender Equality, Homosexuality, and Bars**

The issues that many of the participants came to understand as cultural rather than religious during their time studying at one of the two universities were social issues. These social issues encompassed mainly issues of gender equality as understood in the context of dress and segregation, and autonomy, but also included homosexuality, and going to bars.

**Gender Equality.** Since studying at GFSU, Tania stopped wearing hijab. She expressed that removing hijab was actually a sign that her faith had strengthened. Regarding her decision to not wear hijab, and what it meant for her, she said,

> ...since I came here I started to think about my religion, and I started to think... so what's the point for me to do (Islam), because there are a lot of cultural impact on the religion, like there are a lot of things which are tradition, but we will start to think it's part of religion, like hijab. People start to think it's very strong part of their religion, but not me, I think it's tradition and part of the region. Because of that, I feel like I've gotten stronger in my faith.

Tania’s choice to not wear hijab was informed by her discernment of Islam and Arabic culture, and her conclusion that hijab was not a part of Islam but a part of Arabic culture. Again, it was at GFSU that she came to this decision.
Tania has also undergone shifts with regards to her perceptions of male and female relationships in the context of friendship and marriage, and, further more, gender equality. In Saudi Arabia, Tania mentioned that men and women are often segregated from each other in a variety of contexts, including schooling, work, and social functions. She said,

*Dealing between men and women in my culture is... so extreme... Women don’t supposed to have friends from other sex... so women don’t grow up having... male friends, except like their family and relatives. For me, I don’t believe in that. I feel that all of us are equal and we should treat us with respect. I don’t picture the friendship... between male and female... as something very bad.*

Tania spoke of her previous work in a hospital in Saudi Arabia where she worked along side males, and talked about how the men were hesitant to talk to her because of the social norms regarding male and female interactions. Marriage in Saudi Arabia is also an issue that Tania has begun to take up with some her Muslim friends. Tania believes that women should be able to marry anyone, including a non-Muslim if they so choose. She said,

*...when she (Muslim woman) wants to get married to a non-Muslim person like an atheist or like anything, they (Muslim women) shouldn’t because people will not accept their daughter to have non-Muslim husband... Some things Islam say you should react with people with moral ideal, or moral way, but... I see a lot of people from different religion and with no religion, and they also treat each other with morality and respect. So I feel like... it’s more spiritual, like if two people have a deep connection between each other no matter their religion.*

Tania’s shift in perspective regarding male and female relationships extends further, as mentioned, into the issue of gender equality. Since studying at GFSU, Tania has witnessed
gender equality unlike anything she had experienced in Saudi Arabia. Observing gender equality at GFSU caused her to critically think about why such a principle does not exist in Saudi Arabia. She said,

All of us back at my home country, there is a differentiation between males and females, and a lot of females are not happy about this differentiation or discrimination. When I came here I started to compare how people are equal here and why don’t we have like equivalent… Going to other cultures, you start to have this passion to change your culture, to improve things.

She went on to talk about how when she lived in Saudi Arabia she might read a news story about a woman being abused by her husband and have pity for the woman, but now, since studying at GFSU, she said she feels more responsibility, saying “…now I feel like people should move and have act about trying to prevent that (abuse). I start to feel like that I’m more responsible… about changing things to the better.” Tania also said that since studying at GFSU, she realized that Saudi Arabian culture is dictated by appearances, specifically as it pertains to being a good Muslim. She said that instead of judging “the book from the cover,” people should “deal with people and understand them.”

Helen wishes to return to Bahrain. Aside from being closer to family and friends, and in a familiar culture, Helen wants to return to Bahrain because, in doing so, she believes she would no longer question her Islamic faith, and the practices associated with it. She said with regards to living in the U.S.,

…it’s too much to deal with and at the same time, I do have these questions and I don’t want to have them… I want to stick to my religion but I am having all these things that are keeping me away from doing that. Going back to Bahrain will put me back.
While Helen’s appearance speaks to her faith as she donned both abaya and hijab to the interview, internally Helen feels as if she’s becoming less Muslim since studying at GFSU. This feeling is a significant concern for her. Though she wants to be Muslim, her exposure here to American culture, specifically as it pertains to dress and socializing, has caused her to question the restrictions within her faith. Regarding this she said,

...when I came here, it’s a completely different society. People dress differently, act differently, eat differently, do everything completely different. I started wondering...why can they do this and I cannot? Like girls would go out and have fun and dress up as much as they want and me... I’m just sitting and watching movies. I don’t want their life, but I want some of it... I feel I’m kind of trapped in my religion. It’s not that my religion has suppressed me, but it has prevented a lot of things, so I start questioning sometimes, like, why do these things exist and at the same time it is forbidden for me to do. Like if it’s forbidden, why do they exist? Why can some people do it and I can’t?

Helen’s shift from complacency in her faith to questioning her faith is similar to Samuel’s shift to what he calls a philosophical perspective of Islam. Helen’s exposure to the way people dress, which, she referred to as “half-naked” because of the women’s “short shorts, and guys go around the street without shirts” (the interview occurred during summer), has caused Helen, to ask: in a society where such outfits are the norm, why, if she is also living in this society, can she not partake in this style of dress? Helen is not necessarily asking why she cannot also dress “half-naked” but why she cannot take off her hijab. She told me that regarding hijab she asks, “…why do we wear hijab? Some people say it’s not mentioned in the Koran. Some people say you have to wear it.” She also mentioned that as a result of feeling forced to wear hijab, she told
a friend of hers, who does not wear hijab, “that they were living the life that I always want to live.”

Helen’s shift has also led her to question why she cannot have relationships with men, not in a romantic context, but as friends. To this she said,

_ I’m not going to say it as a boyfriend kind of thing, but going out with a group… like going out and having fun… some religious people say that’s completely forbidden, and I find that this is ridiculous because if you’re not going to be with guys (say) in a trip, you’re certainly going to be with them once you graduate and go to work.

Samuel believes issues surrounding gender inequality in Yemen, and other Muslim countries are cultural and not religious. He attributes the understanding of these issues to be a problem with culture, and not Islam. He said,

_ …and that’s what is sad even in most of the religious countries like the Islamic countries, it’s become the culture over the religion… Some countries… take it to the extreme, which is like women driving in Saudi Arabia for example, which is stupid… women in the prophet’s times… used to fight in battles… and they part of society… So right now… I think about it and I ask about anything, is that culture or is that religious, and if it’s religious, why is it religious? I take it to the philosophical level.

Samuel believes that issues surrounding women’s rights, specifically as it pertains to traveling without family, and, women’s education, are also cultural issues and not religious. He believes that jihad and radical Islam, along with women’s rights, are part of antiquated cultural practices that are no longer relevant, but continue on because people do not question such practices. He said, “…I feel sad for those people who just follow their leaders or sect or whatever, and they say yes means yes and no means no.” For Samuel, since studying at GFSU,
his curiosity has increased and resulted in him trying “to find anything that makes sense, because to me… Islam makes sense… and I wanted to do it by choice, not by, I had to follow, so that encouraged me to be more curious when I came to the U.S.”

Since coming to study at CSU, Frank has come to question gender equality not only as it pertains to women, but also men. One significant issue he has been unable to understand is why, in Saudi Arabian culture, young men are not allowed to gather publicly. He told me that if he and I wanted to go Olive Garden in Saudi Arabia, we would not be allowed to because we are two men. He told me that he was denied access by a security guard to the mall in his home city because he was not with his family. Frank would change this discourse surrounding young men if he could. Regarding women being allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, Frank said, “…woman should drive in my home… Give me a reason, give me something from Islam. There is nothing about that, but the culture… the man always do stuff for the woman.” Frank felt like laws protecting women should be enough to allow them to drive, and deter any potential harm.

Adam, like other participants, shared that studying at GFSU has provided him with insight into understanding what is Islam and what is Yemenis culture. He acknowledged that being able to discern between Islam and culture has changed his perspective regarding what he now sees as a Yemenis cultural practice. He said, “…like ten or fifteen years ago we’d actually go get engaged, you couldn’t talk to your fiancée until you got married and that’s not a religious thing, that’s just a cultural thing we came up with.” Adam said what helped him gain insight into the difference between Islam and culture was being exposed to Muslims from other countries that have different cultural practices yet the same faith. Adam believed the issue facing the bifurcation of Islam and culture was that many people do not seek truth on their own; instead,
they simply accept it from one person whom they consider more knowledgeable. Regarding this he said,

_They don’t try to search and read from different people… when you read about different scholars and different ideas, you see that maybe this is not right and this right… Islam is all about making your mind work and asking questions and if it’s logical or not, and you take it and think is this logical or not, and I believe that the logical mind develops when you meet different culture, different people… I feel like that help me a lot here in the States… my logical sense developed a lot more. Especially living in the United States you know everybody around the world. You’ll meet people from India, South America, so we develop a wider perspective around the world, that is logical._

Although Adam initially referred to his shift to being less conservative as a necessary adaptation, he also appeared to frame his shift to being more accepting, in addition to understanding the differences between Islam and culture, as more than simply an adaptation, but as a reflection of his developing logic, and a new characteristic of his personality and faith.

**Homosexuality.** Samuel said that since studying at GFSU he has become more liberal. He described himself as the same person doing the same things as he was in Yemen; however, he said, “I’m doing it with better passion. Like accepting others like homosexuals and stuff like that…” Samuel has discerned a divide between Islam and culture is homosexuality. Samuel alludes to homosexuality having no part in Arabic or Muslim culture, saying,

_...we are very homophobic as Arabs and Muslims and conservative cultures. You don’t have homosexuals… but coming here to the U.S. was like you know I accept the others more. It’s their life. If you want to do whatever. If you want to be gay, it’s up to you. For me, I have some gay friends now… and when they take it to the extreme I’m like do_
whatever you want and I accept that because acceptance of others is becoming better with me… back home it’s like, ‘Oh, he’s a homosexual. Don’t even talk to him or whatever…

Bars. Before Matthew came to study at Gold Finch State University, he spent some of his free time at cafes in Jordan. In these cafes alcohol is prohibited. Now, at GFSU, Matthew spends that time in bars, where alcohol is served in large and affordable quantities. Before he came to GFSU, Matthew never thought he would be socializing in bars, saying,

I was never thinking I would go to bars. Here, most of the people go there... This is what they have, what they believe. Even if it’s not okay for me, at least... I’m more flexible to hang out... It’s not like being in a bar, at least from my point of view is wrong. Maybe for other people it would be. Being in that place, they would be like, ‘Maybe I would drink. Maybe I would do something wrong so I don’t go at all.’ For me, I feel confident, I go, I hang out, I do many things I want but I can still maintain my identity, my culture... my personality.

Although Matthew does go to bars to socialize, he does not drink. He compares them to cafes back home, saying, “It’s equivalent to going to cafes. That’s what I’m doing. Back home I go to cafes… It’s the same here, you gather with friends, laugh, dance, right? So I go to bars but I don’t drink.” Matthew mentioned, as previously stated in the section regarding what it means to be Muslim at GFSU, that it is Islam that gives him the ability, or flexibility, to go to bars, but flexibility does not extent to being allowed to partake in drinking. Matthew also discussed his flexibility in the context of allowing himself to be exposed to people who have different beliefs and lifestyles than his own. He said, “I’m flexible to talk to many people no matter where they
came from, their religion. That’s the change… back home, some people would get afraid to be exposed to other religions and cultures. They get afraid of losing their identity."

Adam also goes to bars for the purpose of spending time with his friends. In Yemen, Adam did not go to bars, but at GFSU, he views it as a necessary adaptation he must make in order to be able to spend time with friends, saying,

...it’s not something I chose to, but it’s a way of being more accepting... because when you want to live here in a liberal city you have to be a little bit more liberal than you used to be. For example, like in Yemen none of my friends drink, so when I go out with them nobody drinks at the table... now I have friends who drink so when we go out they drink, and I’m not used to it, but I accept it because they’re my friends and it’s their culture.

Religious Issues: Singing

Through much of the hardship that Martin has endured while studying at CSU, it is his singing voice he said, that helped him persevere through the difficult times, and ultimately ended up bringing him back to a stronger relationship with Islam. According to Martin, as a Shia Muslim, and within his tribe, singing is forbidden. He told me had planned to audition for Arabic Idol while he was back in Saudi Arabia during CSU’s summer break. Arabic idol is a singing contest similar to American Idol. However, such an act on his part, he said, would shame his family. He said, “It was a bomb on my society. They were like what! This guy, the son of that guy (sheik) want to be a singer. That’s a shame. That’s a big sin. That’s a mistake.” He sought approval from his father, who told him, “…if you want to do it, go do it, but I’m not responsible,” and his mother who told him, “…no way!” I asked why his mother told him no, and he said, “Because when I do that people will… talk shit about my father.” As result of their
reaction, Martin chose not to try out for Arabic Idol, and instead, returned back to the U.S. to finish his studies at CSU.

Although Martin has undergone various shifts pertaining to his religious identity, as well as his behaviors, including drinking, smoking, and dating, he believes that he is a stronger Muslim for it, and is able to understand why Islam has certain restrictions specifically regarding drinking and dating. He did, however, say that his perspective is different now with regards to the lack of openness in Saudi Arabia. He would like to change this, in addition to the traffic laws, which he says are not enforced and often lead to accidents. Martin believes that he can bring change to Saudi Arabia, specifically with regards to making it more open to singing, and not compromise his faith, or his family’s reputation. He intends to do this by building his popularity in Saudi Arabia with the music work he has done here. He sang for me during the interview, utilizing both English and Arabic. He considers this a new style of singing that he believes will help him gain popularity and ultimately acceptance as a singer in his family, and Saudi Arabia as a whole.

**Implications**

The participants who expressed a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity while studying at CSU or GFSU, also described what the implications of their shifts would mean in their home country. All the participants who experienced liberal shifts in their cultural identity expressed that the implications of such shifts would be negative as it pertained to all facets of their home country including family, community, and government. The positive implications of those participants who experienced a liberal shift in their cultural identity, were described as an opportunity to, in a sense, evangelize about the differences between culture and Islam, and, therefore advocate amongst their peers for certain social issues, the prominent one being gender
equality. However, even for the participants who expressed this as a positive implication, juxtaposed it with the fact that many of their peers, and especially the older people in the society, would likely resist such ideas.

Tania said that upon returning to Saudi Arabia to teach, she hopes to teach in a way where her students, “question themselves and ask a lot of questions.” She said that she too had a professor that taught students to question things, yet the students resisted this teaching. Samuel said that he hoped to engage his friends in discussions regarding what is cultural and what is Islam. Regarding the issue of female driving, he said, “I think I’ll argue and say no that’s not religious, you only do it because the culture told you to do it and that has nothing to do with religion.”

Regarding the implications of his temporary conversion to Christianity, Moses said, *They (his parents) would feel like... we first lost him to the idea of no God, and now we lost him to the idea of a Christian God. It’s almost worse than believing in no God. It’s like... some other religion won you over... we weren’t good enough.*

He mentioned that although he did tell his family he became an atheist, he would never tell his family that he became a Christian. He said, “I wasn’t even going to test it, no.”

Martin mentioned that if he had gone to sing in Arabic Idol, and become a singer, he would have been forced out of his family and society, saying, “…if you are Shiite and become singer, you never come back. You are never welcome.”

Although Elaine’s religious and cultural identity shifted almost ten years ago, the data from her interview still expresses the implications of what a shift in religious and cultural identity could mean for a Muslim student from Iran, who decided to return after studying in the U.S.
Frank did not share specifically what would happen if his father knew about his behavior at CSU. He only said that his father could not know. He also mentioned that because of his newly acquired English, and his use of it in Saudi Arabia, his father criticizes him for sounding American. Frank also explained what the implications might be for a female Muslim student from Saudi Arabia who decided to date, as he said that if her father found out she would be “married off as soon as possible.”

These implications are important to note because they may have an impact on international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, or whether they experience a shift regarding their Muslim and/or cultural identity at all.

Summary

This chapter detailed the results of the data as they pertained to the emerging themes that arose inductively from the data. The themes will be used as axial and central categories in the follow chapter, which will analyze the results and answer the central question: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing in regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? Additionally, the sub-questions included: What is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? What are the implications of these shifts?
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the nature of international Muslim students’ shifts in their Muslim and/or cultural identity and the contributions to, and implications of their shifts. To understand the implications of and contributions to participants’ shifts, this chapter will be primarily guided by analysis of themes derived from participant interviews. As well, the chapter will utilize, to a certain extent, Kim’s (2012) International Student Identity model, Fowler’s (1981) Stages of Faith, Astin, Astin, and Lindeholm’s (2011) Measures of Religiousness, and Erikson’s (1963) Psychosocial Stages of Identity. These frameworks, while not providing the theoretical framework, will be used to help elucidate the themes coming from the data.

Using an inductive approach, this research analyzes the interview data, from which arose three axial categories and one central category. The three axial categories are independence, exposure, and questioning. These three categories provide the scaffolding for the core category of discernment. These axial categories and core category will be used to answer the main question: What are the shifts international Muslim students are experiencing in regards to their Muslim and/or cultural identity? And sub-questions: What is contributing to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity? What are the implications of these shifts? This chapter will begin with looking at the shifts international students experienced with regards to their religious and/or cultural identity, and then look at the axial categories, and core category to understand these shifts.

**Shifts**

Eight out of the twelve participants in this study said that they experienced a strengthening of their Muslim faith while studying in the U.S. at the time of their interview. Two of the four participants, Elaine and Moses, that did not experience a strengthening of their
Muslim identity, had lost their Muslim identity prior to studying at a higher education institution in the U.S. Moses did, however, experience a shift regarding his temporary conversion to Christianity. One of the four participants, Neda, said that she neither experienced a strengthening or weakening of her Muslim identity while studying in the U.S. For her, studying in the U.S. had no bearing on her faith. Only one participant said that they had experienced a weakening of their faith at the time of their interview. While other participants had mentioned that they went through a time of weakening to ultimately arrive at a stronger faith, Helen was the only participant who concluded that her faith had weakened as a result of studying in the U.S.

Seven participants expressed that they had become more liberal in their cultural identity, which is understood as being more open to new behaviors or opinions and willing to discard traditional values. Six of these seven participants while becoming more liberal in their cultural identity said that they grew stronger in their Muslim identity.

All of the participants, aside from Elaine, who became an atheist in Iran, came to the U.S. as Committed Traditionalists, defined as emergent adults who embrace “a strong religious faith, whose belief they can reasonably articulate and which they actively practice” (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 166). According to the participants, they believed in, and practiced Islam regularly in their home country. They adhered to the Five Pillars of Islam and the teachings of the Koran. All of the participants except Samantha described their family as conservative Muslim. Two of the participants, Frank and Martin, have fathers who are religious leaders in their communities.
Table 4: Participant Shifts in Cultural and Muslim Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Cultural Identity upon arrival</th>
<th>Cultural Identity at the time of the interview</th>
<th>Muslim Identity since studying at CSU/GFSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Atheist (no change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Weaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Atheist (became a Christian for a time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neda</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>No difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Stronger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the participants’ shifts in religious and/or cultural identity since studying at one of the two universities appear to follow a pattern of while becoming more liberal in their cultural identity, they grow stronger in their Muslim identity. While this is not the case in all of the participants, both those who do not follow this pattern and those that do can be understood in the context of the process detailed in the axial and core categories provided in this section.

**Independence**

Independence is the first axial category. The fact that most international students experience a significant amount of independence is a presupposition. The process of studying abroad includes leaving one’s home country, culture, and often times, family and friends for a new country and culture which to study in. In this study, six participants mentioned that they came to study at CSU or GFSU alone. The other six participants expressed that they came to
study at CSU or GFSU with either a friend or family members. The three participants who said they came to study with family members mentioned they were here with siblings or cousins. No participant came to study in the U.S. with a parent or grandparent. This is important to note, because even though the participants who were studying with family members, they still expressed having a significant amount of independence studying in the U.S., by contrasting this with the dependence, they had in their home country. This issue of independence contributed significantly to those participants who did experience a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity.

Most participants’ home countries consist of strong central governments that impose heavy regulations on behavior, such as drinking, dating, and gender segregation. Additionally, many participants remarked that there are many societal pressures that work in conjunction with their central governments’ behavior regulations, such as wearing hijab and arranged marriages. Furthermore, many of the participants’ home countries demographics are homogenous, and all but two of the participants belonged to the majority, which was typically Sunni Muslim, and was an overwhelming part of the population, often times 90 percent or more. As a result of being part of the dominant people group, many participants expressed that they were unaware of other cultures, and in many cases, other religions. Many participants said that from their perspective “everyone was Muslim.” Therefore, they never questioned their culture or religion.

It was only a result of leaving their home country, culture, and community, that they were able to achieve independence, and in doing so, many participants expressed that it was their independence from their home country, culture, and community that facilitated exposure to new ways of thinking, behaving, and being that they had never known prior to coming to CSU or GFSU to study. Many of the participants also expressed that their independence afforded them
the ability to be able to reflect on the new ways of thinking and behaving that they were exposed to. In their home country, as mentioned above it would be difficult to reflect, because the forces that govern their lives, such as family, religious community, and government are ever present and influential. Being away from such forces, many of the participants expressed that they were able to compare and contrast such issues like hijab, dating, going to bars, gender equality, and so forth free from the societal and governmental pressure, and as result discern these issues to ultimately come to their own conclusion, specifically regarding whether these issues were cultural or religious, and whether they were going to continue to agree and practice with these issues, as they were in their home country. Regardless of whether the participants agreed or disagreed with certain issues, like hijab and gender equality, the independence they had as a result of studying at CSU or GFSU allowed them to be exposed to new ways, reflect upon these new ways, and ultimately discern whether these new ways were going to inform their life. The graphic below shows the contrast between the dependence the participants had as members of their home country and the independence participants have studying abroad at CSU or GFSU. The dependence arrow represents the top-down authority that many of the participants expressed their family, community, and government had in their lives in their home country, while the independence arrow represents a bottom-up authority that the participants personally had in their lives at CSU or GFSU. It should be noted that this figure does not represent a strict dichotomy, but a process. Some participants appeared to be caught in the middle of this process, between dependence and independence. While they embraced the independence that their study abroad experience afforded them, it was only to the degree that they were still acting in accordance with the model of top-down authority present in their home country as manifested in the governing power of their families, religious communities, and government, while studying at one of the two
universities. While some participants appeared to be able to break significantly from their
dependence upon their home country while studying abroad, other participants were still deeply
influenced by their home country while studying abroad. Yet, even these participants who were
still dependent upon their home country’s influence still achieved much more independence than
which they described having in their home country. Lana expressed that she dresses according to
her parents’ liking. She mentioned that she would wear abaya if her parents asked her to,
however, they have only asked her to wear hijab. Although Lana is still dependent upon her
parents’ approval regarding her dress, she expressed that she has a significant amount of
independence that she otherwise would not have in the U.A.E. as a result of studying at CSU.
Lana mentioned that she engages in activities, such as riding alone in taxis and living and
shopping alone that she would never said she never engage in back in U.A.E., and these activities
are a direct result of the independence she has as a result of studying at CSU.

Figure 2: Dependence/Independence

Helen credited independence, in part, as being the reason why international Muslim
students are prone to losing their faith. She expressed that this was a result of the dependence
people, in particular Middle Eastern people, have to be accepted by a conservative Muslim
society, saying,

...coming to the U.S... there are no more people I know here. I can do whatever I want...
the fear of what people will say and what people (in the Middle East) will start talking
about and gossiping about is... more than the fear of God. So that’s why when people come here (U.S.) they lose their faith in everything because the people they once knew aren’t here anymore and they aren’t here to watch them.

Being able to do whatever one wants looks differently in various cultural contexts. What Helen, and many of the other participants may do at CSU or GFSU is, to a certain extent, in stark contrast to what they may do in their home country. Participants may go to bars, drink alcohol, not wear hijab, date, sing, travel alone, and change their cultural and religious identity, legally. The independence afforded by studying abroad, provides the participants with exposure to new culture and customs that they were not familiar with in their home country.

**Exposure**

Exposure is the second axial category. All the participants were exposed to new ways of thinking and behaving as a result of their study abroad at CSU or GFSU. Only one participant, Samantha from India, mentioned that she came from a diverse country, in which she was exposed to other ways of thinking and behaving than her own. Matthew had studied at another Midwestern university for a summer during his secondary education in Jordan as an exchange student, and was exposed to American culture. Some participants mentioned being exposed to aspects of American culture through watching movies. Adam and Samuel both studied at an American institute in Yemen where they said they were exposed to American teachers. Yet, none of the participants expressed that they were necessarily prepared for what they have experienced regarding each universities’ culture. As mentioned in Chapter IV, drinking alcohol is prohibited in the majority of the participants’ home countries. Hijab, and abaya are standards for female dress. Women are not allowed to drive or travel alone. Dating is prohibited. Singing in Martin’s tribe was not allowed. In Elaine’s case, not publically practicing Islam resulted in a
loss of promotion and raises. In all but two countries, changing one’s religious identity was illegal and punishable by prison, and according to Elaine, death. Many of the participants, as a result of their home culture, were exposed to a new culture, new customs, and new ways of thinking, that were not present in their home country, and that in many of their cases, led to a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity. From the data, I found that the participants’ shifts, or in some cases non-shifts, were informed by their reaction to the exposure.

Lana said she was “heartbroken” by what she has seen her fellow students, and also fellow Muslim students engaging in at CSU. Specifically she related this to going to clubs, and dressing immodestly. She reacted negatively to her exposure and she expressed that her cultural identity was stronger as well as her Muslim identity. Tania’s exposure to the culture and customs at GFSU, specifically as it pertained to gender equality gave her a “passion to change” her culture, and to “improve things” through educating her students back in Saudi Arabia. Tania reacted positively to this exposure and it informed, in part, her decision to not wear hijab. As a result, her home cultural identity weakened, even though her Muslim identity grew stronger. This was a unique phenomenon discovered in the study that revealed that Muslim and cultural identity are not necessarily synonymous, and may operate independently from one another. All of the participants who experienced a weakened cultural identity expressed having a positive reaction to their exposure to their universities’ culture and customs. The graphic below demonstrates most of the participants’ reactions to exposure and the result of those reactions.
Figure 3: Exposure Reactions and Results

This process was not the case for all of the participants. Helen’s experience with exposure was unique in that she expressed more of an ambivalence regarding her exposure to the culture and customs at GFSU. She held simultaneous feelings of wanting to embrace her new culture, while also wanting to flee it, because of the negative impact she thought it would have on her Muslim identity, and consequently her relationship with her family and home country.

Fowler (1981) addresses some of the issues that many of the participants dealt with regarding exposure. In his Individuative-Reflective Faith stage, Fowler (1981) found that individuals tend to experience a spiritual upheaval in which they wrestle internally with contradiction and conflict regarding their faith. This internal struggle is often triggered by an individual’s exposure to beliefs and lifestyles different than their own, especially from people they admire and respect, leading them to question their faith (Brown, 2012). Individuals, as result, may find themselves oscillating back and forth between their old religious identity and a new identity (Brown, 2012). Some of the participants’ experiences alluded to such a conflict as they talked about being exposed to people whose culture and beliefs contrasted significantly with their own. However, in the case of this study, and different from Fowler’s (1981) Individuative-
Reflective Faith stage, participants did not experience an oscillation between their old new religious identity, but actually an oscillation between their old and new cultural identities.

As the result of studying at one of the two universities, most of the participants’ religious and cultural identities became compartmentalized. Whereas prior to studying in the U.S., their cultural and religious identities were considered to be synonymous. Exposure to American culture provided them new insights into understanding how their Muslim and cultural identity were not necessarily synonymous, and in fact, for many of the participants, their exposure to American culture informed a weakening of their cultural identity, or in many cases, a liberalization of their cultural identity, while they experienced a strengthening of their Muslim identity. In their home country, for many of the participants, it was understood that their conservative culture was the result of Islam, but, again, as a result of the exposure they experienced studying at one of the two universities, many of the participants came to believe that Islam does not necessitate a conservative culture only, but, in the context of the U.S., can also operate within, and even inform a liberal culture, and, therefore, a liberal cultural identity.

In her interview, Helen mentioned that living in Iraq, Jordan, and Bahrain, she never “spoke to a person who doesn’t believe in God, because it does not exist there. Or even if it exists, they are not around… that’s one of the reasons why I could stick to my faith in the Middle East, because I did not come across the different opinions of people…” At Gold Finch State University, Helen works at dentist’s office, with a dentist who also identifies as a Muslim. However, he is, according to Helen, “not a very strong Muslim.” By that Helen means he drinks, he doesn’t fast, and he has decided what Islam means to him, not what it means to others. Helen’s relationship with him, in addition to the exposure to women and men engaging in relationships, and women being able to wear the clothes or lack of clothes they choose to, has
impacted her relationship with Islam dramatically. It has caused her to question it, and in many ways, suffer it.

Samuel’s faith has also been deeply impacted by his exposure to American culture, and specifically homosexuals. In his interview, he said that Arabs and Muslims are very homophobic, and alluded that he was once too. However, since studying at GFSU, Samuel has developed friendships with homosexuals. Although Samuel said, “I will raise my kids in a very heterosexual way,” he holds that his exposure to homosexuals, and subsequent friendships with them, have produced a new facet of his Muslim identity which accepts people that he once did not. Similarly, Matthew, and Adam, experienced a shift in their socializing at bars, as a result of being exposed to, and developing friendships with people who drink. Whereas they mentioned they would never patron a bar in Jordan or Yemen, they are able to at GFSU and still maintain their Muslim identity. This is unique because they have had the opportunity to make Islam their own and not simply dictated by the cultural and governing authorities. For Tania, her faith adopted a different theology at GFSU from which she was raised in Saudi Arabia, specifically as it pertained to hijab. Exposure to American culture, and women who do not wear hijab, challenged Tania’s perspective of hijab, so much that she sought out literature to better understand this issue, and ultimately arrived at the conclusion that the hijab is cultural and not religious. Her ideas about the cultural elements of her faith, similar to the others mentioned, shifted as she drew more conclusions for herself instead of following the conclusions drawn for her by her home culture.

Martin also experienced a shift in his Muslim and cultural identity as a result of his exposure to American culture and people. He mentioned this in the case of his roommates who he said drank, smoked, and partied in a way that conflicted with his faith, but at the same time,
treated him better than his cousins and fellow Muslim students studying at Cardinal State University. His American roommates not only treated him better than his extended family and fellow Muslim students, but also helped him out financially when he was experiencing financial hardship. This led Martin into a time in which he expressed that he was “Against religion. Against values. Against everything.” In his interview, Martin talked about observing his roommates drinking and smoking, and thinking how good these people were to him, but at the same time doing something that in Islam is considered bad. He said it made him question if the acts of drinking and smoking were actually bad if good people were doing them. He concluded at the time that he too could engage in drinking and smoking and still maintain his faith. This was also true regarding singing. In his interview, he said that according to the Shia Muslim tradition, singing was prohibited, however he engaged in singing because he felt it did not compromise his faith. He alluded to his singing career being impacted by a musician at CSU, who he collaborated with.

In his interview, Moses said before coming to the U.S., he had never been exposed to a “scientific perspective.” Additionally, before coming to study at CSU, Moses said he had never been exposed to Christianity. It appears that Moses’ exposure to the scientific perspective and Christianity informed both of Moses’ shifts. Different though than the other participants who maintained parts of their Muslim identity while adopting American cultural perspectives and practices, Moses abandoned his Muslim identity, and later, his atheist identity, followed by his Christian identity altogether. Moses’ oscillation between different religious and nonreligious identities resembles, to a certain extent, Erikson’s (1963) Psychosocial Stage of Intimacy vs. Isolation, which according to Erikson (1963) occurs during the ages of 18 – 24 years of age, and is characterized by either identity reinforcement or identity questioning that is based upon the
beliefs and worldviews of those who they are socially and relationally engaged with. Because Moses had relationships with people who held an atheistic perspective about the origins and meaning of life, as a Muslim he experienced identity questioning rather than identity reinforcement, which ultimately, in part, led to his shift from Islam to atheism. The same, in part, is true for Moses’ experience with Christianity. Because he was in community with other Christians at CSU, he underwent identity questioning, which led to his shift from atheism to Christianity. In his interview, Moses said that he returned to atheism because he did not get the answers he was seeking.

Exposure was a category that all the participants experienced as result of the independence they had from studying abroad. While many participants had divergent reactions to their exposure, which produced different shifts regarding their cultural identity, almost all of the participants grew stronger in their Muslim identity as a result of the their exposure, regardless of whether their reaction to it was positive or negative. But these shifts only occurred as a result of the questioning that came as a result of the participants’ exposure to a new culture, and within that, new ways of thinking and behaving.

**Questioning**

Questioning is the third axial category. Many of the participants expressed that as result of their exposure to a new culture and customs, it forced them, specifically, to question what this new culture and customs means in light of their faith. Samuel used the term, “philosophical level,” to describe his questioning of the culture and customs at GFSU, and what they meant with regard to his faith. Referring to this term Samuel provided the example of drinking. He said,

*When I came to this country, I have the options to do all of that (drinking)... before,*

*because you are surrounded by Muslims and never thought of it... I never thought about*
drinking back home but here you have the option in front of you... I have many Muslim friends who drink and they ask me, ‘Why don’t you drink?’... so I shifted to an upper philosophical level, and started thinking about the meaning of why we do not drink.

It was this philosophical level of thinking, or what I will refer to as questioning, that appeared to ignite Samuel’s pursuit for understanding those ways of thinking and behaving that are a part of his culture, and those that are a part of his Muslim faith. In seeking to distinguish between that which is cultural and that which is religious, Samuel felt he was growing stronger in his Muslim identity in the process, in a way, because he was refining it. Helen expressed a similar time of questioning as she felt like Islam prevented her from doing a lot of things that she wanted to do, and she saw others doing at GFSU, such as not wearing hijab and having friendships with men. She said this conflict caused her to question, “…why do these things exist, and at the same time… forbidden for me to do? Like, if it’s forbidden, why do they exist? Why can some people do it and I can’t?” Tania shared in her interview that since she’s come to study at GFSU, she’s begun to “examine everything related to religion and started to think about what’s the thing which is truly from religion and which just impacted from traditions.” Many of the other participants, particularly those who experienced a lessening of their cultural identity also expressed a time of questioning as a result of the independence and exposure they have experienced since studying in the U.S.

Fowler’s (1981) Synthetic-Conventional Faith stage, to a certain extent, alludes to this time of questioning one’s faith, especially when an individual comes to understand their faith not as their own but as the authorities’, including parents, community, and in the case of many Middle Eastern countries, the government. Fowler (1981) found that individuals in this stage may become disenchanted with their faith and their home culture in light of this revelation,
leading to a new disposition skeptical of their faith. Many of the participants in this study, although sharing similar characteristics of Fowler’s (1981) Synthetic-Conventional Faith stage, did not become skeptical of their faith, as much as they became skeptical of their home culture. It was only Helen who became truly skeptical of her faith.

Kim’s (2012) International Student Identity Model, also, to a certain extent helps elucidate the time of questioning many of the participants experienced as result of studying at CSU and GFSU. In her Emerging-Disclosing Self phase, Kim (2012) found that international students, although still appreciating their home culture, begin to explore and adopt new legitimate ways of thinking and acting as result of their exposure to new cultures and customs. The participants’ time of questioning becomes the place where they begin to consider alternatives to thinking and behaving that they grew up with in their home country. The graphic below shows how the participants’ exposure leads to a time of questioning.

**Figure 4: Questioning**

This time of questioning is not a time where decisions are made, but where alternatives are considered. It is also important to note that in this time of questioning, many of the participants expressed having to also consider the implications of their potential decisions. These implications are important because they showcase the unique experience of what international Muslim students face if they choose to think and behave in ways that are not
acceptable in their home country. Many of the participants expressed what their shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity would mean if they were to manifest in their home country.

**Implications**

In the case of those participants who experienced a weakening of their cultural identity while studying at CSU and GFSU and end up returning to their home country, the implications could be vastly different than for those participants who remain in the U.S. This is especially true for the participants from Islamic theocratic countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Jordan, and Bahrain. Whereas the implications of the participants’ shifts may include an increase in social and cultural capital in the U.S., in their home countries, their shifts may have the opposite effect, taking away their social and cultural capital, and, in some cases, potentially their health and freedom. In the case of Elaine, she said her identity as an atheist in Iran could result in her loss of life if that information was made known. Elaine was the only participant who identified as an atheist and planned on returning to her home country. She became an atheist during her undergraduate education and has been living discretely as an atheist in Iran for ten years. Participants who have experienced a weakening of their Muslim and/or cultural identity during their study in the U.S., which may be understood as going to bars, accepting homosexuals, having relationships with members of the opposite sex, drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, not wearing hijab, and speaking out for gender equality, may find that their new ways of thinking and behaving are not accepted, socially or legally, in their home country.

In most Islamic theocratic countries, it is not unusual to find women wearing hijab, abaya, or jilbab. These dresses and coverings veil their bodies, hair, and faces from the gaze of men. Veiling is necessary in efforts to keep something hidden from attention. For both male and female participants in this study who have experienced a weakening of their Muslim and/or
cultural identity, most participants said veiling their adaptations would be necessary if and when they return to their home country.

One example of this type of necessary “veiling” in one’s home country versus “unveiling” in the U.S. came up during Frank’s interview. Frank has had two girlfriends since he came to study at CSU. He told me that he could also date in Saudi Arabia, but if anyone asked whom the woman he was with was, he would have to say “my sister or my wife.” If he said wife, then he said the authorities would ask him for a marriage certificate. Therefore he would be better off saying she was his sister. If she and him get caught on a date then Frank said that he would probably only receive a scolding from his father, “but for the girls, it’s a big deal.” A big deal, he said, in the sense that she would be placed under house arrest until her father married her off. Frank specifically said, “He not going to let her go outside her place, and he going to take the phone from her and find as soon as possible to let her marry.” I asked Frank why a woman who was caught on a date might be married off, and he said, “…she’s doing bad ways that’s not legal back home.” As much as dating is part of his life at CSU, Frank would have to abandon dating, or, at the very least keep it veiled.

Gender equality is an important issue for Tania at GFSU. She believes that men and women should be treated equally. According to her, this equality does not exist in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, “there is a differentiation between males and females, and a lot of females are not happy about this differentiation or discrimination,” she said. When I asked her how her passion for gender equality would manifest itself in her home country, she told me that her best hope would be to teach her students to question culture. She said to start a campaign would be too difficult because, “the society is so conservative… this mission really need a strong person because maybe all the society will go against you.” I asked her if she had been exposed to the
teaching style that questions culture in Saudi Arabia that she was referring to, and she said that there was one teacher but the students became upset and asked her to teach using a “traditional lecture.” According to Tania, her passion for gender equality would have to be veiled upon returning to Saudi Arabia.

Samuel has become more accepting of others since studying at CSU. When I asked him what this would mean for him if he returned to Yemen, he said that he would revert back to accepting Yemeni culture and all that it entails; however, he said that he would likely find himself in arguments regarding what is cultural and what is religious. He said that he was engaged in an argument over Facebook at the time of the interview with someone from Yemen. They were arguing about whether women should be allowed to drive. Samuel said that the law is tribal and, therefore, cultural instead of religious, but the man who he was arguing with said it was religious because it was tribal. Samuel had hope that he could reveal more of his new liberal perspective with his family and friends, all of whom, he said, were highly educated. However, with those that were not highly educated, Samuel said that he might not be able to be as open and accepting of others he does not know.

Matthew and Adam said that although they go to bars to spend time with their friends at GFSU, they would not go to bars in Jordan or Yemen. Adam said that if he was out to dinner with his friends and one of them drank he would say, “…dude, what are you doing? Because you don’t see that you know.” Going to bars, and being affable with friends who drink alcohol is significant part of their social lives at GFSU, but would not manifest in their home countries. That desire would remain veiled or curtailed altogether.

Singing in Martin’s Shia faith is prohibited. He said that his hope is that he gains enough of a following here in the U.S. that he changes his fellow Shia Muslims’ perspectives about
singing, so he may be able to sing in Saudi Arabia. As it stands, Martin said that in his Shia Muslim society, “if you... become singer, you never come back. You are never welcome.”

Martin sings a lot at CSU. As mentioned, he collaborates with local musicians, and he is working on a new style of singing that merges Arabic and English. However, unless Martin does develop a following, and does change the hearts and minds of his society, his singing will have to remain veiled.

Spending the past ten years breaking the law in Iran, Elaine is very familiar with the implications of her shift. Although her shift was not informed by her study at CSU, her understanding of the negative implications that face many participants who adopt new liberal ways of thinking and behaving is important because it reveals the devastating consequences that participants face if they do adopt liberal ways, or, even more devastating, a new religious identity. Unless these participants are willing to experience legal, social, and familial consequences, their shift in perspective and behavior is unable to manifest. Their new identity is forced behind a veil, which is ironic given that for all of the participants who experienced a strengthening of their faith, they also experienced a liberalizing of their perspectives and behaviors. And for many of the participants, it was these liberalizations and exposure to liberal ways that, they said, contributed to their growth as a Muslim. Helen said in her interview, “…the fear inside one’s person is… is… the fear of what people will say and what people will start talking about and gossiping about more than the fear of God... that’s the problem. We were raised to fear people more than to fear God because of what people would say.” It is the core category of discernment that the participants make their decisions regarding what they conclude as cultural and what they conclude as religious. It is these decisions which ultimately informed whether the participants experienced a shift in Muslim and/or cultural identity.
Many of the participants who experienced shifts in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, adopted democratic and liberal ways of thinking and practice that were not necessarily present in their home country. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, Frank said that women are not allowed to travel alone. Frank, Tania, and Martin all mentioned that dating, or even having relationships with members of the opposite sex in Saudi Arabia is prohibited. Helen also said that in Bahrain she could not engage in relationships with members of the opposite sex. Matthew and Adam said in their interviews that drinking is illegal for Muslims in Jordan and Yemen. In fact in Yemen, legal bars do not exist. In her interview, Elaine said that books such as Darwin’s *Origin of Species* are illegal. She also said that a conversion to other religions or ways of thinking is illegal and punishable by imprisonment and possibly death.

These implications are of the utmost importance when questioning and considering new ways of thinking and behaving that are not supported by one’s family, community, or even government. As a result, discernment is vitally important to the future of the participants and their shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity.

**Discernment**

*Discernment* is defined by Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary as “the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure.” Merriam-Webster defines *discern* as “to recognize or identify as something separate and distinct.” Discernment, in the context of this study, means the ability to grasp and comprehend the differences between that which is cultural and that which is Islam. Many of the participants expressed that since studying at CSU or GFSU, they have been able to discern between which ways of thinking and behaving they grew up with are a part of culture, and which of these ways of thinking and behaving are a part of Islam. The participants’ discernment is necessary because, according to many of them, in their home countries that which
belongs to culture and that which belongs to Islam is obscure. As a result, discernment is the
core category, and was the crux of the shifts in Muslim and cultural identity that the majority of
participants experienced while studying at CSU or GFSU. Discerning between culture and Islam
provided the essential understanding for the participants regarding which elements of the faith
they had grown up with were actually cultural and which were actually religious. The
participants’ ability to discern between their culture and religion allowed them to make their faith
their own and reconcile it with their new cultural context at one of the two Midwestern
universities. Once able to reconcile their Muslim identity with their new cultural context,
participants were able to participate in the larger campus community that was neither Muslim nor
culturally conservative. In doing so, they were exposed to new ways of thinking and behaving.
With this exposure, these participants were forced to reflect on these new ways of thinking and
behaving for the purposes of discerning whether these new ways aligned with their Muslim
and/or cultural identities. Often, the participants expressed that if these new ways of thinking
and behaving did not align with their cultural identity, but could be reconciled with their Muslim
identity, they were okay to participate in them. As a result, many participants grew stronger in
their Muslim identity, while weaker in their cultural identity as they came to better understand
both their religion and their culture. Exposure and subsequent questioning were only a result of
the independence these participants achieved as a result of studying abroad and being away from
their families, communities, and governments, all of which were often considered significant
sources of influence. Often, when discernment occurred regarding what was cultural and what
was religious, it brought forth even more independence, which created more exposure, which
necessitated more questioning, and resulted in further discernment. Ultimately, this process
appeared to be cyclical. During this process, the participants grappled with many issues,
including gender equality, going to bars, homosexuality, and other liberal cultural practices, Ramadan, singing, and other religious practices, and at the center of this process, the implications of the participants’ shifts, which informed all stages of the process. The figure below details this cycle.

**Figure 5: Discerning Identity Model**

This process of discerning between culture and religion typically resulted in a liberalization of cultural identity for the participants. I must admit, prior to this study I thought
that students who grew stronger in their Muslim identity would also grow more conservative in their cultural identity. However, this was not the case for the majority of the participants. The axial categories of independence, exposure, and questioning speak to the participants’ stronger Muslim identity and more liberal cultural identity. The axial categories and core category also speak to those participants who grew stronger in their Muslim identity and did not shift in their cultural identity, as in the case of Lana and Samantha, and those students who did not grow in their Muslim identity or shift in their cultural identity, as in the case of Neda, Elaine, and Moses. In the cases of Elaine and Moses, the axial and core categories, while not necessarily explaining their experience at CSU, do help explain the shifts in their Muslim and cultural identities that occurred prior to coming to CSU.

Nine of the twelve participants shared that since studying in the U.S. they have begun to revere certain practices deemed religious in their home country, including hijab, women rights including driving and traveling alone, gender equality, relationships with the opposite sex, singing, and going to bars (while refraining from alcohol), as cultural, and, therefore, with a new skepticism. These participants came to these conclusions as a result of studying in the U.S. where they have been exposed to a culture much different than their own. It is this exposure, in addition to the independence which facilitates the exposure, that has allowed these participants to question and compare their home culture with their present culture, and, in doing so, discern the difference between those things from their religious upbringing that they considered to actually be religious and those things they considered to be cultural. As a result of this discernment, many participants now consider certain things, such as hijab, gender inequality, dating, and socializing at bars, to be a reflection of the authorities (central government, families, communities) and not Islam. Of these nine participants, many of them expressed skepticism,
and, in some cases, disdain, calling them “nonsense” and “stupid.” As a result of many of the participants’ discernment of Islam and culture, they have been able to make Islam their own in the U.S., unencumbered by familial, societal, and governmental pressures. Whereas in their home country, they practiced Islam like their parents and peers, often in accordance with a government mandate (depending upon the country). In the U.S. they practice Islam as they see fit, which was often different from the way they said they practiced in their home country. Because these participants were able to take ownership of their faith, free from the dictate of family, community, and government, their relationship with Islam grew stronger.

A similar parallel is found in Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) Measures of Religiousness, in which they found that students who experienced a religious struggle, understood as a time of questioning and challenging their faith, also experienced an increase in religious engagement, which included behaviors reflective of the faith, such as praying, religious singing, and reading sacred texts. Many of the participants who claimed to grow in their faith while studying in the U.S. expressed both a religious struggle and increased religious engagement.

Religious engagement appeared to signify the experience of the participants’ process of making their faith their own. Tania, Samuel, Helen, Martin, Frank, Lana, and Samantha all expressed some component of religious engagement that increased as a result of their religious struggle. For Tania, it was reading the Koran. For Samantha, it was attending mosque. For Martin, it was religious singing. For Helen, it was bringing her questions to religious leaders. For Samuel, it was reading Islamic theology. For Lana, it was dressing conservatively. For Frank, it was confession and resolving to be better. Matthew and Adam, although expressing that they grew in their faith while studying in the U.S. did not mention an increase in religious
engagement, but also did not express any religious struggle as did the other participants who experienced a religious struggle and increased religious engagement.

Of the eight participants who experienced a strengthening of their faith, seven of them expressed that they grew in their faith as a result of being able to discern between Islam and culture. Tania, Helen, and Samantha expressed this in terms of hijab as a cultural practice and not a religious practice. Matthew and Adam discussed this in terms of socializing at bars. Samuel considered this in terms of accepting homosexuals. Martin expressed this in terms of singing. Tania, Helen, Adam, Martin, and Frank talked about this in terms of relationships with members of the opposite sex. Tania, Helen, Samantha, Adam, Samuel, Martin, Frank, and Elaine mentioned this with regards to gender equality. In almost each instance where participants expressed the ability to discern these issues as cultural rather than religious, they credited that discernment with making their Muslim identity stronger. Helen however was the exception. Her discernment led to a weakening of her Muslim identity.

Understanding many of the participants’ criticism of culture rather than faith, it appears reasonable that they would experience a strengthening of their faith, and a liberalizing of their culture. Whereas, in their home country, a liberalizing of culture would likely be interpreted as weakening, or in some cases, a loss of faith, in the U.S., these participants’ liberalization of culture is actually not weakening of faith at all, but a strengthening. Samantha and Tania both discussed how, as a result of not wearing hijab, many of their fellow Muslims asks them if they are actually Muslim. Samantha provided an anecdote in which she had an encounter with a woman at the mosque near CSU’s campus who asked her if she was Muslim. Samantha said, “Yes.” To this the woman replied, “Why aren’t you wearing hijab?” Samantha told her, “Wearing a hijab doesn’t make you a Muslim. You can be a Muslim and still not wear hijab.”
Tania had a similar anecdote but with her fellow male Muslims. For Tania, more so than Samantha, since she never wore hijab, not wearing hijab was part of Tania not only discerning between Islam and Saudi Arabian culture, but also making her faith her own. In making it her own, she grew stronger in it. Making their faith their own, in the case of Samantha and Tania also demonstrated that their Muslim identity was not contingent upon their outward appearance, and in fact, it was, in part, because they came to this belief that their faith grew stronger. This appears to be the case for most of the participants who said they grew stronger in their faith.

**Summary**

For many of the participants, the process of strengthening their faith as a result of the axial categories, independence, exposure, and questioning, and the core category, discernment, externally appears to be a weakening or loss of faith. However, internally, it is a bolstering and actualization of their faith that, arguably, could not exist without liberalizing from their culture. Questions that arise from this paradox include: What does it mean to be a good Muslim? Does it mean to wear hijab? Does it mean to refrain from going to bars? Does it mean gender inequality? Does it mean not dating? Or does it mean having one’s own relationship with Islam, absent of authoritarian influence and mandate? These are many of the questions that the participants faced as result of the independence and exposure they experienced studying at CSU and GFSU. In the case of Helen, her questioning appeared to become so stressful and overwhelming that she expressed that she wished she could return to Bahrain so that she would no longer have to deal with questioning her faith. This is important to note because it shows that the cycle of independence, exposure, questioning, and discernment is not a necessarily a fluid cycle. Though Helen voiced numerous questions and skepticism regarding her Muslim and cultural identity, she has not discerned any of her questions. The only thing she appears to have
discerned is that she wants to return to Bahrain so that she does not have to deal with the questions brought on by the independence and exposure of studying in the U.S.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

Introduction

International Muslim students’ experiences regarding shifts in religious and/or cultural identity is important, especially as more international Muslim students come to the U.S. to study higher education. The literature review in this study discussed higher education students’ spiritual, religious, and cultural identity formation, international student identity formation, information regarding the practice and plight of Islam in higher education contexts, and information regarding international education. This study gave voice to twelve international Muslim and/or former Muslim students who provided thick, rich data through interviews that guided the research, ultimately to the discovery of the axial categories of independence, exposure, and questioning, and the core category of discernment. This final chapter includes a summary of the study, conclusion of the findings, evaluation of the theory, and recommendations for practice and future research.

Summary of Study

The participants of this study were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Access to the participants was obtained through various gatekeepers. This study consisted of a literature review that looked at the spiritual, religious, and cultural experiences of Muslim and international students at American universities. Using a grounded theory design, this study used interviews that yielded thick, rich data. The data was coded using open, axial, and selective coding, which produced emergent themes, which became the axial categories of independence, exposure, and questioning, which finally supported the central category of discernment.
Conclusion of Findings

This study found that when the participants experienced the process of independence, exposure, questioning, and discernment regarding issues of culture and religion, as a result of studying at one of the two universities, they experienced a shift in their Muslim identity, cultural identity, or both. This study found that in most cases, participants who went through this process almost always grew stronger in their Muslim identity. This study found that a majority of the participants who go through this process experienced a weakening of cultural identity. As a result of these shifts, a unique imbalance appears in many of the participants, as they grow stronger in their Muslim identity while weaker in their cultural identity. The graphic below demonstrates this imbalance that many of participants’ held regarding their Muslim and cultural identities.

Figure 6: Conclusion

Independence was a shared factor that contributed to many of the participants’ ability to be exposed to a new culture, to be able to question a new culture, and also to be able to discern whether this new culture was compatible with their Muslim and/or cultural identity. Independence had an ambivalent connotation as some participants expressed that their independence led them to do things they regretted, or they found their independence frightening,
and even depressing. Most students however credited their independence with affording them the ability to interact and engage with a new culture and people, and gain new perspectives.

Exposure was a factor shared by all of the participants. The participants were all exposed to a new culture, and with it, new ways of thinking and behaving that were not acceptable or illegal in their home country. Again, exposure, similar to independence, had an ambivalent effect, in which some participants were upset by the things they were exposed to, whereas other participants were encouraged by many of the things they were exposed to. Exposure impacted all of the participants in either a negative or positive way that led them to a time of questioning.

Questioning for many of the participants was a challenging time. For some of the participants, it was an overwhelming and stressful time in which they wished they could return to their home country so they no longer would have to question. For other participants, questioning was a time of maturity, and the beginning of understanding. Questioning for some seemed to be a safe time, where they were able to critically reflect, yet not necessarily come to any conclusions. This is important, because the following central category of discernment that takes place after questioning, had significant, and often negative implications, especially if the participant intended to return to their home country.

Discernment, for those participants who experienced it, appeared to be a time of revelation and equanimity. There seemed to be a peace within those participants that expressed reaching a point of discernment, specifically as it related to Islam and culture. Discernment appeared to always necessitate a growth in the participants’ Muslim identity, which appeared to further instill in them a sense of peace. Discernment also seemed to bring forth more independence as participants expressed a stronger sense of security in who they were.
The data revealed that the axial categories and core category, of independence, exposure, questioning, and discernment tend to be cyclical in nature. Independence brought forth exposure, which brought forth a need to question, which in turn brought forth a need to discern. It appears that through this process the participants experience shifts in their Muslim and/or cultural identity.

**Evaluation of Theory**

To evaluate the grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) four central criteria for judging applicability of a theory to a phenomenon, and seven evaluative criteria for grounded theory studies, will be used to determine whether the theory is sound.

**Applicability of Theory**

Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) four criteria for determining whether the theory is applicable to a phenomenon are fit, understanding, generality, and control.

*Fit* of a theory is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as being, “faithful to the everyday reality of the substantive area and carefully induced from diverse data,” (p. 23). The theory regarding the contributions to international Muslim students’ shifts in religious and/or cultural identity was grounded in data provided through interviews by the international Muslim students who experienced a shift in their religious and/or cultural identity. Some of the participants provided member checking for the data and confirmed the findings. However, I confess that more could have been done in this area, and unfortunately as a result of time constraints, I was unable to follow-up with all of the participants.

*Understanding* refers to theory’s ability to be comprehended by the participants and other professionals in a related field (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Some of my participants and peer reviewers were asked if this theory made sense, to which they agreed that it did. Again, similar
to fit, more could have been done to ensure that the theory was understood by all of the participants.

*Generality* is understood as the theory’s ability to relate to other similar contexts that may experience a similar phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data collected in this study on the contributions to, and implications of international Muslim students’ shifts in religious and/or cultural identity are also generalizable to other international students that come from a religion and/or cultural that holds conservative practices and perspectives, who study in a contrasting liberal setting, away from their home country.

*Control* refers to the theory being arrived at systematically from the derived data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The axial and central categories were arrived at systematically and inductively as result of the data provided through the participants’ interviews. Additionally, these categories resembled other findings and theories from related studies (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Fowler, 1981; Kim, 2012; Erikson, 1963; Smith & Snell, 2009).

**Evaluative Criteria**

Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) seven evaluative criteria to determine the sufficiency of this study.

Criterion 1: How was the original sample selected? On what grounds?

The original sample was selected through gatekeepers who knew international Muslim and former Muslim students studying at the either CSU or GFSU who had, or they thought had, experienced a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity while studying at one of the two universities. Additionally, once initial participants were selected, a snowball sample occurred.
Criterion 2: What major categories emerged?

The categories that emerged from the data were the axial categories, independence, exposure, and questioning, and the central category, discernment. These categories were arrived at through comparing and contrasting the data collected from each participant’s interviews.

Criterion 3: What were some of the events, incidents, or actions (indicators) that pointed to some of these major categories?

When the participants studied abroad they were provided independence from their family, community, and government, which allowed them to make decisions, to a certain extent, independently from what would otherwise being significant sources of influence in their home country. As a result of studying abroad, in a new cultural context, participants were exposed to new ways of thinking and behaving perhaps not present and/or legal in their home country. As result of this exposure, and the independence these participants had, they questioned whether this new culture, with its new ways of thinking and behaving were legitimate. Additionally, they also questioned if the culture and/or religion that they grew up with was legitimate. Lastly, as result of their questioning, participants had to discern which parts of their culture were religious and which parts of their religion were cultural. Furthermore, they had to discern, whether in the event something was cultural, if it was okay for them to discard that that part of their culture in favor of a new cultural practice or perspective that they preferred.

Criterion 4: On the basis of what categories did theoretical sampling proceed? That is, how did theoretical formulations guide some of the data collection? After the theoretical sampling was done, how representative of the data did the categories prove to be?
International Muslim students experience shifts in their cultural identity, behaving and thinking in ways that would not necessarily be acceptable in their home country. I sought to understand what informed these shifts and what were the implications of such shifts.

Criterion 5: What were some of the hypotheses pertaining to conceptual relations (i.e. among categories), and on what grounds were they formulated and validated?

This study initially sought to understand what types of shifts pertaining to religious and/or cultural identity international Muslim students were experiencing. One hypothesis I had was that participants exposure to a new and liberal culture would bring forth questioning and ultimately result in a shift away from their Muslim and cultural identity. This hypothesis was formulated and validated, in part, by own experience regarding exposure to a new and liberal culture in higher education and the shift away from my religious and cultural identity that occurred as a result. It was also formulated and validated based off testimonies of the international Muslim students who had experienced shifts in their religious and/or cultural identities while studying at an American university.

Criterion 6: Were there instances in which hypotheses did not explain what was happening in the data? How were these discrepancies accounted for? Were hypothesis modified?

My hypothesis did not account for the data where participants who became more liberal in their cultural identity also became stronger in their Muslim identity. I initially believed that such shifts in cultural identity would necessitate a weakening or loss of religious identity. That was not the case for most of the participants. My hypothesis was modified, especially as I began to understand the differences between the participants’ Muslim identity and cultural identity.
Criterion 7: How and why was the core category selected? Was the collection sudden or gradual, and was it difficult or easy? On what grounds were the final analytical decisions made?

The core category of discernment was selected as a result of what I found to be the most widely shared theme amongst the participants as it pertained to their shift in Muslim and/or cultural identity, as well as those who did not necessarily shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity. The act of discernment appeared to be the ultimate informer of the participants’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, as well as the ultimate informer of whether a participant experienced a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity.

Recommendations for Practice

Many of the participants themselves provided recommendations for American universities to employ in efforts to help support their international Muslim student populations, especially those students that come from countries where things such as alcohol and dating are illegal, where dress is considered modest, and significant gender inequality and segregation is present. I will detail their recommendations first, and then provide my own.

Participants recommended that an on-going orientation be specifically tailored to meet the needs and challenges international Muslim students from such countries, as those of the participants, face. Again, this includes exposure to alcohol, partying, immodest dress, dating, and gender equality. Many of the participants lamented that while their university provided a general orientation for all of the international students, it did not address their specific issues and challenges. Additionally, many of the participants mentioned that they missed the orientation. Other recommendations participants suggested included providing halal meals, and private prayer space on campus where students can also wash their hands and feet without feeling as if they are being judged by their non-Muslim peers. One participant mentioned that strong student
organizations, whether Muslim or not, can have a significant impact on international Muslim students by reaching out to them and developing relationships. Helen provided a caveat, saying that an international Muslim student group may keep international Muslim students in a “bubble. Keep them in their own comfort zone.” She felt like such a group could run the risk of inhibiting these students from interacting with the culture and non-Muslim students.

In a time of cut budgets and deficits, it feels like recommendations that incur a cost are likely to fall on deaf ears. However, much of the recommendations that the participants made do not necessitate large quantities of money, if any money at all. While I do agree that all the recommendations would be beneficial in helping international Muslim students adjust, Helen’s caveat is important to consider, and raises a larger ethical consideration: How accommodating should American universities be to their international students? Furthermore what is a university’s mission for having international students, and is that/should that be compartmentalized further into international students of a specific origin and religion? My belief, or mission (for what it is worth), which I am sure is shared by other universities, is to bring international students to universities to internationalize campuses for the purpose of sharing cultures and perspectives in efforts to build global relationships and understanding. I believe mission is incredibly important in informing how international students are integrated and treated in the larger campus community, and I believe international students are incredibly important to the success of a university, especially as it pertains to issues of diversity, acceptance, and cross-cultural learning and collaboration. As international education becomes more of a business, and international students become more of financial contribution rather than social and cultural contribution, the mission seems likely to shift, and the way international students are integrated and treated seems likely to suffer as a consequence.
I am hesitant to make any sweeping policy recommendations because I believe, from my limited experience, that policy does not always change culture, and rather instead only modifies and/or limits undesired behaviors. I believe this particularly as it relates to cultivating relationships and reaching out to marginalized people groups. While policy may encourage people to reach out to marginalized people groups, international Muslim and former Muslim students in this case, I feel it can often lead to the objectification of a people group, and the act of developing relationships becomes a means to an end and not an end in and of itself. That end may be how it makes the one reaching out, feel about themselves (self-esteem), or perhaps, there is a some sort of incentive gained (resume builder). In the case of a university’s administration, this incentive may be recruitment and retention of international students, and therefore money. To change the culture, I believe that developing relationships with international Muslim and former Muslim students, and all international students, must be the ends, and therefore, the relationship must be valued because of what it is, and not necessarily what it can do. Changing the culture for good, I believe, needs to come from changing perspectives, not necessarily from changing policy. I believe one of the best ways to change perspectives is by providing opportunities to develop relationships with international Muslim students.

My recommendation, specifically as it pertains to supporting international Muslim students, would be to facilitate and empower students, faculty, staff, and community members to reach out and pursue relationships with these students. I believe, more than anything, that facilitating and cultivating relationships with international Muslim students, and international students in general, will provide meaningful and helpful support as these students deal with the challenges that arise from the independence, exposure, questioning, and discerning that they experience as result of studying in the U.S. I believe the best way to do this is by creating
student organizations, learning communities, events, seminars, and ultimately culture that’s mission is to internationalize the campus, share culture and perspectives, and build global relationships and understanding.

During my undergraduate education, I founded a student organization that brought domestic and international students together through social events. This was not the result of any policy, but of my own time studying abroad. As an international student in Spain, I found that I, and the other international students in my program struggled with feeling isolated from the campus, and specifically, the Spanish students that made up the campus. The university provided no opportunities to interact with Spanish students, and because many of us struggled with the language, we were hesitant to engage with Spanish students on our own. When I returned from my study abroad, I sought out an organization that reached out to international students, simply for the purpose of building relationships with international students. No organizations or programs existed specifically for that purpose so I founded an organization called the International Student Ambassadors, that’s mission was to bring domestic and international students together through social events, in efforts to build relationships and share cultures and perspectives. While this organization and its mission are in no way a panacea in changing the university culture as it pertains to international students, I do believe it can be the foundation of lasting cultural change. This cultural change that not only provides better support and services for international students, but fosters relationships that internationalize a university campus for more than the purpose of rhetoric on a brochure to recruit more international students, or to demonstrate that a university is diverse, but because it is right thing to do.
Recommendations for Future Research

This study looked at a very small sample of international Muslim students, who studied at two universities situated within the same region. Future research that looks at a larger sample of international Muslim students studying in various regions of the U.S. would be beneficial to understanding, on a broader scale, if international Muslim students studying in other regions, and at other universities, are experiencing similar shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity that many of the participants in this study experienced. Furthermore, a study with a larger sample situated in various regions of the U.S. would be help to understand if other international Muslim students are undergoing a similar process with regards to independence, exposure, questioning, and discernment, and if that process is leading international Muslim students to shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity. Additionally, other regions and universities may provide different contributions to international Muslim students’ shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity, that could not be accounted for in this study. I believe it would be interesting to compare international Muslim students’ experiences regarding shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity in urban areas versus rural or suburban areas. In many urban areas in the U.S., such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the like, international Muslim students would likely have much more access to Islam, and their home culture, as a result of a larger contingency of people from their home country and faith living in those urban areas. It would be worth researching whether having more access to one’s faith and home country has a greater or lesser impact on whether they experience a shift in their Muslim and/or cultural identity, and if they do, to what degree.

A longitudinal study that interviews international Muslim students multiple times throughout their study in the U.S., and then finally after they have returned to their home country, would help to understand the dynamics of their independence, exposure, questioning,
and discerning much better as they are occurring, rather than only interviewing the participants one time, who were all at various points in their study abroad experience, as was done in this study. Interviewing the students after they have returned to their home country would provide important information regarding how their shifts in Muslim and/or cultural identity have manifested in their home country, and what the implications have been as a result of their shifts.

Future research would also benefit from focusing more on the influence of each participants’ home countries’ government, and the policies that regulate and monitor cultural and religious identity in their home country. The state’s influence, although only being explicitly mentioned by one participant in this study, is arguably a significant factor that informs participants’ cultural and religious identity formation while studying abroad, and further research examining the role of the state in the cultural and religious identity formation of international Muslim and former Muslim students as they study abroad could help elucidate further the motivations and implications of international Muslim and former Muslim students’ shifts in religious and cultural identity while studying in the U.S.

Lastly, I believe action research could yield important data. Coupling a longitudinal study with programming and support for international Muslim students participating in the study could help understand what programs and support structures work to better help international Muslim students as they navigate their Muslim and cultural identity through the systems of a new culture during their study abroad experience.

**Conclusion**

Higher education is an important time of identity formation, as detailed in the literature review. Belonging to the dominant culture of a particular university may provide significant challenges to an individual’s identity as it relates to their religion and culture. The independence
an individual has coupled with the exposure to diverse ways of thinking and behaving can bring forth intense personal questioning that can be enlightening, stressful, and in some cases depressing. The need to discern what is what, and what an individual will adopt and what an individual will discard, is the crux of identity formation, as out of discernment, a new identity emerges. Furthermore, the implications of an individual’s new identity may be significant with regard to their home culture. In some cases, the implications may be positive, however, they may also be negative. If this process of identity formation is intense for those belonging to the dominant culture what does this process look like for those in the minority?

This study revealed what it is like for twelve international Muslim students studying at two Midwestern universities. This study showed that for many of these participants, this process often leads to a strengthening of one’s Muslim identity, while a weakening of their cultural identity. As understood by many of these participants, their home culture and Islam are not necessarily synonymous. The only way they were able to discover that was by leaving their country to study abroad. The independence and exposure they experienced as a result of studying abroad triggered the questioning and discernment needed to be able to understand their identity in relation to their faith and culture, and furthermore what their identity was going to be now that they had experienced to a new culture.
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Brown, M. S. (2012). The nature of spiritual questioning among select undergraduates at a Midwestern university: Constructions, conditions, and consequences. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH.


APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would describe your religious background? Family’s?

2. How did you perceive non-Muslims prior to coming to the U.S.?
   A. What did it mean to be Muslim in your home country?
   A. What does it mean to be Muslim at ________________ (CSU or GFSU)?

3. During your time in the U.S., have you experienced a shift in your identity as a Muslim? This can include a strengthening, weakening, or loss altogether of your identity as a Muslim.
   A. If yes, what have you shifted to?
      a. A deepening of your Muslim faith?
         1. If yes, what are some examples that illustrate this deepening of your Muslim faith?
      b. Another religion?
         1. If yes, what religion?
         2. What are some examples of your participation in this religion?
      c. No religion at all?
         1. If yes, what are some examples that illustrate your loss of religion?

B. If no, how have you maintained your Muslim identity while studying in the U.S.?

* Note: If student answers that they have not had a shift in their identity as a Muslim, questions 4 – 8 will not be asked and the interview will conclude with this question.

4. What has influenced the shift in your Muslim identity?
A. If education, what aspects of education? These aspects may include, for example, professors, coursework, campus culture, residence life, organizations, and the like.

5. What does this shift mean for you with regards to relationships in your home country?
   A. In the U.S.?

6. What does this shift mean for you with regards to religious membership in your home country?
   A. In the U.S.?

7. What does this shift mean for you with regards to citizenship in your home country?
   A. In the U.S.?

8. Has the shift in your Muslim identity informed new perspectives of your home country?
   A. In the U.S.?
APPENDIX B. HUMAN SUBJECT REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

DATE:

TO: FROM:

PROJECT TITLE:

SUBMISSION TYPE: ACTION:

June 24, 2013

Brett Erickson
Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

[473129-2] Implications and Perspectives of International Muslim and Former Muslim Students' Regarding their Shifts in Religious Identity at two Midwestern Universities

Revision

ACKNOWLEDGED

Thank you for submitting the Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has ACKNOWLEDGED your submission. No further action on submission 473129-2 is required at this time.

The following items are acknowledged in this submission:

• Advertisement-ResearchStudyFlyer-Erickson.docx(UPDATED:06/17/2013) • ApplicationForm-HSRBAppliation-Erickson.doc(UPDATED:06/17/2013)• ConsentForm-ConsentForm-Erickson.docx(UPDATED:06/17/2013)• Other-Script-Erickson.docx(UPDATED:06/17/2013)

• Questionnaire/Survey-InterviewQuestions-Erickson.docx(UPDATED:06/17/2013)

If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM

Letter of Informed Consent: Students Interview (Higher education students 18 years old and over)

Title of the project: Implications and Perspectives of International Muslim and Former Muslim Students’ Regarding their Shifts in Religious Identity at two Midwestern Universities

Persons responsible:
• Brett Erickson, M.A. Student in Cross-Cultural and International Education, Bowling Green State University, Email: bericks@bgsu.edu, Phone: (563) 340-1607.

About the study: The purpose of the study is to understand how international Muslim and former Muslim university students’ religious identities have shifted during their time studying in the United States, and what components of their education in the U.S. have specifically contributed to their shift. Also, this study seeks to understand what the implications are for students’ shifts in religious identity in their home country and the United States. Lastly, this study seeks to understand if the students’ shifts in religious identity have informed new perspectives on their home country and the United States. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview concerning how your life and your time studying in the U.S. has contributed to a shift in your religious identity. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete. The interviews may be audio recorded with your permission, as indicated by your signature below. Interviews will take place in-person at a mutually agreed upon time and location on or near (within 5 miles) campus, or, via telephone or Internet communication service (i.e. Skype, Google Video Chat). Interviews will be conducted at your convenience. Additionally, follow-up interviews may also occur. If a follow-up interview is needed, you will be contacted at least 24 hours in advance. The follow-up interview will as well be conducted at your convenience, either in-person, or via telephone or Internet communication service. The location and time of the follow-up interview will be mutually agreed upon.

Benefits: If you agree to participate in this research, you will provide important information concerning American higher education’s impact on international Muslim and former Muslim students with regards to religious identity. This work may be used to improve education as well as spread awareness about issues affecting international Muslim and former Muslim students. You will be provided a $10 Visa gift card for your interview participation.

Risks: Since the study asks students about the shift in their religious identity, some students may feel uncomfortable talking about their shift because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter. For this reason, at any time a student feels uncomfortable with a question or questions, the student may choose not to answer the question(s), or withdraw from the study altogether.
Confidentiality: The information you provide will be stored electronically on password protected computers of the principal investigator (myself). Your real name will not be connected to the data. No one other than the research team (myself and my advisor) will have any access to the information.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the interview at any time, and you may choose not to answer any questions. Whether or not you choose to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher or Bowling Green State University. Participation or withdrawal will not affect any rights to which you are entitled.

Contact Information: If you have questions or concerns you can contact Brett Erickson at (563) 340-1607 or email: bericks@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Bruce Collet at (419) 372-7354 or email: colleba@bgsu.edu and/or the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), with questions or concerns about participant rights.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

______________________________________________________________________________

Agreement

I have been informed of the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions I have about the study. By signing this agreement I agree to be in the study and verify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Signature of the interviewee: ______________________________________ Date: ___________

Printed name of the interviewee: ________________________________________________