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Saudi Students' Experience of Intercultural Communication

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Introduction

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

In the U.S., higher education institutions are committed to diversifying their student population. The domestic students in these institutions have the opportunity to interact with international students from all over the world. Intercultural communication enables domestic students to raise cross-cultural awareness and develop multicultural competence, which will help them with career development in the global age (Rai, 2002). The diversification of the student population will enable domestic students to be world citizens by theme.

understanding international trends and issues beyond their country and local community (Yıldırım, 2014).

Moreover, many talented international students do not have adequate access to well-equipped labs with advanced technology and learning resources in their home countries. Inviting and accepting these students is beneficial for the U.S. and the rest of the world because they have the opportunity to make greater contribution toward the advancement of science and technology. In addition, the international students who study in the U.S. usually develop a deeper understanding of American culture and values (Peacock, 2009). They are able to bridge cultural gaps that may exist between their home countries and the U.S. (Jardine, 1990).

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

Kung (2007) interviewed 18 international students about the benefits and the advantages of studying in the U.S. The participants mentioned that studying abroad helped them to 1) become more confident in socializing with people from different cultures, 2) learn more about American culture, 3) be able to speak English fluently, 4) have American and international friends, 5) have a better job, 6) develop themselves personally and professionally, and 7) gain intercultural competence.

The Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been aware of the advancements of U.S higher education (Al-Khedaire, 1978). Therefore, the Saudi government has supported thousands of students to study in the U.S. The first Saudi students came to the U.S. in the 1950s. ARAMCO (Arabian-American Oil) sent those students to obtain engineering and medical degrees (Smith, 2003). Since then, the Saudi government has continued to send students to the U.S. until they peaked at 30,000 students in the 1990s. Unfortunately, the number of Saudi students drastically decreased to 5,800 students after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The number declined further to 3,500 students (Smith, 2003) after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. This decline negatively impacted both countries. The Saudi government missed out on the advanced STEM education of the U.S. that Saudi Arabia needed to improve their infrastructure. The American government lost a large portion of the international students (Smith, 2003). In 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and

President George Bush met to reinforce the Saudi-U.S. relations (Taylor & Albasri, 2014) and issued the following joint statement: Finally, the United States and Saudi Arabia agree that our future relations must rest on a foundation of broad cooperation. We must work to expand dialogue, understanding, and interactions between our citizens. This will include programs designed to (1) increase the number of young Saudi students to travel and study in the United States; (2) increase our military exchange programs so that more Saudi officers visit the United States for military education and training; and (3) increase the number of Americans traveling to work and study in the Kingdom. The United States recognizes we must exert great efforts to overcome obstacles facing Saudi businessmen and students who wish to enter the United States and we pledge to our Saudi friends that we will take on this effort. (U.S. Department of State, 2005)

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

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

Statement of the Problem

One of the goals of King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) is to facilitate the Saudi students' developing intercultural competence and mutual understanding between Saudi students and the host nations (Saudi Arabia Cultural Commission, 2012). Saudi students reported that learning English, understanding American people and culture, and having American friends encouraged them to study in the U.S. (Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Razek, 2012; Shaw, 2010). Therefore, communication with domestic students is crucial to fulfill the purposes of the scholarship and students. Salter and Teger (1975) stated, "Only the type of contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in change in attitude" (p. 213). Alreshoud and Koeske (1997) found that Arab students' interaction with American people generated a mutual positive attitude. Moreover, the communication between American students and international students enhanced their understanding of different cultures (Hall, 2013). Therefore, the intercultural communication between Saudi students and American people is crucial for both countries because their understanding of each other will increase. The more they communicate with each other, the more they understand each other, which will reduce the conflicts. There were other benefits of communication with local people as well. It helped international students to adjust to the new culture and avoid loneliness (Hofer, 2009; Jammaz, 1972; Shaw, 2010; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Zimmermann, 1995). Furthermore, Kim (1994) confirmed, "Adaptation occurs through the communication interface between the stranger and the host milieu—just as the natives acquire their capacity to function in their society through communicative interactions throughout their lives" (p. 394). Thus, the communication with the people from the host nation assists the international students to adapt to the culture in their host nations. In addition, the satisfaction of the international students increased when their communication with Americans increased (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Zimmermann, 1995). Last but not least, the sense of belonging among international students was positively correlated

with their interactions with domestic students (Glass and Westmont, 2014; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). As the sense of belonging increased, the international students' academic achievement increased, while the perceived discrimination decreased (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Although the benefits of communication between international and domestic students are tremendous, researchers have noted that the interaction between American students and international students, especially students from the Middle East has been very limited (Trice, 2004). Several qualitative studies indicated that Saudi students rarely talked with American students (Al Murshidi, 2014; Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997; Hall, 2013; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Razek, 2012; Shaw, 2010).

The majority of the articles about Saudi students were conducted between the years 1970 and 2000 (Akhtarkhavari, 1994; Alfauzan, 1992; Al-Ghamdi, 1985; Al-Harthi, 1987; Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Khedaire, 1978; Al-nusair, 2000; Al-Shedokhi, 1986; Al-Shehry, 1989; El-Banyan, 1974; Jammaz, 1972; Mustafa, 1985; Oweidat, 1981; Rasheed, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996). Many changes have occurred since these studies were published. Among these changes, as a result of the 9/11 tragedy, the inter-cultural communication between Saudi and American students was especially affected. Fifteen out of nineteen of the hijackers responsible for the 9/11 tragedy were Saudis. Consequently, the way that Americans perceive and treat Saudi students was dramatically different than before 9/11. Some Saudi students experienced discrimination, alienation, and fear (Ghaffari, 2009). Some Saudi students did not complete their studies and left the country immediately after the tragedy, and others changed how they looked, such as women removing their head scarves and men shaving their beards (McMurtrie et al., 2001).

Recent studies have focused on success strategies and Saudi students' perceptions about Saudi education and American education (Heyn, 2013; Shaw, 2010), homestay issues (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009), the Saudi students' experiences in a mixed gender education (Alhazmi, 2010), oral communication such as presentation and speaking (Al Murshidi, 2013). Hofer's study (2009) employed a

mixed method to explore the adjustment problems. The participants expressed their desire to have American friends. Hall's article examined academic difficulties and how studying in America changed the students' values (2013). Lastly, Razek (2012) reported that the reasons that Saudi students rarely contacted with American people were food restrictions, religious, gender, and alienation. None of these articles examined the interpersonal communication between American people and Saudi students in-depth. Little attention was paid to the benefits of the communication with American students. Therefore, research is needed to explore the reasons that prevent or encourage the intercultural communication between Saudi students and American people.

Purpose of Study

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

Research Questions and Design

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

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

Sub-Questions:

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

Significance of the Study

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

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

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is the interaction between two people or more from different cultures (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004). The communication between domestic students and international students is considered intercultural communication.

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

The international students' academic and social satisfaction is positively associated with the intercultural communication with host national people. A study conducted in Hawaii reported that the international students who had a high ratio of local friends were more satisfied and happy (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011). In addition, their satisfaction of their communication skills was increased (Zimmermann, 1995). Furthermore, a study held in a mid-western university in the U.S. found that the international students' academic and social satisfaction was positively correlated with interacting with American students (Perrucci & Hu, 1995).

In addition, communicating with host national people will enhance the international students' sense of belongingness and social connectedness. Glass and Westmont (2014) distributed a survey to 1,398 international students and 17,230 domestic students. They found that sense of belonging was positively correlated with intercultural communication. Another study in Australia also found that the sense of connectedness increased when the interacting with Australian students increased (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2006). Hurtado and Carter anticipated that joining an ethnic or race organization or gathering did not help the students to feel sense of

belonging, instead these gatherings would eliminate the diversity because the intercultural communication would be limited.

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

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

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

In another study conducted in Australia, the researchers utilized a mix method approach. Three hundreds and forty-one international students were surveyed, and 20 international students were interviewed. The researchers found that the language competence had a positive correlation with the number of domestic friends and a negative correlation with the depression and anxiety, while the racial discrimination had a negative correlation with anxiety, loneliness, and depression. The more those students participated in the local events, the lower the level of depression, loneliness, and anxiety. In the qualitative section of the study, the participants assured that the lack of language proficiency and perceived discrimination were two of the communication barriers. They also reported that the cultural differences between them and domestic students constrained their interaction with host national students because their understanding of the Australian culture, norms, customs, and traditions was limited. In addition, the participants mentioned that the domestic students' lack or misunderstanding of the international students' culture blocked the conversation or avoided talking with international students. The international students also stated that they were afraid of shame, awkwardness, discomfort, and fear when they communicated with local students. Last but not least, the differences in religious beliefs and practices also discouraged international students and domestic students from communicating or socializing with others. For example, one of the participants said, I am Muslim, I don't drink, I don't go [to] clubs, so I am away from those parties with a lot of drinking. For me, it is not possible to enjoy everything which local people enjoy. For Muslims, it is not easy to make friends with local people. Some people, especially teenagers are not friendly with you (Yue & Lê, 2013).

Hinchcliff-Pelias and Greer interviewed 64 students from 20 nations to describe the communication barriers that participants had when they communicated interculturally. Two themes emerged from the data: "Self inadequacies and Other's inadequacies." The participants revealed that the lack of language competence and

knowledge about the host culture took away from their communication with the students of host nations. They also stated that they did not want to put themselves in an intense and uncomfortable situation. In addition, the participants pointed out that the domestic students' lack of interest to learn more about other cultures, their culture insensitivity, and the stereotype that they had for international students and their culture made the communication difficult. Sometimes the domestic students did not have time to talk with international students. In addition, the study found that the ethnocentrism was one of the significant barriers. This happened from both sides of the students: the international and the domestic students. Moreover, the participants assured that the media played a central role of blocking the conversation between the international and local students by depicting some culture negatively. Lastly, the physical appearance was also mentioned by the participants as a barrier. One of the participants articulated his disappointment, What intercultural communication? I would like to get to know some of the other students here from different countries, but they only want to be with their own people...the Americans hang out with other Americans, the Spanish with other Spanish, the Italians with the Italians, and so forth. (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004, p. 14).

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

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

of intercultural communication (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Ying, 2002; Yue & Lê, 2013).

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

Personality has a pivotal impact on the intercultural communication, either negative or positive. A study held in the United Kingdom sought to examine the impact of personality and prior experiences on intercultural communication. The researcher employed the Five Factor Model of personality traits as a conceptual framework. The Five personality traits were Conscientiousness (self-discipline and diligence), Agreeableness (altruism, empathy, and trust), Neuroticism (prone to anxiety and negative emotion), Openness (comfort with new experiences and positivity towards change), and Extraversion (high levels of personal activity, outgoing, and self-confidence). There were several variables in this study. Five of these variables were the five personality traits while the remainders were ethnocentrism, cultural intelligence—the

person's ability to adapt to the new culture effectively, language ability, international orientation and multicultural upbringing. The participants were 755 students from three universities. The study revealed that there was a negative correlation between the ethnocentrism and all other variables, except the neuroticism, while cultural intelligence was positively associated with all the variables. The researcher indicated that the strong impact on the intercultural communication from the personality traits were agreeableness and openness (Harrison, 2011).

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

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

Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory

In this study, I utilized the Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory to guide my inquiry into Saudi students' experiences of intercultural communication. The Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory developed by William Gudykunst, focuses on strangers' intercultural adjustment. Gudykunst started his

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

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

Furthermore, when the anxiety level is lower than the minimum thresholds of anxiety, the individual will be unmotivated to interact or adjust to the new culture (Gudykunst, 2005).

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

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

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

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

more secure when his/her self-concept is confirmed by the host nationals; the host nationals accept who she/he is.

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

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

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

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

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

Research design

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

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

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

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

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

I asked the participants general and open-ended questions, so that they could speak freely and say what was important to them, instead of my dictating to them what to say. However, sometimes a participant seemed stuck on one idea or two, or did not recall all of what he experienced because of time constraints. At this point, the participants were prompted using questions derived from the axioms of AUM theory.

Findings

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

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

Theme 1- Detecting mutual interests.

Theme 2- Identifying what attracts Americans to communicate with you. Americans seem attracted to a person who:

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

Sub-theme 2.2- Shows and receives empathy.

Sub-theme 2.3- Does interesting things.

Sub-theme 2.4- Shows hospitality.

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

Sub-theme 3.1- Benefiting academically.

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

Sub-theme 3.3- Improving their language skills.

Sub-theme 3.4- Increasing their host cultural awareness.

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

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

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

Sub-theme 4.2- Their identity was jeopardized.

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

Theme 1: Detecting mutual interests.

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

For example, Bader says,
Last time, I met one of my friends in the class. I saw him wearing a cap that has a Summit sign, a company that modifies cars and sells car parts. I start a conversation with him: “Oh, are you working in Summit? He said, “I just got the cap from them. I just bought a compressor for my car”. Then I asked him,” What kind of car do you have?” He mentioned the kind of his car. I am very interested in the classic car. So, I start the conversation easily with him, and after that we become friend.

When Bader noticed that his classmate was wearing a cap that carried a company well known for selling and modifying cars, he knew this would trigger the conversation between them because there was something that they both cared about. Bader and his classmate had the same hobby of modifying classic cars. This hobby was the gateway of developing a friendship with each other.

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

I found religious people are very interesting because they have the same thing that we have in our Islamic culture. They are proud of their religion and what they believe. Sometimes they talk about their prophets and the religious things; you can find same threads. We

have the same things. We have too many things in common like believing in God... She is brilliant, so when we talk about prophets and the culture things that they have, I found so many stuff we share together.

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

I think to get to know people is to share their interests, usually sports. Personally, basketball got me to know other people. Once I know certain people who like to play basketball, I found from their friends who like to play rugby. Then I join to those people who play rugby... You can play basketball and be good it, and people will like you, and you know they want to know your name. The basketball tournament and football tournament are interest the American people the most... When I played basketball in the gym, we usually engage in a conversation about which team wins this championship. You see a lot of interest of what your opinion is, or who is the best player? You will see a lot of people interest in what you think.

Sports provided Ali with an opportunity to communicate more with American people, and because he had a vast knowledge of sports, he was introduced to other people who were interested in a particular sport such as rugby.

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

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

There were several studies confirmed that mutual interests between international students and American people enhanced the communication between them. Gareis (2012) demonstrated that the different interests that international students had from domestic

students limited the conversation between them. In addition, another study held in Australia mentioned that individual similarities between international students and host national students like hobbies, personality, values, and the age similarity were factors facilitating intercultural communication and friendship (Kudo & Simkin, 2010).

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

When the person is able to identify what aspects and features that he/she has that attract people to interact with him/her, he/she will be able to use these favorable things to enhance his/her communication with the people with whom he/she would like to talk. Every culture and individual have their own desirable attributes. Finding the main attributes that attract American people will help Saudi students to enhance communication with them.

Sub-theme 2.1: American people are attracted to a person who shows self-confidence in their language and themselves. In AUM theory, Gudykunst mentioned that when language and dialect proficiency increase, anxiety and uncertainty will decrease. As a result, an individual will be more competent to communicate interculturally because he/she will be able to understand what has been said (Gudykunst, 2005a). Therefore, the self-confidence in one's language and oneself are important to communicate interculturally with other people. As Bader declared,

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

In addition, Ahmed agreed with Bader by explaining,

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

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

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

Bader emphasized understanding jokes while Ali put an emphasis on telling the jokes by saying,

You have to have a sense of humor. You have to be funny. You have to crack a joke. People love funny people. Sometimes I try to crack a joke here and there, and people love it. They usually love you and try to surround themselves around you. They talk with you more because they think you are more relaxed, not tight enough like they think of you when they first saw you.

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

A study conducted with Saudi and Emirati students revealed that they were unable to understand American jokes because their language proficiency was low and the jokes were usually related to American culture. The participants indicated that not understanding the jokes prevented them from socializing with American students

(Al Murshidi, 2014a). There were many studies that negatively associated lack of or low language proficiency with communicating effectively with host national people (Gareis, 2012; Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Harrison, 2011; Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Trice, 2004; Ying, 2002; Yue & Lê, 2013).

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

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

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

what encouraged the Americans to talk with him and took advantage of it. Ali used the same technique as well. He stated, I usually start my conversation by asking about how they are, and then I ask them what they are doing here. If they are in the library, they usually say that they have homework. Then I ask them what the homework is. I try to keep the conversation about them. Keep them interested by answering the question.

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

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

Sub-theme 2.3: American people are attracted to a person who does interesting things. When a person has skills and is good at something, he/she usually attracts American people to communicate with him/her. In AUM theory, Gudykunst (2005a) anticipated that when a person is attracted to another person who is a complete stranger to him/her, his/her anxiety and uncertainty would decrease accordingly. As a consequence, the confidence to approach a person and talk will increase. The interesting person who has skills in sports, music, or in the class will attract people to interact with him/her and to become a friend. No one will go to a person who is bored and lazy. Ali illustrated this point by saying, If they saw me at the gym, and I played soccer and did good, they usually come to ask me where I start playing, when I start playing, and how did I play that good? In class, if I have a good question or had a good joke, or I did something that they like, they think it is very likeable about me; they will come and ask me about it. Also, another thing is the more American friends you have, the more others will attract to you because they think if that many people like

you, and then there are something interested them about you... if I play a basketball at the gym, and I did good that day, people will come and say hi. Ask me about where I live, what my major is, and other things. I think in the right time and the right place people will come to talk to you, and it depends on where you see them, or how they see you as a person. If you are playing basketball, and you are not good or score, and do nothing, then no one will think of you, but if you score and say something funny, people will think of you as more relaxed, and is not a type of person who will reject me when I talk with them.

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

Bader realized the importance of being interesting if he wanted to communicate with American people. Therefore, he managed to sit outside his apartment and smoke hookah. He says, I used to smoke hookah near to the pool in my previous apartment. During the time, I just cook my tea and prepare my hookah. There are American people who smoke hookah sit with me and chat with me. We start a conversation about the hookah and how it is made, and they start smoking hookah with me, and I explain what I can do and how to cook food. Then they ask me if I can cook for them. So, I invite them to go with me to my apartment. We just cook food during that night, and it was a good night.

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

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

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

Bader also shared a story about this topic,

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

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

Theme 3: What encourages Saudi students to communicate with Americans

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

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

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

So, Ali noticed that socializing and studying with American students would help him in his academic pursuits. He learned to concentrate on his homework and understand the subject better. He contrasted his experience of studying with Saudi friends and American friends. He found that his Saudi friends were wasting their time and hovering around without doing much work on their assignments while the American friends worked hard to finish as soon as possible, and they enjoyed the rest of the day. Furthermore, being friends with American students will help the Saudi students to catch up with their professors by reading their American friends'

notes. As Bader declared, “I am a very bad note taker, so I cannot take notes during the class, but I found that American students would give you their notes easily.”

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

Sub-theme 3.2: A Saudi student is encouraged to communicate with Americans when it helps him/her to acquire skills that facilitate his/her life in and outside the U.S. As one noted, the U.S. is the greatest country in the world, and it would not be the greatest country unless its citizens worked hard and managed their time and resources well. Saudi students were eager to come to the U.S. to earn advanced degrees and acquire skills that would help them to get a good job and better life (Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009). The participants mentioned that they learned life and job skills from American people. For instance, Ali indicated, When I first came here, I did have a job. When you had a job, you will need to cope with the way of life. So, you have to organize your time and surround it what is more important than the others. So, you have to look at your job’s schedule, and you have to look at your homework, so that you can put a time for your family. I learned it from them. Now I organize my time better than when I first came here.

The skills, such as time management and prioritizing tasks, which Ali learned from American people, would help him while he is studying in the U.S. and also assist him in his future life and job.

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

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

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

Sub-theme 3.3: Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with Americans to improve their language skills. All of the participants declared that the main reason to communicate with American people was to improve their English skills; they want

to enhance their speaking, listening, and understanding. Bader indicated that socializing with American people helped him learn conversational, colloquial English when he said,

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

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

Sub-theme 3.4: Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with Americans to raise their host cultural awareness. One of the reasons Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with American people is to deepen their knowledge about the host culture. The participants would like to know what Americans like and dislike, how they treat each other, and how they think. The more knowledge they have about the host culture, the more their cross-cultural journey will be fruitful and peaceful. As Ahmed says, I am not interested in knowing American people and their culture for the sake of knowing, except for improving my English and knowing what the appropriate and accurate thing to say in front of them in order not to do wrong against them. I want to know how to treat the professors, the taxi drivers, and the waitress properly. Every place in

the U.S. has its own culture. I want to know what is appropriate culturally to protect myself, so my interests lead me to know the culture. I want to know the commonalties in the American society in order to treat them properly.

Ahmed realized that his awareness of the culture's norms and traditions would make his stay in the U.S. more secure and peaceful because it helped him stay away from creating cultural conflicts. Ali and Bader wanted to learn more about the American culture because they were fond of it. As Ali mentioned,
I was interested in learning about how American people think. I was interested in how people live, how people eat, how they've got things done, and what they are doing in their daily activities. You know American people are very organized. The good things I try to look into it, and the bad things I try to stay away from.

Ali was fascinated with the American culture. He wanted to know more about American people and culture, and also he attempted to obtain the beneficial features and stayed away from the useless ones.

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

Sub-theme 3.5: Saudi students are encouraged to communicate with Americans when they encounter an American person who understands and respects their culture and religion. In

AUM theory, Gudykunst (2005b) stated that when a person perceives that the host national people's receptivity is high toward strangers, the person's anxiety would be lowered. Therefore, Saudi students would be more likely to speak with American people who try to respect and understand the Saudi culture. For example, Ahmed shared his story about a woman, who understood and respected his culture,

There was a woman who mingled with Saudi students extensively, and she was really helpful and understanding because she knew the Saudi culture. She was trying to learn Arabic language. This woman when I ask her to help me, I found her there, and even when I did not asked her and saw me in the library, she will go toward me and ask me if I need help.

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

In contrast, a lack of understanding of Saudi culture on the part of a host national can be discouraging to a Saudi student from communicating interculturally. In a study conducted in Australia, international students mentioned that domestic students lack of understanding of the international students' culture blocked the

conversation (Yue & Lê, 2013), while another study revealed that a domestic student who is more receptive to other nations is easy to talk to because he/she is more empathetic and interested in learning about other cultures (Kudo & Simkin, 2010).

Theme 4: What discourages Saudi students from communicating with Americans

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

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

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

Before Ahmed came to the U.S., he did not know anything about the U.S. and American people, except what he saw in the movies. Therefore, some of this misleading information stayed longer because they had been sustained by a few Americans.

Similarly, sometimes Americans have a stereotype about Saudi students. For example, Ahmed noticed the American people were more comfortable talking with him when he was alone, but when he had his wife, who wore a Hijab, they were less comfortable and tried to avoid him and his wife.

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

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

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

As Bader clearly stated that he would avoid the person who offended his religion because his religion shapes who he is, so if anything bad said toward his religion, he would consider this insult as if it had been directed toward him. Not only Bader felt this way, but all of the participants did. Ali shared his feelings in this matter, If someone likes to talk about girls, sex, and music every time I talk with him, I usually do not try to talk with him ever again because this is out of my comfort zone. I do not talk to him about what he did last night, or who's that girl. That happens to me a lot when I first came here to the U.S., the students know that in Saudi Arabia, women wear a hijab. So, when I talked with a guy, he will ask me what I think of that girl; this is out of my comfort zone. This guy makes me a little anxious. This is not respectful for me.

Islam forbids sex outside marriage, and also some of the interpretations of Islam consider listening to music a sin, as well as touching women outside the circle of one's relatives. Therefore, Ali was not comfortable around the people who talked about this topic. Another incident happened to Ahmed with his teacher in the ESL center.

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

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

I told my friend that I do not like to socialize with women, and he kept insisting, so I told him that my religion prevented me. He said

to me the religion is an old-fashion, and we now in twenty-first century. Afterward, this guy stopped answering my calls and avoiding me since then.

Ali also said that he did not like talking about religion. He shared his story about a classmate that he had in one of the classrooms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

things to do. I was too busy doing my master research, and my kids kept me busy.

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

Conclusion

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

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

The third theme was about the reasons that pushed the Saudi students to communicate with Americans. Five sub-themes were extracted from this theme. The Saudi students were more inclined to interact with American people when they benefited from their counterparts academically, such as receiving help to understand course material or get their notes. The participants also reported that communicating with American people helped them to improve their English skills and learn the American accent. They also learned more about American culture. In addition, the participants indicated that they gained skills that facilitated their living in the U.S. and

their lives in general; they learned how to manage their time and get things done, and they also deepened their practical understanding of American law. Last but not least, Saudi students indicated that they were more motivated to communicate with American people who respected their culture and religion, who understood their religion and traditions, and who encouraged them to practice their religion without judging them.

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

the cultural perceptions. Furthermore, Ahmed's major is education whereas Bader specializes in science, and Ali specialized in engineering. Jammaz (1972) found that students who were majoring in science and engineering were more adjusted than the students who were majoring in humanities. Additionally, the students specializing in humanities were more concerned with their English language proficiency than students majoring in science (Al-Shedokhi, 1986).

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

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

the conversation usually took a minute and two. As I go on and learn more words and learn how to speak it, the conversation last for five minutes, and so on.

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

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

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

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

and how it is practiced by Saudi students in America since it seems to have an effect on intercultural communication.

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

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

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

The commitment that Saudi students have to their country and religion is obvious in the literature (Abdel Razek, 2012; Heyn, 2013). Similarly, when their religion or country was offended, the

participants in this research would try to correct the misunderstanding that a person had. For instance, Bader said, If a person says something bad about my religion, background, or he tries to discriminates me and offend me, absolutely I am going to avoid them after I explain to him what he said is very wrong and offended me and my people in my culture. If he does not understand me or mean to do it, I will avoid him.

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

Limitations and Future Research

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

Lastly, this study uses qualitative research methods to gain deeper understanding of this phenomenon. AUM theory has been tested quantitatively, though not with Saudi students, and applying quantitative research methods to a larger sample would provide insight into whether the themes identified here have more

generalizability. Also, another relevant intercultural communication theory that could be used to explore this phenomenon using either qualitative or quantitative research methods is Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (Kassing, 1997). Kassing proposed that a person who is willing to communicate with people from his/her own culture would not necessarily be willing to communicate interculturally (Kassing, 1997). It would be fascinating to inquire about the Saudi students' intercultural willingness to communicate.

Recommendations

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

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

international students, especially the Saudi students more engaged with the American people and culture,

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

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

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

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

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

In the Engineering College, we have a class every fall where they gather all the students for that department. They divided them into 25 teams. They usually try not to put the Saudi students in one team.

The teams do a big project. Last year, we made a chocolate pudding and sell them. We work together for the whole semester. The class is mandatory.

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

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

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