

## Saudi Scholars' Heritage Language and Their Ethno-Cultural Identity in Multilingual Communities: An Exploratory Case Study

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### Abstract

Immigrant students' linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity is considered an issue of significance that speaks to the need for more rigorous research, especially in multicultural and multilingual societies. This paper highlights Saudi scholars' heritage language and the relationship thereof to their ethnic and culture identity and its maintenance dynamics in a multilingual and multicultural society. Employing a case study approach and interviews, the researcher sought to identify the impact of Saudi scholars' ethno-cultural identity on their heritage language. Analysis of data revealed three broad themes that emerged from the interviews: The first theme indicated that participants of both genders developed a dual cultural identity. The second theme indicated that the proficiency of Arabian scholars and their offspring had a strong impact on the ethno-cultural identity of the parents and the children born and raised in the USA. Third, negative stereotypes could be a potential cause for cultural identity clash. These broad themes seemed to be incongruous with the intricacies identified with cultural and ethnic identity maintenance mechanisms and their impact on heritage language speakers. The results have been discussed with relevance to prior studies and the theoretical framework.

**Key words:** Heritage language (HL); Saudi scholarship; Immigrants; Multilingual and multicultural societies

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### INTRODUCTION

The term "heritage language" is a relatively new one in linguistics. Therefore, many researchers have sought to theorize a definition for it just to express the comprehensive meaning of the term within the relevant literature framework. Heritage language (HL) refers to all languages, except for Aboriginal languages, brought to host societies by immigrants. Valdés (2000) defines it as follows:

Heritage language is the language someone learns at home as a child which is a minority language in society, but because of growing up in a dominant language, the speaker seems to be more competent in the latter and feels more comfortable communicating in that language. (p. 376)

However, the term was originally defined by the Canadian Legal Information Institute as "a language other than one of the official languages of Canada that contributes to the linguistic heritage of Canada" (Canadian Legal Information Institute, 1991, "Definitions"). Cummins and Danesi (1990) define HLs in the Canadian context as all languages brought to Canada by immigrants, with the exception of Aboriginal languages, English, and French. The case being thus, it is a language predominantly spoken by non-societal groups or linguistic minorities in the context of a multilingual, multicultural country (Valdes, 2005). Valdes further notes that "Heritage languages include indigenous languages that are often endangered. . . as well as world languages that are commonly spoken in many other regions of the world (Spanish in the United States, Arabic in France)".

In addition, in North America, there are several synonymous terms that have been used such as "ethnic language, minority language, ancestral language, third language, nonofficial language, community language, and mother-tongue" (Cummins & Danesi, 1990, p.8).

Valdes (2005) explains that speakers of a heritage language who have been raised since early childhood in a host community are significantly varied in terms of their

language abilities, which Polinsky & Kagan describe it as a continuum that ranges from *fluentHL speakers* to *hardly speaking* individuals of the home language. Therefore, some HL speakers could be highly proficient in the home language, possessing the ability to produce several registers, while other HL speakers may be barely able to understand the home language but are not able to produce it. In addition, when individuals in a multilingual, multicultural society are somewhat culturally connected with a minority language, yet are unable to speak, that language could also be considered their heritage language.

According to Montrul, the term *heritage speakers* has been defined to refer to individuals “of a linguistic minority who grew up exposed to their home language and the majority language” (Montrul, 2010, p.4). Montrul (2010) further suggests that the concept of ‘heritage speaker’ has come into existence in Canada in the mid-1970s, but has mushroomed in relevant literature in the United States since the 1990s” (Montrul, 2010, p.4). Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky (2010) tacitly encapsulated the definition of this term, as follows: “Heritage Language speakers are speakers of a language who interrupted or otherwise incompletely acquired their first language (or one of their first languages, in the case of children exposed to multiple languages from birth).” (p.26)

Cultural attitudes of both HL speakers towards the host community and the attitudes of the host community members towards HL speakers have received little research attention in prior research. In addition, these attitudes and the positions of the host country towards HL speakers vary from country to country, from culture to culture, and even from one context to another, depending on the socio-economic and political contexts in which those HL speakers have been raised, and on how far they have been merged in the host culture.

Therefore, this paper will show the impact of scholarship programmes on some cases of Saudi scholars and their children in host countries, and the relation between heritage language and previous knowledge, customs, and beliefs. It will also show how much the host culture affects the scholars’ and their children’s aptitudes and attitudes towards foreign/second language acquisition. It will have a look at the outcomes of cross-acculturation on Saudi learners as second language learners. In addition, it shows some of the scholarly investigations about the relation among races, cultures, and identities in a second language education setting.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

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Most studies conducted on HL have emphasized the exploration of the difficulties facing scholarship learners and how they adapt with cultural differences and the conflicts/shocks between their own culture and the host culture, including language use dynamics and psycho-

social dynamics to adjust to the new culture and its ethnics. Hotly controversial issues in this area seek to address questions of this sort: could these learners manage cross-cultures clashes/shocks or not? Which strategies might they apply in their new life? For instance, Peirce (1995) and Norton (2001) indicated that “While learning the target language, learners are continually assessing, reassessing, and changing their perceptions of who they are and how they fit in, or connect with the “social world” (Peirce, p.17).

As for linguistic issues, HL speakers diverge from native speakers in the host country in terms of phonology, lexical knowledge, morphology, syntax, case marking, and code-switching (Benmamoun et al., 2010). By explanation, phonology is the excellent area HL speakers master, but they often speak the HL with an accent. In addition, lexical knowledge among heritage speakers is often much weaker than among native speakers. Syntax is more likely to be completely acquired, but some areas are problematic, such as binding in pro-drop languages or difficulties with word order, passive constructions, and comprehension of relative clauses. Code-switching among heritage speakers occurs when two languages (or language varieties) are present in the same discourse for HL speakers.

Benmamoun et al. (2010) further described three significant issues that are problematic to HL speakers or their children who have been raised in the host country; i.e., Incomplete acquisition due to insufficient exposure to native language input; Attrition due to interlanguage and linguistic variation in the new context, and language transfer, which occurs when there is interference between the first language and the primary language. These problems affect the children of HL speakers’ children born and raised in the host community more than the recent immigrant parents.

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## 2. HL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY PRESERVATION

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There has been growing research on the relationship between heritage language and cultural identity preservation. This is a natural relationship between these two constructs because language is part of culture according to the classic definition of culture by Taylor (Cummins, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Cavallaro, 2005; Cummins & Schecter, 2003; Garcia, 2003; Park, 2011). For example, cummins advocated the significance of the preservation of HLs and their associated cultures in a host society, and called for more research on the topic since the 1970.

Garcia (2003) also called for more research on HL maintenance being a necessity to support globalism. In this sense, Cho (2000) demonstrated that preserving and developing the HL of Koreans could be of benefit for Korean-Americans by developing their bilingual skills, which in turn, could be of great avail to their careers in the host society.

Researchers also elaborated on the advantages of developing and maintaining the HL of immigrants, especially for their families and children, culturally speaking; for example, maintenance of HL of immigrant families encourage the development of active and positive connections with the family roots of immigrants in a way that promotes the children’s use of their heritage languages (Guardado, 2002; Park & Sarkar, 2007; Park, 2013) as well as preserves the HL against immigrants’ native language loss or its attrition in the long run due to permanent or long stays in a host society (Fillmore, 1991). According to Farruggio (2010), heritage language maintenance helps individuals preserve/create strong ethnic identities, encourages sustainable survival mechanisms, preserves cultural competence, and promotes healthy family relationships in the host country (Li-Yuan & Larke, 2008; Ro & Chatham 2009).

Preservation of HL can also inculcate positive attitudes in the parents’ attitudes towards their HL and their native culture (Park, 2013) in a way that implies that “parents’ positive attitudes toward their children’s heritage language maintenance” can help maintain, develop and enhance the children of immigrant scholars’ “language skills in a multilingual context” (Park & Sarkar, 2007, p.232).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Method

The researcher sought to examine the case of some Saudi male students delegated to the USA on educational scholarships as regards the effects of the host community’s language and culture of the former’s heritage language and their cultural identity. To achieve this purpose, the researcher went through the experiences and the hardships

these scholars faced upon living in a culture that differs totally from their own. The method of research, the case study approach, here employed is descriptive in nature, thereby grounded in surveys and structured interviews.

The scholars were introspected through semi-structured interviews conducted on a sample of Saudi scholars enrolled in Western Michigan University. The participants of the study were approached via the researcher’s sister who lives and works in the US.

#### 3.2 Sampling and Procedures

The five students were from different cities in Saudi Arabia, ranging from Riyadh, the capital and largest city in Saudi Arabia to smaller towns in the suburbs of Jeddah and Mecca. All participants were given pseudonyms. Their previous exposure to the English language was also varied. So, they faced different and various experiences dealing and communicating with others. The clearer issue was that female learners had troubles more with their customs and beliefs than male students. As in their previous life in their original culture, they had to wear Abas (loose, sleeveless outer garments made of fabric or of silk, worn by Arab women), and they had to cover everywhere. In addition, it was not allowed for women to mix with males everywhere. Even when necessary, dealing with men of their own culture was very much limited, but in their new life style, it became more and more common. Therefore, they faced different unbalanced criteria that they had to manage.

As education with different groups with different and various backgrounds will generate a good field of numerous contact zones, this study shows how a mixture of cultures can take a positive or negative role in education. Table one below describes the characteristics of the sample:

**Table 1**  
**Description of the Participants’ Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Age	Educ. Program	Family setup	Years in the US	children attended classes in Arabic
Ahmed	31	PhD	Wife + 3 children	9	Yes, regularly
Firdaus	28	PhD	Husband + 2 children	6	Yes, regularly
Reme	29	PhD	Brother + 1 child	8	Yes, very briefly
Ula	30	PhD	Husband + 4 children	9	Yes, regularly
Mohamed	32	PhD	Wife + 4 children	10	Yes, regularly

In spite of the increasing presence of Saudi Arabian international college students in American higher education, the literature regarding the experience of Saudi students in the United States is limited. This paper examines this subject in an attempt to describe the real life experiences of 5 Saudi Arabian international college students studying in the United States. All the participants had studied in the United States for at least 6 years and were regularly admitted as international students to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

The evaluation, collecting data, and outcomes analysis implemented in this study were conducted depending on different methods. The researcher asked an assistant (her sister) living and working in the US to do the interviews by proxy with the main objective of the study being to describe the lived experiences of the nine participants without reaching any far-fetched assumptions about the objective reality of those experiences.

The structure of the interview protocol was contrived to glean information from the participants as regards their

perceptions, beliefs, and experiences along two threads—one related to their cultural identity and the other in their heritage language. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended items devised by the researcher (see Appendix A). Based on a preliminary interview whose results were sent by the researcher assistant in the US, further follow-up questions were contrived and sent to the assistance to include in a second round of interviews, which were conducted on an individual basis. The following research questions were posed:

- (a) In what way does heritage language proficiency influence Saudi scholars and their children in maintaining their native cultural identity?
- (b) What are the characteristics of cultural identity of these Saudi scholars who maintain their Arabic heritage language?
- (c) What challenges/difficulties do Saudi scholars encounter to help their children maintain the parents' language and culture within the American culture in a multilingual, multicultural society?

Data were gathered via individually run interviews, which were conducted in English or in Arabic depending on English proficiency levels of the interviewees. Each interview continued for one hour at most, and each interviewee was interviewed a total of three times at three intervals, with each interval lasting for 2 days. At the completion of the third interview, the researcher felt that no follow-up questions were needed to tackle the research questions, thereby reaching the conclusion that the interviewees have already provided their responses and insights related the research focus.

### 3.3 Background and Hidden Factors

Demographic data of the participants in the study highlight the difficulties of studying in the United States. The moment is the Saudi Arabian students arrived in the United States, they entered a world that is immensely culturally different from their home country. Along with the cultural shock they experienced, they also faced language challenges as nearly all of these arriving students spoke Arabic as their first language. The consequential language barrier led to difficulty exploring the educational system and everyday living experiences.

Another compelling factor behind this study is the fact that most Saudi Arabian international college students studying in the United States are males, but their accompany the scholars, and in case of female scholars, it is a must that they are accompanied by their husbands or a legal custodian (often a relative of the first class, the father, or the second class, a brother). Thus, in order to begin bridging the gap that exists in the literature, this study sought to understand the lived experiences which are relevant to gain knowledge about the strengths and challenges this group faces while attending school and living in the United States in attempts to adjust to the new culture and pay service to their heritage language.

## 4. FINDINGS

From the analysis of interviews, three broad themes emerged from the data: the first theme indicated that participants of both genders developed a dual cultural identity. The second theme indicated that the proficiency of Arabian scholars and the passed down high proficiency levels of their offspring had a strong impact on the cultural identity of the parents and the children born and raised, or raised for longer periods of time in the USA. The third theme the interviewees has developed negative stereotypes that could be a potential cause for cultural identity clash, but that did not affect their clinging to and preservation dynamics of maintaining their heritage language to them and their children. These broad themes seem to be incongruous with the intricacies identified with cultural and ethnic identity maintenance mechanisms and their impact on heritage language speakers or their children.

### 4.1 Theme # 1: Cultural Duality

Findings from introspective interviews show that, at least at first glance, all interviewees assumed dual identities of Arabian and American – a phenomenon that Ghuman (1991) calls “hyphenated identity”. Upon asking the interviewees how they could identify themselves, whether they were Saudi Arabians or Arabian-Americans, in a straightforward and simple fashion, they answered that they are Americans on the American lands, but when they go back home, they are Arabians to the marrow. For example, one of the participants, Mohamed, said,

I'm Saudi-American because I have lived here in USA for nearly a decade, but I'm Saudi as well. Yet, I wish my children would live here for ever. I have been very careful to get them to get the American passport and be naturalized as Americans. I feel the present and future at their best for the god of our children are here.

Upon deeper examination, however, the complexity of forming one solid and integrated cultural identity for heritage language speakers appears to be clear. All participants responded that they were Saudis because they perceived themselves as Muslims and they needed to be related to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds and they expected to come back one day for work and living in Saudi Arabia. Ula's words illustrate the point:

I look Saudi in complexion and apparel. Other people expect me to be a Saudi Arabian veiled woman. Were I to ignore this fact, that would be ridiculous, and ungrateful to my country with whose money I am receiving a decent life and education here. Thus, being Saudi is something that I have to maintain and respect and be proud of. However, I still love the freedom I enjoy here. I can walk on the streets alone. I can go to the markets on my own. I can drive freely. I can even mix with men, uninterrupted by the native culture which suffocates us back home.

Those scholars do not appear to have the freedom to choose an identity other than being Saudi Arabians,

especially because they have jobs back home, and they are well-paid as several of them indicated in their responses. In other words, they inevitably identified themselves as Arabian because that is what is expected of them, and because they felt grateful for their government that pays their tuitions and life expenses. While Ahmed was more inclined towards accepting the new host society expectations, Firdaus suggested that she was a clear case of assuming a dual identity: She said,

I am an Arabian Saudi woman who is infatuated by Uncle Sam's culture. I like the freedom here. Back home, I feel I have an American mentality, but entrapped in the restrictions of the Saudi society which are greatly exercised on women. However, it's important to stay in touch with my culture back home for religious and tribal reasons, but I feel like I'm a rebel inside and passively revolting against our traditions.

In addition, culture shock can be clear through the anxiety that results from losing all or some familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. As Saudi students who come from sub-cultures very different from those in the United States may have a hard time adjusting to the traditions, lifestyle, and customs of the host society. Delving deeper into the interviews' data, it appeared clearly that over the past century, Saudi Arabia has experienced a collision between tradition and modernization to a great degree. Saudi Arabia has managed to maintain a balance between conservative Islamic values, cultural norms, and rapid modern advances. This had its impact on the native Arabians who would often suffer a cultural shock when they travel for longer periods of time abroad for study.

Since all Saudi Arabians are Muslim Arabs, scholars sent abroad typically follow their apparently religious instructions such as prayers, Hajj, celebrating their two festivals Aid Al-Fitr and Aid Al-Adha, and Fasting during Ramadan. All of these practices and behaviours affect their surroundings as they exchange effects between them and the others. The citizens especially in the countries that always host scholar students are used to respect the religions of others. Therefore, they allow them to practice their religious rituals freely. In addition, sharing celebrations and festivals allow cross-cultural interactions easily. As well, the university allows the Islamic Society to have a specific area as a chapel or a meditation room for all Muslim students to pray and meet each other. They may do this in meditation rooms shared by people who belong to different religions.

As part of their religious beliefs, women have to be fully covered when in the presence of men who don't belong to their family when they are in Saudi Arabia. They have to wear Abaya and also cover their face in public with a black veil – the 'Niqab'. At first, some of them used to follow this tradition, but it was difficult to maintain its most natives there wouldn't accept that easily. So, in time, women had to remove their Niqab but keep their Abayas and decency as much as possible, at least on the surface. As time passed, others around these women accepted their costume and

outfits. So, this could be considered as a form of exchange of culture and knowledge.

Ahmed, who seemed to have a highly developed sense of his family's and his own dual identity, poignantly suggested that "Society here and back home can have an influential impact on one's identity, but eventually, one has the freedom to be what s/he wants to become..." Ahmed concluded that eventually, it is one who determines his or her own ethnic and cultural identity, but being prone to the impact of the host community's identity is a must, for neither one nor his or her family could acquire the language of the new society without accepting to be acculturated in the host society. Many scholars, however, according to Mohamed, may not be strongly apt to resist the cultural identity that the host society imposes on them; this could be conducive to the creation of inner conflicts/ clashes for those heritage language speakers who do not want to be identified as ethnic or cultural sub-groups within the entire American community.

## **4.2 Theme # 2: Impact of HL Proficiency on Cultural Identity**

Interviewees belonging to both genders emphasized that they got more benefits from their interactions with people and practicing language in their daily life than from theoretical learning of English. Their language level and acquisition got better day by day. But they were also careful to communicate in Arabic with their native Saudis or other Arabs in their community to preserve their HL.

For instance, Firdaus said: "I like my children to speak English even at home. Albeit, I am educating my children in Arab Muslim schools to hitch them to their roots and religion, but I let them enjoy the freedom of this liberal world."

Mohamed also agreed to what was said by Firdaus; he concurs:

I send my children to an Arabic language school to help them preserve their mother language. The children being born and raised in here can speak English fluently as native-speakers – even better than me. Yet, I was afraid they lose their parents' mother tongue, especially because we have plans to return home after the scholarship program is over.

An in-depth exploration of the relationship between the cultural identity and heritage language of the interviewees reveals of findings in congruence with prior research findings: i.e., the stronger the heritage language proficiency, the more positive and long maintained the perceptions of belonging to one's native cultural identity. Interviewees indicated that their proficiency in Arabic and so is their children's proficiency contributed to making them feel positive about being Saudi Arabian. Ula said that her and her daughter's ability to speak Arabic assisted her to preserve her HL and its associated cultural identity:

I couldn't really say that my daughter and I are Saudi unless we knew how to speak our mother tongue - Arabic. Indeed, speaking Arabic helps me keep abreast with my Arabian roots.

Actually, with my daughter, who was born and raised in the US, being able to speak Arabic makes me feel she is still more like a Saudi. Her ability to speak Arabic shaped her identity as an Arabian girl, and Saudi Arabia is the source of our ethno-cultural identity. I believe the Arabic language has a lot to do with our cultural identity because if we can't speak Arabic, and especially our Saudi dialect, I don't know if I would really feel Saudi, because language plays an important part in shaping our identity. Through language, I can communicate with other Arabs living in my community, and I have to be able to communicate with them in Arabic' otherwise, I'd just feel like I was utterly Americanized.

Mohamed aptly observed that he and his family's fluency in Arabic helped them learn more about their culture back home:

Speaking Arabic helped me as much as it helped my family to know more about our culture and our identity as Arabians. When we have informal conversations in the Saudi dialect, we get this feeling that other Arabs living in our community know that we are from Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, children of the interviewees who developed a high level of competence in their heritage language made their parents feel happy that cultural and ethnic their identity had been well preserved in a society where two different languages and cultures may clash and one language and one culture have to succumb to the others.

### 4.3 Theme # 3: Negative Stereotypes Causing Cultural Clashes

Despite the fact that participants in this study have revealed a robust feeling of belonging culturally and ethnically to the Saudi identity taking pride in it, some participants expressed feelings of embarrassment and sometimes shame when the media addresses issues related to terrorism or when they are strictly screened and personally searched in airports on their entry to the US. The cause of embarrassment seems to be the negative stereotypes attached to Arab minorities in general and the Saudis in particular due to media stories that describe terrorists or Jihadist Islamists as Saudi citizens. Ahmed provided some remarkable notes exemplifying how proud he is to be Saudi Arabian, yet at the same time, how he is embarrassed when public discussions address issues of Saudi militant Islamists. These sentiments were expressed quite strongly several times throughout the interview:

One day I was in the lounge of a hotel in my area having a talk with some American and Chinese friends. They were talking about recent events in Syria and the Islamist army of ISIL. One guy said that many of the young men joining this militant group were originally from Saudi Arabia. I felt embarrassed and I wanted to dash away because I was afraid that other people might associate me with them, you know. I don't know, I don't know why, they did not say anything to hurt me in person, but I just felt embarrassed. I don't like other people to think we are all like ISIL people.

On the other hand, women had some negative attitudes towards the perceptions of Westerners of Saudi women as maids kept by their men and locked in, and deprived all forms of liberty and freedom. According to Ula, she would

be embarrassed when people chat about emancipation of women:

Yeah, when other women, especially Arabs, like Egyptians or UAE women, talk about women's freedom to go out on their own without a custodian in their own countries or when they mention that they can enjoy driving on their own, or they can go to a mall or a movie, I'm kind of embarrassed. And when I'm the only Saudi Arabia with a lot of Arab people, I feel sometimes uncomfortable. I don't know why.

This contradictory attitude toward one's cultural and ethnic identity suggests that there is a subtle conflict between "being proud to be Arabian" and "lacking the desire to be seen as a Saudi woman in Saudi apparel."

In fact, these women are prone to such negative stereotypical thinking of other ethnicities or cultures towards them. There is little doubt about this because it was contended in the individual identity in terms of forming an ethno-cultural identity (Phinney, 2003). It can finally be deduced that HL speakers may entertain a strong sense of ethno-cultural identity clash/conflict with the cultures in the host society caused by negative stereotypes. This is indeed detrimental to the identity formation and can be conducive to embarrassment or even self-rejection.

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## CONCLUSION

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For expatriates to safeguard their ethno-cultural identity, individuals or groups pertaining to cultural/ethnic minorities may be inclined towards the adoption of a dual or hyphenated identity; in the present study, the participants assumed an Americanised identity when they are in the US while they maintain their heritage language and culture in themselves and their families, but when they are back, they are necessitated to retain their full Saudi Arabian identity which they cannot escape due to religious, cultural and tribal bonds. The question that follows from the assumptions and findings underlying and emanating from the present study is: can a dual identity be chosen by HL speakers or is it imposed on them? Analysis of retrospective data from the interviews indicates that developing and maintaining one's ethno-cultural identity is not exclusively an individual decision taken out of one's own volition. Interviewees confirmed that they are Saudi Arabian and they identify themselves as such, but in the host society, they enjoy much freedom and privileges in the new society as well as they absorb the social values of that society to an extent that they think they are Americanised. Albeit, they are conscious that the host society inevitably imposes an ethnic/cultural identity on them. This duality of perception is what Brown (2003) describes as "public identity" versus "private identity."

By agreeing to take one's public identity based on physical features, such as dialect, wear and physical/facial features, heritage language speakers from the Middle East as from elsewhere can and are likely inclined to embrace

the cultural part of their ethnic identity: i.e., the culture, conventions, customs, and even personal habits that accompany this cultural identity.

Cultural clashes or conflicts may ensue, however. One shield to protect one's heritage language and ethnic/cultural identity is to maintain them in the children by keeping them to cling to their roots by developing a positive and healthy ethno-cultural identity, and embracing their heritage language and culture.

However, negative stereotyping was revealed to be a factor of significance for the participants with respect to the way they feel about their Saudi ethnicity and culture; this is compatible with prior research which correlated negative stereotyping with negative perceptions of one's ethnicity, language or culture (Khan & Lambert, 2001).

This issue is, therefore, one of the most growing research topics. Many approaches have been devised to analyze the factors that influence the cross-culture effects and the challenges that face both genders especially for Saudi ones, including stereotypical thinking of ethnicity, culture and heritage language.

Participants noticed some difficulties as well as some advantages. The data analysis identified some themes overlapping the experience of being in mixed gender environment. This paper describes three themes that participants discussed in rich detail during their interviews. It showed how the Saudi culture of extreme gender segregation has impacted on the experience of these students, particularly in their ability to relate to members of the opposite gender in a mixed gender environment. Participants indicated that being in mixed gender environment impacted on their cultural identity, as well.

Although their positive experiences have not been discussed in this paper, it is clear from statements from female interviewees who said that their personality has completely changed, but they indicated that not all the experiences in the US were negative ones. The data from interviews demonstrated how complex it was to explore the lived experiences of the participants. The data analysis was complex because this kind of experience involves two intersecting phenomena; each of them is structured differently by the students plus the involved difficulty in working across languages. In addition, it was found that the view of the Saudis as international students acknowledges some common experiences due to religious and national identity being, in some ways, inseparable from their own cultural identity.

In brief, there is no doubt that Saudi scholars' culture and identity are influenced and changed by living the experience of expatriates in a liberal society like the USA.

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## APPENDIX A

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### Guide to the Semi Structured Interview

#### Identity-related Questions

- 1). How would you identify yourself in the host American society? What do you base your identity on?
- 2). What does it mean to you to be Saudi Arabian?
- 3). What does it mean to you to become American or Americanized by the new acculturating environment?
- 4). Who or what decides your identity before coming to the host society, after coming to it and after leaving it?
- 5). Is being Saudi Arabian a burden, a problem, or a hindrance in any way in any sense?
- 6). Is there such a thing as being perfectly balanced between a Saudi and American identity?

#### Heritage Language-Related Questions:

- 1). As your ability to speak Arabic shaped your ethnic identity in any way?
- 2). Do you feel more Saudi when you speak Saudi Arabic?
- 3). What would you say the relationship between heritage language and identity is?
- 4). What would you say the relationship between language and culture is?