

Identity and Context Change

Case Study of Saudi Women in the UK

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my younger self, who, bravely enough, decided to go through this challenging life experience.

Abstract

Saudi women's social and religious position, rights, agency, and identities are gaining more academic prominence inside and outside Saudi Arabia. This project brings these aspects together with a focus on their intersection in international mobility. This research project examines the impact of changing social and religious contexts on Saudi women's identities abroad. Saudi women in the UK are then put forward as a case study examined using a qualitative research design. This research draws on academic literature, 21 in-depth interviews, and photo-elicitation to discuss how Saudi women (re)construct and negotiate their identities during their stay in the UK with relevance to their self-understanding, aspirations, and interpersonal relationships. The findings of this research conclude that relocating to a foreign environment with distinct social and religious landscapes from those of Saudi Arabia had a positive transformative impact on the Saudi research participants because it offered them more space to navigate diverse possibilities, negotiate their identities, including cultural, social, and religious dimensions. It also enabled them to grow on personal and professional levels, articulate their voices with newfound clarity, and reclaim their agency. These findings contribute to the scarcity of academic works on the Saudi women diaspora in particular and the Arab Muslim female diaspora in general. They also contribute to building contemporary and accurate accounts of Saudi women and debunking long-lasting and widespread stereotypes and misconceptions about this particular population.

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List of Abbreviations

KSA: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The UK: The United Kingdom

The INT: The Identity Negotiation Theory

The MENA: The Middle East and North Africa

1 Chapter One: General Introduction

1.1 The Beginning: The Researcher's Perspective

On a Friday evening, I attended a gathering with some Saudi women I knew from a reading club. Few of us were relatively new to the country, whereas the rest lived in the UK for over five years. When we, the newcomers, were asked how we were settling in, there was a loud silence, a shared confusion, overwhelmingness, a feeling of not fitting in, and even a few seeds of depression resulting from our inability to settle in. To reassure us, one of the women, who has spent over ten years in the UK, asserted that there was no need to worry— even though she felt the same way we all did and perhaps more. She affirmed that we would eventually learn how to live with it, and we nodded in agreement. In that meet-up, dark humour disguised the fact that we were all trying to find or be ourselves in this new context, but, for some reason, we could not, or at least up to then.

I contemplated our shared confusion surrounding our identities and our struggle to settle into the new setting, especially our adopted “just-live-with-it” approach. A possible answer was perhaps because it was “us”. Perhaps it was because we came from similar backgrounds and were living a relatively similar experience— women originating from Arab Muslim countries who moved to a markedly distinct social, cultural, and religious environment and struggled to integrate into the new society. This hypothesis quickly evolved into a fundamental inquiry: How does a change in context influence our identities? Nevertheless, this question was overly expansive for a single study; hence, I needed to refine both the specific contexts and the demographic under investigation.

I explored the commonalities among women from Arab Muslim countries and decided to focus on Saudi Arabia mainly for the significance of the Saudi women's community in the UK, particularly in Leeds, which presented a rich collection of diverse stories and narratives related to their struggles and

transformations that deserved documentation, and for the unique intersection of religion and culture in Saudi Arabia compared to other Arab Muslim countries. Therefore, examining the impact of this intersection on the identities of Saudi women living abroad became academically intriguing. Accordingly, this research explores the experiences of twenty-one Saudi women navigating their identities abroad. It explores these women's self-understandings, identity performance, and negotiation processes in light of their international mobility experiences, focusing on the social and religious context change and the extent of its impact on their identities.

While this research does not represent all Saudi women abroad, nor does it claim to cover every aspect of their experience or struggle, the interviews conducted with Saudi women within this research offered substantial evidence of the intersection of social norms, tribal laws, gender expectations, and religion in shaping the identities of Saudi women abroad. Significantly, the experience of living in a foreign environment, distinct from their native upbringing, provided the Saudi women interviewed with a unique and transformative space that offered them new perspectives for self-redefinition. Specifically, their identity negotiation processes entailed a positive comprehensive reevaluation of their gender and social roles, a reordering of their personal and professional priorities, a fundamental reconsideration of their social and religious values, and a recalibration of their approach to interpersonal relationships, particularly with regards to mixed-gender interactions. Their experiences further led to the reconstruction of their moral frameworks and the reposition of family, tribe, and broader social structures as sources of power and influence in their lives. These findings underscore the profound impact of the context change on the multifaceted identity negotiations of Saudi women abroad, which overemphasises their complex and evolving processes of self-definition and identity negotiation.

1.2 The Background and Rationale of the Study

Over the past three decades, the position of women in Saudi society has witnessed significant transformation, shifting from a historically private and restricted role to one marked by increased public visibility and social, political, and economic engagement (Eum, 2019). These changes are primarily attributed to comprehensive national, political, economic, and social reforms, which resulted in some key transformative milestones, such as the initiation of studying abroad programs like the 'King Abdullah Scholarship Programme' (KASP)¹ in 2015, the historic lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018, and the reduction of some restrictions associated with the male guardianship system in 2019. Although Saudi women continue to grapple with persistent challenges deeply rooted in the long-established systems of gender segregation and inequality, notably embodied by the guardianship system (Al-Rasheed, 2020), these reforms have indeed granted women certain rights and privileges previously exclusive to men, which enhanced their freedom of movement and consequently led to an expansion of their community abroad².

However, the documentation of Saudi women's experiences of living abroad remains inadequate and limited (Alsweel, 2013). Based on a thorough review of the existing literature regarding Saudis' experiences abroad, I identified several noteworthy gaps. Firstly, a substantial portion of this literature predominantly focuses on educational aspects, with an emphasis on males (Alraddadi, 2015; Barnawi, 2009; Heyn, 2013; Shaw, 2010). Works that do explore Saudi women predominantly centre on female students and neglect Saudi women outside educational contexts (Alshareef, 2017; Song, 2018; Almuarik, 2019; Alfurayh, 2021). Secondly, a significant number of these studies were conducted by non-Saudis (De Costa, 2011; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Sheridan, 2015), which renders them susceptible

¹ The world's largest overseas scholarship programme (Bukhari and Denman, 2013)

² The Saudi female community abroad (Saudi diaspora) started earlier than that, under more political ground (Al-Rasheed, 2020).

to biased sampling and literature manipulation, where specific types of Saudi women or selective portrayals of Saudi Arabia are highlighted to support the researcher's agenda (Mustafa, 2019, p. 138). Thirdly, these studies largely overlook identity as an independent subject of investigation (Alandejani, 2013; Altamimi, 2014; Alamrani, 2014; Alrefaie, 2015; Ahmed, 2016; Alamri, 2017).

Thus, this study responds to the shortage of academic representation of Saudi women as a growing diaspora in Western countries, in general, and in England, in particular. This research is an important contribution to understanding the experiences of Saudi women living abroad outside of educational settings. It focuses on their identities and interactions with the social and religious differences between Saudi Arabia and the UK. It innovatively approaches Saudi women's identities by using in-depth semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation as data collection methods to explore the effect of changing contexts on these women's self-understanding, beliefs and values. Social and tribal norms, gender, and religion are key themes in this research; they are investigated as powerful and influential structural institutions in Saudi society.

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Questions

The research questions were designed to contribute to the relatively scarce literature on Saudi women abroad and their identity development and negotiation dynamics. They include one primary neutral, general, and overarching question and three sub-questions, all starting with words like *what* or *how* to express an open and emerging question design (Creswell, 2007):

- How does the change in social and religious contexts affect Saudi women's identities abroad?

This question is divided into sub-questions:

1. *How do Saudi women define and perform their identities?*

Understanding these women's different representations and performances of identity helps identify their salient ones, which helps

understand their behaviour and why they react to situations in different ways. Answering this question builds diverse profiles of Arab Muslim women abroad, which can be used in similar studies.

2. ***How did Saudi women's identities develop during their stay abroad?*** This question is important to understand these women's sites of struggles and confusion, wins and accomplishments, and experiences of reclaiming agency and redefining themselves. It also sheds light on the concept of home and its interaction with identity. Answering this question is a reference for academic and non-academics on how Arab Muslim women navigate their lives abroad.
3. ***How do Saudi women position and negotiate their social and religious beliefs abroad?*** This question helps to understand how living in a different social and religious context affects identity negotiation, presentation, and performance. Answering this question sheds light on the unique cases of Saudi women abroad, provides a framework for cultural exchange and integration, highlights the agency and resilience Arab Muslim women might demonstrate in shaping their own lives, and helps in implementing policies and initiatives to support their rights and addressing the specific challenges they face. It also contributes to academic research in gender studies, migration studies, sociology, and anthropology. It also appends to the existing literature and generates a more comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality of social norms, religion, gender, and identity.

1.4 Research Objective and Significance

This study has two primary aims: first, to investigate how Saudi women's self-understandings and identities are influenced by changes in social and religious contexts during their time abroad, taking into account the challenges, barriers, and enablers they face. Second, it seeks to provide an alternative portrayal of Saudi women abroad, distinct from the prevailing Western emancipatory perspective, with the intention of creating an academic

reference and framework applicable to the study of other Arab Muslim women communities living overseas.

The significance of this research circulates beyond the academic audience to include Arab Muslim women, specifically Saudi women, religion, and society. This research offers in-depth insight into how Saudi women negotiate and experience their identities in the UK, which responds to the scarcity of scholarly works on Saudi women abroad in a non-educational context and contributes to the academic and theoretical knowledge on Arab Muslim women's identities abroad. Furthermore, this research is significant as it contributes to the ongoing activism challenging gender norms in Arab Muslim countries. According to the findings discussed in the analysis chapters, stereotypical and traditional gender norms affect Saudi women abroad to a great extent, which affects some of these women's sense of fitting in and belonging to the host society.

The significance of this research also lies in its contribution to creating a more layered and nuanced understanding of the intersection of gender, religion, social norms, traditions, and Saudi women's identities by piecing together the voices and narratives of Saudi women experiencing international mobility. Additionally, this research is important because it improves and promotes social, cultural, and religious awareness about Saudi women; it debunks generalisations and narratives portraying Saudi women as passive, second-class citizens in constant need of emancipation. It uses Saudi women's voices to build social accounts which foster and promote understanding of differences, clarity, acceptance, heterogeneity, and inclusivity.

In addition to its academic contribution, this research is significant because it helps empower Arab Muslim women, specifically Saudis. Examining how Saudi women shape their identities and sense of self, roles, aspirations, experiences, failures and successes and exploring how complex the role these processes play in the larger narrative of their self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-empowerment can be used in further studies on similar populations.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This doctoral thesis studies Saudi women's identities abroad by examining four themes. The first one is "identity", which covers different layers and categories (self and social, gender, ethnic, and national identities) and processes (presentation, negotiation, development) of identification. The second theme examines religion as a social and political institution, which is often not separated from but integrated with Saudi women's self-understanding. The third theme is the Saudi social norms and traditions, which examines the effect of society on identity and how Saudi women negotiate and challenge these effects. Finally, the fourth theme analyses the change often witnessed in an international mobility experience. Based on these four themes, this thesis is structured as follows:

1. **Chapter One** is the introductory chapter; it establishes the researcher's perspective while highlighting the reasons for choosing the topic, its background, and its rationale. It identifies the gap in the literature and, thus, the contribution of this research and sets out the thesis structures.
2. **Chapter Two** sets the scene in the context of Saudi Arabia and the social positions of Saudi women. It looks into religion and male guardianship, gender, the social and political reforms to understand the background of this research case study. This chapter also scrutinises Saudi women's status inside and outside Saudi Arabia, especially in the UK. This chapter aims to help the reader understand the closed society of Saudi Arabia and the intersection of religion, social norms, and the state in Saudi Arabia by inferring from existing theories and literature.
3. **Chapter Three** discusses the theoretical and conceptual frameworks informing this study and reviews relevant former studies on the relationship between women's identity, gender, religion, and social norms. This chapter consists of two sections: conceptual and theoretical. The conceptual sections review identity as a key concept in this study, along with its alternatives, such as identification and categorisation, self-understanding, and belonging. The theoretical sections review the main

theories informing this research: intersectionality theory, Islamic feminism, and Identity Negotiation Theory.

4. **Chapter Four** details the methodological approach, which underlays this research project, including research knowledge, design, sampling, and data collection methods. It demonstrates the appropriateness and value of using particular methods to answer the research questions. This chapter also details the data analysis techniques and introduces the research participants.
5. **Chapters Five, Six, Seven, and Eight** comprise the analysis chapters, wherein the findings are reported and discussed. The narratives of twenty-one participants yielded four main themes: 1) dimensions of identity, encompassing gendered, ethnic, and national identities; 2) social and tribal norms and traditions; 3) religion, covering religiosity, spirituality, Islam, the Quran, and the Hijab; and 4) change, highlighting the participants' experiences with concepts such as home, mixed-gendered interaction, language, loneliness, and autonomy.
6. **Chapter Nine** concludes this research. It revisits and answers the research questions, summarises the research findings, underlines the contribution of this research, explains the research limitations and makes recommendations for further studies.

This chapter is a roadmap that enables the readers to navigate the research journey easily and prepares them for the following chapter, which offers an essential contextual foundation about Saudi Arabia and Saudi women. The next chapter sets the scene in the Saudi Arabian context by providing a comprehensive examination of the social and religious milieu of Saudi Arabia, the research participants' country of origin.

2 Chapter Two: Setting the Scene

This chapter offers historical and contemporary insights into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which helps the reader to understand the socio-political and religious landscapes of Saudi society, thereby understanding the prevailing discourses within the narratives of the Saudi women interviewed in this study. This fourfold chapter provides a comprehensive overview of Saudi society, explores religion's role through internal and external lenses, contextualises gender as an influential factor shaping Saudi power dynamics, and reviews Saudi women's social position within Saudi society and diaspora, taking into account the intricate interplay of religion, gender, social norms and traditions, and women. It is important to acknowledge that the representations of Saudi Arabia's historical accounts in this research may not represent absolute truths, given how these accounts are continuously reimagined and retold based on the different traces historians follow.

2.1 Saudi Arabian Society

Oil and religion have dominated the representations of the political and social landscapes of KSA— due to limited access to Saudi society— at least until the 2000s (Al-Rasheed, 2020). With the new reforms introduced by Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of KSA, to open Saudi Arabia up to the world, new areas of interest have captured the attention of scholars. For example, Yamani (2000) explored the different challenges young Saudis face as the new generations in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the different aspirations, needs, and aspects of change of Saudi youth; Le Renard (2014) explored how Saudi women navigate their lives amid patriarchal traditions, modernisation, and political and social representations; and Al-Rasheed's (2013; 2020) examined how gender narratives and the role and positions of women are interwoven with the state's role and religious nationalism. These studies, among others, were the academic foundation upon which the subsequent sections of this chapter were built.

The modern Saudi Arabian society was primarily built by the ruling royal family of Al Saud, who unified tribes with different political systems, cultural norms, and traditions and established KSA in 1932 with Arabic as the official language, Islam as the official religion, and the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* as the official sources of law (Long, 2005). KSA consists of five major provinces: The Central Province (Najd, including the capital city Riyadh), Northern Province (Tabuk and Hail), Southern Province (Asir and Abha), Western Province (Al-Hijaz including Makkah, Al-Madina, and Jeddah), and Eastern Province (Al-Ahsa, Al-Dammam, and Jubail) (see Almuarik. 2019, p. 11). The Western and Eastern provinces are the most ethnically diverse, cosmopolitan, and liberal, as reflected by women's ability to be publicly present and active in these regions.

Saudi society is profoundly family-oriented, whereby the family is the unit of all social structures, whether in small or extended forms. Family is argued to be the source of identity for many Saudis (Al-Sweel, 1993; Long, 2005). This social configuration is often linked to the tribal nature of the society, in which individuals can derive a strong sense of identity from their familial affiliations, leading them to subordinate personal aspirations to the interests of their families, clans, and tribes (Jandt, 2020). This dynamic resonates with the teachings of Islam, which emphasises unity, harmony, and reverence for elders (Almuarik, 2019). Nevertheless, the profound influence of the family in Saudi society often reinforces patriarchal practices, as evidenced by the perpetuation of parental authority, usually justified by religion and strengthened through social conventions—any deviation from these established norms is met with negative consequences, such as social exclusion (Jandt, 2020).

Saudi social norms, traditions, and culture—heavily derived from pre-Islamic and Islamic eras—have many markers, including, but not limited to, the Arabic language, decent Islamic clothing, and the regime of “shame”, gender segregation, and gender roles. The Arabic language holds a fundamental position in KSA, primarily because it is known to be the language of the *Qur'an*

(Long, 2005). Although young people, especially those residing abroad with limited exposure to standard and colloquial Arabic language varieties, are more open to learning new languages than older generations, Arabic still holds a significantly higher status than any other language, mainly English (Almuarik, 2019). Indeed, with the new social and educational reforms, in which the English language is more of a portal towards globalisation that everyone ought to learn, it is still socially and even religiously “stigmatised.” In their work, Elyas and Picard (2010) argue that because, for so many years, Islamic ideologies have been reinforced, causing more detachment from any other possible foreign teaching, including the English language, many efforts were made to detach the English from its native Western cultures, for there was the fear that “more English” would lead to “less Islam” (Elyas and Picard 2010, p. 141 cited in Alfurayh, 2021, p. 105).

The traditional clothing for women in KSA is the *Abaya*, a loose-fitting, full-length robe, usually black, that covers the body (Le Renard, 2014). For most, it is worn with the hijab, which covers the hair only, or the veil, which covers the head and face, respectively (Fayyaz and Ambreen, 2023). For others, an Abaya is worn without a head cover. More or less, the main purpose of the Abaya, hijab, and veil is modesty and purity, for women are supposed to be the symbol of their own families’ honour (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Almuarik, 2019). Furthermore, women’s modest clothing serves as protection from non-relative men, although such a purpose is being challenged by the different attempts to render women’s clothing more fashionable and contemporary (Alamri, 2023). In a society driven by a regime of shame like Saudi society, how women dress should mirror the level of authority the men of their families have: the more decent and modest a woman’s clothing is, the more respected, pious, and devoted the male figures in her household are thought to be, and the improper or revealing her clothing is, the more compromised the image of the men in her family is (Christianson et al., 2020).

The regime of shame, which is deeply rooted in the family-oriented nature of Saudi society, dictates that the individual’s conduct impacts the family as a

whole, whether in a matter of pride or shame. Simply put, individuals' behaviour is moderated by whether it would bestow their parents and extended families with success and praise or failure and shame (Alfurayh, 2021, p. 85). In this regard, Al-Saadoon et al. (2020) argue that shame-based culture is common in Arab Muslim societies, in which the honour and social image of the family and society override individual autonomy. Nevertheless, scholars often disagree on whom this regime affects the most. On the one hand, scholars like Doumato (2010), Al-Sharif (2017), Eum (2019), and Al-Rasheed (2013, 2020) assert that the shame-based culture inflicts women mostly. For example, in her work on the women's position in KSA, Al-Rasheed argues that women are indeed the "*boundary makers that visibly and structurally distinguish the pious nation from other ungodly polities*" (2013, p. 16), which emphasises women's longstanding role of symbolising, protecting, and preserving the Saudi pious image.

On the other hand, scholars like Mustafa (2017) and Mustafa and Troudi (2019) argue that men and women, since the reforms, share similar opportunities and, therefore, are bound to similar social, political, and economic obligations, suggesting that inequality between the two genders is no longer a valid argument to use when reviewing women's issues in Saudi Arabia, especially with the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030. Furthermore, Mustafa and Troudi (2019) argue that it is time for women's affairs in KSA to be approached from an empowering perspective rather than the prevailing discourse of oppression, passiveness, and gender discrimination. However, their argument is yet to be confirmed, as evidenced by how cases of women's rights are handled and controlled by the traditional patriarchal code of honour of Saudi society³.

³ The case of a Saudi woman, who was arrested and sentenced to two years in jail after the unusual incident of running on stage and hugging the popular male Iraqi-Saudi performer Majid al-Mohandis in Taif in July 2018 (McKernan, 2018).

In recent years, Saudi society has witnessed a drastic transformation driven by several factors, among which are the key roles played by Saudi youth, particularly those who have pursued their education abroad. According to Yamani (2000), members of this “new generation” are very assertive about their progressive inclination towards autonomy and substantial change, which highlights their critical awareness and their abilities to question some of the social norms and rules (Alfurayh, 2021). The change in Saudi Arabia was also significantly driven by the Saudi Vision 2030, the reforms and strategic initiatives implemented by the state in response to the demands of the new generation and in alignment with the demands of the contemporary global landscape. These reforms seek to reduce the nation’s reliance on oil revenues, foster economic diversification, and elevate women’s visibility and participation in the public sphere by shifting towards a more moderate interpretation of Islam. This interpretation contrasts with the more conservative tenets of the Wahhabi tradition and rejects the previous paradigm of religious nationalism that played a significant role in shaping the contemporary image of Saudi Arabia (Eum, 2019).

2.2 Religion in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was built under a religious agenda of creating an Islamic Utopia centred on the Wahhabi religious tradition (Al-Rasheed, 2020). Therefore, religion is upheld in almost all private and public matters and domains. Noteworthy, Saudi Arabia has no codified constitution (Waheedi, 2021). Instead, it has a legal foundation rooted in the Law of Governance issued by King Fahd in the late 1990s, informed by the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammed and relies on fiqh interpretations⁴. This notable aspect of Saudi Arabia contributes to the prevailing perception of the nation as the most conservative and orthodox Muslim society worldwide. Indeed, most of

⁴The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. Basic Law of Governance | the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. [Online]. [Accessed 16 February 2023]. Available from: <https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance>.

the existing literature argues predominantly that Saudi Arabia is built on Wahhabi Islamic rules, embedding masculine patriarchal governance practices (Schwartz, 2002; Long, 2005; Ayub et al., 2014; Diemen, 2015; Alshareef, 2017; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019; Al-Rasheed, 2020; Iliev et al., 2022).

The role of the Wahhabi tradition in shaping and governing Saudi society's religious and political trajectories is crucial and is understood to be both positive and negative. The negative perception of Wahhabism highlights its intolerance for other interpretations and modernity spurred by the discovery of oil in the 1930s because they threaten the preservation of Saudi Islamic values—conservative, religious, traditional, and family-oriented (Beydoun, 2011; Diemen, 2015; Alsherif, 2017; Alfurayh, 2021). This negative perception has associated the Wahhabi tradition with gender segregation, imposing constraining behavioural codes on women, upholding male dominance, and fostering patriarchal norms for a notable period, arguably until the 2000s, marking the beginning of reforms. Within the Saudi Vision 2030 reforms, Wahhabism is neither completely abandoned nor wholeheartedly endorsed (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019; Al-Rasheed, 2020).

On the other hand, the positive perception of Wahhabism highlights it as a major reform movement in Saudi Arabia, arguing that it was assigned a disparaging reputation by its outsider opponents to isolate its interpretation of Islam from other forms and to vilify its followers because they were not considered followers of Islam but of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself (DeLong-bas, 2004; Curtis, 2010, cited in Mustafa and Troudi, 2019, p. 134). Regardless of the debate over defining Wahhabism, its significance lies in its role as a prominent component of Saudi 'national' belonging. At the early stage of founding the state, Saudi people constructed a collective imagined identity on the grounds of a religious tradition rather than a common sense of loyalty to a cultural, ethnic, or social entity (Hitman, 2018), which is the core definition of Religious Nationalism (Al-Rasheed, 2013; 2020). The latter dominated Saudi Arabia immediately after its creation by focusing on salvation, purification of

faith, and correction of religious practices. Such narratives have been closely intertwined with the state's legitimacy (Nehme, 1994).

Religious nationalism in Saudi Arabia intensified in 1979 due to the extremist insurgents' takeover of Mecca's Grand Mosque in 1979 and the Shia Islamic revolution in Iran that same year (Eum, 2019). As a result, the state solidified its alignment with religion, rooted in Wahhabism, expanding its influence over political, economic, and social spheres. Nevertheless, in recent years, with the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030, a new form of nationalism, referred to as 'Saudi first', has emerged, signifying a departure from the previous religious nationalism paradigm based on Wahhabism (Lall, 2018; Eum, 2019). Despite this, even as Saudi Arabia undergoes this transformation, the manifestations of religious nationalism continue to shape not only the state's identity but also Saudi women's identities and their outer perception.

For instance, on the international stage, religious nationalism still defines the state's foreign policy and its position as the guardian of Islam. This definition has global implications for how the world perceives and engages with Saudi Arabia as a religious state. Among these implications are the widespread stereotypes of Saudi women as submissive and very religious (Al-Rasheed, 2020). On the domestic level, the impact of religious nationalism persists through factors like loyalty to the state and the ruling family, adherence to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, and its reinforcement through educational curricula, media, and religious institutions (Hamdan, 2017). Moreover, it continues to exert control over gender dynamics and women's positions in Saudi society.

Differing perspectives on Wahhabism are relevant to this chapter as they highlight the diverse approaches in examining this religious and ideological framework. Wahhabism has predominantly shaped the interpretation of religion, which is upheld in almost all social, economic, political, and cultural spheres in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, examining both favourable and unfavourable views on Wahhabism helps understand how Saudis and non-Saudis, Muslims and non-Muslims perceive it. These perceptions put forward

the challenges many Saudis face in distinguishing between what is inherently religious and what is influenced by social norms (Long, 2005). Moreover, the intricate confluence between religion and social norms has far-reaching implications, particularly for women. The blurred boundaries between these domains can render women vulnerable to the complexities of understanding and navigating their gender roles and behaviours within the social framework.

2.3 Gender in Saudi Arabia

Gender is firmly rooted and maintained in Saudi society by religious, social, and legal precepts, shaping women's social expectations and roles. Segregation is the defining feature of gender in Saudi Arabia, upheld across various domains, such as education, employment, political participation, social roles, family law, religious interpretation, mobility, and media representation (Al-bakr et al., 2017). Although, historically, Arab Muslim women had never been denied participation in these aspects of political, social or economic life, gender segregation has become a comparatively widespread practice in Muslim countries (Hamdan, 2017). Nevertheless, it is more pronounced in Saudi Arabia compared to other countries, as the separation of the sexes is strictly applied in all public spaces, including schools, universities, shops, restaurants, and other contexts where male and female interaction would be deemed inappropriate (Yamani, 2000; Meijer, 2010, Al-Rasheed, 2020, Winkel & Strachan, 2020). Gender segregation has its roots in the Wahhabi religious conservative interpretations and has been reinforced by social norms and legal policies for decades to restrict women's rights in education, employment, and other parts of their public lives.

As many researchers have pointed out, gender segregation is not a traditional custom in KSA but rather a practice that has been actively promoted since the 1980s by the state, the revivalists of the Islamic awakening movement, the conservative clergy, and the religious police (Meijer, 2010; Van Geel, 2016; Eum, 2019; Topal, 2019, Al-Rashedd, 2020). *Ikhtilat*, the Arabic word for mixed-gendered social interactions, as opposed to gender segregation,

demarcates the line between the conservatives and the reformists. The formers advocate the Wahhabi conservative interpretations of Islam that strongly emphasise adhering to traditional rigid gender roles and delegitimise the *Ikhtilat* to uphold modesty and protect social values. On the other hand, the *Ikhtilat* promotes reform, progress, modernity, and the development of knowledge that should be enjoyed by both sexes (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 157). Islam interpretations are structurally significant in shaping gender dynamics in Saudi Arabia. Debates and discussions around religious teachings and their implications for women's social roles reveal how previous generations of *Ulama*⁵ had incorporated the tribal and patriarchal aspects of early Saudi society into their religious opinions on important gender issues (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Eum, 2019). In other words, they enforced exclusionary social habits and policies by blurring the line between culture and religion.

There are many debates on the legitimacy of attributing gender segregation to religion. Although the main parties of such debates are conservatives and liberals, it must be noted that the so-called liberals are also divided into different categories, all involved in these dialogues. The formers believe that only the Shari'ah is legitimate to constitute a righteous and pious nation, and any interference from other sources is condemned as 'intellectual terrorism' (Meijer, 2010; Van Geel, 2016). Therefore, they emphasise that gender separation is a necessary religious practice to maintain the Saudi conservative identity. In contrast, liberals, including reformists (Van Geel, 2016), progressives (Hamdan, 2005), Islamic intellectuals and Islamic activists (Al-Rasheed, 2013), maintain that Saudi society faces a profound problem of religious monopoly and misuse in determining the permissible and the prohibited. Nevertheless, the liberals, who remained within the fold of religious traditions, i.e., Islamic activists, maintain that gender segregation is not the

⁵ The Arabic term for Islamic scholars and religious authorities with substantial knowledge of Islamic theology, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), religious texts (the Quran and Hadith). They are responsible for interpreting Islamic law (Sharia), issuing religious rulings (*fatwas*), and guiding the Ummah (the Muslim community) on matters of faith and practice (Hamdan, 2005).

result of religion but rather a byproduct of intersecting tribal and patriarchal social and cultural dimensions and that individuals must not conflate between what religion deems as *haram* (Arabic for forbidden) and what society condemns *ayb* (Arabic for shame). Although the end of such a debate is far to be seen, it is still a positive move in drawing the line between religion and social norms.

While social norms and religion primarily drive gender segregation, it is also enforced by laws and social policies. For instance, the guardianship system, weakening since 2019, is one of the prominent practices reinforcing gender segregation, thus promoting gender inequality. The male guardianship system, or the system of 'Wilaya', is a globally known practice featuring women's positions in Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2020). Although not legally codified, it is profoundly enacted through formal and informal social, medical, educational, and bureaucratic arrangements, granting women's male relatives (father, husband, brother, or son) the complete authority to decide on matters dictating women's daily lives. Although the male guardianship system is globally perceived, based on the international norms of gender discrimination, as disadvantaging women against their counterparts men (Tonnessen, 2016), it has more religious, political, and social multilayered significance than it can be globally addressed. To understand how male guardianship factors in defining Saudi women's status, we must examine how it operates as an agent of the state, enabling patriarchy to move between the families to the public domains (Al-Rasheed, 2020).

Recently, the influence of the Wilaya system has diminished significantly due to the continuous challenges arising from its inconsistency with the gender reforms implemented by the state (Aloufi, 2017). Alhajri and Pierce (2022) highlight many of the milestones Saudi women are experiencing, including the 2017 royal order granting women access to government services without the need for a male guardian, the 2018 decision allowing women to drive, and the 2019 royal order enabling passport issuance and foreign travel without guardian consent. Such victories undeniably reflect the substantial strides in

diminishing the influence of male guardianship over women's rights. Nevertheless, beneath the surface of such advancements, Saudi women still face challenges and obstacles deeply established in the long-lasting structures of gender segregation and inequality perpetuated through the guardianship system. To fully understand the dynamics at play, it is imperative to examine the different sites where gender segregation operates and is solidified.

Education is a powerful site of gender separation, for gender has always served as a line dividing the entire Saudi educational system. According to Yamani (2000), while formal teaching is segregated in terms of locations, it is also segregated in terms of content. While boys receive more scientific and inclusive teaching, preparing them for higher education opportunities and, therefore, more prominent work positions, girls, whose schools were opened much later than boys, receive 'feminine' teaching, preparing them for their roles of wives and mothers (Alsuwaida, 2016). The main purpose for maintaining such strict gender boundaries in education was to uphold the Saudi conservative values that sharply contrast with the new values brought by modernisation. Gender affects women's education through educational policies by dictating their subject choices. In this regard, Lorz et al. (2011) argue that women and men choose their education majors based on the social expectations of both genders. In other words, the educational system in Saudi Arabia directs women and men to learn certain subjects, perform certain activities, and work in certain professions to maintain the social order and patterns compatible with the Saudi social expectations of the characteristics of men and women.

Undoubtedly, resulting from the reforms implemented since the 2000s, women in contemporary Saudi Arabia have access to more educational opportunities, with universities and educational institutions admitting both genders (Hamdan, 2017). Despite such a transformative shift, fields of study and occupations still display gender disparities, resulting in the overrepresentation of women in the humanities and their underrepresentation

in the scientific fields, such as architecture and engineering (Alwedini, 2016). Furthermore, gender dynamics also influence women's economic empowerment. Gender segregation extends to the workplace, where women and men are assigned separate facilities and spaces. In both educational and professional spheres, women confront unjustified restrictions compared to their male counterparts. Such a gendered inequity began after the oil boom in 1938, when the structural significance and position of gender, mainly within labour, became significantly more pronounced (Al-Khateeb, 1987). The forthcoming section delves more into the multilayered situation of women in Saudi Arabia amid the interplay of social factors, historical context, and ongoing reforms.

2.4 Saudi Women

Exploring the portrayal of Saudi women over time is vital for tracing the various social changes that might reflect on their identities today. The prevailing portrayal of Saudi women often falls into a clichéd representation that must be scrutinised and reflected upon effectively and critically to avoid perpetuating a persistent misrepresentation of their identity. However, the lack of 'accurate' information on Saudi women has always been an academic impediment when researching them. For example, Al-Rasheed (2013, p. 33) emphasises that researchers face a persistent problem of limited historical knowledge about and current research on Saudi women as most academic works focus on the country itself. Within the same line of thought, Al-Sudairy (2017, p. 6) contends, "*Even when articles or studies are published, they tend to be written by people who lived abroad all their lives [...] or by Westerners who are unaware of the culture and customs known to Saudis*". Such an argument puts into question the credibility and accuracy of many works.

For instance, Qutub (2013) gives the example of a YouTube video of a Western journalist filming in a well-known walking area in Jeddah near the beach, in which the journalist reported that no women were walking in the street and, therefore, assumed that Saudi women are not allowed to walk in

the streets. Qutub (2013) refutes the analysis on the grounds that neither men nor women would walk on the streets in the daytime because the temperatures would be immensely hot. Qutub's example supports Mustafa and Troudi's (2019) argument that many academic works on Saudi Arabia and Saudi women disseminate the clichéd image of an oppressive regime and oppressed women. It is important to note that this research acknowledges the limitation of exclusively focusing on this enduring image, as doing so may overlook the existence of alternative realities.

Saudi women are subject to dual depictions within scholarly works. The first depiction acknowledges the progressive trajectory of Saudi women's status across history, gaining a more equitable, rightful, and measured social position (Qutub, 2013; Alhussein, 2014; Al-bakr et al., 2017; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). Conversely, the second depiction obscures these advancements, concentrating solely on unfavourable dimensions, particularly narratives of oppression, limited agency, dependence, voicelessness, victimisation, submissiveness, the desperate need to be saved, and other derogatory attributes (Sakr, 2008; Nicolas, 2010; Al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015). For various reasons, this narrative of oppression dominates the academic debate, inevitably shaping global perceptions and stereotypes surrounding Saudi women. The first pivotal factor to this domination is the pre-eminence of religion, notably the Wahhabi tradition, which fostered an essentialist model predominantly condemning women, inherently by their gender, to the roles of wives and mothers (Al-Farsy, 1982; 2023; Bucholtz, 2003; Miller-Rosser et al., 2006).

Another factor is the patriarchal regime of Saudi society, upheld by social customs, norms, and tribal traditions and reinforced by familial structures (Yamani, 2000; Doumato, 2001; 2010; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). Moreover, the predominantly Western Media's portrayal of Saudi women has played a powerful role in shaping people's ideas and perceptions of Saudi women. Nicolas (2010, p. 7) maintains that for decades, Western media portrayed Arab Muslim women in general and Saudis in particular as "*veiled*,

conservative and dominated by men, or as sex objects, doing pornographic oriental dances to entertain men". Similarly, Qutub (2013) affirms that, unlike the West's image of Arab Muslim women, including Saudis, as marginalised and oppressed, these women can be the exact opposite.

2.4.1 Inside the Kingdom

In most societies, including Saudi, a set of normative social conceptions determine which roles are more suitable to be performed by each gender. Such an argument is reflected in Rosaldo's (1974) essay *Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview*. The latter claims that gendering public and private social domains helps explain women's subordination. In this context, private referred to domestic spaces and functions, whereas public referred to contexts where men spoke and made decisions for their communities (Rosaldo 1974). Accordingly, women are assigned private roles, whereas men are assigned public roles. Before discovering oil in 1938, secluding and veiling women were mostly observed in the urban areas rather than amongst rural and Bedouin populations (Maisel, 2009).

Many factors determined how much women should be secluded and veiled during that period, including the degree of wealth and the position held by the seniors of their families (Al-Khateeb, 1987). In wealthy Saudi families, women had to be secluded, and their movements had to be restricted. In contrast, low-income families needed women to work outside their households to sustain their families due to the severe economic conditions at the time. In addition to the wealth and position of their male relatives, the region had influenced the setting of women's roles. In Bedouin areas, married and unmarried women were allowed to work, but only married women were permitted to work outside their houses in rural areas (Al-Khateeb, 1987). Women from wealthy families did not participate in external labour, in contrast to women from more deprived backgrounds. Alqahtani (2012) adds that before the oil era, it was 'normatively' accepted for poor women to work as servants for wealthy families.

Nevertheless, with the rise of living standards after the oil boom, it has been considered disgraceful for Saudi women to perform domestic tasks for others. Additionally, the prominent position held by men affected the seclusion of their women; being politically in charge in their communities meant more seclusion and covering for their women. Al-Khateeb (1987) gives the example of the Sheikh's wives, subjected to more seclusion and restriction in their movements than others. Bedouin and rural women enjoyed more freedom in dressing and circulating than their counterparts in the urban areas. Not only did Bedouin women participate in public activities, which were mostly agricultural, but they also participated in leisure activities. Saudi women's participation in labour was not as important and controversial as in contemporary times, for in the pre-oil era, their "unpaid" labour was not thought of as having any destructive impact on their reproductive roles in the family (Al-Khateeb, 1987). The latter argues that while Saudi women in the pre-oil era were identified inside and outside their households, outside labour was an unpaid extension of their domestic roles.

To sum up the pre-oil era in Saudi Arabia, men and women were brought up to believe that each had particular roles to perform; such roles did not overlap, for it was against the norms of the society. Women performed more subordinate roles and were second-class members of society because of how intertwined the political, educational, and economic fields were with religion. Therefore, women in Saudi society had the weakest social position despite their roles in both private and public domains. They were withheld from many privileges granted to men inherently because of their gender, a reality that started to be questioned after the oil boom.

In the post-oil era, Saudi women's status has undergone a fundamental socio-economic transformation, challenging the social norms in Saudi Arabia. However, such a transformation was significantly slow. Saudi Arabia's early encounters with modernity were after the oil boom in 1938 with the arrival of foreign engineers, employers, and their families to work in the established oil companies in Saudi cities, namely ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil

Company) (Rajkhan, 2014). While their presence reinforced the cultural contact between Saudi Arabia and the rest of the world, mainly America and Europe, it also highlighted their differences. For instance, unlike Saudi women who were not allowed to drive, shop in female-only malls without their veils, or move around without a male guardian, their American counterparts were granted the right to do all the precedents. Such a contrast pushed Saudi women to question and negotiate their gender position in society by demanding some of the rights American women living with them had. However, their attempts were soon suspended for several reasons (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

Secluding women from public spheres and imposing their veiling gained further momentum during the post-oil era due to religious, economic, and social factors. To mention a few, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, resulting in the establishment of an Islamic Republic, significantly influenced Saudi Arabia's religious landscape. The Iranian revolutionaries' profound adherence to conservative interpretations of Islam resonated with segments of Saudi society. Therefore, the authorities reinforced conservative religious practices to avoid any threat of revolutionary ideologies infiltrating Saudi Arabia (Sulaib, 2020). Moreover, the militants' Siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 highlighted the need for stricter adherence to conservative religious and social norms and guidelines in response to the perceived unrest and dissatisfaction with the existing order. Furthermore, the 1990 Gulf War and *Sahwa* movement also contributed to the strengthening of the conservative social landscape of Saudi Arabia. The revivalist movement condemned Al-Saud for their alliance with the decadent West during the Gulf War, mainly the United States against Iraq (Eum, 2019, p. 121).

The growth of oil revenues during the post-oil era brought about substantial economic changes in Saudi Arabia. Along with prosperity, the oil boom also created new challenges for Saudi Arabia, such as rapid urbanisation, growing exposure to Western lifestyles, and the influx of foreign workers. In response to these pivotal events, the Saudi state implemented reforms to strengthen its

grip on power. Central to these reforms was the reinforcement of religion and its authority over decisions and legislative processes within the Kingdom. Considering Saudi Arabia has no codified law, the clergy became more influential with their authority to issue royal decrees, which were heavily influenced by prevailing social norms, customs, and conventions, often bearing disadvantageous consequences for women's legal rights and economic status (Alhussein, 2014). In other words, the Saudi government asserted more control over religious narratives and societal norms by emphasising the segregation of women from public spaces and imposing the wearing of veils to uphold religious and national orthodoxy and to maintain the Saudi traditional identity in the face of economic transformation and growing internal challenges (Afzal, 2015; Gambrell, 2016).

Women's education was delivered informally before the 1960s; henceforth, formal public schooling was introduced (Hamdan, 2005, 2017). Both boys and girls received Islamic learning to know how to worship God and follow the rules of Islam from the Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah. Their knowledge was mostly based on memorisation rather than reading (Doumato, 2001). Notably, girls' education took place in private classes, unlike boys, who received their learning in Mosques. Puberty was the sign that women had to be veiled from men and, therefore, to stop their education (Hamdan, 2005). Many conservative males had the strong conviction that female education meant the breakdown of the morality and values of Saudi society, even though investing in women's education generated more achievement for the state. At the same time, most of the girls' education was about preparing them to be perfect wives and perfect mothers, which implicitly ingrained the theoretically performed roles ascribed to women into their self-perception. In this regard, Doumato (2002, p.93) argues, "*...girls were taught enough to buy into an assigned role, a role in which they were subordinate to men, but not enough to challenge it.*"

Despite the opposition of many conservative clergies and the Saudis, the first school of girls opened its doors under the reign of King Faisal in 1960. However, to absorb the opposition, girls' education was put under the

regulation of the religious authorities, whereas boys' education remained under the authority of the Ministry of Education (El Manaa, 1982). Not all girls have finished their schooling; most of that time left at the primary stage because 'society' decided that they had received enough education compared to male students who were encouraged to pursue higher degrees. Al-Khateeb (1987) mentions that one of the reasons for such a decision to girl schooling was the general preference to marry none or less educated girls. Moreover, Saudi women earned the right to benefit from government scholarships to study abroad in the 1970s. They were later restricted due to the increasing emphasis on Islamic values, ending women's access to scholarships or limiting it to a male guardian accompaniment in the early 1980s (Ramazani, 1985). Unlike males who were still receiving opportunities to carry on their studies outside the Kingdom, in 1978, women were no longer entitled to benefit from governmental scholarships even with the availability of male guardians. According to Al-Khateeb (1987), in 1986, compared to 815 males granted scholarships through the Saudi Educational Office in Britain, only 21 females did, as they secured theirs before the restriction law.

After the 1980s, women lost the semi-equal position they used to have; their seclusion limited their involvement in politics, economics, and even social participation (Aloufi, 2017). Two elements emerge as points of contention when analysing this period. Firstly, despite how the trajectory towards modernisation influenced the interpretation and implementation of religion, rather than undergoing improvements, women-related matters deteriorated further as they were kept under the strict interpretation of the Wahhabi tradition. Secondly, given how intricate the interplay between modernity and religion was and in the absence of improvements to their matters, women's identities and social engagements remained markers of the Saudi nation. These two points underscore how women have always been the centre of all transformations in Saudi Arabia, in the past and the present. They are assets needed as subordinates rather than partners to build the new society (Eum, 2019). Nevertheless, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, issues of Saudi

women's reforms began to emerge, considering how the 9/11 attacks were a turning point for all Muslim countries.

To reduce religious extremism and in attempts to enhance their global image, women were, again, used as a 'filtering card'. Women's education and schooling were among the first introduced reforms under the premise that educated mothers raise educated, thus moderate, children (Meijer, 2010; Al Alhareth, 2015). Although women remained under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002 (Rajkhan, 2014), their re-gained schooling privileges have allowed them to use the 'legitimate language', i.e., the language of the deep understanding of Islamic ideologies, which helps to better understand and defend their rights in the name of Islam, which was the seed of Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia (Rajkhan, 2014, p.9). By 2015, the Ministry of Education reported that 51.8 per cent of Saudi students were female, indicating that the percentage of literacy among women was 91.84 per cent compared to 96.95 per cent among men.

Academic representation and access to educational opportunities still face challenges and limitations. The growing number of educated women calls for creating female spaces within different industrial and economic domains. Although such a challenge is addressed in the Saudi Vision 2030, implemented under the reign of King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud, it still challenges the conservative beliefs and norms of Saudi society (Frowerck, 2017). Furthermore, Saudi reforms were not limited only to women's education. During the reign of King Abdullah (2005-2015), the first female deputy minister of education was appointed, the first mixed-gender university was opened, women were no longer forced into marriage, were granted the right to vote in 2015, the right to drive in 2018, and were exempt from the confines of male guardianship in 2021 (Alotaibi et al., 2021). Nevertheless, scholars like Al-Rasheed (2013, 2020), Liou and Musgave (2016), Ghattas (2018), Turker and Lowi (2018), and Eum (2019), argue that the contours of these reforms, especially those implemented under the reign of Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz, still aim to control women by ensuring that their rights are only

expandable within permitted boundaries set by the government instead of being gained through the bottom-up women activism.

Drawing on existing literature on the intersection of religion, gender, society, and social and political policies, it is evident that Saudi women's rights have increased in light of the implemented reforms. However, a reflective critical consideration of Saudi women's status from a gender perspective reveals that the image Saudi Arabia is promoting about women as economically and politically assertive and active does not reflect genuine progress on gender issues as much as it constructs women as needed assets to economic and political prosperity. Given the discourse above, although it was imperative to explore the different socio-economic, religious, and political facets of Saudi society and their implications on the different implemented reforms and restrictions and women's status, further delving into these facets might recalibrate the research's trajectory. Nevertheless, based on such in-depth exploration, certain themes emerged as foundational to Saudi women's social position inside KSA, irrespective of women's conformity to them. In what follows, I review this demographic from a diasporic perspective.

2.4.2 Saudi Female Diaspora

The present section reviews the existing literature on the Saudi female community abroad. The concept of diaspora refers to a social and political group formed through either willing or involuntary migration, whose members identify with a common ethnic or national background and live as permanent minorities in one or multiple host countries (Sheffer, 2003, p. 9). This definition applies to the Saudi female diaspora because it contains the elements of voluntary and forced migration. According to Al-Rasheed (2020), the female Saudi diaspora began in 2015, marked by the joining of a distinctive group of young, dispersed, and diverse women who left Saudi Arabia to pursue feminist liberation and engage in secular projects. Al-Rasheed (2019; 2020) contends that a significant segment of the Saudi female diaspora comprises *Millennial Runaway Girls*— a group of Saudi women who 'run away' to escape abusive domestic environments, seeking refuge in overseas destinations. These

women employ various ways to remain overseas, including marrying Saudi or non-Saudi individuals residing in foreign countries, prolonging their studies overseas, or actively seeking employment opportunities beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia.

While Al-Rasheed's (2020) account introduces narratives of feminist liberation and escaping different forms of abuse as reasons for Saudi women's migration, other scholarly works include educational and economic pursuits as other motivations for Saudi women to move overseas. Much academic research, mostly carried out by Saudi female recipients of the King Abdullah Scholarship, has intricately associated narratives of studying abroad and acquiring a new language with Saudi women's migration. Alfurayh's (2021) comprehensive study, for instance, revealed that a substantial portion of this demographic is primarily motivated by pursuing higher education. Furthermore, her research underlined how studying abroad fundamentally impacted the participants' religious and national identities. While these identities were preserved during their sojourn in Australia, they were also significantly accentuated and solidified, reflecting how the experience of living in a foreign cultural context led to deeper introspection and reaffirmation of their religious and national affiliations.

Alfurayh's research findings are consistent with Yaghi's (2019) work on Saudi mothers' sojourning in New Zealand. Both academic works underscore the significance of academic pursuits and intellectual growth as driving factors compelling women to leave Saudi Arabia. On a distinct note, Alshareef (2017), in her doctoral thesis on entrepreneurship among Saudi women, provides findings advancing the understanding that economic factors also drive Saudi women to depart their homeland. Rather than being solely confined to domestic or traditional roles, some Saudi women actively seek opportunities abroad to engage in business-related activities. Another example is Song's (2018) comprehensive study on the socialisation processes of Saudi women in mixed-gender interactions during their study abroad in the United States. In her study, she explored how ten Saudi women strived to maintain what they

perceived as the 'ideal image' of Saudi womanhood while studying in the US. In this narrative, qualities such as shyness and fear of judgment were upheld as pivotal components of Saudi women's gender identity, suggesting that the experience of studying abroad triggered a complex negotiation between their Saudi cultural norms and the influences of their host countries.

Besides the work of Al-Rasheed (2019; 2020), there are a few examples of scholarly works exploring non-educational themes in the lives and experiences of Saudi women living abroad. For instance, Mansour (2013) conducted a photographic study that offered a unique lens into single Saudi women living in the UK, shedding light on their everyday experiences and challenges. Her findings revealed how her participants' homes were dynamic spaces infused with memories and negotiations, bridging the gap between their past and current lifestyles. They also highlighted the complexity of the participants' existence as they strive to reconcile their identities as single Saudi women within a diaspora by navigating social norms vastly different from those of their homeland. The context of geographical and social distance allowed these participants to find opportunities to renegotiate their previous social and gender roles (Mansour, 2013). Similarly, Bajandouh (2013) explored the lives of fourteen Saudi Arabian women living in the UK in light of the differences between Arabic Islamic and Western cultures using photography and visual diaries. Her findings yielded the significance of identity, social life, freedom, religion, stereotypes, and home in her participants' lives and experiences abroad.

The mentioned literature on Saudi female diaspora highlights identity development, acculturation, social adaptation, redefined national and religious belonging, and a pervasive longing to return to the homeland as key themes of Saudi women's diasporic experiences. Although the majority examines educational-driven experiences, the scarcity of research on Saudi women's diaspora outside of the educational context mirrors its infancy, underscoring the promising potential for further studies in this area. Furthermore, although the emergence of a Saudi female diaspora is indeed promising and a

testament to the evolving roles and aspirations of Saudi women, their increasing agency amidst the various sites of resistance and challenge and the broader implications of the Saudi female diaspora on a global scale, it also calls for extensive in-depth research to understand other facets of the realities they face. Such an understanding must incorporate the complexities of their experiences, the diverse motivations driving their migration, and the different strategies they use to navigate and negotiate their identities abroad.

2.5 Empowerment and Restriction

Whether within the borders of Saudi Arabia or abroad, Saudi women persistently strive to reassert and maintain their agency amid numerous restrictions, which are institutionally reinforced by state policies and social norms. The following sections review where these women actively exercise and promote their agency and where they still resist, such as education, employment, entrepreneurship, social media and activism, and the veil. Relevant to the previous discussion, education is a significant site of women's agency, evidenced by the increasing number of educational opportunities both within Saudi Arabia and abroad (Hamdan, 2005; 2017). These opportunities have empowered Saudi women to embark on journeys of academic and intellectual growth, expanding their perspectives and equipping them to make informed choices that transcend conventional gender roles and societal expectations. Consequently, Saudi women have harnessed their knowledge and personal growth to scrutinise and challenge the traditional interpretations of religion and the Quran, which have historically served as justifications for sustaining gender-based disparities.

The Quranic teachings are inherently egalitarian and, in most instances, explicitly anti-patriarchal (Barlas, 2019). They emphasise principles of justice, equity, and the inherent worth of everyone, irrespective of their gender. Nevertheless, in the lived reality of Saudi Arabia and many other Muslim countries and societies, such teachings have often been overshadowed by interpretations that perpetuate gender inequality, patriarchy, and misogyny,

which are selectively invoked to serve both personal and political agendas (Wadud, 2000; Lamrabet, 2018; Rahbari and Longman, 2018; Barlas, 2019). Within their educational pursuits, Saudi women inevitably encounter such a paradoxical reality: the Quranic principles of justice and equality and the interpretations that effectively negate these principles. Being able to identify these contradictions underlines how Saudi women's education is indeed a promising arena where women can push for more egalitarian interpretations of the Quran, accentuating how it divinely reveals feminine models as "*sovereign, enlightened educators, scholars, resisters, and passionate figures*" (Lamrabet, 2016, p. 92), and, thus, exercise their agency.

Education is a complex site where women's empowerment and restriction coexist. In KSA, women's profound awareness of the transformative potential of the Quran's teachings is juxtaposed with the persistent challenges of patriarchal interpretations heavily institutionally supported by social and legal policies, such as male guardianship. Girls and women are still represented in the Saudi Arabian family education curriculum as second to boys and men through exclusion, stereotypical representations, and a lack of female role models within the curriculum (Aldegether, 2023). Outside of Saudi Arabia, women still face inequalitarian treatment within education, mainly because of male guardianship. Al-Rasheed (2020) illustrates how this is resisted through the example of Ms Saffa, the Saudi visual artist living in Australia and the best representative of the "I Am My Own Guardian"⁶ campaign and her journey of applying for a scholarship that was denied at first on the ground that her guardian did not accompany her.

Ms Saffa's actions can be seen as a form of resistance to the restrictive male guardianship system. Her pursuit of a scholarship and her brother's

⁶ The "I Am My Own Guardian" campaign is a part of the broader women's rights movement in Saudi Arabia that challenged and ultimately abolished the male guardianship system, which historically required women to have a male relative, typically a father or husband, as their legal guardian (Al-Rasheed, 2021).

involvement in travelling to the embassy to vouch for her demonstrate a challenge to the system's requirements. It is a form of resistance because she and her brother are actively defying the traditional gender-based norm that dictates women must have male guardians to make important decisions or travel. Their actions signal a refusal to accept the restrictions imposed by this system and a determination to assert their agency and independence, which aligns with the objectives of the "I Am My Own Guardian" campaign. Nevertheless, Although Ms Saffa had her brother's support, not all Saudi women who want to pursue their education abroad enjoy such male support, for not all their male relatives are allies.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing significant economic diversification; consequently, women now have more employment opportunities to participate actively in economic activities, gain financial independence, and contribute to the state's workforce. According to Al-Bakr et al. (2017), Topal (2019), Alghamdi (2022), and Jawhar et al. (2022), Saudi women have indeed made huge leaps over the past few years with increased labour force participation rates and private sector employment. Because of the implemented programs to reform the status of women that have won international recognition, the social landscape of Saudi Arabia has witnessed a behavioural shift in which Saudi families are better informed and relatively convinced about the importance of women's contribution to the inclusive prosperity of all (Al-Rasheed, 2020; Alghamdi, 2022). Similarly, Alshareef (2017) contends that the number of Saudi women entrepreneurs has increased by allowing women to drive, diminishing the religious police authority, and prioritising women in constructing a more egalitarian Saudi state and nation. The entrepreneurial endeavours offer Saudi women a platform to actively exercise their agency by establishing and managing their businesses, contributing substantially to the newly promoted image of Saudi Arabia and its economic growth and challenging traditional gender roles.

Akin to education, employment and entrepreneurship are also sites where empowerment and resistance intricately intersect. Notably, Alghamdi's (2022)

findings reveal the multiple challenges Saudi women encounter on their professional journeys. One prominent challenge is the severe pressure they face from their families when pursuing professional paths. Many Saudi women lack family support when prioritising their careers over their traditional roles. The tension between familial expectations and their aspiration accentuates the resistance dynamic. Moreover, Saudi women striving for professional growth struggle with the lack of support mechanisms essential for their advancement, including the unavailability of training opportunities, restricted opportunities to gain diverse experience and skill sets, and the prevailing dominance of masculine forces within networking and mentoring programs (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Al-Bakr et al., 2017). Alghamdi's (2022) research also unveils verbal and physical abuse within the context of professional growth. Such unsettling themes accentuate the hardships Saudi women endure throughout their professional advancement.

Social media and the internet have proved to be enablers in maintaining the Saudi women's diaspora. They regroup them, allow them to organise whichever form of activism they engage in, and connect them with other female Saudi communities within Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2020, p. 20). With this in mind, social media, journalism, and women's rights activism intersect as sites of agency and resistance for Saudi women inside and outside the KSA. According to El Sirgany and Clarke (2018), Eum (2019), Al-Rasheed (2020), Alotaibi and Molderrig (2021), and Alhajri & Pierce (2022), using social media for women's rights activism in Saudi Arabia, such as the hashtags like #Women2Drive and #IamMyOwnGuardian, have gained international attention as forms of online resistance is valuable and effective advocacy. They granted women of various age groups, who cannot leave their homes and meet others, relatively safe opportunities for access and input. However, with such access came lots of limitations. Although Saudi women can engage in public discourse, raise awareness, and connect with like-minded individuals, transcending geographical boundaries through the internet, they are under extreme surveillance not to become a national threat.

Despite the noteworthy success of the “Women2Drive”⁷ and “I am My Own Guardian” advocacy campaigns, since early 2018, Saudi authorities initiated a disconcerting counteract of arresting leading women’s rights activists. The arrests were based on accusations of engaging in ostensibly suspicious contacts with foreign entities and receiving financial support, with the alleged intent of “destabilising the kingdom and breaching its social structure and mar the national consistency” (Sirgany and Clarke, 2018, as cited in Eum, 2019). The detention of these women activists, some of whom have subsequently become *Runaway girls* overseas (Al-Rasheed, 2020), highlights how paradoxical Saudi Vision 2030 is. While the reform initiatives seemingly advance Saudi women’s economic empowerment, they curtail their voices, freedom of speech, and agency. The paradox is even more evident when reviewing the circumstances surrounding the arrested women activists. Rather than taking a passive or “wait and see” stance, these individuals actively advocated for women’s rights within their abilities, only to be accused of serious crimes and branded “traitors” (Ghattas, 2018). Such discord highlights activism and civic participation in Saudi Arabia as sites of resistance through which Saudi women navigate.

The veil, or the hijab, is the last site of resilience and resistance being discussed in this section. The latter has emerged as the standardised form of veiling across Mulsim, coexisting with the various local and global styles (Lazreg, 2009; Ahmed, 2011). It comprises a headscarf wrapped to cover the head, the neck, not the face, and other parts of women’s bodies with other modest pieces of clothing. It is a sign of Muslim women who are devout —or forced to —and agree with veiling as a mandatory religious practice. The veil is complex and multifaceted across all Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia. Women associate different meanings with the hijab. Some women might wear it under the pressure of their families; others adopt it to negotiate

⁷ The “Women2Drive” campaign, also referred to as the “Women to Drive” movement, is a social and political movement started by Manal Al-Sharif in 2011 in Saudi Arabia to pressure the government into granting women the right to drive (Al-Sharif, 2017).

everyday sexism, avoid objectification, negotiate access to public spaces, claim religious and moral authority, and achieve autonomy from parental restrictions (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). The veil should be a woman's only matter. However, it has long been politicised by forced removal or legal imposition. In the Saudi context, its politicisation entails using religious texts to justify control and command of what women must wear, i.e. mandatory hijabs (Tazamal, 2022), rendering it a site of agency and resistance.

Within the Saudi context, the veil is perceived as the emblem of agency for many Saudi women (Quamar, 2016). In contrast to the notion that the hijab represents oppression and submissiveness of women, many Saudi women take pride in it, for it is a visible indicator and performer of their Muslim identities. It symbolises their agency to express their religious devotion and identity, align with their faith, and fulfil their religious duties. According to Alamri (2023), Saudi women assert autonomy over their religious convictions and personal choices by wearing the veil; they utilise it to distinguish themselves within and beyond their communities. However, it can also be argued that because of the politicisation of the veil, Saudi women do not have much choice over whether to wear it or not and how to wear it. According to Quamar (2016), although a substantial number of Saudi women would continue to veil even if given a choice to wear or discard it, many others would prefer not to veil, but it would all depend on their familial circumstances, educational attainment, professional achievements, economic situation and other factors. In other words, while it must be acknowledged and respected that many Saudi women wear the hijab as a deep religious and cultural tradition and divine duty in their lives, it must also be acknowledged that others who do not necessarily ascribe to such a tradition, have no agency over the decision to wear it.

The preceding sections scrutinised some of the most prominent sites where Saudi women negotiate their agency and resistance. They detailed an intricate spectrum of social, economic, and political domains where these women strive to establish a position equal to their male counterparts. Notably, the very

recognition of these sites as dualities—the coexistence of agency and resistance—denotes a significant step towards transformation within Saudi society in favour of women. Nevertheless, to understand more about the power dynamics within the landscape of Saudi women’s experiences and aspirations, other additional sites warrant scholarly examination, such as using the arts to voice their experiences, perspectives, and critiques of the patriarchal social norms. Through various artistic instruments, such as visual arts, literature, and performance, Saudi women navigate complex narratives of identity, gender, and tradition, which serve as a form of individual expression and contribute to broader dialogues on gender roles and societal change. Another site worth examining is Saudi women’s legal challenges, especially domestic violence and abuse. It is worth exploring how their involvement in legal advocacy would enable them to challenge restrictive legal frameworks, overpower gender-sensitive policies, and contribute to the evolving Saudi legal system.

2.6 Why the Saudi women in the UK?

The focus of the current research on Saudi women residing in the UK and their evolving identities within the shifting social and religious contexts is a deliberate choice driven by several key considerations. Firstly, the UK hosts a substantial Saudi expatriate community. As Clark (2023) reports, approximately 21 thousand Saudi Arabian nationals have resided in the United Kingdom since 2020, an increase from the 15 thousand Saudi Arabian nationals residing there in 2008. The highest number of Saudi Arabian nationals residing in the UK was in 2015, with 23 thousand nationals. However, it is worth noting that detailed statistics regarding the specific number of Saudi women within the UK are unavailable. This demographic fact highlights one reason for exploring Saudi women’s experiences within this context. Secondly, the multicultural environment of the UK, marked by the presence of various religious and cultural communities, creates a multifaceted milieu, accentuating the complexity of the landscape in which Saudi women navigate their identities. Saudi women in the UK are a paramount subset of

the broader Saudi female diaspora, and their experiences, inherently shaped by their interactions with such a complex and diverse landscape, make the UK an ideal setting to examine the intricate interplay of identity and context change.

The research on Saudi women in the UK aligns academically with broader works on the international mobility of Saudis. Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in the migration of Saudi students, professionals, and families to the UK for various purposes, including education, employment, and resettlement (Jameel et al., 2022). Such a demographic shift reflects Saudi Arabia's pursuit of diversified educational and economic opportunities, emphasising its commitment to global engagement. Therefore, while the experiences of Saudi women in the UK are inherently relevant to academic inquiries, they also offer valuable insights to policymakers and stakeholders interested in comprehending the dynamics of the Saudi female community living abroad.

2.7 Conclusion

The existing body of literature on Saudi women documents the gradual yet continuous evolution of their social status, starting from the foundation of the Kingdom in 1932, extending beyond the oil boom of 1938, the significant religious movement in the 1970s, and ultimately extending into contemporary times. The shift is intrinsically linked to the multi-level reforms Saudi society has witnessed throughout the past few decades, expanding the presence of women within both the domestic and international spheres and challenging the traditional gender identities that have long prevailed. Within this chapter, Saudi women's representation within the realms of positioning, roles performed, and participation within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and beyond emerges as a pivotal theme balance between two distinct perspectives: one highlighting the persisting challenges and structural gender inequalities and another positioning Saudi women at the forefront of

transformative change, branding them as influential and leading contributors in the public arena.

However, most of the works on Saudi women abroad, ascribing to both perspectives, focus on the field of education, reflecting a significant shortage in research outside this domain. This gap is especially notable when considering the potential academic insights Saudi women living abroad might offer. Such a demographic group constitutes a rich data source, offering valuable perspectives on enhancing the understanding of their sites of agency and resistance within their journeys of international mobility. This chapter provided a comprehensive background for studying Saudi women, highlighting the dynamic shifts in their social positions across historical, political, religious, and economic dimensions. It examined their status within and outside the Kingdom, emphasising their diverse sites of agency, autonomy, and resistance. These foundational insights lay the groundwork for the subsequent analysis of the participants' narratives in the forthcoming chapters. A central point from this chapter is how essential it is to recognise and approach Saudi women as a diverse group, encompassing regional variations, individual worldviews, and the unique factors shaping their public and private lives.

3 Chapter Three: Literature Review

This research explores scientifically how Saudi women negotiate and present their identity in the UK, with a specific emphasis on how changes in socio-religious contexts impact their negotiation and presentation. Therefore, identity, gender, religion, and social norms are key points in this research, which shall be discussed in this chapter. The latter has two interconnected sections: one conceptual and the other theoretical. While the former thoroughly examines the various analytical terminologies employed along with identity, the latter rationally details the different theories used to examine Saudi women's identities while living abroad, namely the Intersectionality theory, which integrates dimensions of gender, social norms, and religion, Islamic feminism, and the Identity Negotiation Theory. Together, these frameworks furnish a robust analytical foundation for this research endeavour.

3.1 Identity

Since its introduction to social sciences in the 1950s, the term "identity" has proven challenging to define due to its inherent focus on the self, coupled with the widely accepted understanding that it is socially constructed and dynamic (Peirce, 1995; Tajfel, 1974; Alfurayh, 2021). In this research, instead of using one essential overarching definition of identity that edges on either essentialist or constructivist borders, I approach identity fundamentally as a set of social meanings and processes, inherently constructed, negotiated, expressed, and comprehended through social interactions, that should be examined from a relational perspective. In other words, for the needs and understandings of this research, identities are explored by looking into their fluid and constantly evolving nature as they are lived out relationally either as constitutive identities, such as race, religion, class, and gender, or oppositional, such as the race and gender binaries (Lawler, 2014, p.11)

Identities have a dynamic, mutable nature and never exist in isolation but co-exist in multiple layers, including gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, age, occupation, and social class, each intertwined with the others and shaped by ever-changing contexts (Block, 2009; Norton, 2013; Lawler, 2014). They are the set of beliefs, assumptions, and meanings associated with the roles an individual embodies that are contextually contingent and responsive to varying social and temporal conditions (Stets & Burke, 2003). They are also the results of individuals' desire to belong either to themselves, to others, or to wider groups of different natures and on different scales, such as families, social clubs, political parties, or societies as a whole.

This presentation of identity aligns with Bauman's (2004; 2013) conceptualisation of identity as a byproduct of belonging, which reflects his theorisation of the modern social world that emphasises fluidity and change. Bauman's (2013) idea of fluidity, which he discussed in his concept of "liquid modernity", stresses that identities are fluid and continuously evolving and that individuals continuously construct, reshape, and negotiate their identities within the complex and ever-changing social landscapes shaped by globalisation and consumerism. Nevertheless, Bauman (2004; 2013) emphasises that identity is in a crisis of safety and security because of its contingency that results from the consumerist nature of the contemporary world wherein people are cut loose from everything that would anchor them.

Bauman's (2004; 2013) argument for identity fluidity challenges traditional structuralist notions of identity commonly made up of binary oppositions such as male/female, rich/poor, and black/white, which assume that identity is fixed within certain categories (Stets & Burke, 2003). However, this argument does not do justice to all versions and realities of people's interactions, ways of living, and identities. Indeed, Bauman's approach to identity overemphasises fluidity, which might oversimplify the complexities of identity formation as flexible and constantly changeable. In this regard, Rattansi (2017) contends that Bauman's (2013) overemphasis on the notion of individualisation in his

book *Liquid Modernity* can potentially lead to social fragmentation with a diminished sense of community and belonging.

Furthermore, Segre (2019) argues that Bauman's approach often overlooks the broader impact of structural and socio-economic factors as forces influencing identity by over-focusing on individual agency. On a similar note, Lawler (2014) provides a counterargument to Bauman's argument that human identities are solely influenced by constant conditioning, ongoing change, and inherent instability. Lawler's viewpoint recognises the agency of individuals in shaping their identities; at the same time, it acknowledges the impact of external forces and social dynamics. However, it prompts a reassessment of the equilibrium between identity stability and adaptability. While Lawler encourages a nuanced examination of the factors contributing to identity coherence or fragmentation, she also emphasises that these factors extend beyond individual agency to account for the role those with privileges, power, and authority play in defining and enforcing classifications, not only for themselves but also for those who do not have such power (Lawler, 2014).

The previous discussion highlights how Bauman's conceptualisation of identity has potential limitations that call for a more balanced and nuanced understanding that considers both individual agency and broader structural influences on identity. Such an understanding finds some foundation in the work of Brubaker and Cooper (2000), who fixate on the relevance of leaning on structuralist stances on identity, i.e., the hard conceptions charged with essentialism that guarantee the analytical quality of the term because they preserve the sense of sameness and group affinity over time and continue to inform important strands of the literature on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism. These conceptions consider identity as something all people and all groups have, or ought to have, or for which they are searching.

Although Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) contentions of identity emphasise the distinction between identity as a category of practice (categories of everyday social experience developed and deployed by ordinary social actors) and

identity as a category of analysis (the experience-distant categories used by social analysts), they fail to capture the nuances of identity formation and representation (Mallett, 2016, p. 167), especially within the context of belonging, where it is (re)constructed and transformed (see Sedmak & Medarić, 2022). Identity formation and representation are central concepts in this research, approached through the perspectives of Goffman (1987) and Butler (1996; 2004). Despite their distinct theoretical backgrounds—Goffman’s work is associated with symbolic interactionism, while Butler’s is aligned with Queer Theory—both scholars view identity as a dynamic and accomplished process rather than a static possession. They highlight the active nature of identity, emphasising the interconnectedness between individuals and society. Additionally, they challenge the dichotomy between ‘being’ and ‘acting,’ asserting that one cannot exist without the other, as every mode of being involves a form of action.

Goffman (1974; 1990) brings into the discussion a set of concepts that prove relevant to this research, such as performance, social order, and frame. The self, according to Goffman, is a social product of the performances an individual puts in social situations. In other words, selves, identities, and social reality are constructed through performances (Lawler, 2014, p. 122). However, these performances are often constrained by the need to present a self that is socially supported and approved by those with power. In other words, selves and identities are social products subject to either an awarded or withheld validation that aligns with societies’ given norms and social guidelines (Brananman, 1997). The performances individuals put in social situations shape their social interactions, which in turn shape their social reality and social order. In other words, social order is a result of people’s interactions in different real-life situations, in which they follow definite rituals and choose how to play according to social norms or the frame (Silva, 2009, p. 317).

The frame, according to Goffman, is the specifics of space and place that define the setting of individuals’ interactions and organise their experience into meaningful frameworks (Goffman, 1974). However, these frames are not at

random or out of personal preference but are based on what is more generally framed within a specific social context (Lawler, 2014, p. 126). Furthermore, Lawler (2014, p. 135) affirms that, while Goffman focuses on how social order functions successfully, Butler is more concerned with the unconscious processes in performativity and challenges the idea of social order. Goffman sees social order as necessary but fragile, needing continuous repair, while Butler (2004) questions and problematises the concept of social order, particularly when felicitous conditions fail. The latter argues that identities, predominantly identities of sexuality and gender, are “*not expressions of some inner nature; rather, they are performed [...] they are done within the matrix of social relations*” (Lawler, 2014, p. 129).

Butler (1996; 2004) emphasises the distinction between ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ in the sense that the former implies a pre-existing subject who engages in actions, while the latter questions the existence of a fixed subject prior to these actions, which suggests that the repetitive performance of certain actions is what constitutes and defines the subject or identity itself. In this way, Butler challenges traditional views that assume identities are inherent and fixed, arguing instead that they are ongoing, performative processes. Despite their distinctive works, both scholars emphasise the persistence of anxieties about authenticity in notions of identity, challenging the idea that identity must inherently come from a ‘deep within’ and highlighting how this ‘deep within’ is shaped by daily performances.

The precedent sections provided a comprehensive exploration of identity, critically engaging with various perspectives to build a nuanced understanding that considers fluidity, agency, relational approach, and structural influences. The incorporation of Bauman’s emphasis on fluidity, Brubaker and Cooper’s structuralist stance, Goffman and Butler’s emphasis on the performative nature of identity and challenging fixed subjectivity help the reader understand the research arguments. Considering the multifaceted nature of identity, its analytical work, and its “*inability to ever be tied down once and for all*” (Lawler,

2014, p. 135), the following sections sharpen the analytical precision of the terms I used alternatively with identity.

3.1.1 Identity Alternatives

People everywhere always have particular ties, narratives, trajectories, histories, and predicaments informing their choices, interactions, self-perceptions, and claims. Encompassing such pervasive particularities under the term identity, however, creates more ambiguity than necessary inside and outside academia. In this regard, Calhoun (2003) argues that conceptualising all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understanding and self-identification under identity saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary. Therefore, it is better to use alternative analytical terms to do the necessary work without the attendant confusion.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) put forward several terms as alternatives to identity, such as identification, categorisation, self-understanding, social locations, commonality, connectedness, and groupness. These terms contribute to the conceptual and theoretical analysis of social reality because they are less burdened with essentialist connotations and multiple meanings than identity (Petrović et al., 2022). In this study, I have used identification, self-understanding, and self-representation, along with the concept of belonging, as less congested alternative terminology, to complete similar theoretical work as the concept of identity. Sharpening the meaning of these alternatives ensures its conveyance and minimises semantic confusion.

Identification and *categorisation* are the processes of locating the self vis-à-vis others, situating it in a narrative, and placing it in a category in an infinite number of different contexts (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Identification accentuates the specification and relevance of the agents in control of the identification process, which takes place at two distinctive levels: relational (kinship, family, or friendship) and categorical (race, ethnicity, language,

nationality, or gender) (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In modern society, the state is one of the most important agents of identification and categorisation; it has legitimate physical and symbolic forces and resources to name, identify, categorise, and state what is what and who is who (Petrović et al., 2022).

In other words, the state is a powerful identifier because it can create and impose categories and classifications through which people can self-identify or be identified by other people or institutions. To put this into perspective, while the Saudi state has the forces and resources to categorise women as a socio-economic leading demographic in the Saudi Vision 2030, it is not the only identifier that matters. The literature on Saudi female social movements stands evident in how movements challenge official identifications and propose alternatives (the #Women2Drive and #IamMyOwnGuardian).

Self-understanding is another alternative to identity that covers the ways in which understandings of self and social location are better understood as key factors in producing individual and collective actions. It can be defined as individuals' sense of who they are and their social location, which dictate the way they act and react (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). In other words, self-understanding sums up an individual's self-concept and self-esteem constructed and developed through and by reflecting on their interactions with their environment (Huitt, 2018). Self-concept refers to the cognitive aspect of the self that each person holds to be true about their existence (Purkey, 1988), whereas self-esteem refers to the affective or emotional aspect of self as associated with how a person feels about or how they value themselves, i.e., their subjective appraisal of their worth (Walker & Caprar, 2019).

Self-understanding, as a term, edges on Bourdieu's *sense pratique*, i.e., the French expression for the cognitive and emotional practical sense of self and social world individuals develop in navigating social situations (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu's *sense pratique* is closely related to the habitus; it involves an intuitive grasp of the rules and norms governing social interactions within a specific field. Self-understanding, then, could be seen as part of this practical

sense, as individuals draw on their internalised habitus to navigate and make sense of their social world.

Self-understanding implies a heterogeneous, versatile, and unbounded sense of who an individual is. According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000), individuals can define themselves either by flexible categories or by the intricate network of relationships and connections they have with different individuals in their social circles. Such flexibility offers more space to navigate more nuanced understandings of how individuals construct their identities based on the contexts and relationships that matter most to them. Therefore, it is important to consider self-understanding and social locations as relational alternatives to identity and emphasise that both are social context-specific rather than universal forms. In other words, self-understanding is subjective, auto-referential, and can be overridden by overwhelmingly coercive external categorisations. Therefore, it is an appropriate alternative to identity in this research, given how change, as a fundamental attribute to self-understanding, is a key variable in understanding the Saudi research participants' identity development during their stay in the UK. Their constantly reconstructed "momentary" self-understandings are fundamental to building a comprehensive profile of their identity negotiation abroad.

Self-representation, according to Hall and Caton (2017), refers to the ways and processes individuals use to control and guide the impression others could make about them by altering their appearances and mannerisms, physically and digitally, which is distinct from identity in how it involves presenting an idealised version of the self in all situations, whereas identity involves employing specific aspects of an individual's identity to highlight their similarities or differences with others. This alternative has been used along with self-identification or self-identity. The latter involves a sequential relationship of personal and social identities, including individuals' subjective knowledge and understanding of themselves, relationships, social roles, and self-evaluation, and it affects their conscious and unconscious behaviour (Oyserman et al., 2012; Mishra et al., 2022). While there is no sharp distinction

between these terms, they are different from self-understandings in terms of implicitness in the sense that when self-understandings are formed, they may exist and inform action without being directly articulated. Self-representation and self-identification, on the other hand, entail at least some degree of explicit articulation.

Belonging is another alternative to identity. A growing body of scholarly works has conceptualised and delineated the distinctions between identity and belonging, particularly within their academic use (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2018; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). For instance, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) posits that identity and belonging are frequently used interchangeably, which can result in empirical confusion and analytical inaccuracies. She further argues that, particularly as opposed to collective identity, belonging captures the intricate, dynamic, and nuanced facets of human interconnections and interactions, acknowledging their situational and procedural nature (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). Conversely, Yuval-Davis (2011, p. 4) define belonging as an emotional attachment or a feeling “at home” that becomes articulated, formally structured, and politicised when it is threatened in some way. It can transcend the emotional level to include shared values, networks, and resources with others, given how the arenas of the social and the political infiltrate all social life, including feelings, values, and orientations (Anthias, 2018). Alternatively, belonging can also be about sharing or commonalities, such as values, culture, language, ethnicity, and nationhood, as much as it can be about sharing a social class, position, or gender through a projected common future.

Both identity and belonging can be treated in terms of claims and struggles, which constitutes the politics of belonging in its clearest sense. While identity enquires about an individual’s self-conception and affiliations, the analytical construct of belonging enables the exploration of questions related to what individuals belong to, given how it also inherently relies on the process of identification (Anthias, 2018, p. 141). The concept of belonging provides a framework for precise questioning of the specific social spaces and

communities in which individuals are acknowledged as members or perceive themselves as such. Additionally, it invites broader inquiries into the intricacies of social inclusion and the various forms of violence and subordination that emerge within the dynamics of defining boundaries. Such a perspective accentuates the significance of the contextual and place-making aspects of belonging, as corroborated by the scholarly work of Anthias (2002; 2008; 2018).

Belonging works better where identity might fail if its constructed boundaries are perceived as essentialist, which makes them difficult to transcend. According to Yuval-Davis (2011) and Anthias (2018), boundary crossing, as much as boundary-breaking, is an attribute found more in the notion of belonging than in identity as it moves beyond its original essentialism, though it is not always upheld due to the constant baseless, interchangeable use of identity and belonging. Moreover, belonging, as a concept, diverges from self-understanding and conceptualisation by focusing on inquiries related to “to what” and “with whom” individuals belong, how and where they are accepted, and to what or to whom they are attached. It does not seek to provide all-inclusive answers as to who one is but rather centres on relational and contextual aspects.

Using the concept of belonging aligns with the context of this research because of its inherent relation to both physical and symbolic spaces, as well as its capacity to denote temporal and spatial contexts. According to Anthias (2018), the diversity of factors influencing people’s positions, such as gender, race, class, locality, and specific situational and contextual considerations, impacts their sense of belonging within different temporal and spatial dimensions. This multifaceted influence often gives rise to struggles around belonging, including questions about who belongs and the criteria used to determine their eligibility to belong. For example, the struggles faced by Saudi women who do not adhere to culturally prescribed behaviours and conform to gendered social norms exemplify the challenges related to belonging and membership.

The precedent sections covered identity alternatives used in this research, i.e., identification and categorisation, self-understanding and social location, and belonging. While I acknowledge that these alternatives do not reify all the analytical work identity, they were used for different reasons. Mainly, they allow for a nuanced exploration of how the research participants perceive themselves in relation to various social categories and how others categorise them. They shift the focus from external categorisation to how individuals internally make sense of their identity, accounting for the cognitive and emotional aspects, such as self-perception, self-concept, and self-awareness, and they ensure a comprehensive analysis of the participants' identifications by considering how their positions within society, influenced by social categories like gender, race, class, and locality, shape their self-understanding.

Furthermore, these alternatives offer flexible space to examine inclusion, acceptance, and the criteria for membership in different contexts, which makes it particularly relevant as this research explores identity in situations where Saudi women's sense of belonging may be influenced by cultural norms, social expectations, and the need to conform to specific criteria for acceptance. Incorporating these alternatives provides a multidimensional perspective on identity, allowing for its examination as a dynamic and multifaceted construct influenced by individual perceptions, social categorisations, social locations, and the sense of belonging rather than a static concept. Such an approach enhances the depth and comprehensiveness of the analysis of identity in a diasporic context, where it intersects with social categories. Accordingly, the next section discusses the theory of intersectionality and its relevance to this research.

3.2 Intersectionality Theory

This research approach to identity explores the intricate relationships between various definitions and conceptualisations that individuals use to understand and present themselves. It emphasises the inclusive use of identity and its

alternatives, encompassing both identity roles and categories, as well as the more personal, subjective sense of self. Importantly, this approach avoids reducing identity and its alternatives to mere social categories like gender, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. Instead, it recognises identity as a complex construct that transcends such categories, acknowledging that individuals often belong to multiple social categories concurrently. While identity is not confined to these categories, they significantly contribute to individuals' self-understanding and presentation in society.

Based on Chapter Two, gender, social norms, and religion are significant social categories for Saudi women. These categories are addressed in this research using intersectionality theory. Due to the scarcity of Saudi women theorists in the field of intersectionality, this research drew on Crenshaw (1990), Collins (2015), Fatani (2020), and Saleh (2020) to base my understanding of the theory. Intersectionality debates predate its terminology, which has its roots in the work of the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990), who used the term to refer to racism, sexism, and social injustices faced by Black women and to address violence against women of colour. Similarly, the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2015) defined the structural oppression Black women experience by applying intersectionality in the form of a domination matrix entailing race and ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, social class, and religion as the main dominations (Basmehchi, 2019). Inferring from these works, Fatani (2020) and Saleh (2020) examined the intersections of Saudi women's identities with gender, visual representations, social class, life roles, and religion to illustrate how they are all linked to their gendered experiences.

While Crenshaw's and Collins' work on intersectionality provides a conceptual and theoretical foundation, the work of Fatani (2020) and Saleh (2020) offers a contextual foundation. The theory of intersectionality posits that powers come and collide, interlock and intersect to control the access to resources for marginalised individuals, mainly women (Crenshaw, 1990, cited in Fatani, 2020). This access control might vary depending on the level of intersections.

In the context of Saudi women, their positions and agency are understood to be based on the intersectionality of social, economic, religious, and political factors, thereby, the inequalities they face in their multidimensional, complex lives (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). Therefore, a better understanding of Saudi women's identities requires examining the intersection of the myriad gender, social, and religious differences that exist among them rather than presuming their homogeneity.

This research defines identity categories (gendered, social, and religious identities) as intersecting processes of identification rather than as additive identities. In other words, these categories are not separate but coexist dynamically. To echo Lawler's logic, one does not possess a gender in addition to a race and then add a class as if they were isolated identifications (Lawler, 2014, p. 11). Identities do not function in such compartmentalised ways and cannot be theorised as isolated components. To contextualise this point, being a Saudi woman does not entail being a woman with the mere addition of race, nationality, or gender. Instead, the very category 'woman' is inherently nationalised, racialised, and gendered, among other identity categories. This approach highlights the complexity of identity and emphasises its holistic and constructed nature as shaped by multifaceted intersections rather than a simple sum of separate elements.

3.2.1 Identity and Gender

Stoller (1964) introduced the 'gender identity' as a distinction between sex and gender, which he defines as the awareness to which sex one belongs as 'I am a male' or 'I am a female'. Following this perspective, being a woman builds upon gender as a person's psychological experience of belonging to one sex. Some feminist scholars have vigorously questioned Stoller's (1964) concepts of sex, gender, and gender identity, arguing they do more confusion and restriction than clarity and freedom to the meaning of womanhood. For instance, Judith Butler, in her *Gender Troubles* (1999), argues that adhering to sex/gender distinction equals adhering to biological determinism, advocating 'anatomy is destiny' and that the biologically described body

prescribes people's values and shapes all their experiences. Butler conforms to French thinkers, such as Simone De Beauvoir (1949) and Monique Wittig (1929), who have not encountered the term gender in French; thus, she assertively defines womanhood as gender and gender is "*simply an effect of an oppressive social power structure*" (Butler, 1999 cited in Moi, 2008, p. 75).

Understanding womanhood depends on the chosen paradigm of thought. For instance, within a strict essentialist framework, women were historically deemed morally inferior to men, as evidenced by Freud's work in 1920. Though problematic and challenging, this perspective can be understood in light of its historical context— a social setting where women were perceived as passive with an irreconcilable envy toward men. The biological determinism of conceptualising women is rooted in a prevailing model of sex, whereby biological factors substantiate social norms that frequently disadvantage women. Nevertheless, such a lens of inquiry reflects rigidity and partiality of judgment, for it overlooks the multifaceted social, cultural, political, and economic roles women effectively undertake within society (Moi, 2008).

Rubin (1975) introduces another meaning to womanhood: women (alongside men) are products of sex/gender systems that cannot be neutral and raw. She calls for a utopian world where gender is abolished, sex is socially configured apart from biological facts, sexualities and sexual roles are eliminated, and societies are genderless but not sexless (Rubin, 1975, p. 204). In Rubin's definition, a woman is an asset with prescribed sexuality and sexed behaviour that is often oppressive, for she is expected to be only feminine, which can have its appropriate meaning when society becomes empty of any sexual stereotypes. However, arguing that biological differences between men and women should, by no means, ground social norms, as Nicholson (1994) advocates in her essay, *Interpreting Gender*, is relatively exaggerated. Rejecting the idea that biology grounds social norms is to refute that sexed bodies produce any gender norms in whatever context.

In her work "*What is a Woman? And Other Essays*" (2008), Moi raises an utterly pertinent question without a universally agreed-upon and definitive

answer in contemporary discourse. While the use of 'what' instead of 'who' when enquiring about the meaning of womanhood can potentially denote objectification, it is crucial to concede that Moi (2008) does not intend such objectification as a central aim of her work. Moi's definition of a woman (2008) entails a person with a female body who must not conform to the different philosophically justified and inherited meanings of sex/gender. Her definition is grounded in the belief that sex/gender differences are neither requisite in cultural and personal activities nor should they be the most important features of a person or a practice. Henceforth, being a woman is having a female body alongside interests, capacities, and ambitions regardless of how 'others' define them.

The feminist lens, primarily of De Beauvoir (1949) and Moi (2008), uses a different yet significantly relevant approach to this research. For a start, they refute the sex/gender distinction in the context of womanhood and appropriate it in others; they have replaced the sex and gender dichotomy with body and subjectivity. De Beauvoir (1999), in her pioneer work *The Second Sex*, argues that the meaning of being a woman— or called a woman— is unsettling and prone to wear different fabrics that are not always inherently essentialist. She contends it has a subjective meaning, which depends on how much a woman sees herself as a free subject rather than a social material object (Joseph, 2008). The vigorously outstanding claim of De Beauvoir that "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" elucidates that being a woman is not a static reality. Instead, it is a dynamic process women go through to make themselves what and who they are because, as women, their actions shape the meaning of their lives.

Furthermore, Simone de Beauvoir (1949), in her exploration of the construction of female identity, posits that a woman's identity is influenced by the social milieu in which it is nurtured. Building on De Beauvoir's framework, Saudi women's identities are intricately interwoven with the gender context of their upbringing. As previously discussed in Chapter Two (Section 2.4), gender significantly intersects with Saudi women's identities in complex and

multifaceted dynamics. Notably, the deeply rooted patriarchal nature of Saudi society plays a pivotal role in defining the status and self-perception of Saudi women. Such a primitive patriarchal ideology, rooted in the inherent biological differences between the sexes, has been passed down through generations, shaping the collective consciousness without critical examination of its origins or its alignment with women's true abilities and potential. Such a complex interplay between identity, gender, and social norms is central to the examination of Saudi women's identities in this thesis.

In the Saudi social landscape, gender roles and expectations intersect with how women construct their identities around narratives of modesty, prioritising domestic roles over professional careers and the preservation of the family's honour (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Furthermore, this intersectionality touches upon Saudi women's experiences of empowerment, restriction, and conformity. Engagement with power dynamics can become a significant part of Saudi women's identities as they navigate social expectations and norms and, at the same time, perform and maintain their agency (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). For instance, while some women might challenge gender norms and seek greater agency and independence in their lives, others would denounce such attempts and remain loyal to those norms. Overall, gender plays a significant role in shaping and defining Saudi women's sense of self and how they are perceived by society because it intersects heavily with social norms, expectations, challenges, and social changes. Understanding these intersections allows for a comprehensive exploration of Saudi women's identities in a nuanced manner inside and outside Saudi Arabia.

3.2.2 Identity and Social Norms

Social norms, or the "secret" agents of influence (Schultz, 2022), are the rules or standards for behaviour that guide people's actions, create expectations about how others will act, and promote greater coordination in social life (Smith, 2020). Schultz (2022, p. 448) describes them as *secret* because individuals often underestimate the degree to which others influence them, and especially the degree to which they bend to social pressure and conform

to a group. Social norms can operate at multiple levels, straying from the personal to the collective. The former refers to people's beliefs about the kinds of behaviour in which they should (or should not) engage— often referred to as personal or moral norms (see Bicchieri, 2006). The latter, on the other hand, refers to societies' beliefs about behaviours that are prescribed or proscribed (Neville et al., 2021).

Despite how people often minimise their susceptibility to social pressure, social norms can exert a powerful influence on people's behaviour. However, this influence is bounded by a number of important moderator variables that increase or decrease the strength of an effect. Among these variables is the salience of the norm at hand, i.e., the extent to which a (specific) social norm is (made) salient determines the degree to which it is activated. Another moderator is the group size; the larger groups tend to exert a stronger influence on individuals (Keizer & Schultz, 2018). The characteristics of the group itself can also moderate the normative social influence. These characteristics, which stand on the social identity framework, suggest that social influence results largely from categorising oneself as a member of a specific group and then adopting the attitudes and behaviours other members of the group share (Hogg 2003).

Social norms can emerge from social interaction among group members, given how they are exposed to the opinions, actions, and mindsets of one another. Sherif's (1936) study in social psychology demonstrated that groups spontaneously generate their norms and frames of reference when making judgements about ambiguous stimuli. Once established, this norm becomes adopted by individuals as their frame of reference, maintained even when the person is no longer in the physical presence of other group members. Subsequently, groups can then use these prior frames to make sense of new events (Moscovici, 1985). For instance, when the driving ban was lifted in Saudi Arabia in 2018 (Eum, 2019), there was a lot of uncertainty, fear, and scepticism regarding whether it was socially "right" to drive; women and their

families referred to others within their social groups for guidance, which unfortunately for women, was against them driving.

Conforming to social norms is often associated with social acceptance or rewards. Violating them, on the other hand, entails disapproval and social sanctions. However, it is essential to distinguish between injunctive social norms, which tell us which behaviour is commonly approved or disapproved, and descriptive social norms, which inform us about which behaviour is common and shown by most group members and to what extent it is (Keizer & Schultz, 2018). Individuals ascribe and abide by injunctive norms to gain social approval or to avoid social sanctions, which is termed *normative social influence* (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955), i.e., the need to be *liked*. On a different note, conforming to descriptive norms is differently driven; people tend to conform to descriptive out of their desire to be correct, i.e., the need to be *right*. In many instances, following the group will lead to a correct outcome (Keizer & Schultz, 2018). As an example, where clear laws are absent, some women may choose not to drive either because observing that other women refrain from driving influences their decision as it aligns with their desire to maintain their sense of piety (informational influence) or because they wish to avoid drawing negative attention by driving (normative influence).

A dominant approach for understanding the power dynamics of social norms and their intersection with identity is the social identity approach (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987). Tajfel (2010) defines social identity as self-conceptualising based on people acknowledging their affiliations to social groups and the relevance of such affiliations to their overall sense of self. In their Self-Categorisation theory, Tajfel and Turner (1979) focus on how individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups and how these group identities influence behaviour and intergroup relations. The theory proposes that individuals cluster themselves and others into social groups based on similarities and shared characteristics, leading them to adopt the identity of those groups— norms,

values, and behaviours— influencing their actions and attitudes while increasing their sense of belongingness.

The theory also posits the existence of an ingroup bias among individuals, wherein they exhibit a preference for their social group and engage in behaviours consistent with their group's identity, often at the expense of other groups. This theory emphasises the role of social context and situational factors in influencing self-categorisation and subsequent group behaviour. When individuals perceive their group identity and similarities with fellow group members as salient, they are more inclined to conform to the norms and values of that specific group. Such conformity underscores the critical significance of social identity and group dynamics in shaping an individual's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. To illustrate, an individual may manifest distinct behaviours and self-conceptions in various social settings, such as a student at a university, an employee at the workplace, and a family member at home. These identifications indicate multiple social identities, a notion well-established in the work of Neville et al. (2021).

Multiple social identities can include affiliations with family groups, neighbourhoods, workplaces, or nations; each has its distinct set of social norms, highlighting the inherent link between norms and social identities. Consequently, as an individual's social affiliations shift, their social relations and definitions of who and what constitutes the collective "we" also change. This fluidity in social identity and its associated norms leads to variations in what behaviours and beliefs are sanctioned within different contexts. Thus, the interplay between an individual's various social identities, social relations, and the corresponding normative frameworks is pivotal in understanding how people navigate and adapt within diverse social environments.

In the Saudi context, social norms intersect with identity at different levels, mainly gender, religious and cultural norms, marriage and family, employment and travel. Gender-wise, Saudi society has traditionally upheld conservative gender roles and expectations, ascribing women to domestic roles that have historically limited their opportunities for education and employment, thereby

framing their identity as homemakers and caregivers (Al-Humaidi, 2018). Furthermore, the strict interpretations of religion dictated many of the social norms related to modesty, family values, and religious observance that shape women's self-identification as devout Muslims and contributors to their families' moral upbringing. Marriage is also a site where social norms intersect with Saudi women's identities, whereby women are often expected to prioritise domestic life over career, advocating their identities as wives and mothers by emphasising their role in maintaining family stability and traditions.

Despite the historical conformity of Saudi women to social norms, often due to the pervasive pressure practised by their families and social communities, there is a growing trend of challenging traditional roles, particularly amongst the younger generation, who have deployed social media and education to engage with a more critical view of these norms. Although deviating from these norms can result in social stigma and judgment, which can impact their self-identity and self-esteem (Alhajri & Pierce, 2023), Saudi women's challenging these established norms can lead to a reconfiguration of their identities (Altwayjiri, 2019). Based on the previous examination of the intersectionality of social norms with identity, In Saudi Arabia, social norms affect women's roles, religion, family, and societal expectations. While these norms often restricted women's identities, modern Saudi women are navigating a complex path, balancing tradition and modernity to create diverse, empowered identities.

3.2.3 Identity and Religion

Religion intersects with Saudi women's identities in nuanced and complex ways. Besides being a religious doctrine, Islam is a social framework, pervasively influencing all facets of life within Saudi Arabia, including social values, norms, and traditions that significantly shape Saudi women's identities. Similar to the adherents of the Islamic faith in general, Saudi women are expected to uphold Islamic religious practices, such as performing daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, wearing modest attires, refraining from drinking alcohol and engaging in premarital relationships. These religious

practices serve as tangible manifestations of their religiosity—a concept deeply embedded in religious discourse.

Religiosity generally refers to when a person is in a performative agreement with the prescription of their religion (Kecskes and Wolf, 1993, cited in Hubert, 2015, p. 43). Similarly, Hamidaddin (2020) confines religiosity to when an individual performs duties prescribed by religion and avoids sins (p. 41). Within the context of Muslim women, Bendixsen (2013, p. 9) contends that from the late 1990s onward, the concept of Islamic religiosity among young Muslims, especially in Europe, has been undergoing a process of individualisation and privatisation through which young Muslims are reconstructing personalised religious routines within their daily lives (Roy, 2000, as cited in Bendixsen, 2013).

Young Muslim women's active participation in the process of religious individualisation is closely connected to a series of interrelated factors, such as their 'deliberate' choice to regard Islam as a significant marker of their identity. Young Muslim women's increasing independence from the influence of their parents or extended families diminished the significance of traditional religious authority figures in their lives, which allowed them to reclaim their religious faith and disregard the inherited prescribed Muslim identities enforced by older generations. Moreover, the individualisation of religiosity allows women to challenge and reconfigure the established hierarchies prevalent in institutionalised religious settings (Klinkhammer, 2000, p. 281). In doing so, these young women carve out distinct positions for themselves within society, positioning themselves as integral parts of modern society and as equal to men.

The way young Muslim women personalise their religiosity highlights the transformative nature of their religious identities. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that the intersection of religion and identity for Saudi women transcends the mere process of individualisation. Religion constitutes the foundation of Saudi Arabia's legal framework, which remains a subject of

debate. Central to such a debate is the nature of Shari'ah⁸, which, arguably, leans more towards a moral and religious construct than a strict legal system with voluntary adherence. Rejecting such voluntarism opposes individuals' free will to choose out of diverse perspectives and virtuous choices to secure divine rewards (Bunch, 2020). The imposition of systems derived from Shari'a principles contradicts the fundamental tenet of Islam, wherein individual believers are entrusted with the freedom to make choices. Alternatively, adherence to such systems should ideally be voluntary and based on conviction rather than imposition.

Paradoxically, the prevailing reality stands in stark contrast, as Shari'ah exerts pervasive control over all facets of Saudi women's lives, including matters related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance— other sites where religion intersects with women's identities. Such a comprehensive influence inevitably moulds their role identities as wives, mothers, and daughters. As established in section 2.2, Saudi Arabia's Islam explicitly adheres to the Wahhabi religious tradition and jurisprudence, drawing its doctrinal foundations from the Sunni Hanbali school of thought, which serves as the bedrock not only for the official state religion but also for its legal framework (Alharbi, 2015; Rabaan et al., 2021). The Wahhabi interpretation of the Quran plays a key role in tightening the influence of religion, particularly in women-related matters, wherein they are often perceived as legal minors, perpetually reliant on the support and guardianship of men. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that this perception deviates from the core tenets of Islam.

In the Quranic framework governing the relationship between men and women, Islam bestows upon women a position of dignity and honour, positioning them as complementary beings to men, mutually contributing to

⁸ It is the divine counsel Muslims follow to live moral lives and grow close to God, derived from two main sources: the Quran, which is considered the direct word of God, and the hadith, constituting of thousands of sayings and practices attributed to the Prophet Mohammed that collectively form the Sunna (Robinson, 2021).

one another's fulfilment and serving as a means of collective growth (Wadud, 2000; Barlas, 2019). Wadud (2000, p. 106) outlines that the Quran does not advocate specific, predefined roles for its characters, irrespective of gender. Instead, it portrays women in relation to significant personages within three groupings. The first provides an objective depiction devoid of praise or criticism, elucidating the social, cultural, and historical milieu in which these significant figures resided. The second group encompasses universally accepted female functions, which remain subject to modification under particular conditions and exceptions— and have been made even in the Quran itself.

The third group, perhaps the predominant category, assigns a non-gender-specific function to individuals, accentuating the task—such as praying, fasting, or doing good deeds— over the gender of the performer. Within this context, women assume this role without it being inherently tied to their gender. Amina Wadud's work highlights the egalitarian language of the Quran, which clearly honours both genders. Saudi women's awareness of such a fact has notably increased because they individualised their faith, resulting in a notable shift from the traditional interpretations of Quranic texts Alfurayh (2021). Saudi women have increasingly sought to engage with and reinterpret Islamic principles to advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment despite legal constraints and cultural challenges.

Saudi women, in their resistance against patriarchal religious interpretations, exhibit a diverse spectrum of characteristics shaped by factors such as education, social stance, political inclinations, and their different levels of religiosity. According to Al-Rasheed (2013, p. 137), this multifaceted cohort consists of educated elites belonging to different intellectual trends. Some of these women are liberal in their education and outlook, deeply subscribing to international dialogues on gender equality and human rights because of their exposure during their travels to neighbouring Gulf, Arab, and Western countries. Their experiences foster a cosmopolitan perspective, inspiring them to challenge gender norms. Conversely, others align with modern Islamist

trends, advocating for Islamic solutions to gender issues within the Saudi context. They perceive emancipation from an Islamic lens, invoking an idealised historical Islamic tradition that bestowed women with remarkable rights preceding the Western adoption of such principles.

Al-Rasheed (2013) maintains that both groups use the veil as a pivotal instrument for the expression of their views and for maintaining their agency. While some may wear the veil selectively, emphasising personal choice over religious obligation, others steadfastly adhere to veiling practices, underscoring their deep religious commitment. Furthermore, these women share a common resistance against the conservative faction, which imposes subordination through ethical and moral codes. They both have their feminism grounded in a cosmopolitan approach, combined with a strong sense of their local culture and identity, in which they see no contradiction between the global human rights discourse on gender and that of Islam, advocating for the removal of constraints on women's mobility, economic activities, and personal choices.

3.3 Islamic Feminism

This research used the Islamic feminist approach to explore the intersection of Saudi women's identities with gender, social norms, and religion abroad for several reasons. Firstly, Saudi women's identities are deeply intertwined with Islam, both in their home country and abroad (Al-Humaidi, 2018). Therefore, an Islamic feminist lens allows for an examination of how their religious and gender identities intersect and evolve in diverse social contexts. Furthermore, given how Saudi women living abroad often experience shifts in their values and beliefs due to exposure to different cultural norms and feminist ideas (Alfurayh, 2021), this approach helps dissect the nuanced ways in which their identities transform while maintaining a connection to their Islamic roots. Moreover, Islamic feminism accentuates the agency of Muslim women in interpreting and applying Islamic teachings to their lives. Thus, researching Saudi women abroad through this lens acknowledges their active

engagement with their religion and their ability to navigate between tradition and modernity (Bendouma & Kerboua, 2023).

Islamic feminism emerged in direct response to the Western feminist paradigm, which often failed to capture the deeply rooted and nuanced cultural and religious aspects of Muslim societies. Western feminist ideas triggered different reactions in Muslim countries due to their links to colonialism and secularism, which raised scepticism among many Muslims. In this regard, Hoza (2019) argues that the Western feminist movement, while advocating for gender equality, inadvertently reminded Muslim societies of their colonial past and introduced a secular dimension that did not align with their prevailing religious and cultural norms.

Islamic feminism refers to feminist discourse and practice operating within a framework of Islamic principles, characterised by a new consciousness and a distinct approach to gender issues. It combines feminist aspirations and demands while remaining rooted in the Islamic language and drawing legitimacy from Islamic sources (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Badran, 2009; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). It is relevant to this research because it accentuates priorities Western Feminism might fail to capture about Saudi women, such as their struggle with guardianship laws, driving rights, and access to education and employment, which are specific to their context. Furthermore, using the Western feminist approach would be inadequate, considering its limitation of obscuring the diversity of women's lived experiences, agency, and activism (Alkhaled, 2021).

Islamic feminism is directly tied to religion, which has a significant position in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi women feminists and activists approach their activism and advocacy within an Islamic framework, accentuating the religious dimension commonly disregarded by the Western feminist approach. The latter often alienates women who view feminism as incompatible with their faith (see Sendi, 2017, p. 112). Furthermore, employing Islamic feminism in this research enables, expands, supports, and vocalises Saudi women in their efforts to advocate for their rights and create change within their society.

According to Hoza (2019), although Saudi women's approach to improving their conditions deviates from Western paradigms, it is equally efficient and significant. Saudi women's activism and feminism often operate within the framework of Islamic values and traditions, seeking to change and challenge gender-related and other inequalities while remaining rooted in religion.

The revaluation of gender roles in family and society marks the emerging feminist consciousness among Saudi women. The latter is intrinsically tied to the dynamics of new divine politics in Saudi Arabia, shaped by the reinterpretation of religious texts and civil society activism resulting from the engagement of Saudi Arabia with modernity (Al-Rasheed, 2015; Alyedreessy et al., 2017). Although the state's political agenda demands women's piety and 'allows' for their modernity, not all Saudi women support modernity, especially in its feminist form. The discussions of Kurdi (2014), in her study on Saudi women in the press, and Alhajri and Pierce (2023), in their study of Saudi women's attitudes towards female activism, unveil paradoxical attitudes.

While the emerging feminist consciousness is discernible among some, many Saudi women resist the label of feminism, a term embraced especially by their counterparts who have encountered feminist ideas abroad. Furthermore, certain segments of Saudi society condemn activist women who assert their rights, clinging to traditional gender roles that confine women to domestic duties. Such a complex landscape presents a serious challenge for Saudi feminist activists as they navigate the intricate interplay of evolving consciousness and deeply entrenched traditional beliefs (Kurdi, 2014; Alhajri and Pierce, 2023). To sum up, the story of Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia is one of religion, nationalism, and social norms and values. Applying it to this research allows for detailing Saudi women's diverse experiences and identities beyond prevalent stereotypical portrayals, for it accentuates their roles as active participants in shaping and negotiating their identities.

3.4 Identity Negotiation Theory

Individuals construct their identities by exploring what they value in life, their belief systems, and the objectives they would like to accomplish (McLeod, 2013). As discussed in Chapter Two, the shift in the sociopolitical and economic status of Saudi women mirrors their journey in exploring their values and beliefs and negotiating their self-perceptions (Alshoaibi, 2018). Identity negotiation is the dynamic process through which individuals construct, manage, and navigate the complexities of identity when interacting with others and self-positioning within changing environments. The Identity Negotiation Theory, INT subsequently, is a dominant framework on which this research was based.

The INT originates from Gudykunst and Tsukasa's work (1986), in which they addressed the topic of identity formation and development within a group, considering both intergroup and interpersonal relationships with a great emphasis on the importance of recognising both an individual's identity (personal identity) and group identity (social identity) without compromising either one. This approach gives rise to issues of intra/interpersonal issues, such as group expectations, identity conformity, and the process of negotiating membership (Alshoaibi, 2018). The coinage of the term, on the other hand, can be located in the work of Swann (1987, p. 1038), who states that "*Social reality was not simply constructed by perceivers acting alone; it was negotiated by perceivers and targets acting together*". Swann (1987) argues that individuals construct their self-representations to understand the world around them and regulate their behaviour and that of those around them.

These scenarios accept two possibilities: the perceiver assumes the role of an individual attempting to influence another individual, i.e., the target, with the aim of persuading them to align their behaviour with the expectations held by the perceiver. Alternatively, the target possesses the capacity to persuade the perceiver to conform to the beliefs and convictions that align with the target's perspective. Fundamentally, these contrasting perspectives give rise

to a state of tension, which subsequently undergoes a negotiation process aimed at establishing behavioural expectations among participants within a group (Swann, 1987). Within this context, Swann and Bosson (2008, p. 466) contend that while identities define individuals and render them viable in their humanity, the processes of identity negotiation define relationships and render them viable as the bedrock for structured social interactions. This contention accentuates the interconnectedness of an individual's self-perception with their social relationships.

In contrast, Druckman (2001) theorises identity negotiation within the discourse of sociological conflict, aiming to shed light on the intricacies of the identity negotiation process itself, particularly emphasising how "*social identities are rarely a subject of negotiation*" (Druckman, 2001, p. 282). Druckman (2001) posits that identity is a multifaceted concept encompassing personal, social, ethnic, professional, and national dimensions. The process of identity negotiation comes into play when these identity dimensions of individuals collide and conflict with social expectations and norms, necessitating an internal reconciliation to construct their social identity.

It must be noted that Druckman's approach is contingent upon the degree of intensity at which conflicts over values manifest. As noted by Alshoaibi (2018), the success of negotiation can lead to the moderation of extreme perspectives and the reconciliation of group members, resulting in a de-escalation of conflict. Paradoxically, this may weaken group cohesion because the group's original, strongly held beliefs or values might be thought of as being diluted. Conversely, when negotiation fails, conflict and tension can persist at elevated levels, but group cohesion tends to strengthen. This intricate process underscores the central premise of the negotiation process, termed "negotiated identities" by Druckman (2001, p. 282).

The formalised version of the INT was first introduced in Ting-Toomey's (1999) work with ten detailed pivotal assumptions, which were combined with interdisciplinary research to provide a manifold structure applicable across a wide range of cultural and social environments. The INT was further amended

to include five boundary-crossing identity dialectical themes⁹ and three identity negotiation competence outcomes¹⁰ (Ting-Toomey, 2005; 2017). Collectively, these additional measures and more robust definitions culminated in the modern definition of the INT employed by researchers active in sociological studies in the present day. The ten primary assumptions of the INT can be abridged as follows:

1. Symbolic communication with others forms the core dynamics of people's group membership and personal identities.
2. All people share fundamental motivational needs for identity security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and consistency in both group and personal identities.
3. Individuals typically feel emotionally secure in familiar cultural environments but may experience emotional vulnerability in culturally unfamiliar settings.
4. Individuals feel included when their desired group memberships are positively acknowledged and differentiated when their desired group membership identities are stigmatised.
5. Individuals commonly encounter predictable interactions when communicating with culturally familiar individuals and unpredictable interactions with culturally unfamiliar individuals.
6. Individuals often seek interpersonal connections through meaningful, close relationships and experience a sense of identity autonomy when they go through periods of separation in these relationships—meaningful intercultural-interpersonal relationships affect their emotional security and trust.

⁹ The boundary-crossing themes include added identity security-vulnerability, inclusion-differentiation, predictability- unpredictability, connection-autonomy, and identity-consistency across time (Ting-Toomey, 2017, p. 2).

¹⁰ The identity negotiation outcomes included the feeling of being understood, the feeling of being respected, and the feeling of being affirmatively valued (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 229).

7. Individuals often encounter identity consistency when engaging in repeated cultural routines within a familiar cultural environment and identity change in unfamiliar cultural settings, straying from minor shifts to significant transformations to identity chaos and turmoil.
8. Cultural-ethnic, personal, and situational variability dimensions influence the meanings, interpretations, and evaluations of these identity-related themes.
9. Competent identity negotiation emphasises integrating intercultural knowledge, mindfulness, and adaptive communication skills for culturally dissimilar interactions.
10. Satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued (Ting-Toomey, 2017, p. 2-3).

Ting-Toomey's presented argument, which accentuates the fluidity of identities and the dynamics of social comparison, can be situated within the broader framework of Social Identity Theory, initially proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Their theory underscores the inherent human tendencies of ingroup favouritism and out-group differentiation, which reflect the complexities of identity formation and transformation. Specific circumstances can trigger individuals' ingroup favouritism, thereby, the salience of particular identities. Emotional vulnerability and either positive or negative stigmatisation of individuals' membership identities are notable triggers. Individuals may either suppress their personal identities in favour of conforming to socially sanctioned norms by playing certain roles, albeit at the expense of their individuality and authenticity or reconfigure their personal identities to project that of their "role models" through thorough observation to avoid social alienation (Ting-Toomey, 2017).

Furthermore, social and religious contexts influence the identity roles individuals play in their relations with others. The latter encompasses two facets: actual personal identity and desired personal identity. The former is rooted in an individual's life experiences and traits, while the latter represents

the idealised attributes that individuals aspire to possess— they are experienced as inside (or ‘true’) and outside identities (see the work of Elias, 1994). Crucially, the negotiation of identity within communication processes is intricately linked to the pursuit of the desired identity. Communicators seek understanding, respect, and support to validate their preferred attributes, often prioritising their desired identity over their actual identity. This argument underlines the critical role of identity negotiation, wherein individuals strategically navigate their identities in response to social dynamics and the pursuit of positive social comparisons.

In comprehending the intricate processes of identity negotiation, the concepts of role and role identity hold high significance. According to Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 36), a role can be defined as “*a set of anticipated behaviours and their associated values, as culturally or ethnically defined, which a society deems as appropriate or acceptable.*” It is imperative to note that roles are inherently context-dependent, subject to evaluation and judgment by individuals projecting their diverse expectations. These assessments and expectations, in turn, are influenced by an interplay of personal, situational, and cultural variables. This contextual dynamic is equally applicable to Saudi women residing abroad, as they may harbour distinct perceptions of their role identities subjected to other Saudi and non-Saudi individuals’ expectations and preconceptions. Simultaneously, they maintain and subject others and their role identities to their corresponding expectations.

Within society, each harbours a manifold of identities; however, what sets them apart is the emphasis they place on particular identities in any given situation. The intricate and multifaceted socially ‘prescribed’ roles undertaken by Saudi women further compound this complexity. Consequently, these individuals must strategically render certain identities salient in response to the demands of particular situations within and outside of Saudi Arabia. In other words, while abroad, Saudi women navigate a complex web of professional, national, ethnic, cultural, and personal identities, each competing for salience contingent upon the context of engagement and the

groups with which they interact. However, an essential query to this research centres on the identities these women choose to present abroad. This query is extended to explore the extent to which social and religious context change exerts influence over the salience of these identities.

Furthermore, while exploring Saudi women's identities abroad, it is crucial to distinguish between negotiation methods, primarily settlement and resolution approaches. Settlement primarily entails the attainment of a resolution through compromise, involving one or multiple parties making concessions to arrive at an agreeable outcome satisfactory to all involved members. In contrast, the resolution seeks an agreement achieved by identifying a solution that incorporates the ideologies of all parties (Druckman and Wagner, 2016). Given how cultural and religious beliefs hold significant sway in the Saudi context, women's differences can become particularly divisive, intensifying conflicts among group members in particular and society in general.

Examining the outcomes of these conflicts, if they are resolved at all, provides insights into the durability of the solution, individuals' internal validation, and the group's cohesion. It also prompts us to consider how negotiations would unfold in the absence of, or in a different context from, the conditions where conflicts typically arise. In other words, when these women are abroad, where the contextual factors contributing to conflicts are significantly diminished, how does the negotiation dynamic change? The answer to this question is detailed in the upcoming analysis chapters.

While the preceding sections have presented an extensive groundwork on the INT, its core principles, and its pertinence within the context of Saudi women's identities abroad, what follows details the rationale behind choosing INT, alongside intersectionality and Islamic feminism, as one of the primary theoretical frameworks for this research. Despite facing criticisms related to its tendency to oversimplify identity, exhibit cultural insensitivity, and inadequately consider power dynamics (Swann and Bosson, 2008; Lee and Anderson, 2009; Cai et al., 2022), the INT remains particularly relevant in studying individuals navigating significant transitions. Saudi women residing

abroad often grapple with new norms, values, and expectations that diverge from those in their homeland. Consequently, employing the INT allows an in-depth comprehension of how these women negotiate their identities in reaction to these contextual alterations (Alshoaibi, 2018).

Furthermore, while abroad, Saudi women may struggle to maintain multiple identities, including but not limited to gender, national, religious, social, and personal identities. The INT offers a framework to explore the strategies and mechanisms employed by these women in managing, reconciling, expressing and communicating their diverse identities to diverse audiences while residing in foreign environments (Alsaggaf, 2019). Additionally, the INT framework aligns philosophically with this research, asserting that individuals harbour multiple fluid identities shaped by cultural, gender, ethnic, religious, and social factors, all of which are moulded by context and interactions. It emphasises the pivotal role of social context in the identity negotiation process, recognising that disparate social circumstances and cultural milieus necessitate individuals to navigate their identities amid prevailing expectations and norms.

To sum up, the INT supports an approach to identity that considers conformity to social demands and expectations, acknowledging the potential for individuals to adapt or adjust their identities to conform to the prevailing norms of a specific context. This adaptation may involve accentuating certain facets of their identity while downplaying others. Using the INT framework enables a comprehensive exploration of how Saudi women from diverse backgrounds manage their identities when confronted with social and religious disparities, power dynamics, and social expectations.

3.5 Conclusion

The current chapter detailed the conceptual and theoretical frameworks employed within this study to investigate the identities of Saudi women abroad and their intricate interplay with social and religious context change. When approaching identity, a very crowded concept with various meanings and multiple analytical works, this research employs various terminologies,

including identification, self-understanding, and belonging. These terms, though used interchangeably, are acknowledged for their nuanced distinctions in meaning. Nevertheless, the primary focus lies in their relational aspects rather than their isolated utility for conveying specific meanings. Furthermore, intersectionality theory, one of the three distinct theoretical frameworks, is instrumental in facilitating an in-depth examination of how gender, social norms, and religion converge, diverge, intersect, and interact as intricate power dynamics with Saudi women's identities abroad. Secondly, Islamic feminism serves as an apt feminist paradigm for scrutinising the influence of religion on Saudi women residing abroad, elucidating their processes of navigation and negotiation of identities, all the while considering the prominent position religion occupies within Saudi Arabia's social and political landscapes. Lastly, the INT offers a comprehensive lens for delving into the manifold mechanisms and processes employed by Saudi women to maintain, reconcile, express, and communicate their identities abroad.

4 Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approaches implemented in this study and the rationale behind their selection, starting by conceptualising 'research' and reviewing the underpinning philosophical assumptions. The chapter also explains the reasoning behind adopting a qualitative approach and details the sampling strategy, data collection methods and process, and data analysis procedures.

4.1 Research Knowledge and Theoretical Consideration

Conceptualising research is essential because it ensures that readers comprehend the researchers' perspectives, which can reduce confusion and possible misunderstandings (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). Research is the final product of conducting a thorough and rigorous study by complying with specific rules, employing specific skills, and following a specific framework when analysing the results (Walliman, 2022). It ascribes to epistemological and ontological perspectives underpinned by relevant theories, which ensure that the results, whether confirming or enhancing current knowledge or creating new insights, are firmly grounded. Accordingly, this thesis is a scientific, social research. As social research focuses on the systematic and scientific gathering of data to address inquiries about various aspects of society, thereby facilitating the comprehension of their dynamics (Lawal, 2019), this research systematically examines the social specifics of identity and how Saudi women living abroad, as a group of social agents, express and interacts with it using scientific methods.

The following sections clarify this research's philosophical underpinnings, highlight the research procedures, and elucidate the relevance of the methodologies and methods used in this work. It is essential to do so to help the readers familiarise themselves with the researcher's assumptions, views about how knowledge should be produced, and views on the nature of reality

that heavily affect the research process they adopt (Clark et al., 2021; Walliman, 2022). In other words, the assumptions about what exists in reality—what can be known and how it can be acquired— determine how research is conducted

4.1.1 Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Framework

Similar to all research carried out scientifically, this research has a fundamental philosophical foundation and thorough consideration of the nature of the research, supporting evidence or data, and research methods (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). This research builds on an epistemological assumption, which posits that knowledge is produced using scientific research methodology and methods while prioritising ethical considerations, rigorous and thorough data analysis, and effective distribution of findings to the intended audience. These philosophical assumptions support the data collection methods and analysis techniques, ensure the quality of the findings, guarantee a rigorous scientific inquiry and preclude inconsistency and bias using a qualitative research approach.

This research focuses more on including in-depth layers of understanding the social phenomenon of identity negotiation abroad than on generating one definite, generalisable, and universally applicable truth about Saudi women (Saunders et al., 2002). Furthermore, this research depends on me, as the researcher, and the participants to work together to construct knowledge (Bryman, 2016; Gachago, 2018). Hence, this research stands on the foundation positing that knowledge is constructed from social reality, which is subjective and different from one participant to another depending on many factors, such as culture, race, ethnicity, religion, and social, economic, and political backgrounds (Neuman, 2020).

Due to its focus on exploring the identities of Saudi women in the UK and their interactions with the social and religious context change, this research is more suitably aligned with the interpretivist methodological paradigm for several reasons. First, this paradigm embraces the assumption of the subjectivist

epistemology, which holds that the social world is not given but constructed and imposed by humans through social interaction (Goldkuh, 2012). Social reality is shaped by how people perceive, experience, and evaluate the world in which they live; they construct their realities through ongoing interaction, communication, and negotiation processes with others, in which they often rely on unverified assumptions and commonly accepted norms about the world around them (Irshaidat, 2022).

Furthermore, in the interpretive paradigm, knowledge is relative to historical, temporal, and subjective circumstances and exists in multiple forms as depictions of reality based on individuals' interpretations (Benoliel, 1996). In other words, Interpretivists accept multiple meanings, ways of knowing, and realities and assert that objective reality can never be captured; rather, it can only be known through individual representations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). While reality from a relativist perspective is not distinguishable from the subjective experience (Guba and Lincoln, 2005), it would be misleading to consider them inseparable; to assume that reality *is* human experience and human experience *is* reality is faulty because reality is beyond two people experiencing an external world differently (Levers, 2013).

Instead, people's realities and worlds are different, and with multiple interpretations of experience come multiple realities—there are as many different realities as there are people (Levers, 2013). Thus, the rationale for using the interpretivist relativist ontology is to understand Saudi women's subjective experiences of reality and multiple truths abroad. Furthermore, the interpretivist methodology relies on experiential, naturalistic, inductive procedures in collecting, analysing and interpreting data (Hack-Polay et al., 2021). In other words, data are collected through direct first-hand experiences in real-world contexts and naturalistic settings without any attempt to manipulate or control possibly affecting variables and are analysed and interpreted by drawing conclusions and patterns from that specific data, which can lead to the development of expanded theories or generalisations.

The last reason for choosing this paradigm is its value-charged axiology. Walt (2020) maintains that the entire interpretive process seems value-laden. To clarify, the knowledge obtained from this research is not value-free because, as a researcher, my values and beliefs were present when I chose what to research, how to conduct the research, and how to interpret the data (Edge and Richards, 1998). My values and beliefs are based on my assumptions of the world, scholarship status, age, gender, and other variables. Moreover, as this research focuses solely on women, it adopts Neuman's (2020, p. 119) claim that the impact of a woman's perspective and her desire to gain an intimate relationship with what she studies opposes the value-neutrality claim of positivists. Accordingly, I shall discuss my position as the researcher conducting this study in the following section.

4.2 Researcher's Positionality

Positionality refers to the position researchers adopt in relation to their research. It entails their ontological and epistemological assumptions and views about human nature and agency (Holmes, 2020). These assumptions are sculptured by the researchers' values and beliefs, political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, ethnicity, race, social class, status, (dis)abilities and other variables (Marsh et al. 2018). In this section, I deliver a clear disclosure of my positionality in this research and highlight where and how I did and might have influenced it, which ultimately would enable the reader to make a better-informed judgment about my influence on the research process and about how 'truthful' they feel the research data are (Gachago, 2018).

Articulating positionality requires reflexivity, which refers to an ongoing process of self-consciousness and self-assessment by researchers about how and which values and beliefs could or would, directly or indirectly, influence their research process decisions (Holmes, 2020). Reflexivity necessitates researchers' awareness and sensitivity to their cultural, social, religious, and any other contexts they believe are influential (Bryman, 2016).

Furthermore, to easily identify their positionality, researchers must locate themselves in three areas: the topic under investigation, the research participants, and the research context (Grix, 2019; Savin-Baden and Major, 2022). Holmes (2020, p. 4) adds a fourth area: time, i.e., exploring positionality and writing a positionality statement can take considerable time and much ‘soul searching’ and is not a process that can be rushed. Accordingly, I discuss these areas below.

I consider it vital to this research that I am part of the social world I researched in this study. Being part of such a world enticed the participants to express and share truthful and candid information and thoroughly narrate their experiences to me. However, rather than claiming neutrality, I would like to be more aware of my biases, personal positions and selves, points of view, beliefs and values that I have brought into this work. I am an Arab Muslim woman born and raised in a small city in the west of Algeria. I spent twenty-three years in an intellectual, moderately religious household. However, despite how such an upbringing equipped me with what I believe to be a moderate perspective of life and religion, I have always been considered— by my extended family and the common social standards— unconventional.

This perception was triggered by my constant questioning of social norms and traditions in the Algerian society, which I consider patriarchal and wrongful to religion. I have always believed that social norms exert more control over individuals than religion, especially in the Arab Muslim world, where people function based on what society deems normal and appropriate and what it condemns as deviant and inappropriate rather than what religion considers *Halal* and *Haram*¹¹. Nevertheless, I never had enough space, be it physical or intellectual, to investigate my questions properly and adequately on how social norms, traditions, and religion influence how people perceive, present, perform, and negotiate themselves, especially women. Nonetheless, an

¹¹ The Arabic translation to what religion considers permissible and impermissible, respectively.

opportunity emerged when I received a scholarship to pursue a PhD degree in the UK in 2017.

After moving to the UK and meeting many Arab Muslim women, I decided to pursue the subject of women's identity and how it interacts with different context changes. For many reasons, I chose to study Saudi over Algerian women in the UK. First, it was hard to recognise the different social, cultural, and religious patterns which I lived by daily for almost a quarter century. I was more likely to take many things about these patterns for granted that an outsider would pick up right away. In this regard, Bernard (2013) argues that there is no final answer on whether it is good or bad for researchers to study matters in their own cultural and social settings. However, picking up the different relevant patterns would be challenging on the minus side because they might be unrecognisable.

The second reason for studying Saudi women was how Saudi Arabia and Algeria differ regarding religion's involvement in politics and, therefore, in society. The Saudi political systems are completely built on religion (Lazreg, 2011; Al-Humaidi, 2018), making the social and religious context change in the UK more distinctive. The third reason was how larger the Saudi female community in Leeds was compared to the Algerian community. Their large presence enabled me to build a network of Saudi women and meet with gatekeepers who assisted me with recruiting participants. Finally, the fourth reason for choosing Saudi women was how they were plagued with issues of misrepresentation dominated by emancipatory tones. I wanted to do them more justice and offer them an opportunity to tell their stories.

Context-wise, the research was conducted entirely in the UK, including the data collection. There was a discussion on whether I should interview Saudi women while in Saudi Arabia to have more layers of understanding of the topic; however, that discussion was quickly put to an end for several reasons. First, the research design would have changed from a case study, in which every participant is a case unit, to a comparative case study involving two settings. Such a change would not have fulfilled the aim of the research of

voicing out Saudi women's experiences of identity abroad. The second reason was that such a study needed a longitudinal approach to be adequately and thoroughly conducted. The final reason for discarding such an option was the administrative requirements needed— applying for a Saudi Visa, for which I was not eligible¹² — and how unfeasible it would have been to finish the thesis on time. Accordingly, I disclose openly my positionality and its influence on the context in which the research was conducted.

To sum up, I actively engaged with my research and did not maintain emotional neutrality, which is a very common practice among social researchers in general (Bernard, 2012; Bryman, 2016; May and Perry, 2022) and among those working on women studies (Neuman, 2020; Walliman, 2022). Following Dubois' claim (2015) that no matter how reflexive and open researchers can be about their positionalities in their works, they can never objectively describe reality, in the previous sections, I acknowledged and reflected on the areas I believe my assumptions have influenced the research topic, participants, and context. Moreover, while I managed to contain my involvement and maintained the highest standards of qualitative study, it is only logical to say that the concepts of insider and outsider intersected in this research.

4.2.1 Insider / Outsider position

Merton (1972) defines insider-outsider researchers as members and non-members of specified groups and collectives of specified social status under examination. To be an insider researcher— or to adopt an 'emic' account — is to be an integrated part of the topic under examination (Court and Abbas, 2022). An insider researcher has a direct or indirect personal experience, is a member of the group or community studied, shares common characteristics

¹² Saudi Arabia was a closed-off destination to foreigners in the past. It only recently introduced an international tourist visa (September 2019), which again closed because of the pandemic until 2021 (Uy, 2022).

or experiences with the participants, and directly understands the group's culture, language, and social dynamics. On the other hand, being an 'outsider' researcher— adopting an 'etic' account— is having no prior intimate knowledge of the research topic or the research participants (Holmes, 2020). In other words, an outsider researcher is external to the group or community studied.

The concepts of insider and outsider are intertwined in this research because I continuously shifted between the two positions. I adopted the insider position when I faced situations calling for my direct experience as an Arab Muslim woman living in the UK, such as my familiarity with the linguistic aspects of the research participants, which granted me easy access to their culture. Additionally, knowing and sharing some of the participants' social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, along with the colloquial language and non-verbal cues, allowed the participants to trust me and perceive me as one of them. Thus, I could ask more meaningful and insightful questions, secure more honest answers, produce a more truthful, authentic description and understanding of the topic, and reduce or remove any potential disorientation due to culture shock.

In a different line of thought, I was an insider, for I inferred from my position as a woman conducting the research. Court and Abbas (2022, p. 442) conducted a study on women from the Druze culture. The two female scholars contend that women from conservative societies and cultures are more at ease sharing their experiences with other women, to which I relate. In other words, gender was, among other factors, important to construct the insider-outsider collaboration on which this research was conducted. While emphasising that men's narratives are no less significant, Court and Abbas (2022) further argue that women are more likely to feel comfortable interacting with other women during interviews, which can ease building rapport. Oakley (2015) explains that rapport is a technical device that must be worked on or established between the interviewer and interviewee to produce data. Being

an insider meant I had the advantage of not having to work hard on establishing that rapport with some participants.

With others, however, I was intensely self-conscious about the identity I projected, which, in many ways, was influenced by the interview settings, time, place, as well as the participants. Therefore, I agree with Thwaites (2017) that rapport is not necessarily a natural result of two people discussing a research topic; it can be difficult to achieve. Building rapport with the research participants can be emotionally demanding. As a researcher, I was genuinely interested in the participants' stories, and I was content to present myself as friendly and approachable during the interview situation, which proved to be an emotional labour considering how it connected with other aspects of power-sharing, gender identity, and honest, open discussion of the researcher's views and opinions. For instance, with some participants, I was often asked to respond to the same questions I asked during the interview, about which I had to be vigilant not to come across as avoidant.

I assumed the position of an outsider in this research in different ways. First, I continuously reflected and assessed my position to avoid being inherently and unintentionally biased or overly sympathetic to the culture and religion studied. I also acknowledged that my prior knowledge was insufficient and might be risk-free if I unknowingly avoid raising triggering or taboo questions because I am compelled by a social or religious custom or code (Holmes, 2020). I maintained the outsider position by elaborating on what the participants thought I already knew or should have been too obvious because they perceived me as one of them. Another outsider perspective I brought to the research was being an Algerian, which made participants more willing to reveal sensitive information than they would have with a Saudi researcher.

To conclude, despite knowing that neutrality is a challenge in social sciences (Gachago, 2018), claiming it would be incorrect because I embraced my position as an insider while conducting this research. However, efforts were consistently made to examine critically any personal biases, assumptions, values, and traits I possibly integrated into the research process, maintain a

robust and impartial approach to research interpretation, and ensure the separation between my previous experiences and my role as a researcher within the same social sphere as the research participants. The careful crafting and asking of open-ended questions maintained the power-sharing between the participants and me during the interviews, which reduced the influence on the research participants to adopt specific responses.

4.3 The Research Design: Approaches and Methods

Research design is the scientific framework for collecting and analysing data, which reflects the researcher's philosophical assumptions and decisions regarding the research strategies, methods used, sampling, and data analysis procedures (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2016). This research used a qualitative exploratory case study design to answer its questions and achieve its aims and objectives. Exploratory research primarily examines a little-understood issue or phenomenon, develops preliminary ideas about it, and moves toward more refined research questions to produce advanced knowledge (Neuman, 2020, p. 38). Using this approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the individual experiences of the Saudi research participants in navigating their daily lives and negotiating their identities abroad, which is lacking in the academic literature on the Saudi female diaspora in specific and Arab Muslim women diaspora in general.

Given how exploratory research seeks to explore and question what is happening, how individuals experience it and how they perceive those experiences (Gray, 2018, p.37), it was suitable more than descriptive or explanatory designs. Additionally, a researcher needs rich, descriptive, and detailed data to explore the participants' world and understand their ideas, perceptions and expectations more clearly (Saunders et al., 2023). Therefore, the exploratory design permitted focusing on the participants' perspectives as active agents in their social worlds and capturing their voices. Furthermore, using the exploratory qualitative design yielded multi-layered factors, issues, and attitudes arising from the experiences of negotiating identities abroad.

The participants' photo-elicitations and responses produced variations of perspective ranging from discovering their identities, (re)constructing them, and resisting or embracing the change, all captured implicitly through exploration. The exploratory approach highlighted the interconnectivity among social and cultural norms, gender roles, religion, expectations, stereotypes, and international mobility within the community studied. Nevertheless, there are certain limitations to the exploratory design. For example, an exploratory research design has limited generalisability. In other words, the findings cannot be generalised as they aim not to produce a conclusive profile of Saudi women abroad but rather suggest approaches that have not yet been used to explore identity amid the different context changes.

4.3.1 Research Strategy

Designing a flexible, exploratory interpretivist qualitative research and deciding which strategy to use is challenging at first but crucial because it facilitates recording the critical issues, the nuanced insights, and the emergent themes throughout the development of the research project. According to Blaikie and Priest (2019), a research strategy is the logic of a given inquiry that provides a specific starting point, a series of steps, and an ending point used to answer the inquiry questions. He discussed four research strategies related to a particular philosophical and theoretical tradition: inductive, deductive, retroductive, and abductive. The present research used the inductive strategy, which, although originally used to generate hypotheses in the natural sciences, is now being used as a method of theory construction in interpretive social science (Blaikie, 2007).

The inductive strategy does not fully generate theory initially but is often used as a background to the qualitative investigation (Bryman, 2016). Accordingly, it is used primarily in the interpretation of the findings of this research. The inductive strategy is often linked to exploration as an aim of a study; it associates variously with interpretive approaches to social inquiry (Blaikie, 2000, p.124). According to Malhotra (2017), the inductive strategy is used by Interpretivism to produce scientific accounts of social life by drawing on the

concepts and meanings social actors use and the activities in which they engage. The inductive team vitalises the need to find out how individuals interpret their actions, understand their social reality, and discover the daily knowledge they use in their daily social interactions.

Hence, reality is socially constructed by the people who inhabit and live it and not necessarily as conceived by researchers (Blaikie, 2000, p.98). In that sense, it is the task of the social scientist to discover and describe this world from an 'insider' view and not impose an 'outsider' view. The inductive strategy involves moving from first-order constructs (lay language people use to describe and explain their views) to second-order constructs (the technical language of the social scientists' interpretations). Given that this research addresses the processes of self-identification and self-negotiation in a different socio-religious context, the appropriate procedure to deal with this topic and answer its questions is to generate knowledge from the social actors' points of view, i.e., young Saudi women.

4.3.2 Case study approach

Creswell (2017) identifies five approaches to conducting qualitative research depending on the research purpose, the researcher's role, collected data, and data analysis techniques and presentation: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. This research was best located within an interpretive case study approach. Yin (2002, p. 13) defines a case study as a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are unclear, and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context". Simons (2013) defines it as an in-depth, multiple-perspective-based exploration of the complexity and uniqueness of a given entity in real life. Thomas (2014, 2023) conceptualises it as looking at a unit in detail without seeking generalisation.

This research adopts Merriam's (1998) definition of a case study, in which she defines it as a thing, a single entity, or a unit around which there are

boundaries, i.e., a case can be a person, a program, a group, or a specific policy that is fenced in a set of time, space, and context boundaries (Yazan, 2015). The reason for adopting Merriam's definition is that it presents a broader meaning to the term and more flexibility in employing it within the qualitative design compared to scholars like Yin (2014, 2018) and Stake (1995, 2015). In other words, if the researchers can specify the phenomenon of interest and draw its boundaries, they can name it a case; such a definition provides more opportunities to search wider arrays of cases.

Using the case study approach was the most suitable because it allowed for panoramic documentation of the identities of the Saudi women interviewed by looking into the interrelationship between the key themes of religion, social norms, and change. Furthermore, the case study approach was beneficial in terms of process and results because it helped focus the research within the confines of time and space on the specific case of Saudi women abroad. This approach also tolerates multiple data collection methods (Schoch et al., 2019), such as in-depth interviews and photo-elicitation used in this research. On the other hand, unlike the generalisation that occurs in quantitative studies, using a case study approach can lead to transferability. In other words, using the case study allows others to apply the principle and even the results obtained from the case under study in this research on similar cases.

The case study of this research is composed of twenty-one Saudi women who have been living in the UK for over five years. This case was selected, defined, and explored within particular parameters: 1) the geographical context of the UK, 2) the one-year data collection time limit, and 3) the specific defining criteria of the participants constituting the case. The selection criteria were based on the similarity of the home society's social and religious contexts and the uniqueness of the participants' self-identities. Regardless of their knowledge about the theoretical understanding of the topic, all participants were primary reliable data sources; however, I maintain they do not represent all Saudi women in the UK or abroad. Rather, each participant represented herself and altogether can be used in similar studies on similar cases.

This research case study design did not aim to compare, replicate, or extend new theories (Gachago, 2018, p. 89) but rather to provide multiple, diverse, and holistic accounts of the various facets of identity and their interconnectivity to understand better the interplay of Saudi women's identity and context change abroad (Yin, 2018). To sum up, this research adopted a qualitative inductive, interpretive exploratory case study approach to explore and understand the interplay between the identity of Saudi women abroad and the different context changes they encountered. The decision for these approaches was based on the research's scale, available resources, and the time limit for completing the study.

4.4 The Case Study Sampling

In qualitative research, sampling broadly refers to selecting specific data sources from which data are collected to address the research objectives (Gentles et al., 2015, p1775). The process of sampling focuses on deciding who or what should be sampled (the sampling unit), what form the sampling will take (the sampling strategy), how many people or sites need to be sampled (the sampling size), and if the sampling accords with the data demanded by the selected approach of inquiry (Creswell, 2017). This research case study is of young Saudi women living in the UK (Leeds), and they were sampled using maximum variation purposive sampling. Purposeful sampling is probably the most described sampling strategy in today's qualitative methods literature (Patton, 2015, p. 265). It refers to the selection of information-rich cases for an in-depth study that yields insights and in-depth understanding. The quality of "purposeful" is contingent on how much a source can provide vibrant and relevant information related to the study's research questions (Gentles et al., 2015, p1780).

Maximum variation is the most common derivative of purposeful sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), which involves selecting participants who comply with various defined criteria to fully describe multiple perspectives about the case. Although the selected samples might not be the best representative of

the subject studied (Madondo, 2021, p. 103)— it was already established that this research's aim is far from representing all the Saudi women in the UK— it was used because it helped to generate findings that reflected the differences or different perspectives of the Saudi women under study. Such results were ideal for qualitative research (Creswell, 2017, p.157).

4.4.1 Sampling Criteria and Size

The research participants were selected from within the confines of specific parameters. As established in the researcher's perspective (section 1.2), the research had to be narrowed in terms of context (social and religious) and population (Saudi Arabian women). Using maximum variation sampling necessitates the scrutiny and maximisation of the different characteristics of the selected population to increase the likelihood of the findings to reflect the different layers and angles from which similar cases can be studied (Madondo, 2021). Accordingly, the hijab (veiled and unveiled participants), the guardianship (with or without a guardian), and religious affiliation (Muslim and non-Muslim) were identified as relevant differences, which were used to enrich and enhance the quality of the data obtained rather than criteria for disqualifying Saudi women from participating in this research.

Furthermore, the socio-demographic characteristics, such as single, married, with or without children, and women from different educational backgrounds and professions, were considered as additional criteria to ensure data diversity and procure comprehensive information and reflective findings (Arslan and Coşkun, 2022). There were other defining parameters the selected participants had to meet, which were mostly related to the age bracket, length of stay in the UK, and the requirement of being born and raised in Saudi Arabia. I selected the age brackets of the participants using three frameworks: Yamani's (2000) *Saudi three generations*, Janmohamed's (2018) *Generation M*, and the Pew Research Centre's definition of *Millennials* (Dimock, 2019; Barroso et al., 2020). Yamani (2000) asserts that the third generation of Saudi Arabia was born during the peak of the oil boom in the

1970s or at least before the downturn in 1984. Such a generation consists of people who,

“... [They] know much more than their parents’ generation because of their exposure to wider influences and education, but this knowledge creates problems. They have more opportunities than previous generations but also have more fears. They are still expected to follow their parents’ traditions and to listen to their instructions, but exposure to the wider world poses an increasing challenge to their fathers’ authority.”
(Yamani, 2000, p. 8)

Janmohamed’s (2018) definition of *Generation M* refers to a cultural and social group of young Muslims connected globally by their faith and engagement with the modern world. Although this group does not have a specific age bracket, it typically includes millennials. The Pew Research Centre defines Millennials as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019). Considering all the precedents, the research participants were aged between 45 years old (born in 1975) and 25 years old (born in 1995) by 2020.

The Saudi women recruited for this research had to fit two other criteria: first, to be born and raised in Saudi Arabia; second, to have lived an international mobility experience for over five years. The first criterion ensures that the participants were fully immersed in Saudi society, including having their extended families, schooling, and experiencing culture and religion as transmitted from one generation to another. The second criterion was selected based on the work of Bajandouh (2013) on Saudi women’s lives in the United Kingdom and the length of the participants’ stay in her work. It is worth noting that selecting an over-five-year migration does not undermine the findings of any research or study conducted on shorter periods.

The research participants were selected based on their ability to meet the criteria detailed in the previous section. The number of participants included was determined by reaching data saturation, which refers to reaching a point of redundancy in which additional data collection has less or no contribution to the study (Gentles et al., 2015, p1782). Within the same line, the number of participants is relatively small in qualitative interpretive research (Holloway,

1997). Although multiple cases are “*often considered more compelling, and the overall study as being more robust*” (Yin, 2009, p. 53), it is highly recommended that beginner researchers begin “with a simple and straightforward case study” for the complexity of managing and analysing large volumes of data (Yin, 2009, p. 162). The sample size in this research is twenty-one participants, whose socio-demographic characteristics are outlined in section (4.9) using anonymised names for ethical considerations.

4.5 Ethical Consideration in the Fieldwork

Designing any research necessitates complying with a set of ethical considerations and principles (Wackenhut, 2017; Gachago, 2018). These ethics vary according to the relationship between researchers and their participants, the narrowness and breadth of the research focus, and the ethical problems associated with the methods used. There was a set of decisions that needed amendments after submitting my application to obtain ethical approval, such as the locations of the interviews, which were initially to be decided by the participants. However, after identifying the inconvenience of such a decision, such as the possibility of choosing places lacking privacy, the locations were to be mutually decided. Another ethical consideration was the use of the Arabic language when participants could not articulate their responses in English due to a lack of fluency. The credibility and transparency of my translation were a challenge, which was addressed by cross-checking all translations with the participants to guarantee that they conveyed their intended meanings fairly and accurately. This method instituted congruency between the transcripts and participants’ perspectives and reinforced the internal validity of the data interpretation (Chiumento et al., 2018; Mohamad Nasri et al., 2020).

On the ninth of December 2019, this research was ethically approved as it complied with all the ethical principles of the University of Leeds (UOL). Shortly after that, I started contacting the population of interest. The first

contact was with a member of the Saudi club in Leeds¹³, who put me in contact with other Saudi women who fit the sampling criteria. After I started my correspondence, in which I formally introduced myself, the research purpose, and the participants' role, 31 women expressed their interest in participating in the research, to whom I sent the information sheets, which provided a more detailed description of the research, explained the participants' rights and requirements, and clarified relevant information to the interviewing process, such as approximately how long it would be, the recording aspect, and the requirement of providing photos for the photo-elicitation method.

One of the ethical considerations was ensuring that the participants fully understood the purpose of the research and their intended role (Gachago, 2018). All participants were given a week to consider their participation to ensure they were well-informed. Although some participants were comfortable being identified, they were all guaranteed anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality, that their identities would be concealed and that any information that could trace them back would not be revealed or disclosed. Participants' consent to partake in the research was crucial. Furthermore, all participants were made aware that if any question caused discomfort or if they preferred not to respond, they had the absolute right not to and the option to discontinue their participation in the study at any time. Thankfully, none of the participants chose to exercise this option.

The data collection process started shortly after obtaining ethical approval. Over half of the interviews were conducted before the unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic became a major health threat, which raised significant ethical considerations for the remaining data collection. I was responsible for

¹³ The Saudi Club in Leeds, established in 2006, is one of the Saudi student clubs operating under the supervision of the Saudi Attaché in the UK. It serves a large number of Saudis, including students attending universities in Leeds. The club offers a variety of activities, including cultural, social, and sports events. Additionally, the club provides assistance to new students arriving in the city. (see <https://saudisnleeds.com/>)

complying with the UOL's ethical principles while ensuring the safety and wellness of participants and myself. As was the case of many researchers during the pandemic (Newman et al., 2021), I needed to modify the data collection process. Following extensive discussions with my supervisors regarding whether to delay data collection or seek new ethical approval for conducting the remaining interviews online, we decided to postpone the interviews until the lockdown restrictions were lifted.

4.6 Selecting and Developing Research Tools

The research tools are among the fundamental parts that must be considered early in the research study design not only to protect the rights and well-being of the research participants but also to understand and test their ability to interpret and attribute meaning to the subject under study (Bryman, 2016; Gachago, 2018; Almuarik, 2019). As I adopted an interpretive exploratory research design, I ensured the use of rigorously designed research tools to curate for the multiple realities constructed by the participants that managed to probe deeply into the different layers of understanding of the research subject. Creswell (2017) advises against using a single tool for collecting data and recommends using multiple sources for data collection as the most favourable for more holistic and balanced research. Thus, the following sections detail how I selected and developed these research tools.

4.6.1 Piloting Stage

Piloting a research study is highly recommended in a case study research design (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2018; Neuman, 2020; May and Perry, 2022). The piloting stage started with a limited data collection test to gain some initial experience, which helped substantially in refining the data collection tools and process, improving reliability, and foreshadowing any rising problems (Creswell, 2017; Neuman, 2020). In this study, the pilot interview, which was conducted with a Saudi participant who met all the sampling criteria, informed the approach to beginning interviews, the strategic

use of the photo-elicitation method, and how to effectively present myself as the interviewer, which can be challenging at first (Almuarik, 2019).

The participant was interviewed in a study room at the University of Leeds, with the interview lasting approximately one and a half hours. The participant was informed that her involvement was part of a pilot study. While she found the questions appropriate and relevant to the purpose of this research, she contributed to refining the interview questions by suggesting additional perspectives. In this case, the pilot interview was a valuable step, which prompted the rephrasing and reordering of questions, the incorporation of more open-ended questions to cover missing aspects, and the utilisation of probing questions to navigate resistance or vagueness during interviews (Smith and Elger, 2014). Furthermore, it enabled me to concentrate on and assess my tone and instructions, allowing for the identification and resolution of potential issues before the main interviews commenced.

4.6.2 Individual Interviews

The present research used in-depth conversational interviews (responsive interviews) for several reasons. Mainly, the interviews served the research objective of examining Saudi women's identity negotiation abroad using their narratives. In this regard, Cohen et al. (2018) recommend using interviews in research where knowledge is constructed through participants' human interactions and not external to them. Moreover, interviews were used because they aligned with the fundamental qualitative assumption that the participants' perspectives on the research topic should represent exclusively their views and not the researcher's, which is an essential tenet of this research interpretive case study design.

Furthermore, interviews offered a considerable degree of flexibility and adaptability in cases where questions were not fully comprehended, which was achieved through techniques like rephrasing, delving deeper into the issues, or repeating questions to ensure that the richness and relevance of the participants' responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Newby, 2014). With the

participants' consent, a total of 21 interviews were recorded for this research. Out of these, 18 took place in relaxed and informal settings, such as coffee shops and study rooms, and three took place in the participants' homes. The interviews typically extended from one and a half to two hours, during which participants drew substantial insights from the images they had pre-selected.

4.6.3 Photo-Elicitation

Photo elicitation, as a data collection tool, dates back to 1967 when John Collier, a photographer and researcher from a Cornell University research team, noted that using pictures during interviews enhances language usage and generates more comprehensive discussions because it helps participants overcome interview fatigue and the repetitive nature commonly associated with traditional interview methods (Harper, 2023). In this research, photo elicitation was participants-led, which means the participants were asked beforehand to present photographs that they either took themselves or outsourced and which they believed reflected their identities the most (Goodman et al., 2021; Roulston, 2023). All participants consented to display some of these photographs in this research (see Appendix B).

The principle of photo elicitation is to “elicit” deeper meanings through the narratives the participants created through the emotions triggered by viewing the images (Pafi et al., 2021). It was used in this research for several reasons. Mainly, it reinforced the participants' agency and engagement in producing data about their identities rather than using photographs as purely documentary (Palmer and Furler, 2018). This tool also assisted in capturing their experiences differently and vividly, ensuring that the content selected within the interviews was relevant to them and thus enabled exploring more sensitive issues. Lastly, it allowed participants who felt marginalised by language differences to express themselves differently (Shaw, 2013).

Despite its advantages, photo elicitation also has some limitations, such as time consumption. The time taken to conduct photo elicitation interviews is considerably longer than traditional interviews (Meo, 2010). However, this

limitation was addressed by allowing the participants to have breaks when needed. Furthermore, using photographs as a stand-alone device is not enough to generate layers of understanding of the issue under study because it hampers communication, limits the narratives, and leaves room for confusion around the interpretation of those photographs, affecting their reliability as sources of data (Shohel and Howes, 2007, as cited in Haultain, 2013). Accordingly, photo elicitation was not used as the primary tool for data collection but rather as a helping tool in the face-to-face interviews.

To sum up, the previous sections detailed the tools used in the data collection process, including the pilot stage, the individual interviews, and photo elicitation. The pilot stage served as a preliminary quality check, permitting the refinement of the research tools. The interviews with twenty-one Saudi women offered a rich, detailed source of qualitative data, which offered an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. Photo elicitation was a helping research tool along with the individual interviews, serving as stimuli for participants to generate diverse, more vivid, and relevant narratives. Overall, the combination of the pilot study, interviews, and photo elicitation proved to be a solid approach to capturing nuanced, multi-layered, and insightful data, which was thematically analysed.

4.7 Data analysis

Data analysis is a qualitative project's most complicated and puzzling phase, receiving relatively limited attention and discussion in the literature (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The imprecision in explaining certain terms describing qualitative data analysis causes a lack of transparency, hindering the reader's understanding of how data analysis was performed and how the findings were interpreted (Nowell et al. 2017), leading to the perceptions that qualitative research is less rigorous than quantitative research (Clarke and Braun, 2013). In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of preparing and organising data— transcripts (text data) or photographs (image data)— for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and

condensing the codes, and finally, representing the data in figures, tables, and a discussion (Creswell, 2017, p. 180).

The present research employs a thematic data analysis, i.e., identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Clarke and Braun (2013) define thematic analysis as a method for analysing qualitative data, entailing searching across a data set to identify, analyse, report repeated patterns, and interpret through selecting codes and constructing themes (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The rationale behind choosing thematic analysis is threefold. First, it was driven by the research objectives to understand the experiences, thoughts, or behaviours of Saudi women within data, and according to Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic analysis is an appropriate and powerful method to use when seeking similar objectives. Second, thematic analysis is a flexible *method* rather than a methodology because it does not tie to any particular epistemological or theoretical perspective. In other words, it can be used within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks and applied to a wide range of study questions, designs, and sample sizes (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

The third reason for choosing thematic analysis lies in its location across a continuum of data analysis methods, defined by the degree to which data is transformed during analysis. At one end, there are descriptive analysis methods, such as topical surveys, in which the data is not significantly transformed. At the other end are highly interpretive analysis methods, such as phenomenological analysis, in which the data is transformed considerably. Kiger and Varpio (2020) suggest that although thematic analysis can be used across such a continuum, it mostly lands at the centre, where it allows the researcher to construct themes to reframe, reinterpret, and or connect elements of the data; however, it does not engage in data interpretation and

transformation to develop a theory - a primary objective of grounded theory. Thus, it perfectly suits the present research design and objectives.

01	Become familiar with the data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, jotting down initial ideas
02	Generate initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
03	Search for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering the data relevant to each theme.
04	Review themes	Checking the themes application about the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic "map" of the analysis.
05	Define Themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall narrative by the analysis, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
06	Write-up	Selecting vivid, compelling examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis to the research question and literature, and producing a scholarly report.

Figure 1: Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Thematic Analysis Framework

The research followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guideline (see Figure 1), as explained in Maguire and Delahunt (2017), which is the most influential approach in the social sciences. Using thematic analysis aims to identify themes, i.e., patterned responses or meaning derived from the data that informs the research question, which goes beyond simply summarising the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Accordingly, the following section details the six steps used in the data analysis of this research.

4.7.1 Becoming Familiar with the Data

The first step in the thematic analysis is for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the entire data set by repeatedly and actively reading through it (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process was done on four levels that were carried out simultaneously and continuously, along with taking notes and

making sense of the data: (1) listening multiple times to the audiotaped interviews, (2) translating Arabic segments of the interviews to English, (3) cross-checking the translations with the participants, and (4) transcribing the interviews fully in English. The first step of thematic analysis also included getting familiar with the second type of data, i.e., photographs. The participants presented more than fifty photographs throughout the interviews, some of which participants consented to be displayed in the research.

Attempts were made to transcribe the interviews using the software Otter.ai¹⁴, which unfortunately failed due to its poor transcription accuracy for complex audiotapes, inability to identify the end of sentences, and limited support for the different variances of English pronunciations. Therefore, most transcriptions were conducted manually using Microsoft Word documents, where photographs were attached under the respective question and response. Statements from the transcripts were highlighted to facilitate the coding process. Although themes and subthemes started to emerge while transcribing the interviews, which is common at this stage (Saunders et al., 2023), the second step of coding did not start until the entirety of the data was transcribed.

4.7.2 Generating Initial Codes

The second step of thematic analysis is generating codes by noting potential data items and other preliminary ideas (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Coding reduces the significant amounts of data into small segments of meaning thoroughly and systematically. A code is the most basic and sufficiently well-defined segment of the raw data that can be assessed meaningfully regarding the subject under study, which fits logically within a larger coding template and does not overlap with other codes (Naeem et al., 2023). Despite the many computer software applications facilitating clerical tasks associated with the

¹⁴ <https://otter.ai/> is a software used to record and transcribe conversations in real-time for meetings, webinars, virtual events, or in-person (Agbede, 2022).

manual coding and retrieving of data, such as Nvivo, MAXQDA, and Atlas, they were disregarded in this research as I found them challenging to operate. Consequently, I manually coded the data to avoid unnecessary anxiety (Gachago, 2018), allowing for more familiarity, immersion, and direct interpretation of the data.

The process of coding started immediately after translating and transcribing all the interviews. First, I used manual line-by-line open coding instead of computerised word queries to avoid the 'partial retrieval of information' often associated with the latter as they disregard having multiple synonyms for the same word (Brown et al., 1990). Using this technique helped to manage, locate, identify, sift, and sort the data (Bazeley, 2013). There were no pre-set codes; rather, they were developed and modified as I worked through the coding process (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The participants' responses were scrutinised for patterns, repeated meanings, relationships, and diversities instead of coding every sentence of their interview transcript.

Second, any segments capturing something important and relevant about this research or specifically addressing the research question were highlighted, noted, and stored in a code folder. I started by coding one transcript manually using hard copies of the transcripts, pens, and highlighters, which allowed me to develop preliminary ideas about codes. However, instead of applying the preliminary themes to the whole body of data to search or retrieve parts of labelled data, I looked at the other parts separately and then categorised them. This process, known as *non-cross-sectional analysis* (Mason, 2002), generated new codes along with the initial ones that sometimes had to be modified, forming the code templates (see Table 2).

INTERVIEW EXCERPT	CODE
<i>“Many of my friends, when they moved abroad, would complain that they do not belong or fit in in their new place, that they</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Active social life> A shared feeling of not fitting in

<p><i>miss their old selves after a while, which is absolute nonsense to me. There is no old or new self; it is all you but with new updates, and we must be at peace with all those updates. Otherwise, we would be prisoners of all sorts of external factors that we believe separate the so-called old and new selves.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> A shared feeling of homesickness> Marking differences> perception of the self> perception of the external factors
<p><i>“We are Muslim people because we were born in Muslim families, which means we came in contact with Islam the second we were born. However, as individuals, we must take it on our own to study and understand Islam and other religions to choose it out of conviction rather than remain a dull follower.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Religion is inherited> Faith is a personal journey> Difference between religious conviction and mere following.

Table 1: Sample of Coded Data from the Interviews

Table (2) illustrates some codes resulting from reflexive thinking and immersion in the data, followed by a thorough search for themes and subthemes. At this level of a broader analysis of codes, items that were conceptually inconsistent or had low reliability were excluded from the final version.

4.7.3 Searching, Reviewing, and Defining Themes

The next step in the thematic analysis is to search for themes from the generated codes, followed by a thorough review and definition of the identified themes. A theme is “a patterned response or meaning” derived from the data that informs the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Accordingly, a theme is the outcome of coding; it is an abstract entity encompassing more data interpretation and integration, which can be identified regardless of how often a related idea appears in the data set. In

other words, the significance of a theme is not, by definition, reflective of the frequency with which it appears in the data but by providing substantial insights that address the research questions. Identifying such themes is the researcher's responsibility (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

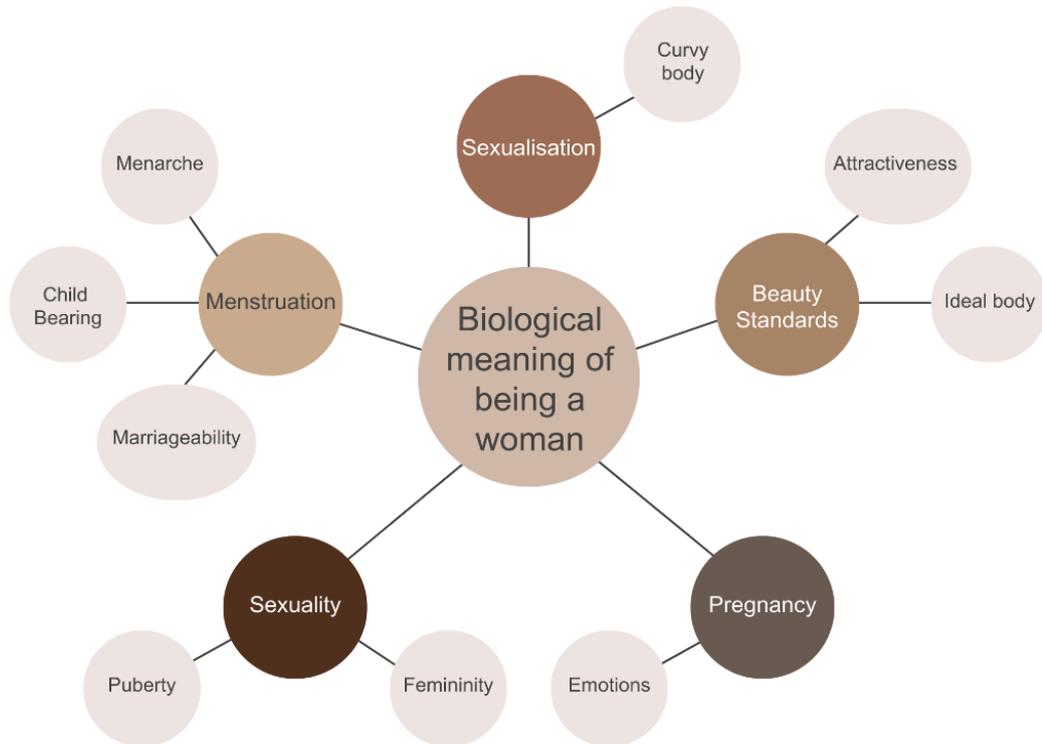


Figure 2: Macro-level Thematic Map for Gender Identity

The themes in this research did not simply emerge from the data but were constructed through analysing, combining, comparing, and even graphically mapping how codes relate to one another (see Figure 2). In other words, this research derived themes inductively to provide a broader, more detailed, and more layered analysis of the entire body of data, enabling the reader to properly interpret and contextualise the findings (Varpio et al. 2017). Figure (2) is an example of how codes were connected to build the category of biological understanding of being a woman, which, along with other categories, forms the initial subtheme of gender identity. These codes and categories were identified by asking how this unit or expression answers the research questions.

The themes were identified to address the research questions about the identity negotiation of Saudi women abroad in light of social and religious context change. They were reviewed at two levels. At the first level, I reviewed whether the codes fit properly and whether the data supporting each theme were coherent and consistent (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). At the second level, I reviewed whether the themes identified fit meaningfully within the body of the data and ensured that the data was accurately and adequately represented by the thematic map (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After refining the thematic map (see Table 3), I ended up with four main themes that became the main headings of the four analysis and discussion chapters: 1) *Identity Dimensions*, 2) *Identity, Norms, and Traditions*, 3) *Identity and Religion*, and 4) *Identity and Change*. Every main theme was divided into subthemes.

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Focus Area
Dimensions of Identity	Approaching Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and articulating identity • Context relevance • Social roles
	Approaching Womanhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biological understanding • Social understanding • Womanhood through a generational lens
	Approaching Nationality and Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a Saudi woman • Being an Arab woman
Identity, Norms, and Traditions	Saudi women and tribes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance of the tribe • Influence of the tribe • Engagement with the tribe
	Women and Social norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Work • Marriage
	The Masculine Figure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and male guardianship • The men in their stories
Identity and Religion	Women and Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religiosity vs Spirituality • Practitioners and non-practitioners

	Women and Saudi Islam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Emancipation Myth
	Women and the Quran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrongful Interpretations • Ignored Equality
	Women and the Hijab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than a piece of clothing • The Abaya
Identity and Change	Identity and Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home as a state of mind • Home as a place • Home as people • The “<i>Real me</i>” is when I am home
	Identity and Geographical Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of geographical location on identity through the dress codes
	Identity and Mixed-gendered Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interactions with men influence how the participants perceive themselves.
	Identity, Loneliness, and Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the influence of self-dependence and the resulting loneliness on how <i>WOMEN</i> constructed their identities abroad.
	Identity and Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The English linguistic efficiency and its impact on how <i>WOMEN</i> perceived and expressed themselves abroad.

Table 2: Thematic Map

To summarise the previous section, this research adopted a thematic analysis approach to examine, discuss, and present the findings. It followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step guideline, in which it started by getting familiarised with the data, moving to generate initial codes, passing by the step of searching, reviewing, and defining themes, and completing with writing the findings report, which, in this case, are the analysis and discussion chapters.

4.8 Research Limitations

Although research on Saudi women's identities abroad is intriguing, informative, and constructive, it has its limitations, such as the religious and cultural sensitivity and bias of the population examined, representativeness, generalisation, and social desirability bias. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial to an appropriate, valid, and reliable interpretation of the findings and relevant recommendations for future research, aiming for a more refined understanding of Saudi women's identities abroad. Therefore, all the limitations mentioned below were addressed, and proper measures were taken to mitigate them in chapter nine. Still, addressing them briefly at this stage is beneficial to prepare the reader.

The first identified limitation is the constantly evolving nature of identity. Any research on identity at a specific time, including the present research, may not entirely capture the fluidity and changes of identity over a longer period. Therefore, more longitudinal research could cover the tracks, development, and construction of Saudi women's identities abroad, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the factors affecting them. The second limitation is the sensitivity of the contexts examined—social, cultural, and religious—and the case study. Researching Saudi women abroad requires a deep understanding of how nuanced and sensitive Saudi society is. Part of addressing such a limitation is for the researcher to be conscious of the potential biases, misconceptions, and preconceived ideas and notions that could impact the data interpretation's validity and reliability. For the researcher to familiarise themselves with the participants' cultural, social, and religious backgrounds is very important to minimise the impact of such a limitation and to ensure an accurate representation of the research participants.

Due to the methodological approach adopted, the limited accessibility to participants, and their potential unwillingness to engage in sensitive topics, the representativeness of the research findings might be challenged. Moreover, factors like age, educational level, family status, socio-economic

background, and cultural and religious beliefs render each participant's identity and experience unique, which might affect the ability of the findings to fully capture the diversity within the Saudi female diaspora in the UK. Another identified limitation of this research is the social desirability bias. Considering how the main tools of data collection are in-depth interviews and photo-elicitation, which are mainly self-reporting tools, there are potential challenges to the accurate articulation of identity. In this context, social-desirability bias might influence the participants and how they present themselves, mostly in a more desirable and socially acceptable manner. Therefore, such bias affects the validity and reliability of the findings. Before moving to the last step of thematic analysis, I added another section to this chapter, in which I detailed the participants' profiles to familiarise the reader with the *WOMEN* of this research.

4.9 Introducing the Participants: *WOMEN*

This section introduces the research participants' profiles, consisting of their code names, ages, marital status, children/free, educational level, employment status, length of stay in the UK, religiosity, un/veiled, and other individual characteristics of each participant, in a detailed yet anonymous way as a reference for the reader to (re)visit whenever needed to (re)acquaint with the participants. It is worth mentioning that, initially, the code names of the participants were to be colours, which were to be used to create a digital colour palette symbolising this research. Each participant was asked to choose the colour representing her the best. Sometimes, participants' choices overlapped, and they were happy to choose other shades of the same colour. However, because the participants preferred to keep their Arabic names, which I could not use due to research ethics, colours were replaced by other pseudo-Arabic names. Although the *Identity in Colours* project was discarded in this research, I still inferred from its concept while producing this section.

Participants	Profiles	Age
Aisha	Nutritionist, single with no kids, veiled and has a moderate alignment with religion. Has been in the UK for more than ten years. Comes from a very conservative and tribal family and has a supportive father.	36
Aseel	A PhD researcher, married with one daughter, veiled with a strong attachment to religion, and has been in the UK for more than six years. Comes from a very conservative family and has a strong attachment to her father	27
Asmaa	A PhD researcher, married with no kids, unveiled and non-religious, and has been in the UK for more than seven years. Comes from a very conservative and tribal family and has a supportive husband.	29
Djihan	The founder and manager of a women's non-profit association, married at the age of 17 and a mother of two boys, comes from a conservative Saudi household and has been in the UK for more than 15 years. Veiled with a strong attachment to her tribe and has a moderate alignment with religion.	40
Farah	A dentist, married and has a son, lived in the UK for more than six years. Has a strong attachment to her small family and has a supportive husband. She has a strong attachment to her religion and has a Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BChD).	36
Fatimah	Housewife, married at the age of 27 as a second wife, has a son, comes from a conservative Saudi household and has been in the UK for over seven years. Veiled and very patriotic with a strong attachment to religion.	34
Haneen	A PhD researcher, born to a conservative tribal Saudi household with divorced parents, single and has been in the UK for over seven years. Veiled with moderate attachment to religion.	28
Ibtihel	A pastry chef, married at the age of 25 and has lived in the UK for more than eight years. Raised in a men's household with many brothers. Veiled with a strong attachment to her national and tribal communities. She holds a BA degree.	37
Imen	An estate agent, married with three kids, veiled, and has a moderate alignment with religion. Has been in the UK for more than twelve years. Comes from a very conservative and tribal family and has a supportive husband.	39

Iness	Born to a conservative Saudi household, got married at the age of 21 but got divorced due to domestic abuse. Has no kids and moved to the UK three years after her divorce with her family. She works as a fashion blogger. Unveiled with moderate attachment to religion.	38
Jomana	MA student majoring in Liberal arts, non-heterosexual, unveiled and non-religious, and has been in the UK for more than eight years. Comes from a very conservative family.	26
Kaouther	Nail technician, married with no kids, veiled with moderate attachment to religion, and has been in the UK for more than ten years. Comes from a very conservative family.	35
Karima	Raised by Saudi divorced parents, she married in her late 20s after finishing her studies; she is also a mother of one child. Karima had a supportive father. She works as a legal representative.	34
Khalida	Wedding photographer, single, veiled with moderate attachment to religion, and has been in the UK for more than ten years. Comes from a less conservative family.	32
Lamia	Born to a conservative Saudi household, currently a PhD researcher, married with two children and has lived in the UK for more than seven years. Veiled with moderate attachment to religion.	30
Lobnah	MA student, single, unveiled, and non-religious, and has been in the UK for more than seven years. Comes from a very conservative family.	28
Nawal	Born to a Saudi father and mother, the youngest to four sisters. A housewife married at the age of sixteen. Nawal wore the veil and positioned her alignment with Islam as mostly cultural.	32
Rima	Nurse, single, veiled with moderate attachment to religion, and has been in the UK for more than seven years. Comes from a very conservative and tribal family and has strong views on gender inequality.	37
Safia	Housewife, married with no kids, veiled with moderate attachment to religion, and has been in the UK for more than six years. Comes from a very conservative and tribal family and has a strong attachment to her family.	32
Sawsan	Raised in a very conservative Saudi family with her brothers, she is single and works as a photographer. Been in the UK for more than six	27

	years. She did not wear the veil. Her alignment with the religion was mostly spiritual.	
Souheila	Born to a conservative Saudi household, raised between the USA and KSA, married with two daughters. Has a very supportive husband and works as a university lecturer. Unveiled with moderate attachment to religion.	41
Zaynab	A PhD researcher, single with no kids, veiled and has a moderate alignment with religion. Has been in the UK for more than seven years. Comes from a very conservative and tribal family and has a supportive family.	29

Table 3: Introducing the Women of the Research

4.10 Conclusion

The present chapter outlined the methodological decisions taken to conduct this research. Both “how and why” this research fits into the exploratory qualitative interpretivist paradigm were explained in the first sections, along with the conceptualisation of research adopted in this study. The rationale behind selecting the case study approach was linked to its best suitability to produce a richly textured, multi-layered facet of identity expression and negotiation abroad in light of social and religious context changes. Furthermore, considering how crucial it is for a researcher to self-disclose, a full section was dedicated to explaining my position as an insider and outsider in this research. Moreover, multiple sections outlined the methodological choices for the data collection tools and analysis approach. This research used in-depth interviews and photo elicitation to gather data from twenty Saudi women living in the UK regarding their experiences navigating their identities following their migration. The collected data were thematically analysed. The next four chapters present the findings emerging from the identified themes.

5 Chapter Five: Dimensions of Identity

This chapter examines the research participants' narratives of identity, which are divided into three main subthemes: a) approaching identities, b) Being a Woman, and c) Being Saudi and Arab. These subthemes effectively detail the participants' identity intricacies, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the concept. The chapter starts with an exploration of the struggles participants faced when defining themselves, the way they defined themselves, and the relevant factors that affected their responses. Next, it examines the participants' narratives of being a woman, which was one of their main performative identities (Butler, 2004), by which they first and mostly identified. The last section analyses the participants' narratives on their Saudi national identity and Arabness (Webb, 2015).

5.1 Approaching Identities

All interviewees recalled stories about who they used to be, who they were, and who they aspired to become by answering self-defining questions (see Appendix 10.4). The findings highlighted how relatively exhausting, revealing, and socially or politically risky the self-identification process was, which made it difficult for many participants to access deeper levels of themselves. They also highlighted the relevance of the context in which identity was discussed because it influenced the participants' answers. The context referred to levels of familiarity, comfort, formality, and informality. Furthermore, the findings yielded the significance of the participants' social roles, such as wives, mothers, and employment positions, to their self-understanding and their salience in their self-defining process. It is essential at this stage to restate that photographs were heavily used in generating the data used in this research as part of the photo elicitation method (Croghan et al., 2008; Palmer and Furler, 2018). This method not only fostered and enriched the discussion but also assisted some participants in navigating through their experiences and enabled others to speak through pictures when words failed them.

5.1.1 Understanding and Articulating Identities

All participants were asked at the beginning of the interview to introduce themselves. Their responses varied from long to short and from concise to very detailed sentences. While a few participants opted for only their names and nationalities, others had additional layers to their answers, such as age, place of birth, marital status, schooling, and working positions. The findings suggest that the variance in responses stemmed from three main reasons: the easiness or difficulty of understanding and thus articulating different parts of identity, the political or social risk self-identifying entails, and the level of comfort and security felt during self-identifying. Self-knowing is within all people, yet it requires more effort to articulate (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Bauman, 2004). Many participants faced difficulties understanding, wording, and articulating the different parts of their identities, which resulted in short and less detailed responses at the beginning of the interviews.

For instance, the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Safia, rarely engaged in self-identity reflection or conversation. Safia explained that with her time fully dedicated to her family and house chores, she had less for herself. Nevertheless, she attested that knowing herself more would be “*shocking yet interesting and important.*” According to Safia, “shock” referred to the undiscovered parts of herself that she was not ready to face. Likewise, the thirty-seven-year-old nurse, Rima, explained that, although she rarely did it, reflecting on her identity should be a regular activity, considering how evaluative and formative it can be. In this regard, Rima asserted,

“I have never questioned who I am and the important parts of my identity in a straightforward way. It feels ridiculous that we never care to know who we are, though we pretend that we do all the time. I think it is because we do not have time for that because we are so consumed by life. I also think that topic is scary and tiring.”

Rima highlighted the fear and fatigue she and other participants often felt when engaging in self-identity talk. For example, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD student, Zaynab, conceded that she often ignored self-defining questions

because they were complicated and usually led to unpleasant facts and realities about herself. Zaynab mentioned that the go-to answers in general situations where a self-introduction was needed were her name, nationality, and, sometimes, profession. However, she often felt blocked in situations requiring deeper, more thorough answers. Zaynab affirmed,

“The question always makes me realise I do not know who I am. I often see myself as ‘Folan’s’¹⁵ daughter or sister. I also feel obliged to see myself as ‘Hurma’¹⁶ [...] I think I am more than that, but I do not know who or what exactly that is.”

The excerpt suggests that Zaynab’s identity was a site of uncertainty and confusion. Given how her self-understanding mostly depended on her relations with her family and others’ opinions of her, Zaynab struggled to conceptualise her identity outside of her social role as a daughter and her gender identification as a woman (*hurma*). The excerpt also highlights the salience of Zaynab’s social roles in constructing her self-understanding and how these social roles are mostly shaped by others’ perceptions and social expectations of Saudi women. The findings suggest that these expectations, as coercive external agents of categorisation, had overridden Zaynab’s self-understanding; therefore, she struggled to identify and express other parts of her identity, which she described as “*more than that.*” This finding reflects Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) argument that social factors can overwhelmingly override self-understanding.

Safia, Rima, and Zaynab discussed how self-defining and articulating identity were two challenging and revealing tasks they often deliberately overlooked. Their narratives mirror the findings of Alsheri et al. (2019) in their work on the Saudi transnational population and how their identity values relate to their origin and host cultures. Their findings highlight the difficulties many

¹⁵ The masculine *fulan* and feminine *fulana* refer to a placeholder name or a generic name for a person used when a name is not known.

¹⁶ The Arabic translation for sanctity often used to refer to someone’s mother, sister, wife, daughter, and any female relative.

participants encountered when accessing deeper levels of self-understanding, either because of the difficulty of the task itself, which they considered a philosophical dilemma or because their sense of self was blurred due to long exposure to the host social values. The participants' narratives also align with Côté and Levine's (2016) discussion on how people approach identities, in which they argue that questioning identity is a luxury enjoyed by those who are free from subsistence conditions, in contrast to those who are constantly preoccupied with maintaining their lives— basic survival needs.

Côté and Levine's (2016) argument posits that only when the fundamental needs are met do people have the luxury of questioning more abstract and philosophical aspects of their existence. Accordingly, and by most accounts, most people would take the ready-made answers about who they are by religions at a personal level and by societies' rigid structures at a social level. While Côté and Levine (2016) argue that such a luxury was more relevant in the historical era, these research findings suggest the opposite. Access to such a luxury is limited even in the modern days, and any attempt to ponder identity questions without securing the fundamental needs first would result in struggles, confusion, and persistent avoidance of the topic, as exhibited by Safia's narratives. Additionally, the findings suggest that the three participants struggled with identity anxiety, which refers to the feelings of novelty, unfamiliarity, and overwhelmingness often accompanying the personal task of forming major aspects of identity (Côté and Levine, 2016). Probing on identity is not universally agreed to be a positive experience. On the contrary, it often leads to unpleasant outcomes, especially when the different forms of identity ascriptions are objects of reflection, revolt, and challenges.

Some participants found revealing who they were hard and challenging due to associated social risks, including, but not limited to, social stigma, discrimination, lawful implications, physical and mental well-being, and access to opportunities (Alsheri et al., 2019; Al-Rasheed 2019). For example, Sawsan, the twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer, hesitantly showed a picture of herself in a two-piece swimming suit on Blijburg beach in

Amsterdam. Sawsan went back through the entire process of taking the picture and said,

“... I know it is silly, but I did not want anyone to see me nor take the picture because no one knows I wore that [the swimsuit] ... I sincerely do not know what would happen if they knew I wore that.”

In Sawsan’s excerpt, ‘they’ refers to her parents, brother, extended family, and society. Despite the inner conflict Sawsan had with how she wanted to express herself freely, without any fear of being judged, condemned, or even punished, she admitted she needed the interference of her family and society to nurture and confirm her views about herself. Sawsan’s need for her family and surrounding to nurture and confirm her self-views echoes Swann’s (1987) Self-Verification Theory, which posits that individuals often need other’s validation of their views to maintain their perceptions of themselves as stable and the social world as predictable. However, there is a clear distinction between how Sawsan perceived herself as free, non-conservative, unveiled, and open-minded and how her family and Saudi society perceived her as the opposite of all that.

Sawsan’s narratives reflect some identity denial experiences and self-concept uncertainty (Garr-Schultz and Gardner, 2019). Identity denial — the rejection and invalidation of a person’s self-identified and performed identity by others or social norms and expectations— negatively impacts self-concept clarity (Garr-Schultz and Gardner, 2019). It is a self-verification threat associated with lower well-being and higher self-conflict, which evokes an ‘identity striving’ to reclaim the denied identity. It also interferes with the need for social belonging, which can result in masquerading one’s identity for the sake of the group’s belonging. For Sawsan, belonging mattered more than being her true self. She needed her family’s validation and approval; therefore, she kept her self-views hidden because her family and society would have denied them. Family represented the scale by which Sawsan could know if she was on the right path or deviating; even if Sawsan sometimes disapproved of their approaches and ideas, she still needed that scale.

The case of the twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher, Asmaa, is another example of the social risk associated with articulating identities. In a nightclub in London, Asmaa celebrated the 2017 New Year's Eve with her friends, which she commemorated with a picture she displayed in the interview. The picture was Asmaa holding what she described as her "*first glass of real Champagne*" (see Figure 3). Asmaa was asked about her alcohol consumption in Saudi Arabia, given how the manufacture, distribution, and use and drinking of alcoholic beverages are legally prohibited in accordance with Sharia law (Mia, 2022). Asmaa confessed that how she self-expressed, dressed, and behaved differs significantly in Saudi Arabia compared to the UK, including alcohol consumption. She reported that her clothing would be more modest, her language more formal and less controversial, and she would practice religion—praying and fasting.

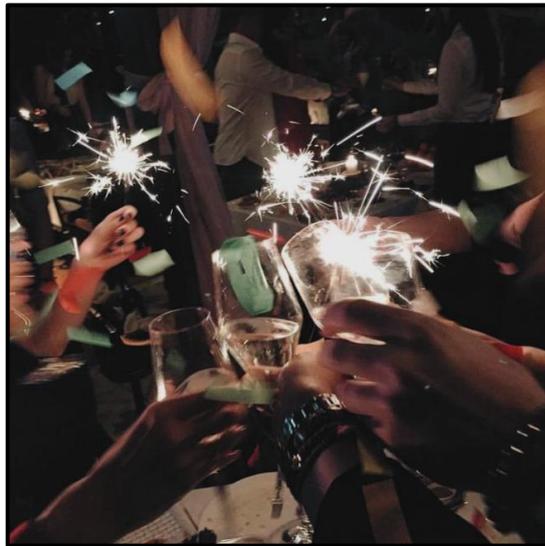


Figure 3: *Another life* (Asmaa, 2019)

The contrast in how Asmaa behaved and expressed herself in the two settings stemmed from her need to play a role that would not cause her family and in-laws shame, even if such a role does not fully represent her. In other words, Asmaa had to perform a practical identity, which refers to a characterisation of who or what people are, which entails particular reasons for acting (Schofield, 2019). Refusing to act according to those characterisations implies

a clear rejection of a certain practical identity. Schofield (2019) further explains that practical identities or selves characterise socially constructed roles—being a mother, wife, daughter, lawyer, or student— associated with a broad set of practical motives and expectations. For example, as a daughter-in-law, Asmaa had to act in a way her in-laws would approve of and encourage her, even if it conflicted with her less conservative and more liberal stances. Refusing to act according to these characterisations of a daughter-in-law would imply Asmaa's rejection of that practical identity, which could lead to negative implications, such as divorce.

Sawsan and Asmaa aspired to be their true selves within their surroundings, yet they felt obstructed and could only do so when they were abroad, where the sources of that obstruction were absent. They balanced their identities according to their surroundings by being conservative in Saudi Arabia and liberal elsewhere. Their true identities did not fit the standard pattern of how Saudi women should be— conservative, dressed modestly, does not consume alcohol. They felt alienated and, therefore, had to put forward their practical identities, reflecting Zhang and Alicke's (2020) argument on the true self. In their study, Zhang and Alicke (2020) examine the concept of the true self and propose that individuals may undergo transformations or behave differently than their perceived true selves. This contrast in behaviour and self-representation is associated with the perception that their genuine identity is restricted or deviant from the norms in a specific context.

5.1.2 Context Relevance

Asmaa, who used her picture with her friends on New Year's Eve (see Figure 1), initially introduced herself with a brief statement: *"I am me; I am Asmaa."* Asmaa decided to reveal only her name at the interview's outset because she was in the process of evaluating whether she could express herself without encountering judgment or misconceptions if she provided more extensive and detailed responses. Similarly, the twenty-seven years old freelance photographer, Sawsan, drew upon a photograph she selected for the

interview—holding the first plant she had ever bought when she moved to her first apartment in the UK— and said, “*I am Sawsan, just Sawsan for now*” (see Figure 4).

Sawsan decided on that specific photograph because it represented that being alive was what defined her. Maintaining the plant in the photograph symbolised her efforts in maintaining herself. Despite how “poetic” her response was, it was still a short statement, which reflected how reserved she was at the start of the interview. In this regard, Sawsan explained how disclosing different parts of herself required a certain level of comfort and security. In Sawsan’s words, comfort and security equated not being judged or socially condemned. In essence, both interviewees began with concise replies as they needed to assess the safety of disclosing their identities.



Figure 4: A happily living creature (Sawsan, 2021)

In similar cases like Sawsan and Asmaa, where participants needed reassurance to discuss themselves, I had to establish *rapport*. A *rapport* is “*the difference between success and failure in obtaining the required data*” (Thwaites, 2017, p. 1). It requires the researchers to reduce or possibly suspend their strongly held viewpoints, to work hard on their emotions to

ensure they conceal their true thoughts, and to adopt an attitude of trust and mutual understanding. Considering the possibility that the participants' accounts could include sensitive narratives, which they might hesitate to share, I had to protect them from feelings of exploitation by making them feel at ease to share their stories by sharing some of my own, which created a sense of togetherness and closeness during the interview (Oakley, 2015) (see section 4.2.1).

In contrast to Sawsan and Asmaa, whose answers were concise, other participants used significantly longer sentences, reflecting their comfort level and readiness to engage with all parts of their identity. For example, the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher, Aseel, included her name, research field and topic, marital status, country, and city of origin. Additionally, she affirmed that she only regularly introduces herself as such if it is in a proper context. In Aseel's words, context referred to the formality level of the conversation, which, she explained, the more formal it was, the harder she would try and feel intrigued to produce detailed answers. Aseel's explanation reflects her level of awareness and control over her answers, which enabled her to dictate the tone and the outcome of her interactions.

Similar to Aseel, many other participants associated context with the quality and length of their answers. For example, the thirty-five-year-old nail technician, Kaouther, and the thirty-six-year-old nutritionist, Aisha, argued that how they self-defined depended heavily on where and by whom they were asked. First, Kaouther focused more on the need for the interview to be in a judgment-free context. Kaouther believed that she, similar to all women in Saudi society, also feared social rejection or alienation if she did not fit Saudi society's constructed norms and standards (see Chapter Six). In this regard, she stated,

"The more judged I feel, the less I reveal about myself. It is not that I am afraid or ashamed of who I am; I just do not want to be the odd one."

Kaouther cared a lot about how others perceived her, especially her family. For instance, she explained that if she had been interviewed in Saudi Arabia, where the possibility of me meeting her family would have been significantly higher than in the UK, she would have probably refused to participate in the research. The reason for that was her fear of being an unconventional Saudi woman per the Saudi social norms, and if her family came to know about that, they would be 'ashamed.' Kaouther's narrative mirrors the idea of a "regime of shame," which is highly maintained and reinforced in Saudi Arabia (Al-Saadoon et al., 2020; Alfurayh, 2021). The family-oriented nature of Saudi society perpetuates this regime, in which an individual's conduct would impact the entirety of the family, whether in a matter of pride or disgrace (Altuwajiri, 2018).

Second, Aisha, the thirty-six-year-old nutritionist, gave a different example of how important the context of the self-defining questions is to the nature of the responses given, in which she focused on 'who' asks the questions. Aisha argued that she shares details of her "*most real self*" when she ensures that what she says will not be used against her. She gave the example of conversing with her best friend, with whom she would be more comfortable compared to her family, who would weaponise what she disclosed about herself if it did not conform to their expectations. In this regard, Aisha stated,

"If you read my WhatsApp conversation with my best friend and see how I talk with my parents, family, and colleagues in class, you would think it is two different people."

The excerpt implies that Aisha's communication style, behaviour, and how she carries herself differ significantly based on the individuals involved. This contrast reflects her adaptability in expressing her identity to suit different relationships and social contexts, which implies having two forms of the self: true and practical. The true self is the true aspects of the self that are not expressed to others, i.e., the essence of being, representing a person's authentic nature, values, beliefs, and innermost aspirations, away from external influences or social expectations, and which are constructed through self-questioning and discovery (Schlosser, 2020). On the other hand, the

practical self is how people express, present, and behave in different situations and contexts to navigate their daily interactions with the social world, including their roles, responsibilities, and behaviours, used to adapt and conform to social expectations and norms and fulfil specific responsibilities or roles (Schofield, 2019).

The findings highlight that, in identity talk, the context is very significant because it affects the interpretations and appropriate responses to '*Who are you?*' For example, in a personal introduction, people give more simple and casual answers to initiate conversations. However, in an identity exploration situation, which is a deeper and more reflective context, asking self-defining questions can be a profound existential query that requires individual reflection on values, beliefs, life experiences, and self-understanding. Furthermore, context can also differ in terms of the interlocutors and audiences. Talking identity with someone familiar results in different responses than with a stranger. In this regard, Marsden and Pröbster (2019), in their study on German women in Tech, argue that people construct several identities amid different interplays, and to understand them the best, they must be considered in their interplay. Accordingly, the best way to study individuals' different identities interplay is to locate the context within which they present themselves.

5.1.3 Social Roles

Many participants used their social roles to discuss their identities. For instance, the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, explained that she understood herself best through the roles she performed daily, mainly her domestic roles as a mother and wife. When comparing herself before and after moving to the UK, Karima affirmed that, in contrast to her behaviour, beliefs, and habits, her social roles as a daughter, wife, and mother did not change. Therefore, she chose to build her answer to '*Who are you?*' on the "*steadier grounds*" of her social roles. Furthermore, Karima explained that these roles defined her identity because they reflected her womanhood, which she described as unchangeable compared to being an employee or friend (see

section 5.2). Karima used different photographs, including one of her son's birthday, to define herself. Karima stated,

"I am a wife, a mother, a very hard-working employee, and a very good friend. A simple but very important answer to me, to who I am and my identity."

Similarly, the forty-one-year-old lecturer, Souheila, explained that identifying herself through her social roles was important to eliminate misunderstandings, which often resulted from disclosing excessive and thorough details, such as social and religious beliefs or political affiliations. Souheila further argued that these details mark people's differences, which can lead to critical situations and misunderstandings. In her viewpoint, people can easily be 'othered' and thereby marginalised if they disclose more than what a particular context requires.

Souheila identified as *"a 41-year-old woman from Jeddah; a wife and a mother of fourteen and thirteen-year-old girls, and a lecturer"*. Souheila explained that being a wife and a mother was significant because it fulfilled her personally; nurturing, caring for her husband, and being in charge of her daughters' needs satisfied her. Being a lecturer, on the other hand, fulfilled her professionally; imparting knowledge as a lecturer brought her a sense of purpose and achievement. These social roles were not only central in situations requiring basic information, but they were also the most socially salient aspects of Souheila's identity.



Figure 5: *His Seventh Birthday* (Karima, 2021)

Karima and Souheila based their self-understanding and presentation on their social roles, notably the expectations, responsibilities, and privileges attributed to those roles. The majority of academic works on social roles and identity argue that there is an important consistency between the roles a person performs daily and who that person is (Parsons, 1951; Stryker, 1968; 2002; Wolfensberger, 1992; 2011; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Turner, 1978; Biddle, 1986; Goffman, 1987; 1990; 2022; Carli, 2015; Stets et al., 2020; Burke and Stets, 2023). Role theory posits that social roles are important to the person experiencing and performing them as much as to the person observing them because they offer an extent of predictability, allowing the identification of the self and the other. Furthermore, social roles are contextually salient; different roles are more prominent at a specific time, location, and circumstances. According to the participants' narratives, the most salient roles were associated with womanhood, especially motherhood, which will be discussed next.

5.2 Approaching Womanhood

The data highlighted multiple narratives of womanhood, a term considered among the hardest words to define today due to the evolving gender norms, diversity, inclusivity, cultural variation, and the recognition of individual and intersectional experiences (Moore, 2022). The following sections examine the biological and social meanings participants attributed to being women, the generational differences in approaching womanhood and how they impacted the participants' perceptions of their identities as women, especially as mothers. The majority of the participants affirmed that womanhood was something they often questioned in light of their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. Therefore, answering the question "*What does it mean to be a woman for you?*" was easy for them to articulate. The responses varied in terms of emotional and verbal engagement. Some answers were delivered with enthusiasm, appreciation, honour, and pride; others, on the other hand, were produced with more apathy, depreciation, and reproach for many reasons, the first of which was biological.

5.2.1 Womanhood through a Biological Lens

The thirty-seven-year-old nurse Rima summarised her understanding of womanhood as “*a disappointment and a source of anxiety*,” in which she referred to menstruation, giving birth, emotional fluctuation, and hormonal volatility as examples of what a human being must endure to be a woman. To explain her perspective further, Rima displayed a picture from a women’s sanitary pads advert, in which the model was “*smiling, happy, and comfortable on her period*” (Rima) (see Figure 6). According to Rima, the advert was a false image that did not describe what women go through. The negative image Rima had of the female body affected her understanding of womanhood. In his regard, Rima asserted,

“I am a woman, but honestly, being a woman is a nightmare [...] we have to bleed monthly, go through labour, and God knows how hard it is; I have not experienced it yet but witnessed many women do it in my job. I would not say I am very thrilled to try it.”

Rima’s excerpt conveys a sense of dissatisfaction and nuisance towards the biological aspects of being a woman, which she called “*challenges*.” She furthered her trepidation by voicing her desire to become a man to free herself from the “*female biological burden*” (Rima) because she was convinced “*that men have it easy compared to women*” (Rima). There are many academic studies on the challenges associated with the female body and their effect and role in (re)constructing women’s identities (Bobel et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2020; O’Neill et al., 2021). The prevailing theme shared by women in these studies is the significant correlation between their self-perception and the extent to which they considered their bodies as “*perfect and complete*,” which highlights the difficult and demanding nature of the female body for these women and Rima.



Figure 6: *We are never that happy during our periods* (Rima, 2020)

Narratives on menstruation pointed out that it was the participants' first encounters with womanhood. For example, the thirty-six-year-old dentist, Farah, explained how the transition from a little girl to a woman happens on menarche. According to Farah, womanhood had constructions centred on marriageability and childbearing rooted in social expectations and traditional gender roles. These constructions influenced many women's identities and social roles. Furthermore, Farah explained further that becoming a woman was aligned with a woman's emerging sexuality, which was mostly perceived as a threat to women's purity and modesty, often expressed through expressions like "*avoid the boys on your period*" (Farah) and "*do not get close to men when you are menstruating*" (Rima).

These narratives were consistent with the study of Hawkey et al. (2020) on migrant and refugee women's constructions and experiences of menarche and menstruation in Australia and Canada. Their study included women from Sudan and Somalia who identified as Arabs and Muslims, whose constructions of womanhood were associated with menstruation and its direct outcome of immediate marriage and pregnancy. Their study concluded that the persistent connection between menstruation and sexuality, potentially

leading to pregnancy, may cause young women to link their maturing bodies and sexuality with feelings of shame, danger, or vulnerability, consequently leading to a self-critique of their identities as women, as exemplified by Rima (Hawkey et al., 2020).

Following their migration, most participants with daughters, who either became of age or were about to, positioned menarche and menstruation differently than their mothers. They reconstructed them as a natural occurrence in and of the female body that does not require a celebration, enormous *flashy* announcements, unjustified warnings, and unnecessary anxiety and embarrassment. These reconstructions were driven by the participants' personal experiences with menstruation, mostly described as secretive, awkward, and uncomfortable. For instance, the forty-one-year-old lecturer, Souheila, recalled a common situation for menstruating women, which she named the "*walk behind me*" experience. The latter refers to one woman asking another woman to walk behind her and check for any red stains from blood leakage on her clothes. Souheila explained that the embarrassment and discomfort resulting from a positive answer to such an experiment—even in the presence of women only—would affirm and enforce the idea that once a woman bleeds, the entire world will judge her and look at her differently.

According to the previous narratives, the findings highlight a strong connection between the participants' biological understanding of womanhood and menarche, menstruation, marriageability, childbearing, and sexuality. These markers were sources of stigma to many participants because of the cultural and social representation of blood as 'disgusting,' 'dirty,' 'awful,' and 'not clean' in the cultural context of the participants' society of origin (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013, p. 12). Furthermore, the suggested connection has influenced how many of the research participants shaped their gender identities, especially following their migration. While some continued to grapple with feelings of shame, self-critique, and a struggle to reconcile the external expectations of their culture with their personal experiences and

understanding of womanhood, others repositioned their gender identities as women.

The research participants were positioned within existing cultural discourses associated with menarche and menstruation for a long period before their migration. However, while not all were able to reposition themselves, those who were able to do so did it by variably adopting, resisting, negotiating, and tailoring discourses and practices associated with menstruation, especially by creating different experiences for their daughters. These findings accord with those of Hawkey et al. (2020), who concluded that for some women, the migration process facilitates the resistance and repositioning of the discourse of menstruation; however, for others, the influence of the *home* cultural discourse may be difficult to resist (Ussher et al., 2017). The data revealed that the cultural discourse around menstruation is strongly linked to the general social discourse on womanhood, which will be discussed in the next section.

5.2.2 Womanhood through a Social Lens

The participants' accounts of womanhood emphasised the significance of social norms and expectations in shaping their comprehension of their identities as women. Their accounts touched upon notions like gender bias, femininity, and beauty standards. On gender bias, many participants reported that men were more favoured than women, regardless of which social or gender role they played. For instance, the thirty-four-year-old housewife, Fatimah, displaying a picture of herself at the age of eleven in their houseyard with her male cousins, laughed off her *boys-like* look at that age. Fatimah explained how this particular appearance was enforced upon her by her father, who had consistently desired a son due to the symbolic associations of power, honour, and physical assistance that a son represented when compared to a daughter.

This perception, according to Fatimah, was reaffirmed by her father's family, who constantly denigrated him for not having boys; it was their way of

maintaining the tradition that men are better than women. Nevertheless, Fatimah still reproached how she was forced into masculinity to fulfil her father's desire by dressing, talking, playing with, and looking like her male cousins. However, with menarche, Fatimah was abruptly pulled from the imposed space of masculinity to the unfamiliar world of womanhood. Fatimah did not know how to be a girl because she was deeply masculinised, making her transition into womanhood following her menarche overwhelmingly rushed. It was difficult for Fatimah to embrace her womanhood as much as it was for her father to accept her as a woman, as their bond was very strong.

The narratives of the thirty-eight-year-old blogger, Iness, on her divorce experience, are also illustrative of the gender bias in Saudi society and how it affected her identity. Iness, who was unjustly burdened with full responsibility for the breakdown of her marriage by those in her social circle who remained unaware of the actual circumstances of her marital life, distinctly recalled her mother's actions, which she perceived as unfair and cruel. Iness' expression of disappointment and sadness towards her mother's lack of support and gender bias she expressed in favour of her son-in-law during a life-changing experience indicates how powerful the role and dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship are in Iness' identity construction as a woman.

"I felt so bad that my mother was not on my side. You would think a mother would stand with her child, whether a victim or villain, but my mom did not. She stood by my ex-husband at first, him and not me [...] I felt that my mother did me wrong because I am a woman."

Iness' narratives raise the question of gender expectations and how social norms and biases can impact women's sense of self. While these narratives fit into gender equality discourse, they also reflect the discourse of patriarchal bargaining, which is a key concept used in feminist theories to understand why and how women become oppressors against other women while simultaneously being oppressed within classical patriarchy (Khamis, 2015; Chattopadhyay, 2017; Aboulhassan and Brumley, 2018; Ali, 2019; Mansour, 2020). Many participants agreed that women could oppress other women despite the assumption of a universal sisterhood (Chattopadhyay, 2017),

either through rejecting the everlasting fight for women's rights (Mansour, 2020), mothers policing their daughters with much greater scrutiny than their fathers (Chattopadhyay, 2017), internalising subordination, accepting marginalisation, and refusing to recognise patriarchal practices exerted over them (Khamis, 2015).

In the case of Fatimah and Iness, female relatives exerted oppression by forcing unrealistic expectations over a twelve-year-old girl who spent her entire childhood performing the role of a yet-to-be-born son or by empowering a son-in-law over their daughter in a life-changing situation. Nevertheless, both Fatimah and Iness affirmed that they were reflecting on where they stand regarding the gender biases of which they were victims, especially after their migration. They both agreed that being away from that environment, where they could have been constantly reminded of such practised oppression, gave them more space to redefine themselves as survivors rather than victims.

Oppression of women by men and other women emerged as well in conversations about femininity and beauty standards. For instance, in her definition of womanhood, Asmaa, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher, reproached the expectations, stereotypes, and preconceived images associated with being a woman, such as softness, compassion, and weakness, whereas manhood is always equivalent to power, intelligence, and roughness. Asmaa argued that women can possess 'masculine' traits and still be women, suggesting that womanhood is not limited to femininity or masculinity. Asmaa rejected confining womanhood to these notions. In this regard, Asmaa said,

"Women are not sweet toys full of compassion, and they should not be anyone's inspiration, life-bearing, kind-hearted mother. Do not get me wrong; I am happy to be a woman but not that kind of woman."

The excerpt indicates Asmaa's desire to challenge the social stereotypes and expectations of femininity placed on women. It also highlights the social division among women themselves when defining womanhood. For example, Asmaa evoked the notion of othering when she mentioned: "...that kind of

woman,” which, according to her, referred to women who “prefer to play the soft, loving, and dependent role” (Asmaa). By singling out women who perform their gender identities using soft feminine traits, which Asmaa denounced and deemed “*manipulative and pretentious*,” she acknowledged she was fundamentally different as a woman because she was not “ruining it for other women” (Asmaa). Asmaa’s narratives were not the only ones on women’s rivalry, which entails acting against each other’s interests while claiming to be ‘perfect women.’ This rivalry was often described as ‘women are their own worst enemies.’

The thirty-two-year-old housewife, Nawal, discussed another relevant topic to women’s rivalry: beauty standards. Nawal explained how she has always had a straight-bodied, slender, small-framed, petite figure, which subjected her to objectifying comments from other female relatives, in which she was constantly compared to her other ‘more feminine’ sisters and female cousins. According to Nawal, the ‘more feminine’ expression was primarily physical, including but not limited to body weight (preferably on the plus size), facial features (full lips, perfect nose, defined jawline, white teeth, and well-shaped eyebrows), clear and fair skin, and long and thick hair. In this regard, Nawal maintained,

“I was told daily to eat more and gain weight so that a man would have a thing to look at rather than a skeleton [...] I have to say that I was sometimes concerned that maybe they were right, that I am not pretty like my other sisters. I worried I was not enough of a woman to be a wife....”

The excerpt indicates that Nawal was emotionally oppressed by being constantly described as “*not a bride-material*.” This oppression obliged Nawal to conform to certain body ideals, such as gaining weight to look attractive to her relatives and society’s standards, which confine women’s worth to their physical appearance. Nawal’s narratives reflect the work of Alwulaii (2022) on men’s and women’s body experiences in Saudi Arabia, which concluded that women had to be a perfect size, not overweighted to be called “*chubby fat*”, and not underweighted to be called “*tedious and boring*” (Alwulaii, 2022, p. 44). Furthermore, the fact that Nawal started questioning her worth as a

woman because she was constantly reminded that she was not enough of a woman to be someone's bride, which, again, limits women's role within the domestic space of marriage, indicates how external validation is influential in setting a person's self-worth and self-value. Nawal inability to fulfil the social expectations of being an ideal bride put her identity and self-worth at stake.

Analysing the dynamic relationship between social ideals of beauty and femininity captures some of the difficulties the participants encountered as women in Saudi Arabia, shedding light on the obstacles inherent in being a woman in that society. In this regard, the thirty-year-old PhD student, Lamia, argued that the essence of womanhood is indeed rooted in the so-called stereotypes of being "*affectionate, soft, and pretty*" (Lamia). Furthermore, Lamia argued that conforming to these social standards grants women benefits and advantages that ease their lives, such as security, comfort, social acceptance, and more favourable treatment from men. On the other hand, defying such standards may result in reducing marriage prospects. Lamia's input reflects the work of Ghafoori and Elyas (2022) on the representation of women in proverbs in Saudi Arabia and how they reflect their society's values, norms, and attitudes.

Their findings show that women are more likely to get social approval if they comply with social beauty standards, even if they can be unrealistic and against their genetics. For instance, dark-skinned, frizzy-haired women receive more derogatory comments than others with whiter skin and straighter hair. Moreover, Ghafoori and Elyas (2022) report that the daily discourse of beauty in Saudi Arabia encourages physical appearance over intellectual abilities, especially within the marriage context, resulting in devaluing women based on shallow criteria, reinforcing stereotypes, and limiting opportunities for women to grow intellectually and use their growth in various areas in their lives. Furthermore, emphasising women's outward appearance may contribute to their objectification, promoting unrealistic beauty standards and creating insecurities, self-doubt, and low self-esteem among women defying those standards.

The findings reported that the main impacts of such beauty standards on the participants' identity formation and construction were through body shaming due to the constant comparison with the standard female body promoted by the Saudi norms, eating disorders caused by either gaining too much excessive weight or losing too much weight through self-deprivation, and the pressure to undergo plastic surgeries (nose and teeth). The work of Mady et al. (2022) and Alsharif et al. (2023) affirm that women often pursue cosmetic enhancement because of the pressure to have the standard physical that would ensure their marriageability, which reinforces the confinement of women's roles within the marriage institution as wives and mothers. Striving to meet specific beauty standards may obstruct a woman's individuality and personal style if they do not adhere to such rigid standards. Beauty trends influenced participants who underwent plastic surgeries. These participants reported that, regardless of how much they resisted such trends, they perceived themselves as falling short if they did not follow them. However, these beauty standards are being challenged based on women's values, background, susceptibility to diverse perspectives, and agency.

5.2.3 Womanhood through a Generational Lens

Most participants reported cross-generational differences in the meanings of womanhood, mostly about traditional roles and their persistence in the modern day. They acknowledged how their views differed from— and sometimes disagreed with— the views of their elder female relatives, which were confined to the traditional roles of wives and mothers. Besides three participants (Souheila, Khalida, and Sawsan), who travelled a lot during their upbringing, most participants shared similar growing settings, where women were mostly seen within domestic spaces. The constant exposure to these settings shaped many participants' understandings of themselves as women. For instance, the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Safia, inferred from her grandmother and mother's saying, *"The hell of your husband or the heaven of your family"* (Safia). According to Safia, their saying indicated how their understanding of a woman was limited to and dependent on the male's presence.

Older female relatives shaped Safia's understanding of womanhood, gender roles, and social expectations. For a very long, Safia believed that a woman's sense of being is tied to her husband and family, depicting marriage as an imperative to being recognised as a woman and divorce as a woman's utmost adversity. This belief system reflects how limited women's autonomy and agency are if they are unmarried, which Safia contested, especially after her marriage. Safia reported that she frequently felt she was meant for more than merely being a wife, pushing herself to break through traditional roles. Her narratives highlight the importance of critically examining the cross-generationally inherited social and cultural norms, including the assumptions attributed to and imposed on women.

The older generations' perception of womanhood can be situated in Yuval-Davis' *Gender and Nation* (1997), in which she examines the relationship between women's gender identity and the nation to which they belong. Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that women in religiously orthodox nations, where civic rights are marked by patriarchy, are present mostly within the confines of the private domain, whereas men reside in the public domain. Furthermore, Saudi society celebrates pious women and punishes, controls, and purges defiant ones (Al-Rasheed, 2013). It perceives women's adherence to traditions, customs, and gender roles as preserving the Saudi feminine identity and perceives their defiance as a betrayal of the nation. In line with these studies, a possible interpretation of this research findings suggests that Saudi women might also strive to maintain their traditional roles and call for their persistence to obtain social validation and security and avoid social alienation.

The narratives of the thirty-five-year-old nail technician, Kaouther, reflect the previous discussion. Kaouther drew attention to the notion of "the complete woman" with regard to traditional roles. Building on her experience with postponing pregnancy, Kaouther expressed her disappointment that, even in modern days, both her family and in-laws perceive her as "*incomplete without kids*" (Kaouther) because she deviated from her socially expected role of a mother. She criticised the fact that her husband was spared from this judgment

and social stigma, even though he was equally involved in their choice not to have children. Kaouther's narratives not only highlight the presence of double standards when it comes to the choice of not having children but also highlight how labelling women who make such decisions as "incomplete" diminishes the agency and autonomy of their womanhood. On this, Kaouther stated,

"Whenever I go back [to Saudi Arabia], especially to my in-laws, my relatives, family, neighbours, and even people who have no right to interfere in such a matter, have only this topic to discuss with me [...] It saddens me that society does not see me as a complete or a real woman without kids."

The excerpt indicates several focal points to Kaouther's self-understanding as a woman. First, it points out how Kaouther's family perceived motherhood as a role and institution defining Kaouther's identity as a woman. Thus, her opting out of such a role deemed her as "*incomplete*" with a "*deviant*" identity (Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2018). Second, the excerpt focuses on how a woman's decision is a matter of intrusive collective interference, in which many irrelevant people feel entitled to intervene and discuss, indicating a lack of boundaries, privacy, and respect for personal choices and decisions. Third, it highlights the excessive emphasis on motherhood as the women's sole role, deriving, substantiating, and strengthening the traditional gendered roles division of men as breadwinners and women as child-bearers and caretakers.

Kaouther's decision not to have children and the stigmatisation she received for such a decision is in line with many studies on motherhood and its influence on women's identity development (Laney et al., 2015; Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2018; Al Naimi, 2021; Rabaan et al., 2021). Findings from these studies conclude that childless women— either by choice or circumstances— are often looked down upon as deviant women. For example, in the context of India, Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2018) reported that women choosing childlessness are perceived to direct their lives away from the social norm of procreation or reproduction, which they further argue is very common among younger women. However, by defying the structurally embedded notions that a "true" woman pleases her husband, gives birth to a male child, and never

speaks back to her husband, these women are redefining, negotiating, and repositioning their identities as women beyond the institution of motherhood.

While many participants established the link between womanhood and motherhood while discussing the generational differences in understanding womanhood, the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, expressed a personal struggle emanating from being a mother. While she displayed several pictures of her pregnancy, Karima described how her relationship with her body affected her sense of womanhood during that period by referring to gaining birth weight, stretch marks, and hair loss (see Figure 7). Karima argued that although such physiological changes in her body were foundational to her understanding of the collective sisterhood of mothers—her relationship with her body within the motherhood experience made her relatable to women with similar physiological changes— they made her feel “*less beautiful*” (Karima). In this regard, Karima asserted,

“I used to be very fit before having my child. During my pregnancy, I used to eat unstopably and gained so much weight. It took me around three years or more to lose it. I hated my body then, constantly thinking if my husband still found me attractive. [...] I could relate to those women losing self-esteem and self-confidence. I was still a woman, but the question was: Was I a beautiful, attractive woman?”

Karima’s excerpt brings together womanhood, motherhood, beauty, and attractiveness. First, it reflects Karima’s struggle with her body image, which, although it offered her a sense of collectivity and belonging to a community of women with similar struggles, put her under pressure to maintain a body image ascribing to social beauty standards, expecting women to always look a certain way even after giving birth. Second, it reflects her concerns about her attractiveness as a woman, which would negatively impact her self-worth and self-views. Moreover, the excerpt summarises, in a way, Karima’s emotional journey of navigating the complexities of womanhood, motherhood, body image, and attractiveness, underlining the social pressures women face

to maintain a social standard body image even during transformational life events like pregnancy.



Figure 7: *Womanhood, Motherhood, and Me* (Karima, 2021)

Karima's narratives were consistent with the findings of Ghafoor et al. (2021) in their work on body image and its role in postpartum depression among Pakistani women, reporting that women's physical appearance is an important aspect in building their character and determining their state of mind and that the physical changes women experience during pregnancy and after delivery greatly affect how they see themselves and behave in a society. Moreover, Karima's concerns about attractiveness mirror Tiidenberg's (2015) discussion of the cultural importance of women being motherly, beautiful, and wifely in the Russian context. Unlike Russian women, who embodied and reinforced their femininity through online practices and exposure, Karima did not adopt any particular means of feminine embodiment. Instead, she was contented with finding emotional support in passive belonging to a community with similar concerns.

On a related note, Farah, the thirty-six-year-old dentist and a mother of one child, pointed out that her self-understanding as a woman changed after giving birth to become deeply ingrained within her role as a mother. According to Farah, motherhood offered her additional layers of self-understanding that were unavailable and unattainable by any other experiences. Farah's narratives contradict the developed theory of Laney et al. (2015), in which they argue that when women become mothers, they develop a motherhood identity either through an instantaneous identification as "mother" or through the long-term practice of mothering, which causes most of them to feel a sense of self-loss, i.e., they become defined primarily by their motherhood identity. Although women redefine themselves in various ways through motherhood, incorporating the latter as an integral part of the core sense of self can fracture their identities, wherein they either lose or compress themselves.

Farah's narratives did not imply any identity fracture (Laney et al., 2015). On the contrary, Farah explained how becoming a mother strengthened her sense of empathy and relatability to other women, femininity, and overall sense of self. Before marriage and becoming a mother, Farah's understanding of womanhood entailed "*strength, potential, and unlimited courage*" (Farah), which at the time revolved around having a career in dentistry. Because her older relatives shared an empowering image of women, Farah was encouraged to complete her studies, which fuelled her strong drive to establish herself professionally, regardless of the external social expectations and gender roles associated with women at the time. However, upon entering a marital relationship, her priorities expanded to include her professional identity and her roles as a wife and mother. Farah's narratives imply that, like the other married participants, there was a requirement to harmonise their identities as women with their roles as wives and mothers, particularly abroad, as these roles necessitated more efforts to maintain a balance between their aspirations and self-expression as women while meeting their duties within the marital context.

Womanhood, motherhood, and generational differences also intersected in the narratives of the forty-one-year-old lecturer and a mother of two children, Souheila, who discussed her struggle as a woman to perform her role as a mother adequately and properly abroad. Souheila explained how, despite her efforts not to let her professional life interfere with her personal life, she was unsatisfied with her role as a mother. Her constant preoccupation with her work distracted her attention from her two daughters, giving her the impression of falling behind compared to her mother and other female relatives and friends back in Saudi Arabia. The heavy responsibility, lack of extended family support, and having to run a professional and domestic life affected how Souheila perceived herself as a woman in light of her role as a mother. In this regard, Souheila mentioned,

“I feel sorry for my daughters sometimes. They come from school and do not find me there welcoming them as my mom did. I know how knowing that my mom was always home waiting for me used to make me happy, and it saddens me that I am depriving my daughters of such a feeling unwillingly [...] I mean, what kind of a mother and a selfish woman I am.”

Souheila's statement indicates many sites of struggle and emotional turmoil, affecting her self-perception as a woman. For instance, her inability to provide a close or similar level of presence and welcome to her two daughters, as her mother did, inflicted upon her motherly guilt of unintentionally depriving her daughters of the same comforting experience she had as a child. This parental guilt impacted her emotional vulnerability, questioning her sense of womanhood. This interpretation reflects the challenges mothers, particularly, and parents, in general, face while tending to their children's emotional well-being. Moreover, the excerpt touches on some social expectations of women to be “perfect mothers,” which is unrealistic. Even though Souheila did not receive any criticism from her daughters or husband, for that matter, she still fell victim to feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism that defied her identity as a mother and, thus, a woman, reflecting the pressures women may feel to comply with the perceived standards of motherhood.

The findings from Souheila's narratives are consistent with Bhambhani and Inbanathan's (2018) argument that the excessive emphasis on women's mothering role promotes it to be compulsory by setting, sometimes unrealistic, conditions to be a "good mother", which often causes working women feeling of guilt for not complying with those conditions. They also reflect the findings in the work of Yaghi (2019) on Saudi mothers in New Zealand, the work of Alfurayh (2021) on Saudi women in Australia, and the work of Al-Qahtani (2021) on Saudi female doctoral students in the UK. The findings across the three studies attest that Saudi women experience various levels of dissatisfaction when performing their motherly role, especially with regard to their relationships with their children because they struggle with multiple responsibilities. Nevertheless, limited research has been conducted to thoroughly analyse the connection between this dissatisfaction and the gender identities of Saudi mothers as women in the context of living abroad.

To sum up, the documented narratives of Rima, Farah, Fatimah, Iness, Asmaa, Lamia, Safia, Souheila, and Kaouther highlighted that womanhood is undoubtedly a salient identification to this research participants. The negative and positive experiences participants had with their identifications as women maintain that womanhood is subjectively defined based on unique long-lived experiences of the female body, performed roles of daughters, wives, and mothers, and as beauty, body images and femininity. Regardless of which definition of womanhood participants adopted, according to the findings, they all agreed that their upbringing settings, including their older relatives, the social representation of women, and social expectation affected their self-understanding as women, which inevitably affected their overall identity.

5.3 Approaching Nationality and Ethnicity

The following sections analyse and discuss the participants' national and ethnic identities narratives abroad and their interactions with their overall self-understanding and identities. On the one hand, the participants' narratives indicated a shared social pressure to preserve the pious image of Saudi

women abroad, highlighting the challenges, struggles, and negotiations arising from being a Saudi woman. On the other hand, their narratives also highlighted a high sense of pride in being Saudi, which indicates a diversity in Saudi national belonging. Furthermore, data revealed an interplay between participants ethnically identifying as Arabs and their self-presentation and negotiation, shedding light on two main groups: participants who maintained their Arab roots while in the UK and those who disregarded them.

5.3.1 Being a Saudi Woman in the UK

The participants built their answers to “What is a Saudi?” on their experiences as women from Saudi Arabia rather than inferring from the stereotypical descriptive discourse on Saudi women often promoted in the media outlets for political and economic agenda (Le Renard, 2014). In other words, they offered a genuine and detailed perspective by sharing their personal experiences as Saudi women rather than conforming to a politically and socially endorsed portrayal of Saudi women. The data identified four descriptive categories from the participants’ narratives of the “Saudi woman”: “good,” “ideal,” “deviant,” and “double-faceted.” A “Good” Saudi woman adheres to the norms and expectations of their tribes, families, and society yet has limited. An “Ideal” woman was the most disliked because she represented the unrealistic version the participants were socially pressured to become— described often as extremely docile, obedient, submissive, and never confrontational, compliant, and unassertive.

The deviant, on the other hand, opposes the “good” woman because she challenges or defies the social norms, rules, and expectations placed upon women’s behaviour, lifestyle, beliefs, and choices and opts for more unconventional or controversial norms of her own. Although the word “deviant” is value-laden, the participants’ narratives indicated that, in the Saudi context, it is an identification whereby the word carries negative connotations, implying misconduct or moral judgment. Last, the “double-faceted” Saudi woman is an astute woman who adeptly navigates the dynamics and intricacies of social

acceptance without compromising her aspirations and needs. In light of these descriptions, the findings highlight the relevance of social acceptance and rejection to the participants' understandings of being Saudi, which was further linked to the narratives of honour and shame.

Numerous participants accentuated the significance of being recognised as “good” women within their families due to the fear of shame. In this context, shame was closely associated with forms of rebellion and disobedience in which women might engage. For instance, the thirty-two-year-old housewife Nawal explained that various experiences from her adolescent years were governed by the idea that independent decision-making was a form of rebellion and straying from the ideals of a “good” woman, such as her failed attempts to have her mother’s permission for overnight stays at her aunts’ houses. According to her recollections, Nawel posited that neither her mother nor she could decide on these matters, as the sole authority rested with her father, whom she refrained from approaching directly. Overstepping her mother would have been perceived as “*straying out of the right way*” (Nawel), i.e., a disrespectful and rebellious act requiring immediate elimination. Nawel further lamented,

“Just choosing to spend the night with cousins at one of my aunts was not allowed unless my father approved it, but I do not think any of my requests reached my father because my mom always rejected them on his behalf. She always thought that a girl spending a night out of her father’s house is shameful and not appropriate for a woman.”

The excerpt delves into the restrictions and the power dynamics surrounding Nawel as a Saudi woman by accentuating the substantial role of the father in decision-making, which reflects a patriarchal home structure in which the father’s permission is imperative for many of Nawal’s daily activities. It also underlines how her family constructed their understanding of a good woman based on social expectations and gender norms that had limited their daughter’s agency and hindered her mobility, autonomy, and decision-making. More importantly, Nawal’s statement reiterates the notion of shame surrounding women, which is commonly discussed in many academic works

on Arab Muslim societies, including Saudi Arabia, such as the work of Abu-Odeh (2010), Le Renard (2014), Guta and Karolak (2015), Zoepf (2016) and Altuwayjiri (2018).

For instance, in her book *Excellent Daughters*, documenting the lives of Arab Muslim women, including Saudis, Zoepf (2016) explains how shame in Arab Muslim societies is bound up significantly with the concept of honour. Women and men have different honour dynamics wherein women do not inherently possess honour but rather represent it (Zoepf, 2016). In other words, a man's honour is intricately tied to the conduct of his female kin, making them responsible for their relative males' social status within their communities. Furthermore, Zoepf (2016) argues that the traditional gender roles and norms, often constructed around maintaining honour and fearing shame, restrict women's agency and mobility, which accords with Nawal's narratives of autonomy and agency in Saudi Arabia. In essence, both Nawal's recollections and Zoepf's findings draw attention to the deep-rooted belief prevailing across generations that women deviating from the confines of patriarchal social norms would inevitably lead to losing honour and afflicting shame.

Nawal became more aware of her identity as a woman, and more precisely, a Saudi woman, after she moved to the UK. Nawal explained that the way others treated her was based on her national belonging, which was highly infused with social expectations, social pressure, and familial concerns and demanded to preserve her reputation and image of a pious Saudi woman. Like Nawal, more participants recollected experiences where their identities as Saudis caused them more trouble than any other identification, leading them to disregard it when interacting with others. For instance, the thirty-nine-year-old estate agent Imen clarified that her national identity was mostly relevant in formal administrative settings where she must provide official documents identifying her as Saudi or in her travels to Saudi Arabia (see Figure 8). In this regard, Imen explained,

“Do not misunderstand me, please. I am not ashamed of being a Saudi, but being one brings too much attention. People expect you to be rich and pay for everything; others are

surprised that you can even travel; others would immediately place you in their mental boxes that you are here as an exiled, a runaway, or that you are oppressed [...] the fewer others know about me, the better, especially for my children. I do not want them to be categorised for something they did not choose”.

Imen’s statement presents rich accounts of the complex dynamics of being a Saudi woman abroad, highlighting the interplay of her national belonging with social expectations, parental challenges, and self-identity. Her narratives resonate with several broader themes. For instance, it highlights the perpetuation of biased harmful stereotypes, which affected Imen’s ability to express one of her identities. It also reflects one of the struggles most participants faced throughout their stays in the UK: disproving the preconceptions surrounding their rights, capabilities, and identities. The fact that Imen avoided mentioning her nationality in most of her social interactions indicates how challenging it was to deal with negative biases and stigmatisation associated with her Saudi background, such as being perceived or labelled as an exile, a runaway, or oppressed. Moreover, the statement addresses the generational dimension of identity illustrated by Imen’s worry regarding her children being potentially categorised or excluded due to their Saudi background, which led her to hide her own identity.



Figure 8: *I am Saudi when I am in Saudi Arabia* (Imen, 2021)

Other participants also had less desire to disclose their national origins for various reasons. For instance, while Imen prioritised her children's identities and autonomy, some sought to assert their personal rather than assigned identities. Others opted for more control in managing the convergence of their identities as women, their nationalities, their social roles, and community members. In this regard, data reported that many participants faced social pressure from members of their Saudi communities more than from other nationalities. Numerous participants faced ongoing disapproval from fellow Saudis for not adhering to traditional Saudi social norms solely because they shared the same nationality. They primarily received criticism for altering their attire and embracing more stylish appearances, a choice often labelled as "*too Western*" (Lamia).

The thirty-year-old PhD student, Lamia, reproached how fellow Saudi women felt entitled to interfere in her life choices solely because of their shared nationality, believing it was their duty to oversee her conduct while she was abroad. Imen and Lamia's narratives reflect the concept of patriarchal bargaining, especially as discussed in Aboulhassan and Brumley's (2018) study on Arab Muslim women in America. Their findings conclude that "preserving family reputation" is the most dominant pattern of Arab women's patriarchal bargaining as migrants, especially in spaces where they can perform their autonomy and agency. They frequently apply pressure on fellow women to uphold their families' honour while abroad, which reflects the patriarchal structure of their home society. This pressure was exerted on Lamia through interference with her behaviour and clothing style.

Furthermore, Abboud et al. (2015) argue that women endowed with greater autonomy may become targets of other women in bargains with patriarchy abroad because they are more likely to denounce the normative feminine behaviour that dictates notions of piety and passivity in hierarchical relationships commonly found in the Arab world. Saudi women like Lamia become targets of criticism, discomfort, and gossip that limit their agency as women. To avoid these forms of oppressive interference, these women try to

balance two competing narratives: monitoring their behaviours to align with normative expectations prevailing in Arab Muslim societies and navigating through new host societies and (re)constructing their self-understandings and identities through their daily interactions with those societies (Abboud et al., 2015). Similarly, these research findings highlight that, apart from a couple of participants who consciously avoided their national identification in social interactions, the majority consistently and constantly negotiated their identities amid the social pressure of their Saudi communities abroad.

In contrast to the previous accounts, the data also reported narratives of pride when discussing national identity, which many participants expressed through their wide selection of photographs celebrating the Saudi national day. Their narratives reflected their opinions on how Saudi women are more economically, socially, and politically empowered than ever. For instance, the thirty-two-year-old photographer Khalida conveyed a deep sense of joy, fulfilment, and contentment with her Saudi nationality by displaying a photograph of her Saudi passport (see Figure 9). Her articulate responses accentuated the significance of her national identity in shaping her life experiences. For example, being a Saudi woman offered Khalida many empowering opportunities, including access to education, participation in the workforce, and the ability to undertake travel in ways women from other Arab Muslim countries cannot access, such as the support the Saudi government offer to male guardians of women who desire to travel abroad for higher education.

Khalida's reference to the ongoing economic and political transformations within the Saudi social landscape is particularly noteworthy because they represent a turning point in women's status in Saudi Arabia. These changes have not just supported the rise of new opportunities for women like Khalida but have also strengthened the role of national identity as a facilitating channel for their involvement in various domains inside and outside Saudi Arabia. These findings reflect Mustafa's (2017) study on the identities of Saudi women, in which he concludes that, in contrast to the widespread image of

Saudi women as passive, agentless victims and subject to continuous social injustice, Saudi women are more aware and able to understand their individuality and, thus, can appropriately and efficiently present and perform the needed subjectivity and agency required by the social structures and settings in which they find themselves.



Figure 9: *It is an Honour* (Khalida, 2020)

Similar to Khalida, other participants expressed their pride in being Saudis, such as the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher, Aseel, who explained that Saudi women are “*The most observed woman in the world*”, referring to how they are now at the centre of attention. Her statement indicates the increased presence, visibility, and prominence Saudi women are gaining on the local and global stage because of the new reforms, social media presentations, and digital participation (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). Aseel was rather very pleased with such worldly exposure because she considered it fundamental in disseminating *false* preconceptions about Saudi women as oppressed and needing emancipation. In summary, the research findings regarding the importance of national identity in the participants’ self-understanding reveal that they could acknowledge, express, and embody their identities in alignment with the requirements of their national ties while challenging

stereotypes, passive roles, victim narratives, and instead, promoting a more dynamic and empowered facet of their identities as Saudis and Arabs.

5.3.2 Being an Arab Woman in the UK

The data reported various points of discussion related to the participants' ethnic identities, such as whether being an Arab is an abstract or performed notion, a collective or individual identification, a source of pride and empowerment or shame and prolonged ethnic exclusion. These points highlight how the participants' perspectives on their ethnic identities were complex and challenging to navigate abroad. Most of the participants' understandings of being Arab women were dominated by the presupposition that proficiency in Arabic, being born within an Arab nation, or adherence to Islam. Although, these presuppositions contend with many religious, ethnic, and cultural accuracies—mainly, not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs (Issa, 2016; Harb, 2016; Webb, 2016).

For example, the thirty-two-year-old photographer Khalida defined Arabness¹⁷ as a linguistic, cultural, and behavioural heritage which transcends generational lines. Khalida's understanding emphasised the significance of Arabic as the official language and the prominence of conservatism and modesty as dominant aspects of the lifestyle distinguishing Arab ethnicity. She further argues that Arabness is a privilege conferred upon those born and raised into Arab families within Arab communities and nations. Notably, Khalida's understanding and positioning of her Arab ethnic identity were much influenced by being a descendant of three generations of migrants. She actively stressed the importance of her ethnic identity, which served as a unifying thread across her diverse national lineages that enabled her to build

¹⁷ The quality, identity, or characteristics associated with being an Arab, which emerged as an end-product of the significant success of early Islam, whereby the new religion, conquests, and restructuring of the Middle East created a new perspective through which Middle Eastern peoples understood their communities (Webb, 2016, p. 36).

a well-founded sense of self. Using a picture of her and her friends with *henna*¹⁸ in their hands (see Figure 10), Khalida explained,

“I am south-Asian, African, and Arab, and I cannot see myself detached from these ethnicities. My grandmother is from Somalia, my parents are Iraqi-born, and I am Saudi-born. Eliminating one of them means I am incomplete.”



Figure 10: *Feeling, Being, and Doing Arabness* (Khalida, 2020)

Khalida’s excerpt touches upon different themes. For example, it shows the diversity of her ethnic belonging and its integral role in shaping her self-understanding, which is multidimensional, supported by her multi-generational narrative traversing different geographical and cultural landscapes, reflecting the fluidity and adaptability of identity construction. More importantly, it highlights Khalida’s understanding of identity that counters fragmentation. Khalida considered all her ethnic origins pivotal to having a complete sense of self, which challenges the reductionist views of identity that simplify complex identities into singular categories (Lawler, 2014). She rejected binary views of identities and adopted a nuanced understanding in which multiple

¹⁸ A natural dye obtained from the leaves of the henna plant, used to create intricate and temporary designs on the skin, often referred to as henna tattoos or mehndi and very popular in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and North African cultures for its decorative and symbolic significance.

identifications coexist and interact. Khalida's conceptualisation of Arabness was deeply intertwined with the essence of being. It extended beyond external labelling or cultural marking to reflect a state of being. The way Khalida related Arabness to her sense of 'being' accentuates that her Arab identity is not a mere label but a fundamental part of her identity.

In contrast to Khalida, the forty-year-old founder and manager of a female association, Djihan, understood Arabness as a set of cultural and linguistic practices and traditions that significantly shaped her identity and influenced her interactions with the world. Djihan referred to a picture album of her family and association members celebrating events with traditional dresses, food, and decorations. Djihan was similar to Khalida in linking Arabness to the Arabic language, explaining how it connected her to the Arab lineage, from which she has been geographically detached for years. Djihan, who moved to the UK at the age of 22, expressed the difficulty of teaching Arabic to her children, which, she believed, made them less Arab. Djihan further attested,

"My son knows the Arabic of the Quran. He reads it, but I doubt he understands or uses it elsewhere, which saddens me. [...] I am trying my best with his sister; I want her to be a true Arab and be proud of it."

This excerpt puts forward the linguistic dimension of Djihan's identity. Her doubts about her son's ability to understand and use Arabic outside religious contexts reflect her concerns about maintaining her linguistic heritage abroad, which she tightly related to her Arab ethnic identity. In other words, language was a means of cultural continuity and connection for Djihan, whose attempts to preserve it reflected her desire to prevent the dilution or erosion of her ethnic identity while abroad. Critically examining Djihan's statement not only prompts consideration of the complexities associated with identity negotiation in the diaspora but also sheds light on the tension between heritage maintenance and adaptation to the host culture many participants evoked in their conversations about their ethnic and cultural identities. Djihan's narratives were consistent with Bahhari's (2023) findings in his study on Arabic language maintenance amongst sojourning Saudi families in Australia, reaffirming the

link between Arab ethnicity and the Arabic language. Bahhari (2023) concludes that the Arabic language is a source of emotional boost attaching families to their ethnic roots.

Djihan's understanding of her Arab identity included her attire, interactions with others, English with a distinctive accent, and the way she commemorated events, which implies that her ethnic identity as an Arab revolved around actions rather than merely 'being'. Although Djihan's understanding contradicts Khalida's view, it does sustain Aly's (2015) argument about the performativity of Arabness. Aly (2015) argues that Arabness is not an innate or fixed identity but rather a performative act influenced by various factors, including social context, individual experiences, and external expectations. Djihan's concern over her son's limited use of Arabic beyond religious contexts projects her desire to perform Arabness through language, aligning with Aly's argument that Arab identity is expressed and performed through specific behaviours, including linguistic practices.

The sense of honour and pride stemming from ethnically identifying as Arab expressed by Khalida and Djihan contradicts what Safia, Asmaa, Rima, Sawsan, and Karima felt towards their ethnic identities. For instance, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher Asmaa was assertive about not being identified either as an Arab or as a Muslim. Her argument posited that these categorisations reinforce political divisions and do not represent individuals' understanding of themselves. Asmaa further explained how people identifying as Arabs did nothing but strengthen her negative ethnic experiences in the UK. Building on her experience in one of the Hookah¹⁹ cafes in Leeds, Asmaa explained,

¹⁹ a place where customers can sit and smoke shisha, i.e., pipes for burning tobacco, in which smoke passes through a container of water before it is breathed in. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shisha-bar>

“Whenever I go, there has to be that Arab man with many English or European girls, and I bet the round is always on him [the one who pays], and I hate being identified with him just because we are both Arabs.”

Asmaa’s statement articulates sentiments of discomfort, frustration, and aversion to being associated with Arabs, who exhibit certain patterns of behaviours, mainly excessive wealth display (Sayfo, 2020). Asmaa deemed such behaviour an unfavourable representation of Arab identity, which was another reason for her to discard her ethnic identification. Moreover, the excerpt highlights the complex dynamics of identity construction and social representation. The way Asmaa refused to be grouped with the Arab man demonstrates her desire for the agency to define her identity and distance herself from a potentially negative image. This interpretation resonates with broader academic discussions on identity negotiation, belonging, and their impacts on people’s life experiences. For instance, in her research on belonging, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) suggests that people, throughout their lives, navigate various forms and dimensions of belonging, such as common and shared experiences, mutual connections, and emotional attachment, both simultaneously and at different times. However, there are moments in life that dictate abandoning certain aspects of belonging.

Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) further argues that some belongings are ascribed, such as ethnicity, family, and sometimes nationality, while others are acquired, such as religion and personal relations. This argument is reflected in the narratives of the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, who maintained that her Arab ethnicity was an ascribed belonging. Karima explained that being an Arab was not something she worked to achieve; instead, it was ascribed to her by being born to Arab parents, and she accepted it as part of her identity. Therefore, she could not claim any credit for her ethnic identity. Furthermore, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) upholds that although ethnicity as a collective asserted boundedness can be perennial and overpowering upon individuals, it can also be navigated through and negotiated, especially by socially mobile people. Accordingly, ethnicity

becomes an empirical matter of whether a person engages with, strives to abandon, or at least reduces their allegiance to communal ties with it. In this regard, Asmaa, who agreed with Karima regarding having no choice over her ethnicity, rejected her Arab ethnic origin.

Asmaa was not the only participant to reject or discard her ethnic identity. For instance, the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Safia, explained that she self-identified as Arab only in legal applications, questionnaires, surveys, or other administrative paperwork demanding ethnic identification. Drawing from an incident experienced at a reputable dining establishment in Leeds, Safia criticised the waiter's behaviour, who, she recalled, presented her with an inflated bill based on her presumed Arab ethnicity, inferred from her accent, leading to the assumption of wealth on her part. Safia recalled,

"I looked at the price before and faced him, but he said no, it is the right bill. I did not want to make a big thing out of it, but I knew it was on purpose, as he was waiting for a big tip."

Safia's excerpt reflects the poignant social dynamics in which she navigated her ethnic identity, surrounded by assumptions and bias inherent within intercultural interactions. Receiving an inflated bill based on the presumption of financial affluence often associated with Arab ethnic origin highlights the disadvantageous impact of preconceived notions driven by cultural markers (the accent in Safia's case), contributing to the continuity of stereotyping and misrepresentation of individuals based on ethnicity. Moreover, Safia's narrative exemplified the duality she and other participants faced in their encounters with identity-based assumptions. While she consciously adopts her Arab identity in formal and official contexts, the downsides she faced because of such categorisation obliged her to abandon her ethnic identity in her social interactions. This analysis resonates with broader discussions on identity construction, highlighting the tension between self-identification and the externally imposed labels and their impact on women's agency.

Whether it was their national or ethnic identities, all participants affirmed that both were accentuated abroad. Based on the data, although most participants

grew up subjected to a specific image of women, they all agreed that moving abroad helped them redefine and reconstruct their gendered identities in light of their assigned belonging to Saudi Arabia. Their narratives indicated a common thread of how often they felt socially pressured to be passive, obedient, excessively feminine, and full of virtue and decency simply because of their national identities as Saudis, relatively opposing their reconstructed identities. Furthermore, the different perceptions of ethnic identity highlighted in the previous sections, straying across notions of pride, neutrality, and embarrassment towards being identified or labelled Arab, were mostly relevant abroad, where the differences, stereotypes, and preconceptions were highly intensified.

5.4 Conclusion

The extensive analysis and discussion in this chapter unveiled the intricate and complex interplay intersection of individual, social, and contextual identification factors. For instance, the participants' reluctance to discuss their identities, either because of the intricate nature of the process or the inherent social risks, and the profound impact of context on the participants' responses indicated the relevance and significance of familiarity and comfort in generating authentic identity narratives. Moreover, the findings highlighted how social roles were crucial building blocks for many participants' self-understanding and identification, which drew attention to the interdependence between their identities and the roles they took on within their communities. Furthermore, examining the participants' narratives on womanhood underlines the complex intersections between biology, social expectations, and personal aspirations that shaped the gender category of the participants' identities. The substantial explorations of the participants' national and ethnic identities shed light on how they actively navigated these categories as they engaged with the different social contexts abroad. The findings indicated how their identity negotiation underpins the complexity of maintaining a sense of self while adapting to new surroundings.

6 Chapter Six: Social Norms and Identity

This threefold chapter explores the interplay between the participants' identities and tribal and social norms. It examines how the Saudi tribal system, which empowers and is powered by social norms, affects the participants' identities, self-understanding, and self-representation by analysing its relevance, influence, and the participants' engagement abroad. It also discusses the participants' attitudes towards social norms and traditions and how they interfere with different aspects of their lives, mainly education, marriage, and employment. Additionally, this chapter examines the role of the male figures in the participants' narratives as producers and enablers but also as agents fighting for the participants' rights in the face of gender-discriminatory traditions.

6.1 Women and the Tribes

The data yielded noteworthy insights into the correlation between tribal membership and the participants' self-understanding and representation, both within the confines of the Saudi Kingdom and across international borders. While there is a shortage of academic works examining specifically the interplay of tribalism and Saudi women's identities abroad, it is noteworthy that scholars such as Hakiem (2021), Aldossari and Calvard (2021), and Aldossari and Murphy (2023) explored the challenging effects of tribalism on the empowerment of Saudi women inside Saudi Arabia, contending that it fosters a strict, patriarchal, and sexually discriminatory environment.

It is a well-established understanding within the Saudi tribal system that defiance of social and tribal norms may result in punitive measures administered by the tribe (Wajd, 2019). Nevertheless, compared to men, women shoulder an excessive burden not to defy these tribal customs because they are entrusted with preserving familial and tribal honour, subjecting them to intense surveying, control, and authority. In alignment with

the dominant social structure in Saudi Arabia, the research participants were also members of tribes, varying in their social standing, influence, and capacity for intervention in social and political matters. Although certain respondents exhibited reluctance in disclosing their tribal affiliations, others were more willing to openly acknowledge their tribal ties and name their tribes.

6.1.1 Relevance of the Tribe

Many participants attached high importance to being members of powerful and well-established tribes. For instance, the forty-year-old founder and manager of a women's association, Djihan, who openly acknowledged her tribal association, posited that the stronger the standing of a tribe, the more individuals desire and actively embrace their affiliation with it as a fundamental marker of their identity. In Djihan's case, her tribal pride found expression through her retention of her family name. In this regard, Djihan expounded that, given her shared tribal and familial background with her husband, she did not have to change her maiden name upon marriage. She further noted that if she had married into a different family within the same tribe, she would have retained her father's name for its esteemed status within their societal context.

Djihan's narratives resonate with the findings of Maisel (2014), whose research highlighted the myriad manifestations of public displays of tribal pride when a particular tribe holds high social esteem. Maisel's study illustrated that such pride could manifest in other forms than marital connections between tribes, such as engagement in poetry and prose competitions, pursuing specific occupations and holding particular positions, participating in camel races, organising festivals and cultural events, inscribing tribal names as graffiti on walls and residences, and incorporating tribal codes onto one's car license plate using a three-to-one ratio (Maisel, 2014, p. 105-111). Furthermore, these insights into the public manifestations of tribal pride contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding tribal affiliations and their role in shaping individual identities within a broader transnational framework.

In contrast to Djihan and other participants who pointed out the high relevance of their tribal affiliation to their identity, others were either dismissive or neutral towards their tribal links. For instance, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher, Asmaa, the twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer, Sawsan, and the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Nawal, denied the importance of their tribes to their self-understanding. However, they acknowledged the tribal influence over their lives. The three women provided different reasons for their tribal dismissal. Asmaa discussed how her tribal connections are built through her husband rather than her father; therefore, her early development of a sense of self was not subjected to any tribal thoughts or interference. Notably, despite Asmaa's marriage to a prominent member of an influential tribe, which brought about alterations in several dimensions of her social identity (mainly dressing and "outer" religiosity), it did not significantly impact her fundamental self-understanding.

Conversely, Sawsan and Nawal explained their detachment from tribal identity by highlighting their status within their respective tribes as belonging to less-prominent families. Such a perceived lower status resulted in them feeling relatively "*neglected and avoided by the more influential members of their tribes*", as stated by Nawal. These diverse accounts challenge the solid conception of tribal identity's centrality in shaping individual self-concepts within a given cultural and societal context. For instance, Özoral (2023) argues that, on a national level, Saudi tribal identity has a defining role in its foreign policy. However, on an individual level, the role of tribal identity is more complex and unique. This argument reflects the narratives of Asmaa, Sawsan, and Nawal, which highlighted the complexity of their relationships with their tribes.

The forty-one-year-old lecturer, Souheila, maintained a relatively neutral position towards tribal affiliation. By displaying pictures of her daughters with their fathers at a dinner held by one of their family's highest-ranked tribal leaders, she explained how, as an individual, she initially did not attach great importance to tribal identity. However, her marriage and the birth of her

daughters drew her into the orbit of her husband's tribe, which holds considerable significance for him and his family. Souheila's narratives highlighted the pervasive influence of tribal structures in Saudi Arabia, even in the lives of those who may not initially prioritise tribal affiliations. Commenting on her husband's tribe, Souheila stated,

“Tribes were never a big deal for my small family, but somehow, I found myself involved in it once I got married and even more when I had my girls. Because I have girls only, they feel entitled to get involved with my family matters, even when we live far away from them.”

Souheila's excerpt indicates how her marriage within the context of Saudi Arabian tribal society has led to the merging of her identities with the tribal identities of her spouse. It is worth noting that Souheila's experience is not unique, as many women in similar circumstances find themselves navigating the complexities of familial and tribal expectations. Alwedini (2017), in her study on Saudi women's patriarchal marriage norms, argues that tribal affiliation is another patriarchal unit according to which women should behave, either in terms of their educational, occupational, or marital choices. Souheila's statement reflects Alwedini's (2017) argument and upholds the patriarchal nature of tribal authority in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Souheila's daughters' involvement in tribal matters is contingent on their gender, which highlights the traditional gender roles and expectations within these tribal structures. Her statement also raises questions about the influence of tribes beyond the geographical confines of Saudi Arabia, which is discussed next.

6.1.2 Influence of the Tribe

According to participants with tribal backgrounds, tribal membership had both positive and negative influences. On the one hand, being a member of a Saudi tribe offered some of them a sense of belonging and identity because of the strong social connections fostered within the tribal community, which provide a support system that can be emotionally fulfilling. Additionally, tribal affiliation may grant access to certain resources and privileges within the tribe, which can be advantageous in various aspects of life. For instance, the forty-one-

year-old lecturer, Souheila, acknowledged the advantageous aspect of her husband's tribal affiliation. Drawing from her experience of relocating to Saudi Arabia several years ago, she elucidated how her husband's prestigious tribal name facilitated their settlement in an affluent neighbourhood within Najd City and ensured quality education for their daughters.

The narratives of the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Safia, are another example reflecting the far-reaching impact of tribal affiliations, which extend beyond geographical boundaries. Safia emphasised the significant advantages that membership in influential tribes bestows upon women, particularly in terms of wealth and elevated social status. She recalled her own experience of financial security that she enjoyed while residing in the UK. This financial stability, attributed to her husband's employment, was facilitated through his tribal network. Safia's narratives highlight the notable reach of tribal connections in shaping the economic well-being and social standing of women, shedding light on the extent to which tribal affiliations can wield over various aspects of women's lives, including residential choices, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and financial comfort, even abroad. These narratives highlight one of the various ways tribal networks influence Saudi women's lives in terms of economic security and social status abroad.

In this regard, Maisel (2015, p.5) contends that tribalism in Saudi Arabia has transitioned from being primarily an economic support system to a comprehensive way of life characterised by shared values, customs, and a shared commitment to the hierarchical patronage system. Within this framework, tribal identity manifests through distinct patterns of behaviour and conduct. Primarily, tribal members seek support, social interaction, and economic and personal partnerships, primarily within their paternal relatives and then extending to maternal relatives. Maisel's discussions highlight one of the notable advantages attributed to tribal affiliation, that is, the ability to access better opportunities and life conditions, which underscores the social significance of tribal networks in influencing individual life choices and opportunities. However, such an advantage has its limitations and constraints,

which may be imposed on individual agency and decision-making, particularly in a rapidly evolving society.

The thirty-two-year-old photographer Khalida approached tribal identity using the collectivism and individualism dichotomy. Her experience of living in London for two years without contact with fellow tribal women prompted her decision to relocate to Leeds. Khalida characterised her solitary life in London as *“too much individualistic and much individualism is painful.”* She emphasised that Saudi society traditionally embodies collectivist values, characterised by strong kinship ties, solidarity, and unwavering devotion to bloodlines and family. The absence of these collectivist features during her time in London left her dissatisfied. While ongoing debates question the applicability and relevance of the dimensions of individualism and collectivism, originally introduced decades ago (Yi, 2018), Khalida’s observations find support in the discourse of scholars such as Al-Otaibi (2010), Cassell and Blake (2012), and Abadeer (2015), who upheld Saudi Arabia’s high scores in Hofstede’s scale of collectivism. These scholars linked this collectivism to the prevalent sense of community identity in various facets of Saudi society, including the enduring influence of tribalism, ideological congruity, and the structural integrity of Saudi families. Khalida’s narrative thus aligns with these academic views, which highlight the complex interplay of individualism and collectivism within Saudi culture and society.

Conversely, the data revealed more paradoxical attitudes towards the influence of tribal affiliation. The latter’s dynamics extend beyond mere identity to include a set of expectations and obligations, which can be restrictive and, at times, conflicting with individual aspirations. One aspect to consider is the social segregation that may result from tribal affiliations. As exemplified by the twenty-eight-year-old PhD researcher Haneen, who recalled her university experience, tribal affiliations can influence social interactions. In her case, she mentioned how girls often gathered based on their tribal affiliations, leading to an exclusionary social dynamic where non-tribal individuals felt like outsiders. This exclusionary behaviour is indicative of how tribal loyalty can lead to a

sense of exclusivity and isolation within certain social circles. In this regard, Haneen said,

“We could not have any strangers with us. I used to feel sorry for those non-tribal girls as they clearly did not fit in back then.”

Haneen’s statement aligns with the observations made by Le Renard (2013) in her study on transgressive Saudi women. Le Renard notes how the social dynamics among young women in Saudi universities mirror the tribal hierarchy present in the broader Saudi state. She argues that girls hailing from highly esteemed tribes often received preferential treatment and greater consideration compared to those from less prestigious or non-tribal backgrounds. As a member of a well-established tribe, Haneen, in line with Le Renard’s findings, maintained that similar Saudi women are often expected to conform to their tribe’s specific rules and norms to uphold the honour and reputation of their tribes. Such rigid adherence leaves little room for mistakes, even if the mistake is forming friendships with non-tribal girls, for that could be perceived as a violation. While Haneen’s excerpt reflects her internalisation of tribal norms at the time, which had a profound impact on her social interactions and life choices, it also highlights the contrast between her new beliefs and old convictions, which she argued against their persistence in her newly formed friendships.

Furthermore, in contrast to the perspective shared by the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher, Aseel, who expressed a belief that being a member of the Ashraf tribe would deter others from wronging her, the twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer Sawsan conveyed a different sentiment. Sawsan’s statement, *“May God never put a woman from the Ashraf tribe in your way”*, highlights the dual nature of tribal affiliation, wherein it can simultaneously accord social prestige and impose challenges. Both statements exemplify how the influence of tribal identity operates as a two-edged sword, deeply intertwined with one’s social standing. In a similar vein to Sawsan’s perspective, the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Nawal, also recalled her experiences with individuals from well-known tribes who actively leveraged their affiliations. For Nawal, these individuals proved to be a source of

considerable distress and difficulty in her life, further emphasising the complex dynamics and implications of tribal affiliations within Saudi society.

The issue of discrimination based on tribal affiliation, particularly targeting non-tribal or lower-ranked tribal individuals, is not a recent topic of discussion in Saudi Arabia (Maisel, 2014; 2015). However, the research findings shed light on the prevalence of such discrimination amongst women inside and outside tribal societies. According to this research findings, few participants faced criticism and exclusion from their tribes or experienced mistreatment at the hands of higher-ranking tribe members. They were frequently overlooked for marriage proposals, which had significant social and personal implications. One illustrative incident comes from the narratives of the twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer Sawsan, who recounted her experience of visiting her university to retrieve her student card. Sawsan said,

“When the woman working there saw me with one of the girls from a much-known tribe, she was all welcoming and cheerful. However, when she asked about my family name and knew my origins, she immediately changed her attitude, and instead of having my student card that day, I had to come and go for more than a week”.

Sawsan’s incident raises critical questions about the pervasive nature of tribal discrimination and its impact on various aspects of individuals’ lives, including access to education and opportunities and the extent to which such practices can be geographically transboundary .It also highlights the need for more extensive discussions and interventions to address and mitigate the adverse effects of such discrimination on individuals’ well-being and social mobility. Sawsan’s example, along with the others, indicates how the influence of the tribal membership can be both positive and negative. Interviewees from well-known and powerful tribes seem to enjoy sets of privileges that others from less-known or no-tribal families lack within and outside of Saudi Arabia.

However, along with privileges come high levels of expectations and social pressure. As Saudi Muslim women coming from strong tribes, the findings in this research highly suggest that being constantly under the pressure of

having exemplary behaviour, social image, and untarnished reputation results in having backstage self-representation, as was the case for Asmaa, who alters her self-representation when abroad (Goffman, 1990; Serpa and Ferreira, 2018). Backstage self-representation refers to an alternative behavioural self-representation free of the expectations and norms often dictated by society and, in this given context, tribes. As Cole (2019) argues, people are often more relaxed and comfortable when backstage; they let their guard down and behave in ways that mirror their true selves. For example, they dismiss elements of their appearance, change how they speak and comport their bodies or carry themselves, often necessitating a front-stage self-representation (Goffman, 1959, cited in Cole, 2019). An argument that complies with Zoepf's (2016) comments on the hidden facades of young Saudi women that often held a sense of contrast between the displayed image in the society and beneath it.

6.1.3 Engagement with the Tribe

The participants' responses revealed a clear distinction between those who actively continued their involvement in their tribes' activities and affairs, those who expressed dissatisfaction with how their lives were subject to the forceful interference of their tribes, and those who deliberately refrained from any engagement with their tribes abroad. The former group explained that their level of involvement in tribal activities varied depending on their age and marital status. Young, unmarried women tended to participate actively in organising and attending social and cultural events. In contrast, older married women assumed responsibilities that extended beyond event organisation, including coordinating events both within Saudi Arabia and locally in the UK, managing female tribal associations, overseeing marriage proposals, and engaging in various other activities.

In contrast to the commonly held belief that men are predominantly interested in and openly engaged in tribal affairs (Maisel, 2014), the research findings indicate that women exhibit a substantial level of involvement in tribal matters, albeit in different ways. Many participants emphasised that the limited media

coverage and gender-segregated environments often lead to the oversight and neglect of women's active participation and contributions to tribal events and issues. For instance, the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher, Aseel, and the thirty-seven-year-old pastry chef, Ibtihal, both belonging to the Al-Ashraf tribe in Makah, provided personal visual representations of their significant roles in female tribal activities. Aseel displayed an image of her wearing a scarf with the name of her tribe embroidered, for which she won first place in an embroidery competition. On the other hand, Ibtihal presented a video of her reciting a poem in which she celebrated her male relatives, particularly her father and brothers. Both Aseel and Ibtihal highlighted that these activities were prominent in their lives before marriage and relocation to Leeds. With shifting priorities toward academic and professional pursuits, they have reduced their engagement in these pre-marriage tribal activities.

While there is a shortage of studies examining Saudi women's perceptions of their tribal connections abroad, Maisel (2014) delved into a related concept of online engagement that enables tribal members to establish connections, whether within Saudi Arabia or overseas. The findings in this section align with Maisel's (2014) discussions, as a limited number of interviewees articulated how online interactions with fellow tribal members played a pivotal role in maintaining and preserving their tribal affiliations, particularly when they were unable to participate in tribal events in their current places of residence. The thirty-six-year-old nutritionist, Aisha, from the Otaiba tribe, elaborated on her experience, highlighting how she relied on various social media platforms, primarily Snapchat, to stay updated about tribe-related events and gatherings. In this regard, Aisha mentioned,

"My sister posts all events on her Snap stories, though it makes me nostalgic; I am happy she does so. With that, I do not feel like I am that far from them."

Aisha's excerpt underscores the significant role of social media, in this case, Snapchat, in bridging geographical distances, for it served as a virtual window into the tribal and cultural gatherings back home. More than that, it helped her create a connection and maintain her tribal belonging, enabling her emotional

closeness to her family and tribe. Such a finding reflects Al-Rasheed's (2020) discussions on the powerful impact of digital platforms in maintaining transnational relationships and preserving cultural identities. Furthermore, Aisha introduced in her statement the nuanced dimension of nostalgia, which, in this context, implies a bittersweet sentiment—a longing for the past, for the physical presence at these events, and the direct, tangible experience of tribal customs and traditions. Aisha's statement highlights the emotional impact of nostalgia, suggesting that while technology can bridge gaps, it cannot erase the sense of loss and yearning that accompanies separation from one's cultural and tribal roots. Nevertheless, it ensured she remained connected to her tribal identity, even while residing abroad.

Social and cultural activities were only a portion of the different ways with which participants engaged while abroad. Another example emerged through the experiences of the forty-year-old woman founder and manager of a women's association, Djihan. Within her tribal role as a married member, Djihan assumed the responsibility of orchestrating matrimonial proposals by connecting potential brides with families within her tribe. However, a pivotal point arose when the question of introducing individuals from non-tribal backgrounds was broached. Djihan straightforwardly asserted the impossibility and non-negotiability of marrying someone from a different tribal lineage. Her rationale edged on the deeply ingrained norms and regulations of her tribe, positing that any defiance of these norms would result in expulsion from the tribe—a fate that extends to one's descendants.

Djihan's role in orchestrating these marital connections serves as an extension of her tribal identity, an integral component of her self-representation and self-understanding she ardently sought to uphold and maintain. Djihan's responses align with Al-Rasheed's (2013) discourse on the intersection of tribalism, marriage, and religion. Al-Rasheed contends that the practice of selecting marriage partners based on tribal genealogy lacks a religious foundation. Instead, it is governed by patriarchal, discriminatory, and irrational norms, which individuals adhere to as a means of preserving the

boundaries of their respective tribes. Within this context, numerous examples emerge among the participants of rejected marriage proposals, citing grounds of incompatibility rooted in genealogy, class, and social status.

The second group of participants, on the other hand, highlighted how tribal interference extended into more critical aspects of their lives, such as education, employment, travel, and marriage, even while being far from their country and society of origin. In other words, the research findings unveiled a sense of dissatisfaction among some participants concerning the pervasive influence of tribal affiliations over their life choices abroad. In other words, the discordance between those participants' personal preferences and tribal dictation suggests that their identities are sites of a complex interplay of conformity and resistance. Despite their reservations, participants often find themselves compelled to adhere to tribal regulations and customs.

Numerous instances emerged in the narratives of the participants, highlighting the multiple ways in which tribal affiliations could intrude upon and shape their lives, which could extend to transnational settings, including accepting overseas employment opportunities or scholarships, selecting specific career paths, and even determining social relationships and marital choices. For instance, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher, Asmaa, who harboured reservations about certain tribal conventions, explained how her daily routines were subject to the approval of male leaders within her tribe. In this regard, she mentioned,

“If the leaders do not approve something, the saying of your father, brother, or husband is pointless, let alone your sayings. In certain tribes, women are still voiceless on many levels. They must obey both their male and older female relatives.”

Asmaa's excerpt encapsulates the intricate power dynamics and patriarchal structures prevalent within certain Saudi Arabian tribes and the preeminent role of male leaders in these structures, as their approval is often paramount. It further suggests women's voicelessness and marginalisation in matters of importance, which aligns with broader discussions on gender inequality in Saudi society (Al-Rasheed, 2013; 2020; Eum, 2019), where women have

historically faced limitations on their agency and autonomy. Asmaa's narratives provide a poignant reflection of the intersections of gender, power, and tradition in Saudi society, drawing attention to the need for ongoing efforts addressing gender disparities and promoting women's agency and empowerment.

Nevertheless, Asmaa's accounts also reveal that men, such as her husband, can also be victims of unwarranted interference, albeit to a lesser extent than women. Such an observation underscores the pervasive impact of tribal influence on both genders, particularly women, impinging upon their freedom of self-expression. Furthermore, Asmaa's narratives tackled transnational limitations of tribal interference. She emphatically asserted that such interference remained confined within the Saudi context, indicating a shift in her daily self-presentation when residing abroad, which suggests that the constraining influence of tribal norms is not universally applicable but rather context-dependent.

Asmaa's perspective on the concept of interference aligns with the prevailing stereotypical portrayal of Saudi society as inherently masculine and dominated by male authority figures (Al Alhareth et al., 2015; Kanie, 2017; Nelson, 2019), which persists despite ongoing efforts to promote and empower women. From a critical perspective, while Asmaa's previous statement underscores the challenges women encounter in asserting their agency and autonomy in tribal settings, it is crucial to acknowledge that these social dynamics are evolving. With the ongoing discussions and efforts to empower women in Saudi Arabia, including legal reforms aimed at enhancing women's rights and opportunities, considering both the existing challenges and the potential for change within tribal societies is essential for painting a holistic picture of Saudi women's agency, autonomy, and identity.

6.2 Women and Social Norms

Traditionally, Saudi women have been ascribed the role of homemakers responsible for managing household duties, caring for children, and dutifully

adhering to the directives set forth by the male household head (Alharbi, 2015). Nevertheless, the research findings unveiled a collection of unconventional and occasionally contentious narratives that posed a challenge to the conventional portrayal of Saudi women, particularly in domains such as education, employment, and marriage. According to the research findings, all participants underscored the pervasive influence of social customs and norms on their educational pursuits, marital decisions, and professional choices. While participants exhibited varying perspectives on these traditions, they all agreed that their impact was substantial to be entirely disregarded. The following sections present and discuss the findings of how social norms intersected with the participants' identities in areas of education, employment, and marriage, highlighting the noteworthy tension between traditional gender roles and the evolving roles and aspirations of Saudi women, mainly abroad.

6.2.1 Women, Norms, and Education

Education emerged as a prominent and positively recalled aspect in the narratives of the study participants. With only a few exceptions who deliberately chose not to pursue higher education, the majority of participants held advanced educational degrees. For instance, the forty-one-year-old lecturer, Souheila, who completed her Master's degree in the USA, enthusiastically shared photographs from her graduation ceremony. Souheila, having spent a significant portion of her life outside Saudi Arabia, regarded pursuing education as the social standard. She emphasised that even if she had considered not pursuing higher education, such a decision would have been met with strong disapproval from her parents. Souheila's upbringing instilled in her the belief that a girl's intellectual development and attainment of an educational degree were imperative.

Souheila's narrative brings attention to the significance placed on education within a segment of Saudi families, highlighting the expectation that women, like men, should strive for intellectual growth and academic achievement. It also reflects the evolving role of education in challenging traditional gender

roles in Saudi society and the increasing importance attached to women's educational empowerment. Similarly, both the thirty-year-old PhD researcher Lamia and the twenty-eight-year-old PhD researcher Haneen shared comparable narratives regarding the significant role their families played in prioritising their education. Haneen recounted how her mother strongly encouraged her to pursue higher education despite facing considerable challenges at the time.

Haneen recollected her experience as the daughter of divorced parents, which presented difficulties as she often felt outcast by her peers, which she refrained from labelling as bullying, as she comprehended the social pressures that influenced her classmates' behaviour. Haneen explained that despite the power her mother's tribe upheld in society, her classmates were still pressured by their relatives not to associate with her due to her parents' divorce, which contradicted the established social norms. Likewise, Lamia's narratives offered a perspective on how her family's unwavering support and emphasis on education were instrumental in her pursuit of academic excellence. The latter stated,

"I was not the perfect student, and my grades were really below average; I was constantly thinking of dropping out of my studies, especially at university. However, my proud father would never let me, so I never did."

Lamia's excerpt highlights a complex interplay between individual aspirations, familial expectations, and the role of parental influence in shaping educational decisions; however, in her case, it was a positive influence. Such a narrative also reflects Lamia's first aspirations of herself, which were relatively within the domestic sphere, indicating a struggle with the notion of whether her education was aligned with her personal goals and interests at the time. From a critical perspective, the narratives of Souheila, Haneen, and Lamia raise questions about whether educational choices should be primarily influenced by familial expectations or individual passion and aptitude, especially in light of how women in Saudi Arabia are advised and sometimes obliged to choose majors to find work in female-dominated fields.

Scholarly works on Saudi women's educational choices indicate an intricate relationship between the latter and the prevailing social norms in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Alwedinani's work (2017) posits that women's decisions regarding their chosen fields of study are profoundly influenced by the prospect of interacting with unrelated men, encapsulated in the concept of *Ikhtilat*, i.e., mixed-gender interactions. The latter is explored in the broader literature by Kulczycki and Windle (2011) and Anishchenkova (2020), who argue that the prohibition of *Ikhtilat* is grounded in protecting family honour, with a particular emphasis on preserving the chastity and purity of female family members. The findings in this section align with Alwedinani's findings, maintaining the enduring impact of social norms on women's academic choices. Within the Saudi social context, her choice was perceived with negative connotations as emblematic by her extended family, for such a choice necessitates interactions with male colleagues. Farah said,

“To study Dentistry means to study with men and later on work with them, and doing that means both you and your family are too open-minded for the Saudi standards. Too open-minded in our dictionary equals shameful and unworthy of respect.”

Farah's narrative offers valuable insights into the intricate web of influences that shape women's academic choices, mainly social expectations and the continuous duty of preserving familial honour. Within such a complex dynamic, women often encounter social obstacles when their choices challenge traditional gender roles, particularly within education. However, Farah was advantageous familywise. The unwavering support she received from her parents, who defied the pressures of their social surroundings to prioritise their daughters' education, played a pivotal role in empowering her to break free from the constraints of entrenched traditions. Her experience highlights the transformative potential of parental encouragement within a society that considers making autonomous decisions, especially for women, a masculine privilege rather than a norm.

The thirty-six-year-old, Aisha, who pursued a major in nutrition sciences, shared a similar narrative of social resistance. She highlighted the opposition

she faced not only from her family's neighbours but also from broader social norms that view certain academic paths as detrimental to a woman's marriage prospects. Aisha's experience sheds light on the paradoxical nature of attitudes toward medical majors in Saudi society. While some families restrict their daughters from pursuing Medicine, they simultaneously seek out female doctors for the healthcare needs of their female relatives. Such a contradiction underscores the persistence of archaic traditions and norms that continue to shape attitudes and choices in Saudi society despite evolving perspectives on women's roles and capabilities.

6.2.2 Women, Norms, and Work

The substantial increase in female education in Saudi Arabia has led to delayed age of marriage among Saudi women (Al-Khraif et al., 2019) as well as an increase in the percentage of Saudi women entering the workforce. However, it is crucial to recognise that the choices women make regarding their careers are not merely personal or individual decisions but are rather intricately shaped by prevailing traditions and social norms that dictate which types of work are considered acceptable for them. The findings in this section put forward several significant issues related to this complex matter. Firstly, there is a surprisingly high number of jobs that are deemed disrespectful to women, indicating the persistence of gender-based occupational restrictions. Secondly, social expectations dictate that women should not earn more than their husbands, reflecting deeply ingrained gender norms regarding financial roles within marriages. Lastly, the prevailing view is that a woman's professional pursuits should never take precedence over her obligations to marriage and family, underscoring the importance of traditional family values.

The participants' responses regarding women's employment were broadly threefold. The first group advocated for women pursuing their desired careers, challenging social standards and pressures that may limit their choices. The second group argued for a more balanced approach, where women can enjoy their rights to work moderately while still respecting and adhering to cultural and traditional values and morals. The last group exhibited an indifference

towards the issue of women's employment, reflecting a range of attitudes within Saudi society regarding this complex and evolving aspect of gender roles and expectations. The variety of the responses highlights the ongoing tension between women's aspirations for career fulfilment and the enduring influence of societal norms and traditions on their choices and opportunities.

For instance, Farah explained how her future career as a dentist might be less troubling than that of a hospital doctor or nurse; she argued that dentistry is less problematic in terms of night shifts and having too many male patients than the stereotypical image nursing has in the Saudi Arabian context. In this regard, Alsadaan et al. (2021) affirm the negative public image of the nursing profession in Saudi Arabia because gender segregation out of necessity is somehow limited compared to what the religious and cultural issues ascribe. They further argue that most families are unhappy with their nursing women caring for male patients (Alotaibi et al., 2015). Moreover, Al-Saggaf (2004, p.13) argues that families are considered an important component of society and the framework of the identity of individuals; as such, it is crucial to maintain good relations with them. However, nursing is not conducive to maintaining these relationships and is considered socially unacceptable (Alsadaan et al., 2021). Farah said,

“There were many concerns about my marriageable prospect if I were to choose to be a dentist, but luckily enough, I have my husband's full support, and that really pushes me forward. I always think of what would have happened if I had conformed to the norms and chosen a different career. I would have regretted it my entire life, especially after moving to the UK.”

Farah's narrative provides valuable insights into several significant aspects. Firstly, it underscores the presence of robust male support within her family, extending from her father to her husband. It is important to note that such unwavering support is not a common experience for all Saudi women abroad, highlighting the extended diversity of familial dynamics in the country. Secondly, it emphasises Farah's growing self-confidence and assertiveness in making academic and professional decisions. She specifically discussed

how, upon relocating to the UK and commencing her career as a dentist, she found herself in an environment that allowed her greater autonomy and freedom without the constraints of social norms and expectations. Farah's narratives shed light on the complex interplay of familial dynamics and social norms in shaping Saudi women's opportunities and choices; they also illustrate the potential for transformative experiences abroad to empower women to pursue their aspirations and assert their independence in ways that may not have been possible within their home country's social context.

Similar to medical jobs, employing Saudi women in sales roles is often met with negative perceptions, primarily due to the cultural concept of *Ikhtilat* or mixed gatherings. An illustrative narrative could be Souheila's, the forty-one-year-old lecturer. In 2015, while on holiday in Riyadh at Al-Faisaliah Mall, she observed an incident that highlighted social attitudes towards women working in sales positions that involve interaction with men. Souheila recounted the incident in which two women, who were customers at a local male clothing store, were openly critical of the female cashier. Such critiques are common when women work alongside men in boutiques, a situation that is frequently regarded as inappropriate in Saudi society, highlighting the social stigma associated with women's participation in certain professions. Such negative perceptions contribute to the limited career choices available to Saudi women and the challenges they face when pursuing employment in certain sectors. Souheila added that she and the two women visited another boutique,

"I am not very sure if because it was a foreign brand boutique, their attitudes slightly changed towards the female workers there. However, those women were seriously looking down on that cashier, and I was more surprised when my husband told me that even men hate having female workers in their stores".

Souheila's narratives reflect Zoepf's (2016) findings on how female sales assistants are perceived in Saudi Arabia and the effect negative perception has on their self-esteem. Building on the experiences of many women who work as sales assistants, she concluded that the social pressure and stigmatisation those women suffered from were not coming only from the

customers but from the religious police force before their authority was sharply curtailed in 2016. The findings in this section accord with Zoepf's (2016) observations that the idea of shame, which is very powerful in the Saudi context associated with some occupations, has negatively affected women and how they perceive themselves. The culture of shame was relatively transnational, as evidenced by a few participants, who reject the notion of employment even abroad, for they believe it is inappropriate for women.

In addition to the complexities surrounding women's employment in Saudi Arabia, another intriguing traditional norm pertains to women earning more than their husbands. Numerous interviewees shared experiences of women earning more than their husbands, who were met with social disapproval, particularly from their in-laws. Such a sentiment was exemplified by the thirty-four-year-old housewife Fatimah, who cited her cousin's situation, a Ministry of Justice employee earning more than her husband, a primary school teacher. Even within her own family, Fatimah observed that her mother held resentment towards her niece for what she perceived as a threat to her husband's social standing. Fatimah's statement, "*A woman should never earn more than her husband because that would hurt his pride*", underscores her internalised social norm governing gender roles. Despite having no work experience, Fatimah expressed a strong reluctance to pursue any job that might tarnish the social image of her male relatives, indicating a preference for not working at all.

In contrast, Khalida had a different opinion and experience than Fatimah. Based on her own experience as a freelance wedding photographer for Saudis in the UK, which has very high revenues, Khalida explained how her earnings might be considered higher than what an average Saudi man would earn; however, she believed that whoever thought of the matter from a demeaning perspective was undoubtedly neither the right husband nor the family-in-law for her. Both Fatimah and Khalida's narratives reflect the findings of Al-Qahtani et al. (2021). In their study on Saudi women's workforce empowerment, they argue that even if women are employed, they are

prohibited from assuming higher positions because of male dominance maintained by patriarchal and traditional norms. Therefore, they often feel pushed backwards.

Another notable aspect of work-related issues shaped by social norms is the prevailing prioritisation of marriage and family over education, career, and employment. In conservative families, women's pursuit of education or work often occurs post-marriage, contingent upon the husband's consent, for it is highly unconventional for women to delay marriage in favour of pursuing further studies or a career. Most employed participants acknowledged that their educational and occupational pursuits were primarily driven by personal development rather than financial necessity, further affirming how their male relatives possessed the financial capacity to support them entirely. Nevertheless, they expressed a strong preference for achieving financial independence as a means of self-fulfilment. For instance, the twenty-eight-year-old PhD researcher, Haneen, raised by divorced parents, affirmed how having a working mother has shaped her unconventional image of womanhood and encouraged her to pursue a career for her life. She acknowledged that, despite her father's financial assistance, having a job covering her financial needs is a part of her identity. In this regard, she mentioned,

"I had my first job as a babysitter when I was in high school; I knew what it means to be financially independent, even for a couple of days, and then go back to my father for money. However, I assure you that independence boosted my perception of myself as a woman."

Haneen's excerpt highlights the transformative impact of financial independence obtained through employment on her self-perception, starting from within the context of Saudi Arabian society to the UK. The significance of financial independence for Saudi women abroad challenges traditional gender norms that often prioritise women's financial dependence on male family members. The brief taste of financial autonomy Haneen had at an early age was a powerful catalyst for reshaping her self-identity, implying how even a short-lived experience of financial independence can empower women and

enhance their self-esteem. Such a transformation suggests that financial self-sufficiency can contribute to women's agency and a more positive self-image, especially in a context where their work is not a source of shame.

From a relatively similar perspective, the forty-year-old founder and manager of a women's association, Djihan, who was actively engaged in both work and social activities, contended that as long as she fulfilled her roles as a wife and mother, her husband would never question her commitment to the family. Souheila echoed similar sentiments, highlighting how traditional norms discourage women from working out of concern that they may struggle to balance their responsibilities within and outside the household. Such a complex tension between social expectations and women's aspirations underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by Saudi women in navigating their career aspirations within the framework of traditional gender roles, which align with the works of scholars like Alwedini (2017), Zoepf (2016), Hallila and Al-Halabi (2018), and Al-Qahtani et al. (2021). Their works maintain that the stereotypical gender roles in Saudi Arabia expect women to tend to their household chores exclusively, and any other distraction might cause improper fulfilment of those duties. However, such expectations appear to be unfair and wrongful to many other Saudi women, especially abroad, where many responsibilities and priorities collide.

6.2.3 Women, Norms, and Marriage

The data underscores the vital role of marriage institutions in the perpetuation of social and cultural norms and traditions within and beyond Saudi Arabian society. A thorough examination of the participants' narratives revealed that the subject of marriage held a central place in their discussions. While married participants offered insights into their marital journeys, single participants shared their thoughts and expectations regarding their future engagements and eventual marriages and how they would be a projection of their identity development. It must be noted that in Saudi Arabia, the institution of marriage builds upon a complex interplay of social obligations and approvals that extend far beyond the bride and groom's desires. Rather, marriage represents

the eternal union of not just two individuals but two families and their respective tribes (Alwedini, 2016).

Consequently, Saudi women find themselves navigating a set of stringent criteria to meet the standards expected of suitable brides. Such criteria often encompass factors such as youthfulness, family reputation, tribal affiliation, and a high degree of conservatism (Al-Rasheed, 2013). While some participants recounted their efforts to conform to these traditional standards, others deviated significantly from them. For instance, the forty-year-old founder and manager of a women's association, Djihan, with over two decades of marriage, emotionally shared a vintage photograph of her in her wedding dress and said,

“My mom started looking for a suitable husband for me ever since I became a woman [referring to menstruation]; I started learning how to be a perfect wife like all the other girls my age because that was the norm. I never saw or met my husband before our wedding, not even for ‘Shoufa’²⁰ as young girls do nowadays. By the age of eighteen, I was already pregnant with my first son and the female head of a household.”

Djihan's statement indicates how a woman's marriage is never a woman's sole matter in Saudi Arabia, as much as it is in most oriental countries (De Bel-Air et al., 2018; Al-Rasheed, 2019). It also sheds light on how early the notion of being a “perfect wife” was anchored within Djihan, reflecting the young age of the internalisation of traditional gender roles and expectations. Additionally, it elucidates how marriage is often more of a familial and social contract determined by family considerations, such as social status, tribe, and shared values, rather than personal preferences or romantic inclinations—given how many Saudi women proceed with marriage without seeing or meeting their prospective spouses.

Djihan's role in motherhood, similar to many Saudi women, began by the age of eighteen, which can relatively be considered an early onset of motherhood.

²⁰ 'Shoufa' or 'lawful viewing', is the right a man has to see his wife-to-be before completing the wedding.

Such a case reflects the social expectation for women to prioritise family life and procreation at a relatively young age over education and career. The ways in which traditional cultural and social norms have shaped Djihan's life and self-understanding within the confines of her role as a wife and a mother mirror the findings of Alwedinani (2016), the latter argues that despite how their attitudes towards marriage might vary greatly, Saudi women tend to have internalised traditional marriage norms. Alwedinani's (2016) findings introduce three categories of approaching marriage as a site of patriarchy. Women either resist the patriarchal system by exercising their legitimate Islamic rights, including asking for a divorce, bargain with patriarchal influences by postponing marriage until after they pursue their aspirations, mainly education, or comply with patriarchal norms without negotiating or bargaining (p. 143).

While Djihan's perspective aligns with Alwedinani's (2016) second group, considering her contentions that marrying at a young age did not hinder her from pursuing a lifestyle, she considered "*an actual reflection*" of her inner self and a clear representation of her identity as a Saudi Muslim woman living abroad, the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Nawal, married for over fifteen years, presented a different narrative. Married at the age of seventeen, Nawal recounted her lack of agency in her marriage decision and her unhappiness with its arrangement. She elaborated on how social expectations dictated that girls should marry before their twenties, irrespective of their personal preferences—a phenomenon that De Bel-Air et al. (2018) note has declined in recent years. Nawal mentioned,

"I came with my husband after he got a scholarship seven years ago, and I thought by now, I would be very good with my English, studying, or at least have a simple job. However, none of this happened, although I was promised so when I got married."

In spite of the shift in marital dynamics in Saudi Arabia, marked by an increasing degree of agency for women in making marital decisions, Nawal's narrative provides valuable insight into a different aspect of such dynamics, especially of the patriarchal control over marital choices and unfulfilled

promises. Nawal's expressed frustration is palpable despite her repeated assertion that her circumstances were considered the norm and beyond her capacity to change or resist. Such a recurring response from Nawal prompted numerous inquiries about her personal freedom and capacity for self-expression. Her consistent response indicated a limited space for her individuality. Nawal explained that her male guardians shared a collective mindset that did not permit her to explore choices outside their established norms, even when living abroad. Her assertion suggests that her husband's perspective aligns closely with those of her father and other male relatives, emphasising the pervasive and transnational influence of traditional gender roles and expectations on women's lives within and beyond Saudi society.

Djihhan and Nawal, despite both marrying at a young age, present contrasting experiences, outcomes, and perspectives. Djihhan's ability to preserve her sense of self despite her early marriage highlights the diversity of Saudi women's experiences in this regard. In contrast, Nawal's discontentment serves as a poignant illustration of the challenges some women may encounter when traditional and patriarchal social norms and expectations clash with their aspirations. Such a dichotomy calls for ongoing research into the intersection of social norms, gender dynamics, marital decisions, and women's agency within and beyond Saudi society. These findings resonate with Zoepf's (2016) research, which delves into the marriage processes in Saudi Arabia from a female perspective. Zoepf's study reveals that many girls in Saudi society grow up with a profound awareness of the limitations imposed by conservative norms, often leading them to relinquish the idea of challenging these constraints and instead entrust their marital decisions to their elders.

Zoepf's research aligns with Al-Rasheed's (2013) observations that many Saudi families prioritise marriage over education and careers. These families often opt to arrange marriages for their daughters and then encourage them to negotiate their education or work with their husbands, as was the case with Nawal. However, this research uncovered a greater degree of agency in this regard. For instance, Souheila, Karima, and Lamia, all married in their late

twenties, deliberately chose to postpone their marriages until after completing their Bachelor's or Master's degrees. While acknowledging that their parents typically determined their entry into marriage, they expressed a willingness to challenge traditional norms for the sake of their personal aspirations and autonomy.

Among the three participants mentioned earlier, Souheila, the forty-one-year-old lecturer, stood out as the only one who knew her husband before their marriage. Such a practice, often considered inappropriate and shameful according to Saudi traditions and norms, deviates from the more prevalent approach. Souheila emphasised that marrying someone she did not know would have been impossible for her— Souheila's approach to marriage is described by Zoepf (2016, p. 146) as an urban legend among many Saudi women. However, the data in this research revealed contrasting findings within the unmarried segment of the participants. While some argued that women over the age of thirty face a decline in their perceived "value" within marriage standards and might only be approached as second or third wives, they also demonstrated a resolve to challenge these traditions and adapt them to align with their aspirations and objectives.

The narratives of the twenty-nine-year-old PhD student Zayneb, the twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer Sawsan, and the thirty-five-year-old nail technician Kaouther were very illustrative of the point above. The three participants held distinct perspectives and attitudes regarding the extent to which they were willing to conform to norms and traditions, particularly the social convention of not encountering or acquainting themselves with their prospective husbands prior to marriage. Zaynab contended that her age is subject to negative perceptions from prospective suitors, leading to a decrease in both the quantity and quality of potential marital offers she receives. Nevertheless, she asserted her unwavering commitment to maintaining her integrity and not compromising herself in deference to marital traditions, family expectations, and social pressure. Similarly, Sawsan expressed her determination to exercise her agency in the process of

selecting her life partner rather than passively adhering to the matchmaking process. She emphasised her desire to make an informed decision and prioritise compatibility with a partner who shared her ambitions and aspirations and said,

“I seriously do not want to have a traditional marriage; it is not that I do not trust my parents’ choice. However, I want to know him outside a traditional Shoufa; I want to feel those love emotions before the marriage.”

Remarkably, there was a conspicuous absence of the concept of love in the participants’ narratives about their marriages. One plausible interpretation can be rooted in the strict social practices that tightly forbid interactions between unrelated men and women. These practices might have left participants with limited opportunities to experience romantic love prior to their engagements or marriages. In this regard, despite her conservativeness, the thirty-year-old PhD researcher Lamia offered a unique perspective. She disclosed that many Saudi women, in their younger years, often experienced what she referred to as “puppy love,” which typically revolved around their cousins. Lamia characterised such a love as a fleeting, youthful infatuation that tended to fade away as they reached puberty.

While Sawsan’s decision to delay her marriage in search of love, along with Zaynab, Khalida, and other unmarried participants, highlights the evolving dynamics of marriage in Saudi Arabia, it also draws attention to the significant role living abroad has played over the years in shielding them from the social pressure other Saudi women might face at their age within the Saudi social context. In Saudi Arabia, social norms often dictate early marriages, and there can be considerable social pressure on women to conform to these expectations (Alwedinani, 2016). Sawsan and Zaynab’s decision to delay marriage is unconventional in this context. Because these participants were exposed to diverse cultures and lifestyles that may not prioritise early marriage, such exposure allowed them to explore alternative paths and make choices aligned with their values and aspirations. It also grants them a degree of autonomy and independence to make decisions about their personal lives,

which might not be as easily attainable with the same level of scrutiny and social pressure they might face in Saudi Arabia.

6.3 The Masculine Figures

The research findings yielded that the participants have long had their legal status entrapped in traditions, laws, and regulations, thereby exposing them to male authority. This section aims to delve into the role and position of men within the participants' narratives of their identities and self-perceptions. During the recruitment phase, a notable pattern emerged, where several potential candidates declined to participate upon learning about the research project and its objectives. These refusals were often attributed to the husbands' rejection, whose wives asserted their legitimate right to control their involvement in interviews and related activities. Conversely, some participants expressed their willingness to participate but regretfully declined due to similar constraints imposed by their husbands. Such impediments were expected, given their widespread prevalence in research involving non-Saudi scholars studying Saudi women (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Mustafa and Troudi, 2019).

Evidently enough, even the participants raised concerns about the challenges involved in convincing potential interviewees to take part in the research. They believed that persuading both the participants themselves and their family members to grant permission would be a challenging task. The pervasive influence of male relatives, irrespective of their familial relationships, is a salient and undeniable aspect of the participants' experiences. Unmarried participants consistently affirmed that their fathers and brothers exerted significant control over their decision-making processes. Similarly, the married participants revealed the considerable influence wielded by their husbands in shaping various aspects of their lives. Such findings highlight the significant role played by male figures in the participants' narratives, which extends from mere decision-making into the intricate fabric of the participants' self-perceptions and expressions. Such a power dynamic was often discussed within the discourse of male guardianship.

6.3.1 Women and the Male Guardianship

Male guardianship in Saudi Arabia imposed extensive limitations on women's autonomy and other critical aspects of their lives, such as marriage, travel, employment, access to healthcare, and education, subjecting their processing to the approval of women's male guardians, typically husbands or the closest male relatives such as fathers, brothers, or sons (Doaiji, 2017). However, noteworthy changes occurred in 2019, marking a significant shift in women's rights. Women were granted certain fundamental rights, including the issuance of identification cards, the acquisition of driving licenses, the ability to pursue employment, and the freedom to travel abroad without requiring consent from male relatives for those above the age of twenty-one (Bunch, 2020; Weiner, 2020). Nonetheless, certain rights, such as the freedom to choose spouses, reject polygamy, receive notifications of divorce, and lodge complaints against domestic abuse, remain unaddressed.

The participants in this study exhibited different attitudes towards male guardianship. Some firmly opposed it, others adopted a neutral stance as it did not directly affect their lives, and a third group expressed support for many of its practices and implications. Such a variety of perspectives mirrors the complexity of the ongoing discourse surrounding male guardianship, the ongoing struggle for gender equity, and the transformation of traditional gender roles. Another notable distinction within the narratives of the participants pertains to the origins of male guardianship. Their narratives, based on their personal experiences with the system, can be categorised into two groups: those contending that male guardianship is rooted in a fundamentalist interpretation of Shari'ah Law and those arguing it has transitioned from a religious foundation to a more social and patriarchal one.

These particular narratives centred on women's driving despite the limited number of participants holding driving licenses or possessing driving skills. Among those who perceived the prohibition of women's driving as a practice legitimised through male guardianship were Safia and Fatimah, both

housewives aged thirty-two and thirty-four, respectively. Their viewpoints align with the claim that male guardianship is closely tied to a conservative interpretation of religious principles, particularly in matters such as women's mobility and access to public spaces. For instance, Safia insisted that she was not interested in driving because her husband was against it and that having a chauffeur was more convenient and appropriate for women.

Safia mentioned that her husband's disapproval stemmed from the fact that it was not clearly stated in the holy book, nor it is encouraged by the clergymen. Similarly, Fatimah affirmed that both her guardians (husband and brother) are against women driving; their disapproval, interestingly, derives from certain conservatives' claim that women who drive risk damaging their ovaries and producing children with clinical problems. When asked about her own opinion, Fatimah said,

"I have no idea if it is true or not, but I do not want any health problems. Besides, I honestly find women driving unusual and vulgar. I mean, here [in the UK], it is okay because it is an old and common practice. However, back home, it is not [...] I am worried about how women are excited to do it even though it was not written in the Quran and men are against it."

Fatimah's excerpt sheds light on her apparent lack of readiness and unwillingness to critically question the legitimacy of the guardianship system concerning her ability to exercise full and unrestricted self-expression, which reflects her deliberate acceptance of allowing someone else to make decisions on her behalf. This finding aligns with the results presented by Zoepf (2016, p.196) in her study. Zoepf's research revealed that Saudi women, who often describe themselves as dismissive of women's rights movements and advocacy efforts, frequently express frustration at how foreigners perceive their lives as problematic due to a misunderstanding of Saudi norms. She further argues that these women do not perceive anything inherently wrong with their lives because their lived experiences are deeply embedded within those norms.

Both Safia and Fatimah believe that the male guardianship system is built on a religious basis, which accords with Alharbi's (2015) claim. The latter's work suggests that male guardianship over women in Saudi Arabia is influenced by interpretations of Islamic law, including aspects of the Quran. While his work highlights the role of religious interpretations in shaping social norms and practices, including male guardianship, it does not explicitly state that male guardianship derives directly from the Quran. Conversely, scholars like Al-Rasheed (2013), Tønnessen (2016), Bunch (2020), and Begum and Varia (2021) argue that the male guardianship system is social and political in the way it is embedded within the patriarchal nature of the Saudi society and it is religious in the way it builds on an extremist interpretation of Quran that disadvantages women more than men.

An illustrative narrative of the second claim above, within the discussion of driving, is the thirty-seven-year-old pastry chef Ibtihal. The latter challenged how contradictory the guardianship system is; she found it illogical how, in the Quran, it is clearly stated that women and men have equal rights and duties, yet it is not the case in real life. Ibtihal compared her father and her husband as guardians; she affirmed how she could express and be herself more with her husband than with her father. Ibtihal said,

“When the driving movement started, I was so excited to get my license here in the UK. My father, who taught my brothers how to drive since they were kids, was against it. He even told my husband off for teaching me. As a wife, I am under my husband's guardianship, not my father's [...] I was about twenty-five when I got married; five months later, my husband taught me how to drive. I got my English driving licence months after we moved, but only two years ago, I got my Saudi driving licence.”

Ibtihal's excerpt highlights several significant aspects. It touches on her personal agency and adaptation. Despite the challenges posed by her father's opposition, Ibtihal benefited from her husband's support and eventually obtained her driving license, reflecting the agency some Saudi women exercise within the constraints of male guardianship. Living abroad enabled Ibtihal to practice her agency more freely compared to Saudi Arabia. While

living abroad equated to being far from any social or tribal pressure, living in Saudi meant ascribing to every aspect of social and tribal norms, including those related to driving.

According to Ibtihal, her father's reservations appear to be rooted in his deeply ingrained tribal background, suggesting how cultural factors influence individuals' perceptions and decisions. Her husband's support and endorsement of her aspirations, on the other hand, stemmed from his recognition of the discriminatory nature of the guardianship system. Furthermore, the excerpt highlights the intricate power dynamics within familial structures and their interconnectedness with broader social norms and how the transfer of authority from the father to the husband occurs irrespective of women's opinions, emphasising the persistence of traditional gender roles and hierarchies.

Much like Ibtihal's father, numerous male figures within the participants' narratives manipulated the concept of male guardianship while invoking religious justifications. Such manipulation was often used as a facade to perpetrate abusive, demeaning, and discriminatory practices against women, actions that deviated from the principles of Islam. Many participants strongly criticised this exploitation of religion, emphasising that it allowed for the endorsement of practices that are fundamentally inconsistent with Islamic teachings. They further contended that the male guardianship system had been perpetuated and strengthened by prevailing cultural norms that predominantly favour and advantage men within Saudi society (Al-Rasheed, 2019).

Despite how the instances recalled by the participants ranged in severity from minor to profoundly impactful, they collectively left enduring imprints on their past selves and continue to influence their present identities. Their narratives underscore the intricate relationship between cultural norms, religion, and gender dynamics, as well as the profound impact they have on the lived experiences and self-conceptions of Saudi women. To sum it up, the narratives presented by the participants reveal a pattern of religious

manipulation within the male guardianship system, raising critical questions about the intersection of religion, culture, and gender roles within and beyond Saudi Arabia and its implications for women's rights and identities.

6.3.2 The Men in Their Stories

The hardship and challenges foreign researchers, such as Le Renard (2013), Zoepf (2016), and Bunch (2020), often encounter when working with Saudi women were akin to the issues encountered in this research within the context of discussions involving Saudi men. Extracting insights from participants regarding their perceptions of their male relatives and how these perceptions shaped their identities and self-representations presented a complex endeavour. Notably, participants harboured concerns that, as a non-Saudi researcher, I might harbour preconceived, stereotypical notions about Saudi men, and the prospect of inadvertently perpetuating these stereotypes weighed heavily on their willingness to divulge candid insights. Such a challenge was addressed by establishing a *rappport* with the participants, which created a comfortable and secure environment for narrative sharing (Oakley, 2015; Thwaites, 2017). From an optimistic standpoint, participants' willingness to express their apprehensions proved invaluable in identifying the different determinants influencing their responses, which, in turn, contributed to a better comprehension of the different variables underpinning their identity negotiation and representation processes.

Contrary to the prevalent stereotypical and stigmatised portrayal of Saudi men in the Western discourse as domineering, abusive, and oppressive, a distinct narrative surfaced in the research, challenging these conventional Western perceptions (Saloom, 2006; Qasem, 2019). In this regard, the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher Aseel underscored the importance of deep engagement and comprehensive knowledge of Saudi society and its people to disentangle the misconceptions that often misrepresent Saudi men and women to foreigners. Within this context, the research findings yielded a more positive, complimentary, and supportive perspective towards male figures, as perceived by the majority of the participants, who shared a commonality: they

all had at least one fully supportive male figure in their lives, with fathers and husbands emerging as the most prevalent examples.

The identified findings can be approached from several interpretative angles. Firstly, it is noteworthy that all participants presented photographs of at least one or two male relatives in their photo collections. Such an observation indicates a degree of self-awareness among the interviewees regarding the need to counteract the prevailing negative perception of Saudi men in the public discourse. The participants actively sought to dispel this negative image by consistently emphasising the various forms of support they had received from male figures throughout their lives— an emphasis aimed at challenging the stereotype of Saudi women as submissive and highlighting their agency. Another plausible interpretation of these findings is the authenticity of the participants' positive narratives regarding their male relatives. Such narratives suggest a genuine sense of joy and unwavering support from these male figures in response to the achievements and ambitions of the female participants. Importantly, not all male relatives were recalled in a positive light, yet they were acknowledged as influential contributors to the participants' self-perception and identity formation.

Several participants in the study, such as the thirty-four-year-old legal representative Karima, the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher Aseel, and the thirty-six-year-old nutritionist Aisha, prominently featured their fathers as the most significant male figures in their lives. These women not only displayed numerous photographs of themselves with their fathers but also articulated the significant influence their fathers had on their personal and professional development by actively encouraging them to assert themselves and engage in social life, pursue higher education, secure favourable employment positions, and strive to achieve their ambitions and aspirations. Karima, raised by divorced parents, emphasised the profound impact of her father's unwavering presence on her emotional and mental well-being. Similarly, Aseel expressed her deep connection with her father in the simple yet powerful statement, "*I am my father's daughter.*" She conveyed her pride

in being likened to her father by others, which further reinforced her sense of identity. The latter further reflected on how her time abroad amplified the traits she inherited from her father, compelling her to live up to his expectations, a thing she did not feel the need to prove when she was in Saudi Arabia. Aseel said,

“I know I take after my father physically, but I am prouder when I know that I take after his personality as well, and that explains our complicity. Now that each of us lives in a different place, I must preserve his image in me.”

The excerpt indicates the pressure Aseel felt to live up to her father's expectations while abroad, compared to her time in Saudi Arabia, which can be understood through several academic and critical perspectives. For instance, the context change Aseel encountered whilst living abroad might have exposed her to different social norms, which potentially intensified her perceived need to preserve her father's standards to maintain her role identity as a daughter. Such a perspective accords with McCall and Simmons (1978) and Burke and Stets (2023) in their work on Role identity theory, who posit that individuals develop a sense of self and build their identity from their roles within various social contexts. Aseel employed her role as a daughter to conceptualise her self-understanding and identity abroad, to which she attached a set of meanings. These meanings are her father's expectations, which she internalised and shared in her role as a daughter living abroad (Pope et al., 2014).

Another perspective is grounded in the possibility that Aseel might have experienced a heightened sense of responsibility to represent her father positively. Aseel may feel the need to counteract any negative comments her father might receive as a result of her living abroad by excelling in her endeavours. Aseel's increased desire to meet her father's expectations abroad can be attributed to a combination of cultural, social, and personal factors, reinforced primarily by the immigrant experience. Aisha shared a similar view of her father; she pointed out his encouragement and support to major in the medical field despite how pressured she feels to be the first in her

family. She affirmed that among the factors that helped her sculpt herself and build the way she behaves and interacts with the outside world is her father's support. All three participants argued that the interference of their fathers in their lives was not forcefully done, nor did it harmfully affect them.

In contradistinction to precedent accounts, Rima harboured deep-seated feelings of resentment towards her father and his child-rearing approach. She overtly articulated her perception that, in his role as a male authority figure, he proved inadequate in fulfilling his paternal responsibilities. While it is plausible that Rima's sentiments are not unique, as others may have similarly voiced sentiments of unease and dissatisfaction concerning the paternal role within their lives, she was the one who stood out as a notable exemplar in explicitly aligning these sentiments with her self-understanding, representation and behaviour. Rima said,

"If I could blame anyone for how short-tempered, aggressive, and masculine I am, I would blame my father. Who I am today could have been different if he saw me as a daughter instead of one of his other sons."

Rima's perspective offers a compelling insight into the complex interplay between father-daughter relationships, self-identity, and gender roles within a specific cultural context. While her statement implies that Rima's expectations about how a father should nurture and support his daughter were not met, it also suggests a clash between traditional gender roles and her desire for a different kind of paternal support. Furthermore, Rima's dissatisfaction with her father's parenting style has had a profound impact on her self-understanding and self-representation, marked by how her father treated her more like a son than a daughter, which could have led to a conflict between her own identity as a woman and the roles imposed on her by her father and society. Rima's perspective reflects the findings of Alwedinani (2017). The latter conducted a study on the influence of fathers on promoting gender segregation in Saudi Arabia; the results yielded that many fathers tend to seclude, prevent, and force their daughters to adhere to their decisions out of fear that their daughters may stray away from the righteous religious pathway. Such

approaches and practices usually obstruct, block, and emotionally psychologically harm Saudi women.

While some participants in the study articulated a deliberate effort to limit the extent of their husbands' influence over their lives, others were more accepting of complete male control over their agency. For instance, the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Safia, asserted that her husband's comprehensive authority over her life did not diminish her sense of self or hinder her autonomy. However, she was critical of the involvement of other men in their wives' lives without their consent. She contended that not all women shared her tolerance for such intervention, emphasising that while the prevailing social norm dictates male dominance, individual responses to this norm vary widely. Safia's acceptance of this norm was rooted in her upbringing, where she had been accustomed to male decision-making, initially by her father and now by her husband.

Evidently, Safia's perspective highlights the complex interplay of social expectations, personal experiences, and individual agency in the context of male control over women's lives abroad. Her viewpoint resonates with the critical analyses put forth by several scholars who share similar concerns regarding the involuntary interference of men in the lives of their wives in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Al-Rasheed (2013) underscores the perpetuation of male authority from fathers to husbands after marriage. She argues that if fathers adhere to misogynistic, segregating, and abusive patriarchal norms, there is no assurance of improving women's circumstances within their husbands' households. Furthermore, Zoepf's (2016) research unveils a thought-provoking revelation that certain Saudi women may not recognise the extent of control they endure. Zoepf posits that irrespective of their high levels of education, extensive travels, sophistication, and professional achievements, some Saudi women consider enduring abuse and seeking permission from male relatives—fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons—for major and minor decisions as an ingrained, natural conduct. This perspective, she argues, is rooted in their upbringing within Saudi society. These scholarly

viewpoints collectively accentuate the multifaceted challenges and complexities that women face in negotiating male dominance and control over their lives within and beyond Saudi Arabia, emphasising the need for a nuanced understanding of the social context.

6.4 Conclusion

The analysis and discussion of how social traditions and gendered norms affected how the research participants perceived and presented themselves revealed that Saudi social norms touch on many layers of the participants' self-representation, mainly their definition of who they are as Saudi women, the degree of commitment towards their tribes, and their conformity to the Saudi male authority. In addition, the findings reported how social norms intersect with the participants' education, marriage, and employment. Delving into their narratives and trajectories clarified how social norms are significantly internalised within many participants, finding public manifestation even in a transnational context depending on their levels of conformity to those norms.

7 Chapter Seven: Religion and Identity

The research participants articulated a shared narrative using different terms, perspectives, and attitudes: religion played a significant role in shaping their current identities, self-understanding and presentation. Notably, some participants proudly embraced their religious affiliations as integral components of their identities. For others, religion held a substantial place in their past experiences but no longer exerted a decisive influence on their present identities. Accordingly, this fourfold chapter examines the intersection of religion with the participants' identities by analysing their nuanced engagement with religion in the processes of self-understanding, identity negotiation, and identity performance. It examines the participants' narratives of religion, religiosity, and spirituality and elucidates their influence on their self-understandings and identities. This chapter also examines the participants' engagements with "Saudi Islam", whether as their practised faith or as the prevalent religion in their upbringing surroundings. The participants' perspectives on Muslim women's emancipation, their interactions with the Quran and its patriarchal interpretations, and their impact on their identities are also brought into the discussion. The chapter analyses and also discusses the significance of the hijab, or veil, as a fundamental marker of identity among the participants living abroad.

7.1 The Women and Religion

Religion was as significant as social norms to the Saudi women interviewed. They understood religion as an ideology, doctrine, mindset, and lifestyle, depending on their affiliations or disassociations with it. It is noteworthy that while the majority of Saudis adhere to Islam (Fahmy, 2018), participants were not assumed to share this faith; rather, their religious status was neutrally approached. The research findings revealed a spectrum of attitudes toward religious identity among the participants. While some displayed a lack of comprehension regarding their religious identity, others employed diverse

terminology to articulate it. Certain others professed a complete absence of religious belief. Nevertheless, despite these distinctions, each participant offered a unique narrative of her experience and interaction with religion, all of which they believed played a role in shaping their present identities.

At the start of the interviews, while most mentioned being Muslim casually, some avoided discussing their religious affiliation. After deepening the conversations, most participants asserted their adherence to Islam as a religion. Others, such as the thirty-year-old PhD student, Asmaa, along with the twenty-seven-year-old and twenty-six-year-old MA students, Lobnah and Jomana, firmly denied having religious affiliations. Their affirmations challenge the common assumption that All Saudis are Muslims. While Lobnah and Jomana were reluctant at first to uncover that part of themselves, Asmaa was assertive from the start. In this regard, Asmaa said,

“If you are looking for a typical Saudi woman, then I am not your girl. Just to let you know, I am an atheist, and I am happy with it, so no lectures, please”.

The excerpt indicates how Asmaa, by preventively distancing herself from the perceived norm of a “typical Saudi woman”, challenged the conventional expectations associated with her cultural and gender identity. Her declaration of atheism, a stance often considered unconventional within a predominantly Islamic society (Khatib, 2017; Wallace, 2020), highlighted her assertion of individual autonomy in matters of faith. Furthermore, her request to refrain from delivering lectures implies a certain level of social or religious pressure she may have encountered, suggesting that open atheism might be met with resistance or attempts at persuasion. Essentially, Asmaa’s narrative highlights the assertion of personal belief and the desire for autonomy in matters of faith within a social context where religious norms and expectations may be particularly pronounced, accentuating the nuanced interplay between individual identity and religious beliefs in Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, when Lobnah and Jomana felt comfortable enough, they disclosed their stances on religion and discussed their journey of rejecting their Islamic

roots. Lobnah expounded on her newly formed perception of religion, which led her to invalidate all divine religions, including Islam. From her viewpoint, religion is a political device employed to control individuals through subliminal persuasion, offering divine rewards for conformity and threats of punishment for non-compliance. Asmaa echoed a similar perspective, characterising religion as a “Machiavellian” instrument used to categorise people and accentuate social divisions between the ‘in-group’ and ‘others.’ Notably, Lobnah and Asmaa introduced a socio-political dimension to their narrative by asserting that their disassociation from religion stemmed from the implicit discriminatory ideologies endorsed by religions, particularly Islam, which, they both contended, were predominantly gender-based, thereby accentuating the intersection of religious beliefs with sociopolitical issues and gender-related discrimination within their narratives.

Asmaa and Lobnah’s socio-political views on religion can be located within the work of Mandaville and Hamid (2018). The latter argue that, within the Saudi context, Islam is used to develop national agendas and to safeguard the state’s authority from potentially destabilising interpretations. Saudi Arabia, with its Islamist-monarchical structure, is particularly cautious of Islamist trends that challenge its religious legitimacy. It promotes its Wahhabi interpretation globally, seen as a form of “soft power” inspiring radical Islamism (Nye, 2019). Furthermore, scholars like Shane (2016) perceive Saudi Arabia’s use of religion since the 1960s as pivotal in steering Saudi society towards conservatism, including the adoption of practices like full-face veiling, which reflects the gender-biased intricate relationship between religion, politics, and social changes in Saudi Arabia.

Except for Lobnah, Jomana, and Asmaa, who held unconventional views on religion compared to prevailing assumptions about Saudi women, most remaining participants concurred that religion shaped their beliefs, actions, and interpersonal attitudes. They defined it as a set of tangible practices essential for a harmonious life, as well as a mindset involving submission to God’s will and laws. Nevertheless, these descriptions appeared abstract,

reflecting how some participants held unquestioned internalised views of religion. In contrast, those who questioned and challenged their faith reported that religion is a personal endeavour. For example, the forty-one-year-old lecturer Souheila articulated her religious journey in terms of “finding” her faith, emphasising the active process of finding, reflecting the critical examination that led her to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of faith. Souheila stated,

“We are Muslim people because we were born in Muslim families, which means we came in contact with Islam the second we were born. However, as individuals, we must take it on our own to study and understand Islam and other religions to choose it out of conviction rather than remain a dull follower.”

Souheila’s narrative offers an insightful perspective on a fundamental aspect of Islam – the encouragement to question religion as a means of nurturing intellectual critical faculties in the pursuit of knowledge and personal growth. This critical engagement with religion can lead to a deeper and more meaningful understanding rather than simply rejecting them outright. Souheila’s stance aligns with the scholarly works of Townsend (2014) and Shahrour (2017), who, rather than advocate for the abandonment of religion, emphasise the importance of intellectual exploration, inquiry, and nuanced interpretations within the framework of Islam. Souheila further affirmed that while such an approach deepened her understanding, it also refined her position within her faith, especially abroad.

Souheila’s critical engagement with her faith equipped her with stronger intellectual and emotional resilience to face the challenges her religious identity might face while living in a different religious context. Her resilience helped her navigate the complexities of being a religious woman in the UK. Furthermore, her enhanced self-awareness, resulting from engaging in critical reflection about her faith, allowed Souheila to gain a deeper understanding of her own beliefs and values, which ultimately helped her feel more secure in her religious identity, even in the face of different faiths and worldviews. In other words, Souheila’s religious experience abroad was shaped by her resilience, self-awareness, and constructive interfaith dialogue, which

enriched her understanding of her faith, fostered a more inclusive and open-minded perspective, and helped her maintain the authenticity of her religious identity.

The twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher Aseel shared a similar religious journey. She emphasised that her faith became stronger through the process of questioning rather than passively inheriting beliefs. Aseel viewed her religious development as integral to her present self-understanding, explaining that she gained deeper insights into herself through the lens of Islam. She highlighted the importance of revisiting Islamic texts, exploring diverse Quranic interpretations, and engaging with non-Saudi scholars in reconstructing her self-understanding as a woman and a believer and addressing pressing questions that, if left unanswered, would have posed significant challenges for her. Aseel stated,

“I was not looking for a way to get religion out of my life, but rather a way to understand it better. Eventually, I became a stronger believer than ever.”

Aseel’s experience of believing in and worshipping a divine deity to construct her identity was not unique. While the relationship between religiosity and self-understanding has received less attention in sociology, there is limited research on the connection between practising Islam and enhancing self-understanding and identity. For instance, Sedikides and Gebauer (2021) found that believers tend to engage in self-enhancement more than non-believers. They suggest that religious individuals are particularly resistant to normative pressures because their self-enhancement within the religious domain is primarily focused on their self-concept. Alternatively, de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2019) proposed that autonomy and choice play a crucial role in the interaction between religious identity and overall self-understanding. They argue that an authentically and autonomously chosen religious identity contributes to a healthier self-construction process.

De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2019, p. 77) acknowledge that their perspective reflects a postmodern and Western viewpoint, neglecting the distinctive

aspects of religious communities that intentionally reject postmodern influences like pluralism and individualism (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019, p. 77). Nonetheless, their findings align with the arguments made by Asmaa, Lobnah, and Jomana, who pointed to unhealthy religious development as a reason for their 'religious deconversion' (Streib, 2021). These participants asserted that growing up in a religiously strict environment imposed demands and expectations regarding religious beliefs and practices, leaving little room for autonomous choices. Additionally, they made a distinction between being religious and being spiritual, emphasising that spiritual abundance is often misunderstood as religious satisfaction.

7.1.1 Religious or Spiritual?

Most participants intensively discussed the distinction between religiosity and spirituality, a concept they frequently encountered abroad. They greatly fixated on differentiating the two terms whenever the relationship between religion, identity, self-understanding, and self-enhancement was questioned. Some participants argued that religiosity and spirituality are completely different and must not be used interchangeably, which is what scholars like Hill et al. (2001), Hodge (2003), Tan (2005), and Stern and Wright (2018) have concluded in their works, that is, spirituality and religiosity are two distinct concepts. Broadly, religiosity is the active involvement in the standardised organisation of spiritual beliefs and practices (Tan, 2005); in contrast, spirituality is the individual relationship with some higher power or intrinsic belief enabling individuals to find and express life meanings and purposes (Hill et al., 2001; Hodge, 2003). In other words, spirituality is personal and subjective, whereas religiosity is social and institutional (Stern and Wright, 2018).

Some participants shared the belief that religiosity and spirituality have equivalent meanings, a perspective in line with Lazenby's (2010) argument, rooted in James' (1982) theological work, which posits no essential difference between spirituality, religiosity, or religion but distinguishes them from 'Religions' like Islam or Christianity. Lazenby (2010) introduced the concept

of “religion/spirituality” to capture people’s immediate experiences when interacting with objects under the broader concept of “Religions.” Conversely, Warsah and Imron (2019) approached these terms differently within the Islamic context. They contend that religiosity serves as a means to attain spirituality and reflects a commitment to beliefs and practices within a specific religion, whereas spirituality involves personal reflection to seek life’s purpose and meaning. This conceptualisation, supporting the idea that religiosity and spirituality, while distinct, share close meanings, provides an alternative viewpoint in the discussion of these terms.

The twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer Sawsan and the thirty-seven-year-old nurse Rima asserted they self-understand as spiritual more than religious. Sawsan’s narrative suggested that establishing a spiritual connection with her surroundings allowed her to understand and shape herself more than religion did. In her definition of spirituality, Sawsan asserted that *“Spirituality is religion minus fear”*. In other words, it is the ability to differentiate between good and bad deeds without the interference of institutionalised religious authorities. Rima, using a picture of her Yoga class with her friends, expressed a similar perspective (see Figure 11). She contended that religion was imposed on her to the extent of developing a sense of obligation to always put herself in a paradoxical box where her spiritual prosperity and growth conflicted with the institutionalised promoted religion. In her comparison of Yoga sessions and praying five times a day, Rima said,

“I reached a point where I prayed only to avoid my parents’ nagging and not feel any internal satisfaction or happiness, which did not help me. I was losing myself rather than finding it. So now, if I want to connect with myself in a godly spiritual way, I meditate or do Yoga. Maybe because the meaning of Islamic prayer in its physical form got afflicted for me.”

Rima’s account highlights her changing relationship with religious practices, particularly Islamic prayer. Initially, she engaged in these practices due to parental pressure, devoid of any personal satisfaction or happiness, which consequently led to disconnection and loss of her sense of self rather than the intended spiritual connection. Rima’s narrative, alongside Sawsan’s, suggests

their experiences of coerced religious practices largely drove their inclination toward spirituality over religion. Similarly, participants like Souheila, Zaynab, and Aisha distinguish between being religious and being spiritual yet claim both identities. According to Souheila, religious identity influences her role within the Muslim community, while spirituality impacts her self-concept and understanding. Such a differentiation highlights the nuanced interplay between religious and spiritual dimensions in their identities.

Souheila's association of religiosity with external groups finds resonance in the experiences of Zaynab and Aisha, who both established a strong link between their desire to belong and be fully embraced within the Muslim community and their religiosity. Importantly, this linkage did not diminish their overall self-presentation. They intentionally linked religiosity to social satisfaction and spirituality to personal gratification, aligning with Brambilla et al.'s (2016) interpretation of Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987). The latter argue that individuals may perceive their religious identity as either a personal characteristic or a group belonging. While the participants were not familiar with academic terminology, their narratives aligned with the notion of having two separate identities related to their religious beliefs, akin to the intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity distinction proposed by Brambilla et al. (2016).

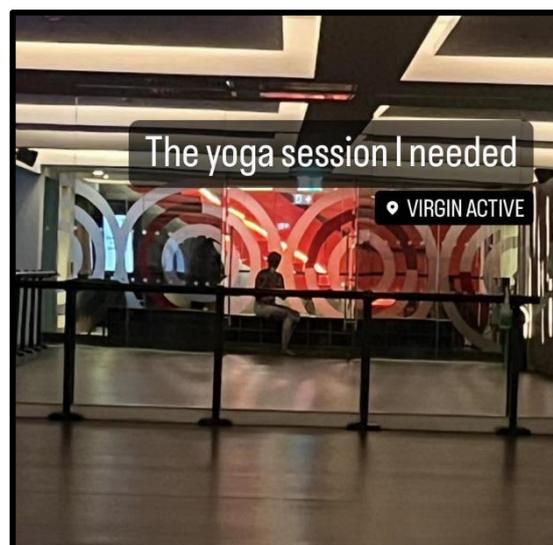


Figure 11: *I am a spiritual being* (Rima, 2020)

The thirty-two-year-old photographer, Khalida, expressed her perspective on the religiosity/spirituality distinction through photographs of her “praying corner”, a dedicated space for religious practices in both her UK residence and her family’s house in Saudi Arabia. Khalida asserted that she considered herself both religious and spiritual, viewing the two terms as synonymous, representing a profound connection with Allah. She explained that while her praying corner served as an extension of her religious self, cultivated over the years in both Saudi Arabia and the UK, it was also a space where she could authentically connect with Allah and express her true self as Khalida. Her narratives highlight the salience of her religious identity within her multiple identities. A similar perspective was mirrored in the narratives of the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, who argued that being religious and being spiritual are essentially the same, as they both contribute to achieving inner peace for the body and soul.

Aseel, like Khalida, identified herself as both religious and spiritual. However, she distinguished her spirituality as having a universal aspect. Aseel argued that spirituality is often perceived as “Westernised”, associated more with Western profiles than Arab Islamic ones, leading to a stigmatisation of the term. She further elaborated on how, in Saudi Arabia, people would prefer her to go to a mosque to pray than to a meditation session. Aseel’s perspective aligns with the experiences shared by the thirty-two-year-old housewife Nawal. The latter recalled her friend’s invitation to participate in a Yoga training program organised by a professional trainer in Jeddah as part of their organisation’s socials. Nawal said,

“I thought it was a good way to connect with my inner self and feel at peace and ease, which was the case for all my friends who attended the training. When I went to the mall to buy Yoga leggings, and my mom saw them on the mannequin, she directly jolted: Astaghfirullah²¹, Astaghfirullah; we do not need

²¹ An Arabic phrase, translating to “I seek forgiveness from Allah”, is a form of repentance and seeking forgiveness for sins and wrongdoings (Ghoor, 2023).

this nonsense. So, I did not go because, for my family, it was nonsense”.

Aseel and Nawal’s narratives highlight the clash between cultural and religious values within Saudi families, particularly concerning spiritual activities like meditation and Yoga. Khalida, Karima, and Aseel contended that a genuinely religious person is inherently spiritual. They supported this argument by emphasising that Islam, as a religion of peace and serenity, fosters spirituality as a higher purpose through adherence to its regulations. Furthermore, these participants linked religiosity and spirituality to the effective construction of their identities. Researchers have varying perspectives on this matter. Ramsay et al. (2019) posit that religious individuals exhibit higher emotional regulation and cognitive reappraisal, aligning with their constructive experiences in shaping self-concepts. Conversely, Villani et al. (2019) in their study suggest that maintaining religious commitment inconsistent with one’s worldview may lead to distress and hinder personal development. Regarding whether practising religion affects identity construction and self-presentation, participants held diverse opinions, which will be discussed next.

7.1.2 Religious but non-Practitioners

Warsah and Imran (2019, p. 232) define religiosity as the barometer of religious mastery, belief, worship, and commitment, implying that a religious person possesses profound knowledge, mastery, unwavering belief, and unwavering devotion to a particular religion. However, participants held differing views on this definition, prompting the recurring question: can religiosity solely hinge on religious practice, and how does such a premise impact an individual’s self-understanding and presentation? Warsah and Imran (2019) argue in their study that greater religiosity motivates adherence to religious teachings, leading to improved emotional regulation and cognitive reappraisal, resulting in a more satisfying and emotionally rich self-concept (Villani et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite scientific support, many participants raised doubts about the connection between religious practice, religiosity, and the construction and expression of their identities.

When Fatimah, Lamia, and Imen— the three participants who argued that it was through practising their faith that they could find a sense of self— were asked how religious they were, they shared similar answers: being religious is about praying, fasting, performing the Hajj, and doing good deeds. However, looking at Stark and Glock's (1974) dimensions of religiosity quoted in Warsah and Imran (2019), including ideology, ritual, knowledge, comprehension, and experience, Fatimah, Lamia, and Imen struggled with a couple of those dimensions. For example, in her narrative, the thirty-four-year-old housewife Fatimah described how she often neglected to fast the days she menstruated during the month of Ramadan²², which is considered a women-duty in Islam. By doing so, she contradicted the ritual dimension of religiosity. When Fatimah was approached regarding this matter, she responded,

“Doing it once or twice does not make me less of a Muslim or even less of a good person. I know people who have done worse but still consider themselves Muslim, and people respect them for that. As for me, I try to cover it with other deeds.”

Fatimah's statement aligns with Souheila's responses. She recalled a very sensitive incident in her neighbourhood back when she was twelve years old and had recently moved to an Arab Muslim neighbourhood in the USA, which she affirms had changed her perception of religious people, which involved a supposedly pious man sexually assaulting children by inviting them over to teach them the Quran. The incident, as Souheila affirmed, was a changing point in her childhood regarding religion; she further discussed how, as a child, she was shocked by the contradictory behaviour of the man, which made it the first step in her religious questioning journey. Souheila stated,

“We moved to an Arab neighbourhood because my father was concerned about us acquiring Western cultural traits rather than Arab or Islamic in general. I would say that little did he know that it was a huge mistake because many children were victims, which he did not accept very well. Since then, I have always doubted the suspiciously very religious people.”

²² During Ramadan, menstruating women are not obliged to fast. They must make up for the fasting days lost, but not for the prayers missed.

Both Fatimah and Souheila's narratives contended that outward appearances of religiosity do not necessarily indicate true religious devotion. Asmaa echoed Souheila's sentiments, noting that she had been taught from childhood that a religious person is always morally upright, a belief she found to be untrue. Furthermore, Asmaa attributed her religious deconversion to what she perceived as widespread religious hypocrisy in Saudi society. She emphasised that her statement should not be generalised and explained how individuals in her environment often exhibited public religiosity while privately behaving differently, a behaviour she firmly labelled as 'hypocrisy'. When asked about how her situation differed from those she described as hypocrites, Asmaa responded,

"It is different for me. The things I do back home and not here are related to God, like praying, wearing a hijab and stuff like that. However, what I am talking about regarding those people includes harming other people, cheating on their wives, bribing and things of the sort. So, we are not the same."

Asmaa's excerpt invites a critical and academic discussion on the intricate relationship between religious identity, morality, and behaviour, particularly within the Saudi social and religious milieu. Asmaa discerned a division between religious practices, such as prayer and wearing a hijab, and what she perceived as morally objectionable actions, including harming others, infidelity, and bribery. Such a dichotomy raises fundamental questions about the genuineness of religious commitment when it seems disconnected from ethical principles. Furthermore, Asmaa's reference to actions occurring "back home" versus in a different setting highlights the significant influence of socioreligious norms on individual behaviour and religious practices. Her statement also suggests a moral judgment on her part and invites an analysis of how individuals within religious communities assess the behaviour of others based on their religious beliefs. Asmaa's perspective leads us to a thought-provoking connection with Goffman's (1987; 1990) concept of 'region,' 'front stage,' and 'backstage,' as elucidated in Lawler's work (2014).

Goffman's dramaturgic metaphor (1990) posits that individuals engage in various roles and performances in different social contexts, wherein these

roles are not masks concealing their true selves but integral aspects of their identity. Lawler (2014, p. 121) expands on this notion by emphasising that these roles are not static surfaces but evolving facets of a person's identity. Applying Goffman's metaphor to Asmaa's situation highlights the distinction between her religious actions in Saudi Arabia and her perceptions of 'hypocrites' as a manifestation of these multifaceted roles. It becomes evident that individuals like Asmaa and those around her are navigating a complex interplay between their religious identity, cultural norms, and social expectations. Rather than being labelled as 'hypocrites,' their actions represent the 'front stage' performances that are, in fact, integral parts of their broader identity. Asmaa's quote serves as poignant evidence of how religion intersects with identity and morality within a specific community or society. It highlights the need for a complex examination of human behaviour dynamics and its connection to religious convictions.

From a different perspective, the narratives of Zaynab and a few others shed light on the relevance of the socioreligious context to their religious practice and identities. Zaynab's account underscores the influential role her father played in shaping her religious commitment, especially in prayer, emphasising the significance of family in religious upbringing. Despite her reduced religious practice abroad, Zaynab maintains that her core identity as a Muslim remains intact, illustrating the complex intersection of religious practice with individual identity. Zaynab's perspective resonates with others like Haneen, Djihan, Ines, and Ibtihal, who also acknowledged diminished religious commitment outside Saudi Arabia but asserted their continuity as Muslims. They attributed this shift to the altered 'religious environment,' referencing the communal aspects of worship, such as group prayers and the call to prayer from a mosque. Such findings challenge the notion that outward acts of devotion solely define religiosity and highlight the dynamic nature of religious identity in response to changing cultural contexts and practices.

Alfurayh (2021) explored in her research the identity changes experienced by female Saudi students in Australia, in which she concluded that studying

abroad led to shifts in identity among these women. The data in this research yielded similar findings. Several participants reported a decline in religious practice due to several factors, such as time constraints, busy lifestyles, and increased responsibilities experienced after moving to the UK. Nevertheless, despite the guilt these participants felt regarding their religious observance, they asserted that the latter did not fundamentally alter their self-identifications as Muslims or as individuals. Furthermore, the findings reported a common explanation among these participants that their reduced religious practice allowed them to critically assess the role of religion in their lives, particularly when comparing it to religious practices in Saudi Arabia under what they collectively referred to as 'Saudi Islam'. The latter, which predominantly shaped perceptions of Saudi women as needing external emancipation, is another subtheme.

7.2 The Women and 'Saudi' Islam

The findings revealed a distinction between Islam practised in Saudi Arabia and the one elsewhere. While few participants believed Islam in Saudi Arabia is very conservative and extreme, most considered it moderate, and others considered it 'modern'. Regardless, the participants' interactions with 'Saudi Islam' were crucial to their religious understanding and identification. They established a link between the overwhelming power of their social surroundings, the tenacity of their constructed understanding of Islam, and their conscious approval of religion to affect their identities and actions. Religious participants maintained the role of social pressure in their religious conformity when in Saudi Arabia; another reason was their unchallenged inability to question the inherited Islamic guidelines and practices. Scholars like Ali (2018), McClendon et al. (2018), and Glas and Alexander (2020) discussed the relationship between the salience of Islam as a religion and its prominent impact on individuals, arguing that the more exposed to religion, the most likely is for an individual to conform, comply, and unquestionably follow it.

During interviews, participants found it intriguing to learn about Algeria while drawing comparisons with Saudi Arabia. They were surprised by how little they knew about the Arab world compared to what the entire world knew about them. For instance, the thirty-seven-year-old nurse Rima described her perception of Islam in Algeria and other Middle Eastern and North African regions (MENA) as “*funny*”, emphasising her claim that Saudis lived in a different religious context compared to other Muslim countries. While Rima’s perspective aligned with academic discussions highlighting differences between Saudi Arabia and MENA regions concerning the influence of religion on society and politics (Albertsen and de Soysa, 2017), her narratives implied a unique nature of Islam in Saudi Arabia. She argued that Saudi Islam was exceptionally conservative due to its strict interpretation of the Quran. Rima further asserted that the distinction was most noticeable in the treatment of women, underscoring the differences in religious practice and social norms. Rima argued,

“You have been driving for ages when we barely managed to get the right to drive. You can choose to wear the hijab or not. I assume you can date and choose your partner without fear of being dismembered by your family or tribe. For us, the only justification ever given was or still is so that Allah will not be mad at us.”

Rima’s excerpt implies that Saudi Islam is more extremist and stricter than elsewhere, which she, along with Sawsan, deemed unfair. Rima and Sawsan explained how Islamic rules and guidelines are dictated based on the Wahhabi interpretation of the Quran, which means more conservative and intense practices than in other Muslim countries. However, what they denounced more was how such interpretation mostly affected women, including themselves. The twenty-seven-year-old freelance photographer Sawsan recalled her childhood and adolescence years, brought out a picture of an old perfume bottle she received as a gift from her mother’s friend and said,

“I have always loved perfumes, but I was not allowed to wear them because it was a sin as I would be seducing men whenever I am outside [...] my brother and cousins have used all kinds of perfume since they were babies, so what about men? They would go outside after spraying an entire bottle on

themselves, and we were seduced as well, but nobody told them a thing; that did not make any sense to me.”

Sawsan’s narrative highlights a gender-based disparity, where her male relatives, including brothers and cousins, were allowed to use perfume freely from a young age, while she faced admonishment for the same. Such an inconsistency, justified by religion, prompted Sawsan to question whether religion was being used for motives beyond meaningful worship. Interestingly, perfumes held significant importance for the participants, who often lamented their inability to wear them. For Sawsan, perfume symbolised more than a pleasant fragrance; it served as a reminder of how religion was employed within her social circle to grant men privileges over women (see Figure 11). Such a perspective underlines the intersection of religious and social norms concerning modesty and attraction. It portrays women’s use of perfume as potentially provocative while men’s use remains unquestioned, which accentuates the dynamics of gender, religion, and social expectations.



Figure 12: *More than a Perfume* (Sawsan, 2021)

In their examination of Muslim women’s educational rights, McClendon et al. (2018) discovered that religion may have contributed to initial gender disparities. Their study highlights the significance of Islamic religious

teachings in family matters, such as marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, which are not merely customs but codified laws (Mclendon et al., 2018, p. 315). This codification strengthens religion's impact on women's socialisation and behaviour, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Similarly, Rahman (2012) concludes in her research that Muslim-majority countries with Shari'ah family laws exhibit higher levels of gender inequality, often justified by religious principles. Consequently, the findings of both Rahman (2012) and Mclendon et al. (2018) support the assertions made by Sawsan and Rima, underscoring that Saudi Arabia, with its utilisation of Shari'ah family laws, employs religion to legitimise patriarchal practices.

Contrarily, the thirty-four-year-old housewife who arrived in the UK at age twenty-seven, Fatimah, held a positive view of the Saudi interpretation and practice of Islam. She critiqued the evolving social changes in Saudi Arabia regarding women's rights, expressing concerns about the direction it was taking. Fatimah's apprehension stemmed from her disapproval of women gaining the right to drive and the removal of guardianship. She believed that granting such freedoms contradicted Islamic principles, and she questioned the authenticity of the version of Islam that supported these changes. Fatimah's perspective highlights her reluctance to embrace the increasing freedom for women in Saudi Arabia, as she perceived it as a departure from her understanding of true Islamic values. Fatimah stated,

"This is ayb [Arabic for morally wrong or shame]. Girls are now outside doing what they want, with no one to guide them or tell them about right from wrong. Things like these never happened before, and we were just fine with it. Now, all they want is the freedom to do this and that; they just want to dress scantily and behave immorally. We will be like the rest."

Fatimah's concerns and worries were understandable, for what appears to have become the norm in Saudi Arabia is dreadfully unfamiliar to her religious and social selves. Similarly, Djihan, who moved to the UK after having her first child at nineteen, compared different eras in Muslim women's conservatism. She attributed the shift to the increased exposure to Western ideologies, which she believed aimed to westernise Muslim women. Djihan, however,

viewed her own life in a European country as modest and pious, resisting temptations and staying on the righteous path. The latter stated,

“Islam back in the day was just right. Maybe people now think it is extremist and conservative, but not for us, and that is why we grew up to become decent women [...] the new generation, with all their meddling with religion to suit their desires and needs, is straying away from Allah’s path.”

Fatimah and Djihan employed temporal and spatial dimensions to discuss their perceptions of Islam, particularly in Saudi Arabia. They noted that their upbringing portrayed Islam as disciplinary, corrective, and equitable for both genders, but they observed a shift towards labelling such an Islam “extreme” in contemporary times. While Djihan experienced such a shift after relocating to the UK in the 90s, Fatimah experienced it after the newly granted women’s rights. They both appreciated the value of what they considered “extreme” and “radical” Islam when contrasting Muslim and non-Muslim social behaviours in the UK. Both participants expressed contentment with the vision of Islam they inherited from their parents, seeing it as flawless. Other participants expressed similar views and regarded seeking alternative interpretations of the Quran or Sunnah as sinful, equating it with disbelief in God. These perspectives highlight how individuals’ limited exploration of religious identity can hinder them from challenging or developing their religious beliefs.

Inquiry and critical questioning have played essential roles in human expression, communication, and social interaction throughout history. To approach a matter critically is to engage the intellect, fostering understanding and a quest for truth (Badi et al., 2017). In the context of Islam, questioning has traditionally been a hallmark of religious learning. However, contemporary attempts to question or reinterpret Islam beyond inherited interpretations are often considered religiously unacceptable and sinful. Badi et al. (2017) argue that questioning can elicit objections and place one in a position of challenging judgments without providing satisfactory arguments, reflecting the reluctance of individuals like Fatimah, Djihan, and others to question Islamic practices. However, questioning does not necessarily imply denial or rejection. Wadud (2000, p.1) suggests that questioning religion involves examining the Quran’s

words and contexts to derive a logical understanding, recognising that Quranic interpretation methods carry subjective elements.

Questioning Islam, in this sense, does not entail rejection but rather a critical exploration of various interpretations to construct an individual religious identity, a process embraced by many participants in shaping their identities as Muslim women within and outside of Saudi Arabia. Islam, as a monolithic religion, governs several life aspects of its adherents, regardless of their gender (Barlas, 2019). However, from a Western perspective, women are more governed by Islam than men (Haq, 2022). Such a perspective affected how the participants negotiated their identities abroad, especially with regard to their perception by others as women in need of emancipation.

7.2.1 The Emancipation Myth

Most participants countered the Western assertion that Islam is inherently patriarchal and disempowers Saudi women; however, only the religious ones contended that Islam has, in fact, been instrumental in empowering them and elevating their social status. While the majority challenged the notion that Muslim women need saving and deliverance from religious oppression, a minority acknowledged specific issues, particularly concerning honour killings, where they believed women, regardless of their religious affiliation, may need help and liberation, albeit not necessarily in the politically driven manner often advocated. The discourse surrounding the emancipation and salvation of Muslim women is not recent in sociology. Scholars like Marnia Lazreg (2011), Leila Ahmed (2012), Abu-Lughod (2013), Sarkar (2017), and Van de Graaf (2021) have interrogated the underlying motives of such projects. While it may seem that the impetus to rescue Muslim women is primarily Western, this perspective is evolving with the increasing number of Muslim female voices from the Middle East and North Africa joining the conversation.

During a first aid training session, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD student, Zaynab, found herself in a group comprising two female students from China, one from Argentina, and a male student from Iraq. During introductions, the

Chinese students asked her a surprising question: “*How come you are allowed to be here?*” Zaynab reported. The latter, as in many incidents, realised that her classmates held preconceived notions about Saudi Muslim women. She clarified that Saudi women have the freedom to leave their homes, but her peers remained sceptical and thus proceeded to ask her about domestic violence, male dominance, and polygamy. Zaynab explained how these misunderstandings occurred often, causing her significant frustration and discomfort. The latter said,

“It is very annoying, if not very sad, that the first thing people do when they know you are a Muslim from Saudi Arabia is to feel sorry for you or petty you because, in their heads, you are a victim, regardless of what you say.”

The excerpt highlights Zaynab’s frustration, particularly as a Muslim woman from Saudi Arabia, when she is automatically perceived as a victim solely based on her national and religious background. Such a perception reflects preconceived stereotypes and biases held by some individuals who fail to see the diversity and agency within the Muslim community, which can be demeaning and dismissive, preventing meaningful and respectful interactions. The thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, had a slightly similar incident. When discussing religious identity, Karima pointed out how intense the debates on Muslim women in legal studies are and how she could not detach herself from such debates as a Muslim woman and a Law student.

Karima discussed her interactions with her supervisors during her academic years, characterising them as “*harmless chats*” to her religious identity. She highlighted how her supervisors commended her choice to study Law in the UK as both brave and unconventional, which, she argued, reflected their perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a place dominated by struggle and conventional lifestyles. Zaynab and Karima attributed these misconceptions to mainstream Western media, with Zaynab mentioning her groupmates’ unsettling experience watching a documentary on women in Saudi Arabia²³.

²³ ABC News In-depth 2019. Women are trying to escape Saudi Arabia, but not all of them make it | Four Corners [Online]. [Accessed 13 December

“It was terrifying”, quoted Zaynab. Both participants agreed that such media often portrays Muslim women as oppressed and voiceless (Rich, 2016), leading to misconceptions about their lives. The data from Zaynab, Karima, and others who faced similar situations supports the idea that misconceptions about Muslim Saudi women stem from Western misunderstandings and preconceived notions of emancipation and saving, which hindered genuine understanding of and interaction with the participants’ identities.

Muslim women, particularly Saudis, frequently encounter victimisation not only from Westerners but also from individuals who are neither Muslim nor Saudi. Stereotypes surrounding Saudi Arabian women have perpetuated notions of oppression, subjugation, and dissatisfaction on a global scale (Winkel and Strachan, 2020). However, the narratives shared by the participants challenge these prevailing stereotypes. They experienced situations where their identity as Muslim women was negatively perceived and questioned, leading them to question why there was a common assumption that they were religiously oppressed and in need of emancipation. The majority argued that this premise was incorrect and needed correction, if not outright omission. Many participants identified as Modern Muslim women and asserted that they do not require saving or emancipation from their religion, not within nor outside of Saudi Arabia.

Several scholars, including Lazreg (2002), Ahmed (2012), Abu-Lughod (2002, 2013), Sarkar (2017), and Van de Graaf (2021), have raised critical questions about the concept of saving Muslim women. Their works delve into the complex history of various efforts to emancipate Muslim women, highlighting the questionable foundations of such projects. Their discussions gain significance when considering that many initiatives for Muslim women’s liberation have occurred in regions once colonised by the West, such as Algeria (Lazreg, 2011), Egypt (Ahmed, 2012), and Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod,

2021]. Available from:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_NppxAt_cY&ab_channel=ABCNewsIn-depth.

2002; 2013), which raises doubts about whether the notion of saving or liberating Muslim women is intertwined with historical and political colonial narratives and, at times, policies. Indeed, past colonial waves have engaged with questions concerning women, but their interventions were selective, targeting specific religious, cultural, and local practices like veiling, marriage, and male domination, suggesting that the colonial agenda extended beyond a mere intention to 'save' women.

Sakleh (2021) highlights how Western foreign policies exploit Middle Eastern and MENA women to promote their image as champions of democracy and human rights while simultaneously perpetuating stereotypes that portray these women as victims in need of rescue. However, while it is important to note that the mission to save Muslim women is no longer solely the domain of the Western world, it is also crucial to acknowledge these women's efforts and their constant fight for agency and liberation from their Western deployment as political tools. Today, various actors, including Muslim women from Muslim-majority countries, are actively engaged in this effort. Examples include the Femen movement in Tunisia, Sister in Islam in Malaysia, Femin Ijtihad in Afghanistan, and the Bussy project in Egypt.

While the majority of participants rejected the need to be saved as Muslim Saudi women, Asmaa held a contrasting view. She acknowledged that although most Saudi women may reject the idea of liberation from social pressures and illegitimate authority, they cannot represent the entire spectrum of Muslim Saudi women. Asmaa argued that by denying the need for emancipation, the majority might inadvertently prevent the minority from receiving necessary help. She emphasised the prevalence of honour crimes committed in the name of religion against women as evidence for the necessity of Muslim women's emancipation. Asmaa asserted that girls subjected to these crimes carried out in the name of preserving male honour require physical, psychological, and intellectual assistance for their well-being

and safety. Asmaa cited a recent honour killing²⁴ incident involving a young lady murdered by her two brothers, denouncing both the act and the motive for the killing. Asmaa stated,

“It is ridiculous how cheap women’s lives are at the cost of honour. Usually, it is related to virginity or running with a man or similar things. However, to be killed because you have a Snapchat and post on it! That is beyond absurd. What frustrates me the most is all the male support and praise the killers as if what they did was the right thing to do.”

Asmaa’s excerpt highlights the critical issue of honour and its impact on women in certain societies. She expressed outrage at the imbalance between the value placed on a woman’s life and the concept of honour, often tied to matters like virginity and perceived immodesty. Of particular concern to Asmaa was the support and praise the killers received from other men, highlighting a deeply ingrained social problem where violence against women is not only tolerated but sometimes celebrated in the name of preserving honour. Similarly, the twenty-eight-year-old PhD researcher, Haneen, shared a comparable experience of being bullied by a Saudi housemate but refrained from seeking help out of fear of consequences for her housemate and said,

“I swear if her family knew what she has been doing to other girls and me and how she is living here, they would slaughter her in a second. Her brothers are so hard, very, very hard.”

Receiving such a response from Haneen was not entirely surprising, given that such practices have historical precedence within Mediterranean and South Asian populations (Cohan, 2010). However, in contrast to Asmaa, Haneen did not personally denounce the act, engage in a discourse about its inherent inhumanity, or emphasise it as a situation necessitating the rescue of women. Her apparent calmness while discussing these events may have appeared perplexing, suggesting a degree of desensitisation to the situation.

²⁴ A woman in the central Saudi Arabian province of Al-Kharj whose 26-year-old sister, Qamar, was reported missing on January 19. Qamar's body was later found buried in the desert and Manal suspected her conservative brothers of killing her, writing online that they had murdered Qamar because she had a public Snapchat account. (Schaer, 2021)

Nevertheless, upon further discussion with Haneen, it became apparent that she had adapted to viewing such occurrences as a form of “normal conduct” within her societal context, leading her to modify her behaviour to prevent others and herself from becoming a victim of such acts.

It is presumptive to associate honour killings, committed in the name of religion, with the Muslim women’s emancipation project, as this would wrongly imply a religious basis for the act when there is nothing inherently Islamic about honour killings (AlBader, 2020). While some might argue otherwise due to the recurring nature of such incidents, it is more reasonable to disassociate honour killings from Islam or avoid the sweeping conclusion that “*honour killings, both worldwide and in the West, are mainly Muslim-on-Muslim crimes*” (Chesler, 2010, p.11). Instead, it is crucial to acknowledge that these acts represent a cultural practice rooted in the preservation of social constructs within patriarchal societies. Zoepf (2016) supports this perspective, having observed that in many cases, men are compelled by their communities to demonstrate control over their female relatives’ chastity under the threat of social exclusion (Zoepf, 2016, p.110). This control over female sexuality is symptomatic of social instability. Given the gravity of this issue, a more practical approach is to address and prevent honour killings for all women, regardless of their religious affiliation, rather than using it as a pretext for hidden agendas involving Muslim women.

7.3 The Women and Quran

In the Quran, the central religious text of Islam, superiority over another person is determined by piety and righteousness, known as taqwa (Barlas, 2019), rather than gender, colour, or nationality. Wadud (2000, p. 36) argues that pious behaviour aligns with the godly system prescribed in the Quran, which both men and women are expected to follow. Notably, the Quran explicitly addresses women as equals to men, setting it apart from other monotheistic religions (Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2019). However, the research participants held different opinions. Many discussed how the Saudi

interpretation of the Quran has abused its gender egalitarianism. For over a century, Wahhabi interpretations of Islamic texts have dominated Saudi Arabia, leaving lasting implications, particularly for women. While it is no longer the sole teaching source of interpretation (Farouk and Brown, 2021), its historical influence, characterised by tribalism, male dominance, and a misogynistic discourse, has contributed to the misconception that Islam oppresses women (Nelson, 2019).

All participants referenced the Quran in their narratives, primarily when discussing religious understandings. Their narratives could be categorised into two main groups. The first and larger category held a predominantly positive view of the Quran, with participants often carrying a physical or electronic copy of it. While acknowledging certain sexist, patriarchal, and male-dominated practices, these participants argued against blaming the Quran itself; instead, it is the biased interpretation and application that deserves scrutiny. Such a perspective aligns with the arguments made by Wadud (2000), Lamrabet (2016), and Barlas (2019). The second, smaller category comprised three participants—Asmaa, Lobnah, and Jomana—who held a negative or sceptical perception of the Quran. Asmaa and Lobnah explained that their questioning of the Quran marked the beginning of their atheism, leading them to deny and reject its content. In contrast, Jomana described how she still used the Quran as a comparative tool in her spiritual journey. Regardless of their perspective, all interviewees acknowledged that the Quran had played a significant role in shaping their identities as women.

7.3.1 Wrongful Interpretations

Nelson (2019) argues that the Wahhabi interpretation of Quranic teachings significantly contributes to the restrictions and violations faced by Saudi women. Her research reveals that while some practices are deemed necessary in Wahhabi Islam, others perpetuate broader injustices against women, including issues related to polygamy, divorce, inheritance rights, and concubinage. Nelson's findings align with this research findings. Participants such as Asmaa, Rima, Souheila, Jomana, Karima, Zaynab, Sawsan, and

Lamia shared their perspectives on how the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran within the Wahhabi school had negatively influenced their self-construction as Saudi women, drawing from their personal experiences and life journeys. Many participants identified areas such as marriage, polygamy, divorce, and violence against women as subjects where Quranic misinterpretations tend to favour male control and negatively impact women.

Karima and Asmaa asserted that Saudi society, under the guise of religion, predominantly privileges men over women. They pointed out that this “masculinisation” of religion is reinforced by the Quran’s use of masculine linguistic markers. Scholars like Wadud (2000), Al-Rasheed (2013), Lamrabet (2016), and Barlas (2019) concur that the Quran has historically been interpreted through a patriarchal lens across Islamic traditions. Barlas (2019, p.97) specifically argues against reading Islam as inherently patriarchal solely due to the Arabic linguistic use of masculine terms (he). She and Wadud (2000) advocate for an Islamic interpretation that aligns with the Quran’s fundamentally egalitarian and anti-patriarchal teachings, challenging the prevailing male privilege associated with traditional interpretations that perpetuate gender inequality and differentiation.

Haneen, reflecting on her past through a picture of herself at the age of sixteen, trying on her mother’s wedding dress, shared her perspective on the concept of marriage in the Quran compared to her mother’s understanding. Haneen described marriage at the time as “*a soft version of the military service*”, she said. However, upon her religious endeavour to understand her faith through the Quran, she concluded that the Quran emphasises the mutual importance of both men and women in marriage, with none being superior to the other. Furthermore, Haneen pointed out that the Quran had been misused to reinforce patriarchal traditional roles on women to serve, obey, and bear children for their husbands. While some participants, like Souheila, challenged such roles, others unquestionably accepted them. Souheila focused on rereading female figures in the Quran to reevaluate her personal qualities, social values and roles, and life experiences as a woman and as a believer.

She explained how mirroring her personal growth as a woman to Mary (the mother of Jesus) made the Quran more attainable, relatable, understandable, and meaningful. Souheila said,

“We were always told that the Quran is out of hand. Though it is in Arabic, we were only repetitively reciting the words without understanding the overall meaning, sometimes even without feeling anything [...]. Once I looked at it like an ordinary, I managed to understand it bit by bit. Up till then, I was missing a lot on myself as a woman.”

Souheila highlighted her early imposed belief that, Quranically, women were obliged to obey and serve their husbands. However, upon in-depth study, she found no explicit verse supporting this obligation in discussions of marital rights and duties (see Barlas, 2019, p.216). Such in-depth exploration marked her initial pursuit of independent Quranic understanding, redefining her role as a Muslim woman. Furthermore, Souheila described how her newfound ability to engage in debates with men on religious topics that were once unquestioned as men's rights but were ultimately revealed as erroneous interpretations had equipped her to better articulate her religious identity abroad. Conversely, the thirty-four-year-old housewife, Fatimah, who was a nationalistic, patriotic interviewee who did not criticise much or question life around her, accepted her socially dictated role as a woman.

To my surprise at the time, Fatimah shared deeper and more extensive narratives on the subject of marriage. Despite being just the two of us in her house while conducting the interview, Fatimah whispered, *“I am a second wife”*, then, cautiously, added, *“The walls have ears, but no one will know these walls are mine there”*, referring to the notebook I used in the interview. Fatimah got married to secure some economic success for her brother, whose argument was, *“either him or nothing, not like you have options anyway”*, Fatimah recalled. She said the fact of being a second wife was not disclosed to her until after marriage, which was justified by *“If it is God's words, who are you to protest?”*. Nevertheless, after eight years of what she described as *“only sexually consumed marriage”*, Fatimah still resents her brother for deciding her marriage without her consent, she alleged,

“To society, I am a good daughter and sister; to my husband, I was a sex machine; to his first wife, I am a traitor; to myself, I am not enough. Maybe when my son grows old, I will be something positive to him.”

After such a teary statement, I could not help but empathise with Fatimah, who apologised and refrained from elaborating more on the topic out of fear of objecting to God’s words and judgment. Her narratives were a poignant account of her internal struggle with all the roles she was trying to maintain. On the topic of polygamy, Asmaa discussed how men use one verse in the entire Quran to justify it²⁵. Although Asmaa’s position was not to defend the Quran but rather to point out men’s ‘ignorance’ and ‘immaturity’, she questioned why it was not permissible in the first place. Asmaa projected her argument on her own life and said,

“My husband and I are both atheists, and we do not care about polygamy religiously. However, as a woman, I would be so against my husband having an affair, let alone three other wives. Knowing that they have the right to do so written in the Quran is, in my opinion, very offending to women.”

The critique of men’s interpretations of the Quranic polygamy verse was not limited to Asmaa; several participants shared similar concerns. Zaynab described how the verse was often wielded as a “weapon” against women. When asked about their views on polygamy, despite its religious promotion, all participants, echoing Zaynab’s sentiments, expressed reservations, with questions like “*Am I not enough for him as a woman?*” Polygamy was deeply personal for these women as it posed a direct threat to their sense of womanhood. According to scholars like Wadud (2000) and Barlas (2019), the patriarchal interpretation of this verse has distorted its meaning, leading men to believe in their unconditional right to practice polygamy. However, Wadud (2000, p.83) argued that the verse primarily emphasises justice— equitable financial management and fairness toward wives and children—a standard

²⁵ *“If you fear that you might not treat the orphans justly, then marry the women that seem good to you: two, or three, or four”*. (Surah 4 An-Nisa, Ayat 3)

that she deemed impossible to meet. As a result, the Quran promotes monogamy as the appropriate marital arrangement, a perspective shared by all participants, who noted that most men remained unwilling to accept this “correct” interpretation of the polygamy verse.

Most of the narratives on divorce centred on the thirty-eight-year-old fashion blogger Iness, who had personal experience with divorce. Other participants discussed divorce either from an outsider’s perspective or as daughters of divorced parents. Iness was eager to share her divorce experience, emphasising its significance to her self-understanding as a woman. Married to her paternal cousin at the age of twenty-one, a common practice within her tribe, Iness fell victim to domestic abuse, which she concealed from her family. Iness explained how women in such situations were raised to endure silently, for discussing it could lead to blame for not obeying their husbands. Initially, divorce was not even considered an option for Iness, for it was rejected within her tribe’s norms. However, unable to tolerate the abuse any longer, Iness confided in her father as opposed to her unsupportive mother. The families discreetly resolved the issue without involving the tribe’s elders, but Iness had to compromise. Her husband, invoking his Quranic right to unilateral repudiation, refused to grant a divorce for fear of damage to his reputation. Consequently, Iness had to accept a *Khulu*²⁶ divorce under the condition that she never disclosed the reason for the divorce. In this regard, Iness lamented,

“What bothered me the most then was not the abuse I faced but how, in the Quran, it is wide clear not to mistreat, beat, or harm women, be it wives, daughters, or sisters. However, in my case, they disregarded all that and went with the one divorce verse to give him the right to abuse me even more.”

Iness relocated to the UK three years after her divorce, accompanied by some supportive family members who assisted her in rebuilding her life. A similar narrative in a transnational context was shared by the twenty-nine-year-old

²⁶ The process when a wife pays some money to strive for divorce, which will be accepted and considered only when the husband wills. (Bakar, 2018, p. 169)

PhD student, Zaynab, who recounted the experience of her friend. The latter had entered a religious marriage as a second wife to one of her father's business partners, only to be divorced while studying in the UK because her husband's first wife had discovered their marriage. Zaynab explained that this divorce was communicated through a brief three-word text message, and because the marriage was only religiously recognised, her friend had no legal rights. Consequently, as a divorcee within their society, her prospects were severely limited.

In the Quran, divorce is viewed as a last resort to solve marriage problems, with specific guidelines on when and how it should be carried out, along with obligations on the husband's part to provide for his wife during the divorce (Barlas, 2019, p. 226). Barlas (2019) also emphasises that even if a woman has independent wealth, the Quran obligates the husband to support her during the divorce (Barlas, 2019, p. 227). Such an obligation often leads to men refusing to grant divorces, prompting women to seek Khulu, where they forfeit their financial rights. This condition was criticised by several participants, including Iness, Asmaa, Souheila, and Karima, who found it sexist and discriminatory, suggesting that it can incentivise men to continue mistreating their wives. While the Quran addresses various concepts related to women's rights and justice, marriage, polygamy, and divorce emerged as central topics of discussion. Despite feminist interpretations advocated by scholars like Wadud (2000), participants' narratives highlight the persistence of patriarchal interpretations in Saudi society, resulting in rules and regulations primarily shaped by men. Wadud (2000, p. 2) argues that the Quran's interpretation historically prioritised men's experiences and often excluded or interpreted women's experiences through a male perspective, contributing to disparities in men's and women's rights within the Quran and Islam.

7.3.2 Ignored Equality

Various Quranic verses are dedicated to women's rights, encompassing aspects such as their status, social standing, property, and religious and social responsibilities (Sharma and Muqtadir, 2021, p. 3). However, despite these

provisions, some societies, including Saudi society, have not progressed to fully embrace women's egalitarian treatment. Participants in this study concurred that the Quran had indeed granted them rights that even some non-Muslim societies had recently acknowledged. Nevertheless, they lamented that the inability to enjoy these rights was attributed to misguided patriarchal interpretations that exalted men. Others also pointed out that the Quran's linguistic nuances, coupled with various Hadith²⁷, contributed to the disregard and neglect of women's rights, highlighting the multifaceted challenges in achieving gender equality in religious contexts.

Participants frequently highlighted how limited Saudi women's rights are, attributing these limitations to the misinterpretation of Quranic verses. They cited two specific Quranic verses often wielded by men to justify their dominance over women. The first verse designates men as "the protectors and maintainers of women²⁸," while the second allows men to admonish, banish, and even scourge their wives if they fear disobedience²⁹. Notably, participants such as Souheila, Karima, Asmaa, Rima, Jomana, Lobnah, and Farah shared instances of male relatives employing the first verse to curtail their activities traditionally considered male-dominated. For instance, Rima recounted her experience learning to drive, noting how her brothers dissuaded her from obtaining a Saudi driver's license, asserting that they would chauffeur her when she visited Saudi Arabia. Such restrictions, participants argued,

²⁷ Thousands of sayings and practices attributed to the Prophet Mohammed that collectively form the Sunna (Robinson, 2021).

²⁸ "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard." (Ali 1997).

²⁹ "So good women are qanitat, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [nushuz], admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them" (Wadud, 2000, p. 74)

hindered their ability to fully explore their potential and determine their desired lifestyles. Rima mentioned,

“Whenever I told them I want to drive myself around, they brought the ‘Alrrijalu qawwamoona AAala alnnisai’ [Arabic words for Men are the protectors and maintainers of women] card as if those words are a magic spell to silence women.”

Souheila and Asmaa expressed similar concerns about how this particular Quranic verse severely restricts women. Asmaa recounted the experiences of her cousins, who were subjected to the implications of this verse. They were repeatedly told that men were inherently more powerful, knowledgeable, and capable of caring for them, leading them to believe that, as women, *“they could do nothing without men.”* Asmaa further reported that her cousins were effectively *“brainwashed that they do not have even the right to question such a belief.”* Karima, on the other hand, highlighted the adverse impact of the misinterpretation of this verse on women’s faith. While she resisted becoming a victim of such interpretation, she lamented that many other women were unable to do the same, falling prey not to the verse itself but to those who misuse it.

Many participants emphasised the violation of their right to physical safety, primarily due to the misinterpretation of a specific Quranic term. The word ‘to beat’ is associated with ‘women’ in the Quran, leading some men to believe it justifies physical violence against their wives, which is far from the intended meaning. The latter does not condone the striking or violent treatment of women (see Barlas, 2019, p.212-222). Sawsan’s experience shed light on this issue. She denounced how domestic violence was alarmingly common in her environment, with many men using Quranic verses to justify their actions. Sawsan, initially hesitant, shared a distressing incident by displaying a picture on her phone. She explained that while she had become somewhat accustomed to physical abuse, this incident went beyond mere physical strength. The displayed image depicted a fourth-degree burn on her ankle, inflicted by her brother as punishment for being several hours past her curfew.

Sawsan's account underscored the serious consequences of misinterpreting Quranic verses and the impact on women's physical safety. Sawsan said,

"I thought when I would tell my father, he would scold my brother for his doing, but he did not. Instead, I was blamed for triggering his violent— yet normal to my family— reaction [...] It has been so long since then, but I still have the picture, I guess, to remind myself how messed up is my family's use of religion and the Quran."

Sawsan's account resonated with my understanding, as her experience mirrored a common issue faced by many Arab Muslim women. What was also less surprising was the participants' narratives on women, who consider beating a privilege. For example, Farah expressed how some women try to convince their female relatives that beating is a sign of love, that if a husband beats his wife, he cares and 'loves' her, which makes her a 'full woman'. In addition, Farah explained that violence associated with expressing love is a toxic trait women are taught to desire and would feel less of women if their husbands did not use violence as a love language. Iness, who had personally endured physical abuse from her ex-husband, raised a critical question about the justification for men giving themselves the right to 'beat' women who are not their wives, even if they claim to do so based on Quranic interpretations. She clarified that she did not condone violence against wives, emphasising the complexity of the issue.

Rabaan et al. (2021), in their study on domestic abuse of women in Saudi Arabia, concluded that among the factors enabling the perpetuation of domestic violence is its normalisation to the extent that it becomes unrecognisable. While a small number of participants did not outright condemn the idea of beating a wife for disobedience, the majority agreed that disobedience should never be a reason for physical violence, especially towards women, which the research data reported as the primary justification for beating women in Saudi society. Barlas (2019, p.216), quoting Wadud (2000), argued that the Quran does not mandate women to obey their husbands, nor does it describe obedience as a prerequisite for women to be part of the Islamic community, challenging prevailing misconceptions on this

issue. While Quranic interpretations were another site wherein religion intersected with the participants' identities, the hijab was also another significant site of intersection, which will be discussed next.

7.4 The Women and Hijab

The participants articulated their identities through verbal and physical means, often intertwining their religious beliefs with social norms. The intersection of religion and social norms became particularly evident in the context of the hijab, a significant site where these elements converged. While many participants identified the hijab— or the veil, Niqab, or Abaya with a scarf— as a significant factor defining the participants' identities as Muslims, the hijab is also perceived by some as a symbol of oppression. Such a complex relationship between the hijab and women's emancipation has been the subject of many academic discussions. For instance, Satiti (2020), referencing the Femen group, who view removing the veil as a form of resistance against oppression, argues that forcing Muslim women to remove their hijab may itself be an act of oppression.

Interestingly, some of the veiled participants shared this perspective. For instance, Aseel, whose religious identity was deeply influenced by her upbringing in Makkah, emphasised that her veil represented satisfaction and honour rather than oppression. She criticised the trend of unveiling among other Saudi women, arguing that it did not necessarily lead to greater freedom. While Aseel held immense pride in her decision to wear the hijab, emphasising that it was her personal choice, she reproached veiled women who chose to remove their hijab after years of wearing it, claiming to feel more themselves without it. In this regard, Aseel said,

"I do not understand them. After years and years of wearing it, they simply take it off. They say they feel more themselves now, but I do not get it. For me, it is just that whoever targeted the Muslim women to destroy the Islamic society has won."

Aseel's excerpt reflects her agency and autonomy in choosing how to express her religious identity. However, her comments on women removing their hijab suggest a deeper and more complex relationship between religious identity, cultural norms, and individual agency. Furthermore, her comment about Muslim women being targeted as the core of Islamic society suggests concern about external influences shaping women's choices, which also reflects the intersection of religious expression, personal identity, and social expectations, providing an opportunity for further exploration of these nuanced dynamics within the context of hijab-wearing Muslim women.



Figure 13: *Hijab is not Oppression* (Khalida, 2020)

Zaynab, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD student, when displaying a recent photograph of her newest Abaya, emphasised the significance of this attire as a public representation of her identity as a Saudi woman. The influence of the

Abaya on Saudi women should not be underestimated. While it is no longer mandatory for religious reasons in Saudi Arabia since 2019, the Abaya continues to be regarded as a reflection of cultural norms in Saudi society (Abdulaziz, 2019). Zaynab stressed that modesty in clothing was a fundamental aspect of her attire, with the Abaya being a key embodiment of this principle. However, she noted that she opted not to wear it in her daily life abroad, in contrast to her routine in Saudi Arabia, where she wore it daily. Zaynab further elucidated that since her relocation to the UK, she had reserved her collection of Abaya primarily for special occasions, marking a shift in her clothing choices. Zaynab said,

“Back home, the Abaya is like your house keys, phone, or wallet. You cannot go out without it. Even now, it is not a must, but we all wear it because we cannot just easily get rid of it.”

In their research on Saudi women and their perception of the Abaya as an element of their identity, Barnawi and Ohkura (2019) noted that Saudi women abroad often maintain their Abaya attire to uphold the stereotypical image of beautifully dressed Saudi women, while others adopt a more relaxed approach to dressing when away from their home environment, where they may feel pressured to adhere to specific clothing norms (Barnawi and Ohkura 2019, p. 164). Their findings align with Asmaa’s experience as one of the unveiled participants. During the interview, Asmaa wore jeans and a shirt, which she considered *“not decent enough for Saudi standards.”* Asmaa explained that her choice of attire was crucial to gaining approval from her in-laws, as non-compliance would jeopardise her marital status. She emphasised that the pressure to conform to the image of a *“model Saudi wife”* was enforced by her in-laws rather than by her husband, which led to her rebellion against such pressure abroad. Asmaa said,

“I have to wear my Abaya on the plane before we land in Jeddah airport because his brother always picks us up, and of course, I need to show the wife they should be proud of so that they do not say I broke his neck [metaphorically]. I conform because I love him; he accepts the real me, but his family will always be in the way.”

Asmaa's excerpt highlights the complex interplay between personal identity and social expectations for Saudi women living abroad by revealing the pressure she faced to conform to traditional dress codes when returning to Saudi Arabia due to the scrutiny of her husband's family. While Asmaa's husband may be accepting of her true self, the family's influence and their perception of an ideal wife place her in a delicate position, accentuating the tension between individuality and conformity, driven by the desire to maintain family harmony, upholding social norms, but also being her true self. Asmaa's narratives shed light on her nuanced negotiations of identity amid the impact of familial and social expectations abroad. Asmaa, among others, described a notable contrast between her life in the UK and Saudi Arabia, emphasising increased agency and independence abroad.

The research finding corresponds with the conclusions drawn by Alamri (2019), who posits that numerous Saudi women alter their hijab choices when residing outside of Saudi Arabia for various reasons. For instance, along with avoiding unwarranted associations with terrorism, evading discriminatory treatment and abuse, as well as demonstrating respect for the prevailing laws and customs in their host countries, within the Saudi context, diverging from the established norms related to the hijab, such as opting for an alternative style or not wearing it altogether, can result in criticism from both male and female individuals, along with a diminished level of societal respect for women who deviate from the hijab's conventions. Consequently, when living abroad, these women may adjust their hijab choices to align with their personal preferences.

The study's findings reveal that the participants' attachment to the hijab was influenced not only by their religious beliefs but also by their preconceived image and the approval of their social environment. Notably, participants exhibited distinct dressing styles in the UK compared to Saudi Arabia, largely influenced by their social interactions. Those who maintained a primarily Saudi social circle expressed feeling compelled to adhere to the dressing style common in Saudi Arabia to avoid criticism from peers. This phenomenon was

exemplified by Farah and Zaynab, who shared experiences of being judged by their Saudi friends for their evolving self-presentations. Zaynab, for instance, sought to improve her English language skills by socialising with English colleagues, accompanied by changes in her dressing style (see Figure 14). Despite denying a direct correlation, Zaynab faced reproach from fellow Saudis who perceived her modified hijab style as improper and 'liberal'. Zaynab stated,

"I do not understand why wearing a bonnet, which will also cover all my hair, would be considered rebellious and consequential of my interactions with non-Saudis. I find it very absurd, even annoying if you ask me."



Figure 14: *It is a Hijab if my hair is covered* (Zaynab, 2019)

Zaynab's narratives reflect her frustration towards other Saudis questioning her choice to change her hijab style, which she perceived as a relatively minor change. Her sentiment reflects the complexity of identity and self-presentation among Saudi women living abroad, where even subtle alterations in clothing choices can be subject to scrutiny. Such complexity highlights the social pressure and expectations placed on Saudi women regarding their appearance, even when residing in different cultural contexts. Zaynab's irritation suggests a desire for autonomy in personal choices, challenging the normative constraints imposed by her social circle. Furthermore, Zaynab's frustration and irritation can be understood through the work of Alamri (2023).

In her research on the hijab in Saudi society, Alamri concludes that changing the hijab for Saudis is not an individual decision only the wearer takes. Rather, it is a collectivist decision that impacts the wearer and her family members because any unfamiliar changes are considered violations of religious and traditional values. Alamri (2023, p.274) further argues that such a situation has resulted in the creation of two types of hijabs: inside hijab and outside hijab. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the extent to which participants adhered to the traditional Saudi dress code varied depending on their location, interactions, and, most importantly, personal choices, which emphasises how changing social and religious contexts indeed influence the participants' process of negotiating their identities.

7.5 Conclusion

To sum up, the discussion in this chapter has explored the position of religion in the narratives of the Saudi women interviewed with regard to their self-understanding and identity. While the majority affirmed their adherence to Islam as a faith, few firmly denounced it, maintaining that their level of religious practice did not affect their self-understanding and self-presentation. For these participants, spirituality was more significant than religiosity, which, the findings revealed, had a lesser effect than expected on how religious participants understood and presented themselves. Indeed, there was an agreement among these participants that the lack or absence of religious practice did not change their identifications as Muslims. In contrast, the non-religious participants affirmed that religious identity is just another paradoxical box they chose not to be placed in, making it increasingly difficult to express themselves and their views. Accordingly, while this chapter has accentuated the intersection of religion with spirituality and self-identity among the participants, the next chapter will explore the intersectionality of change with the participants' identities.

8 Chapter Eight: Identity and Change

The concept of change in the context of identity construction and negotiation has been explored in previous research, mostly on Saudi female students (Alandejani, 2013; Alamri, 2017; Alqudayri and Gounko, 2018; Song, 2019; Alsheri et al., 2019; Alfurayh, 2021; and Winkel et al., 2021). While these studies' findings highlighted the significance of culture as a mediating factor in Saudi women's experiences living abroad, this chapter examines other areas of change in identity. The participants' complex, diverse, and insightful narratives highlighted six areas wherein the concept of change intersected with their self-understanding and identities: notions of home, geographical relocations, mixed-gendered interaction, language, and experiences of loneliness and autonomy. These intersections accentuate the distinctions between the Saudi and English social and cultural contexts, which provoked various attitudes, ranging from acceptance and resistance to negotiation and adaptation. All these attitudes were interpreted as participants' efforts to (re)discover, maintain, and expand their sense of self. Accordingly, this chapter examines the participants' understanding of home and its relevance as a source of their identity security. It also analyses and discusses the interplay of identity and geographical change by exploring the negotiation of family power and authority in regard to the participants' self-understanding and representation. It also examines the participants' experiences with mixed-gendered interactions, the English language, loneliness and autonomy, and their impact on the participants' identities as sites of both struggle and empowerment, both in Saudi Arabia and the UK.

8.1 Identity and Home

A home is unquestionably a place of safety and normality. Such normality, contrary to common belief, is the outcome of people's sustained, often unconscious, interactive relation with infrastructural aspects, such as other people, material environments, or locations, to which they attach a sense of

security, familiarity, and control. While Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) argue that it is needless to wonder about the meaning of home, for it is a very common word, the established connection between home and identity, identified in the data, necessitates deep exploration of its meaning before unfolding its interplay with the participants' identities.

The participants' discussions on safe spaces, self-expression, and identity performance unveiled a profound connection between their identity and their conceptions of "home." Through their narratives, they consistently associated the notions of authenticity, security, freedom, and comfort with the idea of being "at home", which prompted a critical inquiry into their diverse meanings of "home". The findings revealed a prevalent theme of a "safe place" where the participants could genuinely be themselves, often framed as the true self is most readily expressed at home. Consequently, the notion of "home" became a focal point of inquiry. The responses displayed variation among participants: some construed "home" as a subjective feeling or state of belonging irrespective of time and place; others anchored it to a specific geographic territory, primarily Saudi Arabia; and yet another group defined "home" through their social relationships, emphasising the importance of people over physical locations or abstract concepts.

In contrast to the second perception of home, in which it is an immobile concept that produces rigid identities always inflicted by nostalgia and homesickness, the first and third conceptions are more fluid, giving rise to continually evolving identities. Essentially, defining home as a state of mind or as a product of relationships implies that individuals can carry their sense of home with them or create new ones when relocating. In contrast, a view of home as solely tied to Saudi Arabia suggests the participants' struggle with their sense of self. Nevertheless, despite their diverse responses, most participants emphasised that what mattered most about their homes was the emotional comfort they provided, enabling them to express their 'real' selves, which aligns with Ting-Toomey's (2005) concept of identity security, which posits that individuals require a certain level of emotional reassurance in their

identifications to fully and openly be themselves. Otherwise, fear of judgment, social rejection, and a lack of social belonging would foster a 'fake self.' For all participants, this emotional security was found in their homes.

The narratives of the thirty-year-old PhD student, Asmaa, highlight her unemotional view of home, which she considered an effective means to break the perceived link between home and homesickness. She strongly critiqued the emotions of nostalgia and homesickness, deeming them "*irrational justifications for staying within one's comfort zone.*" Notably, Asmaa displayed images of the various homes she rented abroad (see Figure 15), emphasising that the only Arab-influenced element in her living space was a carpet gifted by a friend. She rarely purchased Arabesque decor, and if she did, it was driven by aesthetics rather than nostalgia. For Asmaa, the criteria for a place to "feel like home" were not fixed; she believed it was her responsibility to create a sense of home wherever she resided. Her continuous integration into her surroundings shaped her understanding of home, which allowed her to navigate her identity without the nostalgic sentiments and typical homesickness often experienced by migrants. In this regard, Asmaa said,

"Many of my friends, when they moved abroad, complained about not belonging or fitting in in their new place, that they miss their old selves after a while, which is absolute nonsense to me. There is no old or new self; it is all you but with new updates, and we must be at peace with all those updates."

Asmaa's excerpt challenges the conventional notion of home. She firmly believed that constraining this concept could have negative emotional and psychological consequences, based on the experiences of her many friends who struggled to understand themselves after relocating from Saudi Arabia, which reflect the findings in Alromaih et al. (2022) study Postgraduate and Undergraduate Saudi Students Studying in the UK, in which they concluded that they suffered from anxiety and homesickness. In contrast, she advocated for viewing home as a flexible, universal tool that allows people to express their true selves, regardless of the number of homes or locations involved. In essence, Asmaa argued that perceiving home as boundless liberates individuals from being confined to a single version of it, which could otherwise

dictate their lifelong identities. Such an expansive interpretation of home was not unique to Asmaa. The forty-one-year-old lecturer, Souheila, who had lived in the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the UK, shared similar sentiments, emphasising that home is not a specific place but, rather, the ability to create a comforting space in any location.

Asmaa and Souheila's conceptions of home align with Wise's (2000) early works on *The Theory of Home*, drawing upon Boym's (1994) notion of home to emphasise its fluidity and mobility. Wise explores the complex relationship between home and identity, contending that the *milieus* individuals create serve as the foundation of a home. According to Wise (2000), home is not limited to physical spaces or their structures but rather the way people inhabit these spaces, creating distinctive environments marked by everyday actions. Building on this, Wise (2000) introduces the concept of "territory"— the resulting space of comfort shaped by individuals and primarily influenced by, but not limited to, cultural and social norms. Wise (2000) highlights the link between home and identity, emphasising that territory provides a level of comfort that allows individuals to express what they believe to be their most unmasked selves. Wise's notion of territory resonates with Asmaa and Souheila's descriptions of home as an ever-evolving construct that interacts intimately with individual identity.



Figure 15: My ninth house (Asmaa, 2020)

Conversely, the thirty-year-old PhD student, Lamia, associated her sense of being at home with a specific place, namely Saudi Arabia. Her narratives about home were marked by nostalgia, reminiscence, and homesickness, reflecting her state at the time of the interviews. It is important to note that some interviews took place during travel restrictions due to COVID-19, preventing participants from visiting Saudi Arabia. Because of such a situation, Lamia expressed extensively her deep attachment to Saudi Arabia, particularly through the photographs she shared. When asked to define home, she used a picture folder on her phone named *El-Bayt*, the Arabic word for home, to illustrate how being away from this home altered her identity (see Figure 16).

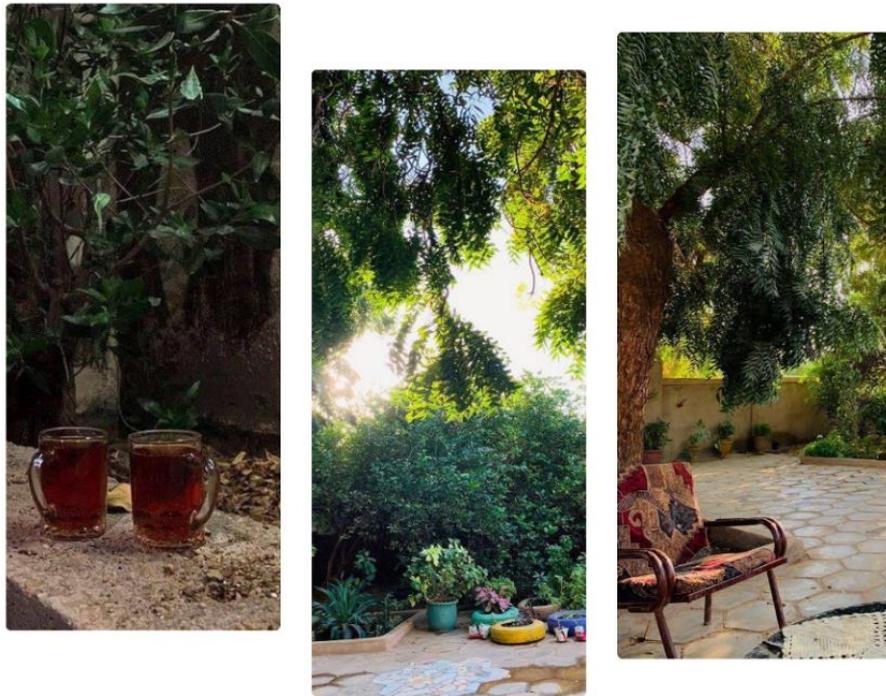


Figure 16: Our Green Yard (Lamia, 2020)

Lamia's strong and evident attachment to Dammam (the Saudi city where Lamia lived) was closely tied to the emotional security she found in that specific geographic location, which served as the foundation for her sense of identity security. Growing up, Lamia was constantly surrounded by familiar people, including her parents, siblings, and friends, with whom she shared strong bonds. These bonds became sources of affirmation and validation for

her. Consequently, any disruption or detachment from these sources, without the prospect of establishing alternatives, significantly impacted Lamia's understanding and expression of herself. The thirty-six-year-old dentist, Farah, shared a similar narrative. Displaying pictures of her in the Great Mosque of Mecca, Farah explained how she could fully connect with, be, and perform her 'real' self in Saudi Arabia, particularly in Mecca. Farah added further,

"When we first came [referring to herself and her husband], we stayed one year without returning to Saudi Arabia. We suffered emotionally. Though we were together, I still felt like a fish out of the sea [...] Saudi Arabia was more than a home to us."

Lamia and Farah's connection with Saudi Arabia, central to their definitions of home, aligns with the existing literature on place identity (Proshansky et al., 1983; Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Peng et al., 2020; Procentese et al., 2021). For instance, Proshansky et al. (1983) highlight in their work the dynamic relationship between an individual and their environment, contending that place not only conveys information to the person but also plays a role in shaping and possibly altering that person's self-identity. Similarly, Cuba and Hummon (1993) define place identity as an expression of feeling at home, often rooted in comfort within one's original space or homeland. Disruption of this comfort can lead to a disturbance in the expression of at-homeness and, consequently, one's self-presentation. Another example is Procentese et al.'s (2021) study of Italian migrants in London, which provides a compelling illustration of Cuba and Hummon's (1993) concept of disrupting the expression of at-homeness.

The mentioned scholarly works highlight that individuals may reshape their place identities when they establish stronger, more familiar bonds in their current context, meeting their emotional and social needs for a stable sense of self. In the case of Lamia and Farah, they appeared to experience these bonds more strongly in Saudi Arabia than in the UK. Consequently, their adaptation to the non-Saudi context encountered challenges. They grappled with comprehending the new and unfamiliar social and cultural norms,

maintaining connections with their families, and coping with increased dependence and detachment. Moreover, they faced difficulties fulfilling their responsibilities, understanding their evolving identities, and finding individuals who could empathise with their confusion.

The research findings highlight family-related, familiarity-related, and community-related reasons why participants associated Saudi Arabia with the concept of home. The family-related were apparent among participants coming from large, close-knit families, as exemplified in the narratives of both Lamia and Kaouther. Their strong family disposition contributed to feelings of loss and confusion when separated from their large family networks, disrupting their sense of belonging and predominantly challenging their development of transnational identity. To cope with their loss and confusion, many participants navigated their lives across Saudi and English borders through online communication and bureaucratic connections. In essence, these participants' identities were constructed on a shared collective notion of home (Anderson, 1983), closely tied to family and personal relationships in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, the thirty-five-year-old nail technician, Kaouther, expressed that she got to be herself with her sisters and mother in their house *“doing anything or absolutely nothing.”*

Kaouther's narratives highlight the significance of the bond she shared with her sisters and mother, which reflects Zoepf's (2016) findings. In her work on Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Zoepf described how the ties between female groups of friends, sisters, female cousins, and aunts were strong and mostly needed. It was almost as if they depended on those gatherings to thrive personally and socially. Zoepf (2016) explained that for a very long time, Saudi women were—voluntarily or forcefully—indulged in a women-only world where they did everything together, trained in women-only gyms, shopped in women-only boutiques, and stayed in women-only hotels. Thus, a mere separation from a best friend would shake their world, let alone a distant separation from family members.

Ibtihal's narratives exemplified best the familiarity with the Saudi context as the second reason for defining home as Saudi Arabia. The thirty-seven-year-old pastry chef, Ibtihal, expressed a sense of intimacy and familiarity with Saudi Arabia, which provided her with emotional and tangible support, security, and a feeling of belonging. She maintained how freely she could express herself without feeling like a stranger, a sentiment that was not entirely felt in the UK. In light of Ting-Toomey's (2005, p. 220) concept of identity security and vulnerability, Ibtihal's perspective reflects how she felt more secure and at ease to be herself and practise her routines in the familiar environments of Saudi Arabia but experienced a heightened sense of threat and ambivalence in less familiar settings. Despite living in the UK for over eight years, Ibtihal still perceived herself as a stranger.

The strong sense of community is the third reason many participants perceived Saudi Arabia as home. The tangible experience of belonging to a community was a significant criterion for them in defining "home", which they associated with a deep yearning for connection and social relationships, validating their existence— a term they used rather emphatically. Such a sentiment was evident in the narratives of the thirty-year-old fashion blogger Iness and the thirty-two-year-old housewife Safia, both of whom emphasised the importance of being part of a community— in their case, a tribal community. For them, a sense of home was strongly tied to being recognised, heard, and validated as individuals, which they believed could only be achieved within the familiar confines of Saudi Arabia.

In essence, the presence of family and friends who intimately knew the participants ensured their comfort by creating a safe space or extending an existing one in which they could authentically express themselves. For instance, in Safia's case, Saudi Arabia represented home because it encapsulated her familiar social network. However, when asked if relocating her entourage to the UK would make her feel at home, Safia acknowledged that it was not solely about the people but also about the distinctive local elements of Saudi Arabia, such as the immediate change in the air upon

arriving at King Abdul-Aziz airport, the scent of Oud perfumes in shopping centres, and the call to prayer (Adhan) that resonated five times a day.



Figure 17: Saudi Arabia is the Home (Ibtihal, 2020)

The data provided supporting evidence that home can be intrinsically tied to specific individuals and deep social connections. For instance, certain participants, like the thirty-four-year-old legal representative Karima and the twenty-seven-year-old photographer Sawsan, firmly believed that home was wherever their closest people were. Such an understanding of “home” hinges on particular social bonds with specific individuals. Becoming dependent on those relationships to build a sense of at-homeness may cause struggles to maintain an independent existence in their absence, which would unsettle a person’s sense of self. Evidently, when Karima and Sawsan were asked whether the absence of their significant individuals would disrupt their sense of home and, consequently, their own identities, they asserted that they would be “homeless” without their people.

Such an assertion raises some identity-related concerns, especially for those whose self-identities are closely intertwined with their relationships. Mainly,

given the inherent potential for change in relationships, individuals might be incapable of independently constructing a sense of identity. Alternatively, perhaps it would be more advantageous to perceive home as a process of engaging in and nurturing relationships rather than as the outcome of such encounters. This perspective aligns with Boccagni and Kusenbach's (2020) *Sociology of Home*, which contends that home is better understood through the dynamics of social interactions and relationships rather than through their cultivation. In other words, home can be defined as an ongoing, lifelong effort of interactions among individuals rather than as a fixed outcome, which, in this case, is the social relationships themselves.

Within the same line of thought, the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, described her home as where she felt most authentic, which was with her family. Karima highlighted that having moved to the UK and experienced significant life events there, witnessed primarily by her husband and child, made them her core sense of home. Similarly, the forty-one-year-old lecturer, Souheila, who perceived home as a continually evolving state of mind, also acknowledged certain fixed aspects about home, primarily experienced through her immediate family. She contends that unchanging aspects were necessary as reference points for self-evaluation, with her family fulfilling this role.

"If I am with my husband and daughters, I can go anywhere and still be home because I am truly me; I get to play all my roles better with them. That is why my home is never one place; however, it is always the same people, even in different places".

Souheila and Karima's accounts reflect how people feel and perform their true selves when around the people they granted substantial value in their lives, no matter their relationship. Regardless of how fragile it could be to build a home on such a ground, the two participants insisted on being and performing who they were through their attachment to their significant people. The data demonstrated a strong link between being, feeling, and performing at-homeness and the participants being their true selves. In most narratives, it was evident whether the participant's identity was impacted by either the

existence or the absence of a home; in most cases, it was the latter. Most participants strongly believed a home was a privilege only a few could access, which is, by far, one of the most significant findings of this research, for it englobed all the participants' struggles with belonging.

During discussions about home, many participants primarily articulated their idealistic and aspirational notions of the term rather than delving into the negotiation and (re)construction of their existing, absent, or lost homes. A possible interpretation rooted in the participants' narratives suggests that not all of them experienced their "actual" homes in alignment with their "aspired" ideals, an inconsistency influenced by individual social backgrounds and living conditions. For instance, Asmaa's conception of home was a continuous state of at-homeness in her mind. However, her narratives demonstrate how the intersection of her ethnic and social identity with Saudi norms conflicted with her desired expression and performance of her identity, turning her identity into a site of struggle. As Asmaa expressed,

"It is ironic how assertive I can be when talking about how I live fully and freely here in England. However, one trip to Saudi Arabia and the entire "Me" is all a big fat lie. I wear, do, and say things I no longer believe."

Articulating these sentiments was not easy for Asmaa, as they amounted to an acknowledgement of her "elusive freedom." When asked if she felt at home, she responded with laughter, saying, "I try to, but I am not there yet," revealing her deep yearning for an idealised perception of a home. Asmaa experienced two versions of home: one compromised, hidden, yet real and another imaginary and unattainable. Asmaa explained that while her identity abroad would never gain acceptance or validation from her family, tribe, or society, she was content with the opportunity to be her unmasked self.

Asmaa's narrative suggests that the absence of family and societal validation relatively hindered the success of Asmaa's sense of at-homeness, leading to identity struggles characterised by dual identities that could never fully integrate into any context. Such an interpretation aligns with Boccagni and Kusenbach's (2020) discussion of home structures, emphasising the role of

time, space, culture, and society in shaping individuals' attempts to establish a sense of home. According to their perspective, home is better understood as a social practice, a form of 'doing' enacted by people in specific locations, contexts, and with particular audiences. In unequal, restricted, or disrupted contexts, the sense of being or feeling at home can indeed disrupt identity performance, as exemplified in Asmaa's experience.

On a different note, the narratives of Lamia and Kaouther revealed a different intersection between identity and home centred on their place identities (Cuba and Hummon, 1993). Both participants displayed strong and deeply rooted feelings and connections to Saudi Arabia, which served as a substantial repository of identity symbols—cherished domestic items that function as personal and public markers of self (Cuba and Hummon, 1993, p.550). However, these participants' identity storehouses were relatively immobile, hindering their ability to establish new homes. Both Lamia and Kaouther, among others, held a strong emotional attachment to these symbol-laden repositories, an attachment that gradually strengthened the longer they resided in the UK, limiting their capacity to explore alternative symbols, create new identity storehouses and, thus, settle in the host society.

Literature on the intersection of home, place, and identity emphasises the importance of place mobility. Identity construction and negotiation benefit from place mobility, accommodating the evolving expectations of different life stages (Cuba and Hummon, 1993). Such an argument aptly explains why participants who restricted their perception of home to Saudi Arabia grappled with their prominent social, ethnic, and religious identities. Their home's immobility heightened their sense of loss and confusion and challenged their ability to settle in upon relocating to the new environment of the UK. Assuming full responsibility for their lives necessitated a departure from their constrained views of Saudi Arabia as their sole home. Such a departure led them to redefine their identities and self-understandings.



Figure 18: Home is Saudi Arabia (Lamia, 2020)

8.2 Identity and Geographical Relocation

The geographical relocation from Saudi Arabia to the UK represented a significant shift for the participants, prompting a reevaluation of their identities. While the influence of geographical relocation on Saudi women's identities abroad is academically underexplored, Alshareef (2017) addressed it in her study on the impact of geographical change on transnational Saudi women entrepreneurs. Her findings highlight the positive attitudes displayed by the participants towards relocating to other countries, especially as it provided them with a sense of agency and freedom from the need to seek familial permission, reflecting autonomy in their narratives. Alshareef's (2017) findings align with the research's broader conclusion that many participants experienced an enhanced sense of agency upon travelling abroad, as exemplified by Sawsan's account. The latter vividly recounted her visit to a beach in Amsterdam and said,

"When I was young, going to the beach was a miracle that happened once in a blue moon. Not that I did not want to go, but even asking to go to the beach was not allowed [...]. When I travelled to Amsterdam, my trip to the beach was so ritualistic. I wanted to enjoy every second of it. There was no family, religion, guardian, police, nothing. Just me and the beach."

The narrative highlights the intersection of religion and women's agency and its profound impact on Sawsan's upbringing, imposing significant restrictions on seemingly simple activities like visiting the beach. Her account points out how these constraints were effectively lifted when she left Saudi Arabia, reflecting Alshareef's (2017) findings regarding the autonomy and freedom of transnational Saudi women. While it might seem that Sawsan only gained free agency after relocating, this research contends that, like the other participants, her agency existed before her journey abroad, albeit concealed by external factors like conservative beliefs, familial and tribal affiliations, and rigid religious interpretations. Distance from these external influences reduced and, in some instances, eliminated their impact, granting her more space to negotiate her identity.



Figure 19: Alone and Free (Sawsan, 2015)

The geographical change significantly impacted the participants' dressing choices, which they considered a crucial marker of their identity. Given the stark climatic differences between Saudi Arabia and the UK, with the former experiencing more intense summers and milder winters than the latter (Bhaumik, 2022), participants had to adapt their clothing styles. Lamia, like others who regarded the Abaya as a source of pride, initially found it challenging to replace this symbol of her Saudi and Muslim identities with

more practical attire. Lamia described discarding the Abaya in favour of trousers and a coat as unfamiliar and bold, for she deemed herself wearing the latter socially inappropriate in Saudi Arabia. Reflecting on a photograph of herself in trousers and a short jacket on an autumn day, Lamia recounted her initial packing for her journey to the UK, saying,

“Selling coats is not a successful business in Saudi Arabia because we do not need them. However, I regretted so much not packing any when we first came to the UK. Trust me; a light Abaya does not protect from the English cold [...]. My husband and kids did not struggle as much as I did to style my coats. A long jacket did not look fashionable with a long Abaya, so I started wearing trousers regularly rather than occasionally”.

Although Lamia emphasised that the most profound impact of no longer wearing the Abaya was on her religious and national identities, her perspective evolved, leading to her adaptability and innovation of her clothing choices while preserving her identity through her hijab, language, and social interactions. Lamia’s narrative finds parallels in the experiences of the thirty-two-year-old housewife, Nawal, who used to wear a full Niqab³⁰ in Saudi Arabia but removed it two years after relocating to the UK. It is worth noting that for Nawal, the geographical change signified a greater distancing from the Saudi people rather than the country itself. Nawal, although hesitant to critique Saudi culture and society, noted that individuals tend to be less judgmental when they are apart.

She further expanded that, in Saudi Arabia, it is considered questionable for a woman to unveil her face while still wearing the hijab and modest clothing, as this act alone may be viewed as rebellious due to social and cultural pressures that place high expectations on women to exemplify Islamic modesty. Nevertheless, Nawal observed that when away from these pressures, people’s attitudes become more relaxed, and they are less concerned about others’ actions. In this regard, Nawal said,

³⁰ A Niqab is a piece of clothing traditionally worn by some Muslim women. It covers the face, leaving only the eye area uncovered (Piela, 2022).

“Because I am thousands of miles away, I get to go out without my face covered. So, people compliment me a lot about the beauty marks on my face. It is very flattering and makes me feel good as a woman”.

Nawal’s excerpt illustrates the impact of geographical change on her identity as a woman. It highlights how Nawal, who grew up in a society where compliments were often seen as having ulterior motives, experienced a transformation in her self-perception. In her new environment, Nawal received compliments and enjoyed feeling flattered for her physical traits, which was a novel experience for her. Such a narrative aligns with Zoepf’s (2016) findings on Saudi women, where they are frequently compared to ‘precious jewels’ or ‘candies’ that must be concealed to avoid attracting negative attention. Nawal’s delayed decision to remove her face cover, which took two years, was due to her need to navigate her newfound freedom and gain her husband’s approval while also considering the potential reactions of her family in Saudi Arabia. The geographical distance from her family allowed Nawal more autonomy to make choices and communicate them to her husband without familial pressure.

To sum up, the findings suggest that all participants had positive attitudes toward the geographical context change they underwent, impacting how they expressed and negotiated their identities in several ways. Firstly, it empowered them to exercise agency, as exemplified by Sawsan. Secondly, it placed them in a constant self-reflective state, as in Lamia’s case, where they had to negotiate their identities through compromises and new decisions. Thirdly, it offered them a pressure-free space for self-reliance, as seen with Nawal. While each participant also had unique ways of perceiving themselves and the world through new cultural lenses, these three modes of impact were common among all participants.

8.3 Identity and Mixed-gendered Interactions

Gender discussions predominated in all the interviews, particularly when the topics of mixed-gender interactions and gender roles were mentioned.

Notably, the participants' narratives offered detailed insights into their experiences and perspectives on mixed-gender interactions. These experiences were diverse, with some participants having prior exposure to mixed-gender environments and being comfortable with such interactions, provided they adhered to ethical standards. In contrast, others firmly opposed mixed-gender interactions on religious grounds. For instance, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher, Asmaa, described her familiarity with mixed-gender contexts based on her previous interactions with men in both formal and informal settings before relocating abroad. On this, Asmaa said,

“Going out and partying with a group of men and women among youngsters was common, discrete but common back in the days. I think the first mixed party I attended was when I was sixteen. I went with my friend who used to date my cousin. It was more of an ‘if you tell, I tell’ kind of situation [...], but still, I will say it is much better to do it openly”.

The excerpt highlights Asmaa's early yet discreet familiarity with mixed-gender interactions. She emphasised her aversion to lying about her whereabouts for brief moments of enjoyment. Asmaa also contrasted the cultural differences between the UK, where mixed-gender interactions were accepted, and Saudi Arabia, where such interactions were often condemned. In the UK, she could express herself freely without apprehension of judgment or alienation. Asmaa alluded to the need to present a false image of herself to avoid social and familial rejection, even acknowledging that many Saudi individuals engaged in practices considered forbidden. However, she attributed this reluctance to fear of scandal and dishonour, which deterred anyone from openly acknowledging their actions.

Similarly, the twenty-six-year-old Liberal arts student and the sole non-heterosexual participant, Jomana, brought her sexual identity into the conversation about her self-understanding in light of mixed-gender interactions. Jomana initially withheld her sexual orientation until she received a call from her partner. She criticised herself for not acknowledging her partner and then openly identified herself as a lesbian. Jomana discussed how, in her case, being raised in an environment where all her friends, schools, and

universities were single-sex settings contradicted the government and clergy's intended purpose of gender segregation, which aimed to prevent misconduct. She commented on her sexuality in an 'ironic' manner, stating,

“Well, this is what you get by separating men from women. You would think you would be doing them a favour, but not really. Alternatively, I guess, in my case, they did. I realised I love women by never having to deal with men.”

Jomana's narratives suggest that she may not be alone in concealing her sexuality in Saudi Arabia. Many others, both men and women, hide their homosexual preferences, as the prevailing Sharia laws dictate severe punishments (Sameer, 2020). While Jomana's mixed-gender interactions remained relatively consistent following her cultural shift from Saudi Arabia to the UK, she strongly criticised gender segregation. The prohibition of mixed-gender interaction had a more significant impact on Jomana's identity, particularly her sexual identity, in Saudi Arabia as opposed to the UK. Nevertheless, Jomana emphasised feeling more at ease with her true self in the UK than in Saudi Arabia, as the former's culture was more accepting and tolerant of her sexual orientation, whereas the latter adamantly opposed it.

Both Asmaa and Jomana's narratives were notable for their uniqueness and divergence from the conventional narratives of other participants, which tended to be less daring and more aligned with social and religious norms. Furthermore, academic literature featuring their narratives is notably scarce, likely due to the limited access to research materials on such sensitive topics in Saudi Arabia. However, studies on the impact of cultural norms and traditions on the identities of Saudi women frequently explore the theme of mixed-gendered interactions. Alfurayh's (2021) research on Saudi women in Australia, for instance, highlighted how all her participants found their initial exposure to mixed-gendered environments to be a critical and challenging experience. Alfurayh (2021) contended that these women were raised in gender-segregated households, primarily interacting with male relatives, which conflicted with their cultural beliefs, norms, and religious identities.

Consequently, mixed-gendered interactions were often uncomfortable for most of her participants.

Lamia, Aseel, Khalida, Karima, Fatimah, and Haneen's narratives generated similar findings; they reported different levels of discomfort associated with interactions with men, be they Saudis or from other nationalities. Nevertheless, while Haneen, Khalida, and Karima overcame such discomfort, Aseel, Nawal, and Fatimah felt hindered. Haneen, the twenty-eight-year-old PhD researcher in cultures and societies, described how overwhelming it was initially to be surrounded by many men compared to when she was in Saudi Arabia. Haneen received all her education in gender-separated schools and universities until she came to the UK. Haneen said,

"I had to toughen up a bit and trust myself more. I was doing a PhD in cultures and societies, and it would have been ridiculous to isolate myself and be constantly intimidated by such an environment where I had to experience my field of study firsthand".

Haneen's use of the term 'toughen up' is noteworthy, as it signifies a shift from a position of perceived weakness to one of strength. She clarified that this transition was not about inherent weakness but rather about making compromises and stepping out of her comfort zone, which, in her account, posed a challenge to her identity. This comfort zone represented a constant certainty about the appropriateness of her behaviours. However, after relocating to the UK, she found herself responsible for determining whether her expressions and conduct aligned with appropriateness, which prompted her to question this concept in the context of her true self. Similar experiences were shared by the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, whose narratives illustrated her need to reassess the significance of gender segregation once she commenced her studies in the UK in 2015. Karima expressed,

"Most of my professors and my classmates were males. I had to attend workshops and seminars with them. If I had to apply gender segregation in this context, staying in Saudi Arabia would have been better than [...] I know myself very well; I

would never be in an unethical position with a man just because we are in the same room”.

Karima defined an unethical position as one in which her virtue and honour might be jeopardised and questioned. She believed that the primary purpose of gender segregation was to prevent such situations. Her unwavering certainty that she would not allow herself to be compromised in this way made it easier for her to navigate mixed-gender environments. For Karima, accepting or tolerating mixed-gender interactions posed a challenge to her self-concept, as it tested her moral compass. These narratives accord with Song’s (2019) findings in her study on Saudi women’s mixed-gender interaction in US (United States) universities. Song (2018) concludes that Saudi women’s adherence to social and religious norms often leads to their nonparticipation in educational and social interactions, which they believe are prescribed by the tenets of Islam. Furthermore, Karima frequently engaged in self-reflection, questioning whether her actions aligned with her sense of right and wrong and whether her relocation had a negative impact on her. Nevertheless, she asserted that her self-assessments consistently favoured her, particularly when her husband validated them.



Figure 20: A source of Validation (Karima, 2021)

The thirty-two-year-old PhD researcher in Media and Communication Khalida's experience in adapting to the changing cultural understanding of mixed-gender interactions was relatively similar to the previous narratives. She discussed her ability to adjust to both Saudi Arabia and the UK, adhering to gender-segregation social laws in the former and adapting to the more liberal norms in the latter. Khalida acknowledged that this constant adjustment did affect her self-perception. She believed that her adaptability was aimed at preventing her family from facing challenges in Saudi Arabia, as they would be blamed for any perceived misconduct on her part. In the UK, Khalida interacted with men both in formal and informal contexts, always adhering to ethical and moral standards. However, her interactions were often criticised by other Saudi individuals for not aligning with traditional notions of decency. Khalida felt safer interacting with non-Saudi men in the UK, as she believed Saudi men and women were more judgmental. Such a change in the UK allowed Khalida a sense of emotional safety and identity security (Ting-Toomey, 2005) to express herself freely in mixed-gender settings.

Aseel, Lamia, and Fatimah shared distinct experiences of discomfort when interacting with men, driven by their self-consciousness and the fear of violating the rule against non-relative male interactions. For instance, the thirty-year-old PhD student, Lamia, recounted a situation where she felt so uncomfortable with a male professor that she had to request a female supervisor instead. Despite the male professor's professionalism, being alone in a closed room with a non-relative man unsettled her. Lamia emphasised that her self-perception would suffer if anyone suggested indecency in her behaviour or appearance. In this regard, Lamia said,

"I did not want to allow anyone to say that the UK changed me and that I am now an uncontrolled woman. So, I closed all doors for sinful conduct, including being in a room with a strange man I am certain would not do anything to me."

Lamia's narratives highlight the profound discomfort and self-consciousness she experienced when navigating mixed-gender interactions within the confines of societal norms. Her self-perception was significantly shaped by

the individuals in her social circle, including her husband, parents, siblings, cousins, and friends. Seeking their validation in her self-presentation and expression was a constant, conscious, and unconscious process for her. Therefore, when she moved to the UK, a culturally different society, it posed a considerable challenge to her identity, as she aimed to maintain the image her social circle held of her. Lamia's case is similar to the majority of women in studies by Alfurayh (2021) and Sharma and Shearman (2021). Their work on Saudi women in culturally diverse countries, such as Australia and the US, initially reported their discomfort when engaging with men, which they associated with the participants' need to adapt and reposition their cultural identities in response to the changes they encountered.

Similarly, the narratives of the thirty-four-year-old housewife Fatimah revealed her struggles in mixed-gendered environments and situations. For example, Fatimah pointed out how she avoided places and situations where she had to deal directly with men, such as medical appointments with male doctors, male cashiers in stores, and using Uber driver services alone. In her account, similar situations triggered problems with her male guardian regarding appropriate conduct. The impact of the mixed-gendered interaction on Fatimah's identity was not limited to hindering her from socialising and integrating into English society. It also affected her ability to improve her English language skills, which she deemed the biggest obstacle, and she was not the only one.

8.4 Identity and Language

The study identified three key ways in which language, as an integral component of context change, shaped the participants' self-understanding and expression. Firstly, the perception of speaking a foreign language differed across Saudi Arabia and the UK. In the former, using English was often associated with excessive independence, imitation of Western norms, and a perceived 'show-off' attitude. Conversely, in the UK, speaking languages other than English was typically viewed positively and admired. Secondly,

language itself served as an element of identity for many participants. While using English primarily out of necessity was considered a sign of unwelcome change and assimilation, speaking Arabic was seen as a demonstration of loyalty to the community and a commitment to tradition. Thirdly, language proficiency, effectiveness, and competence had a direct impact on the participants' self-esteem and personal achievements, at times leading to feelings of failure. In other words, the inability to communicate effectively due to language inadequacy prompted many participants to question their abilities, highlighting the significance of linguistic success in their lives.

Souheila, the forty-one-year-old PhD researcher who spent her early childhood in the US and moved back to Saudi Arabia in her teenage years, affirmed that her English efficiency was a great help when she moved to the UK. People would always assume English to be her first language. However, such quality was often undesired in the Saudi context. Souheila highlighted how speaking Arabic with an English accent was embarrassing, for she was accused of being too American than Saudi. Therefore, it was a must for her two children to master both Arabic and English. The way English was deemed non-Saudi was incomprehensible for Souheila, and her attempt to understand such perception made her question her ethnic and national identities. In this regard, Souheila said,

“Since when speaking slightly broken Arabic mean I am not Arab or Saudi enough? I spent much of my life speaking only English, but I can still communicate in Arabic. It is very sad how you can get judged because you are different from the norm.”

Souheila's narrative highlighted the norm associated with fluency in Arabic, a skill she could not fully attain due to her upbringing in the US. Moving to the UK provided her with a space where she could freely use her language without the fear of being judged as different, as was the case for most participants who excelled in English, which accords with the findings of Alfurayh (2021) that English was a tool to achieve a valued social position, which would offer Saudi women abroad respect, independence and valued identity within their society of origin or their chosen ones. Souheila's use of English helped her

acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn increased the value of her social power (Norton, 2013). Souheila's narratives also align with Winkel et al.'s (2021) study on the effects of reverse culture shock among Saudi Arabian females studying abroad, where advanced English language skills led to challenges upon returning to Saudi Arabia. The participants in their research experienced a sense of alienation, as their English proficiency served as a constant reminder of Western influence. These findings, in parallel with this study, highlight how language, as part of context change, became a criterion for misunderstanding Souheila's language differences, ultimately conflicting with Souheila herself.



Figure 21: Keeping it Arabic (Lamia, 2021)

The Arabic language held a significant role in shaping the identities of certain participants. For instance, the thirty-year-old PhD student Lamia actively sought to be exclusively associated with the Arabic language. Her home prominently featured Islamic art pieces adorned with Arabic script (see Figure 21), and she maintained a strict rule of Arabic-only language usage within her household, especially with her two sons. Deviating from this linguistic norm was seen as a disconnection from her Saudi heritage, which Lamia strongly resisted. English was reserved for academic, external, and necessary social interactions, and any attempt to shift this language dynamic was met with

resistance. When questioned about her resistance to using English, Lamia summed it up with a single word: “*betrayal*.” In other words, Lamia’s aversion to the English language was a deliberate effort to uphold or rekindle her Saudi roots within her family sphere, even in the face of her children’s reluctance.

The forty-year-old women’s association founder and mother of two boys, Djihan, grappled with a complex interplay of identity and language, similar to other participants. During her recurrent visits to Saudi Arabia, she unintentionally interjected English words in her speech, inviting criticism from her surroundings. She recounted hearing statements like, “*England changed you; we barely know you now*,” which sowed internal conflict. Djihan yearned to embrace the personal growth and changes she experienced while living in the UK, which she deemed invaluable for self-discovery and realising her aspirations. However, Djihan was torn between two self-perceptions: hers and that imposed on her by other Saudis. The attempt to reconcile both perspectives posed a significant challenge, leading to inner turmoil and a sense of self-estrangement, manifested through her uncertainty about embracing or rejecting Western influences, her selective social interactions, and the constant fluctuations in her clothing styles.

The pressure exerted by their families and society was a compelling reason for Lamia and Djihan to refrain from using English in non-essential contexts. Such pressure not only affected them but also exacerbated feelings of alienation and detachment from what was once their home. Their experiences mirrored a key finding from Almuarik’s (2019) study on Saudi PhD returnees, where she contended that her participants’ reluctance to overtly employ the English language stemmed from their awareness of how linguistic differences hindered their social acceptance. Some participants associated conspicuous English usage with social prestige, while others saw it as ‘flamboyance’. Almuarik (2019) also noted that linguistic differences were often stigmatised in Saudi Arabia, leading returning Saudis—whether permanently or temporarily—to conform to social norms to avoid criticism. Nevertheless, she argued that such conformity often led to a troubling identity change.

The findings uncovered a different interplay between identity and language. Some participants with limited English language proficiency faced hindrances in effective communication, which, in turn, impacted their self-esteem and sense of achievement. Conversely, those possessing better English language skills leveraged their proficiency to adapt to the new context, upholding a positive self-understanding. For instance, the thirty-four-year-old housewife, Fatimah, shared her challenges in communicating in English since her relocation to the UK. These language difficulties led her to avoid social interactions and outdoor activities because she *“felt embarrassed making mistakes and mispronouncing the words”*, Fatimah said.

Fatimah revealed that the norms and attitudes of Saudi society profoundly influenced her negative perceptions of the English language. She grew up in an environment where the saying ‘English is the language of the *Kufar* (non-Muslims)’ was commonly heard (Elyas and Picard, 2010). Such a prevailing view contributed to her avoidance of learning the English language, as cultural and linguistic differences were viewed unfavourably. However, her relocation to the UK served as a turning point. Her struggles to navigate daily life in the UK due to linguistic limitations led to a sense of inadequacy and diminished self-worth, which was difficult for her to acknowledge, given her strong sense of patriotism. Fatimah believed she could have invested more effort in enhancing her language skills to better integrate into her new environment. In this regard, Fatimah said,

“When my husband told me we were moving to the UK, I did not think much about my English because I did not think I would need it much. I thought it would be like in Saudi Arabia, where I would spend my days at home while everything was sorted out. I was so wrong. I struggled a lot when going to the GP, taking my son to the nursery, or talking to people from the bank. [...] I only blame myself for that. I could have done more, but I was too afraid of being different back home.”

Fatimah’s excerpt points out her struggles with basic tasks due to language limitations, leading to self-blame and self-criticism. She noted that this cycle had a detrimental effect on her self-image, self-presentation, and overall performance. Notably, Fatimah was not the only one facing such challenges

related to English mispronunciation and limited vocabulary, which hindered their full exploration of their new host country. Other participants, including the thirty-two-year-old housewife Nawal and the thirty-year-old fashion blogger Iness, shared similar experiences. Both Nawal and Iness initially prioritised their native language and culture over English, influenced by prevailing Saudi social norms. However, they later regretted this preference when they realised the necessity of English in their new environment.

Fatimah, Nawal, and Iness' experiences align with the findings in Alfurayh's (2021) study, which highlighted the strong influence of Saudi society on some participants' perceptions of the English language. Alfurayh (2021) concluded that these women's views on English were shaped by their traditional upbringing, characterised by gender segregation, an emphasis on virtue and decency, male authority, and religious practices. In contrast, English was associated with gender mixing, adultery, equality, and a lack of religious practices. Accordingly, the necessity of English in their new environment created an inner conflict within the participants, as their social conditioning clashed with their practical need to communicate with non-Arabic-speaking individuals, i.e., their self-perceptions conflicted with their national and, in some cases, religious identities.

The findings highlighted another facet of the identity and language interplay, particularly among participants with strong English language skills. Individuals such as Souheila, Karima, Khalida, and Lobnah emphasised that their proficiency in English provided them with a sense of independence, confidence, and enhanced integration into the host society. They argued that the English language empowered them to navigate, negotiate, and express themselves more freely. For instance, the thirty-four-year-old legal representative, Karima, described how her English proficiency afforded her practical abilities. Hailing from a family where blind obedience to men was not the norm, she elucidated that in Saudi Arabia, she had to yield the lead to her husband, as was customary due to social norms. Nevertheless, upon their

relocation to the UK, she reclaimed her equal role as a wife. In this context, Karima stated,

“My father and husband used to do the groceries back home. Here, I get to do them because I can. I know many other women who ask their husbands to do them because they are not good in English.”

Doing groceries in Karima’s narrative is similar to Souheila’s experience of opening a bank account in the UK. The latter recalled how she took the initiative when she and her husband needed to open new bank accounts and update their address with other banks, a role typically monopolised by men in Saudi Arabia due to longstanding norms. However, upon their move to the UK, participants like Souheila and Karima began taking on more responsibilities for themselves and their households. This newfound autonomy resonated with the twenty-six-year-old MA student, Lobnah, who expressed her excitement about regaining control over her life during her initial months in the UK. Lobnah’s account highlights her sense of empowerment as she could manage tasks independently, thanks to her English language skills, which eliminated the need for male assistance. She noted how, as a Saudi woman, she had always relied on male relatives for various tasks, including administrative work, collecting deliveries, and transportation. Doing these tasks independently in a new country marked a significant change for her, both as a woman and a Saudi. Furthermore, Lobnah took pride in her English proficiency, as it surprised her non-Saudi friends and colleagues, serving as a source of personal pride.

Expanding on the previous narratives and drawing from Norton’s (1997) concept of ‘symbolic resource,’ Alfurayh and Burns (2020) contended that, among various resources, the English language plays a pivotal role in enabling Saudi women abroad to renegotiate their relationships with power. They emphasised that Saudi women in Australia utilised their English language proficiency and the accompanying culture to reclaim rights granted by Islam but often compromised by Saudi traditional social norms. These findings align with the experiences of Souheila, Karima, and Lobnah, who

believed that their English language skills offered them enhanced opportunities for self-representation. A similar connection between the English language, Saudi women living abroad, and empowerment was established by Winkel et al. (2021). They observed that not only did Saudi women proficient in English stand out more easily, but they also gained greater independence, self-reliance, and confidence while residing abroad, characteristics shared by many participants in this study. However, this empowerment also brought forth two significant factors affecting how the research participants negotiated their identities: loneliness and autonomy.

8.5 Identity, Loneliness, and Autonomy

The research findings indicate a complex interplay between identity, loneliness, and autonomy. Regardless of whether they relocated with their families or independently, all participants acknowledged a strong connection between loneliness and autonomy. As they experienced greater loneliness, their reliance on self-sufficiency increased. Conversely, for some, their constant self-reliance led to feelings of loneliness. Regardless of the causal relationship, both loneliness and autonomy significantly influenced how the participants perceived and presented themselves. While most participants expressed appreciation for the transformative aspects of their experiences, they recalled and attested to the challenges of overcoming loneliness in a heart-rending language. Furthermore, the findings revealed that loneliness tended to make participants more introverted, less engaged with the host society, and consequently less inclined to broaden their social and cultural horizons. Consequently, autonomy evolved from being an option to a necessity for many.

In discussions about the emotional aspects of relocating abroad, most participants acknowledged experiencing feelings of loneliness, although in different forms. Their willingness to engage with the topic of loneliness, despite their usual avoidance of it, demonstrated the depth of their transformation and their need to articulate their experiences. Loneliness was

expressed in various forms, such as helplessness, a sense of not belonging in the new or old environment, excessive privacy, homesickness, unfamiliarity, and the need to handle everything independently. The data showed that specific words were linked to particular situations. For instance, participants often felt helpless when dealing with healthcare situations, such as sickness and hospitalisation, and they disliked the excess of privacy when living alone. They struggled with the sense of belonging in educational contexts and missed their homes during religious celebrations and personal events. For instance, the thirty-four-year-old housewife, Fatimah, recounted an incident when her son fell seriously ill, and her inability to navigate the unfamiliar healthcare system left her feeling overwhelmed and helpless. This experience significantly impacted her self-image, leading her to question her adequacy as a mother and her ability to adapt to her new surroundings. Fatimah said,

“I cried and wished for my mom or anyone to be there. I felt so alone, a different kind of alone because it was about him [referring to her son]. It was a mother’s worst nightmare.”

Fatimah’s narrative on loneliness found resonance among several other participants, including the twenty-seven-year-old PhD researcher, Aseel, who often saw herself as her father’s favourite child. The latter recounted an incident during her initial days in the UK when she was hospitalised for a week. While describing her experience, she conveyed a sense of being overwhelmed rather than just helpless, primarily due to the absence of her father or any other family member to provide support and care. Aseel regarded this overwhelming feeling as the most challenging she had ever encountered during that period. She emphasised that such an experience contributed to her personal growth, making her stronger, more knowledgeable, mature, and in control of her emotions, although some participants perceived this emotional control as emotional detachment.

The thirty-seven-year-old nurse, Rima, recounted a distinct experience of loneliness tied to her educational journey. She vividly recalled an incident from 2014 during a meeting with one of her tutors where she received what she described as “*harsh feedback*,” leaving her emotionally overwhelmed. This

feedback primarily pertained to her academic performance, which Rima attributed to the differences between the educational systems in the UK and Saudi Arabia. This event triggered questions of belonging within Rima, especially given that it occurred in only her second year in the UK. She began to doubt whether she truly belonged in the UK, had the necessary qualities for success, or if it was too late to return home and potentially abandon her nursing career. The latter was her least desirable option, given the negative perception of women in healthcare in Saudi Arabia. Rima expressed her concerns, stating,

“It was awful; I did not have close friends to whom I could vent. I had only classmates and did not want them to think I was stupid or not good enough. I could not tell my family either; they would worry, or worst-case scenario, they would have crashed me more by saying I should have never left.”

The 2014 incident deepened Rima’s sense of loneliness, significantly influencing her self-perception and self-presentation. While she considered herself a strong and direct individual, adapting to the differences between the two educational systems posed a significant challenge. Rima explained that bridging the gap in her educational background to excel in an English academic environment was demanding. Her efforts to fit into the new environment enhanced her identity, making her more resilient, receptive to criticism, and willing to explore, negotiate, and make daily choices and decisions. Additionally, the absence of emotional support led Rima to become reserved, emotionally detached, and less inclined to engage in personal relationships, which she found exhausting.

Rima’s emotional turmoil and exhaustion found common ground with other participants, particularly during celebratory and religious occasions. For instance, the twenty-nine-year-old PhD student, Zaynab, recounted her first Ramadan experience in the UK, which was a common theme among participants, describing it as the most disheartening Ramadan she had ever experienced. The thirty-six-year-old dentist, Farah, had a similar narrative. Despite having her husband by her side, she spent the first day in tears due to homesickness, intensifying her feelings of loneliness and further disrupting

her sense of belonging. Additionally, married participants collectively concurred that Ramadan was the loneliest time for them since they had to perform all rituals independently, contrasting with the collective approach they were accustomed to with their female family members. Karima touched on this sentiment, describing the mixed feelings of being the sole woman in the household during Ramadan, which she found both overwhelming and gratifying. Karima mentioned,

“Back home, in one kitchen, you would find a mother, an aunt, sisters, and a daughter-in-law working on preparing the food. There was an ambience in that. Here, there is only me, with my husband helping occasionally. I am proud I could pull that off, working, driving my son to nursery, cooking, and fasting a long day. It was so fulfilling, but I also felt so lonely.”

Karima’s experience of loneliness during Ramadan catalysed personal growth, pushing her beyond her comfort zone and providing an opportunity to explore her roles as a woman, wife, and Muslim in a foreign environment. Similarly, Aseel’s encounter with loneliness had a positive impact on her identity. While her first Ramadan away from family was initially disheartening, it prompted her to step out of her social reserve, embrace social interactions, and organise collective Iftars- Arabic for meals- with fellow Muslim students (see Figure 22). This experience facilitated her journey towards greater openness to other cultures, increased social engagement, and a more profound self-discovery.



Figure 22: A home-like Iftar (Aseel, 2021)

Asmaa's upbringing in a social setting where privacy was often considered an impractical request, deemed a rejection of social interactions (Nydell, 2006), led her to find solace in solitude during her time abroad. However, she acknowledged that excessive solitude could be daunting. Asmaa initially relished her newfound independence and time spent alone, finding it refreshing. Nevertheless, the daily repetition of solitude became increasingly burdensome, especially when her husband frequently embarked on extended trips back to Saudi Arabia. Asmaa expressed how being in social situations drained her, which made her very selective about her friends. Nevertheless, she would still engage in social isolation episodes because she became "*too uninterested, even cold (emotionally) to care*", said Asmaa, who furthered,

"At first, I was very happy to live alone. Having my own space was a thrill. However, after years, I got bored of it [...] I started disliking being alone and craving company, but I also could not stand being around others because they would drain me emotionally. So, it is a serious problem."

Isolating oneself, as observed in Asmaa's case, was among the coping mechanisms noted by Winkel et al. (2021) in their study, alongside symptoms such as sleep disruptions, mood swings, anxiety, and confusion, employed by some participants during their time abroad. Regardless of their desire to belong, all participants grappled with the notion of belonging and resorted to various coping mechanisms to address it. These mechanisms included heightened attentiveness to calls from parents, frequent phone conversations with siblings, insistence on returning to Saudi Arabia during the English winter for holidays and reducing their social circles, all reflecting both their experiences of loneliness and strategies to cope with it.

While existing literature has discussed the inevitability of loneliness when immersing oneself in a different culture for an extended period (Young and Snead, 2017; Alshareef, 2017; Almuarik, 2019; Sharma and Shearman, 2021; Alfurayh, 2021; Winkel et al., 2021), limited research has explored the direct interplay between identity and loneliness. However, the data and findings presented herein demonstrate that loneliness can yield dual outcomes on participants' identities: it can either confine them to social isolation and limit

their engagement in intercultural and transnational experiences or propel them out of their metaphorical cocoon into a realm of self-empowerment, resilience, and autonomy.

Conversations regarding autonomy arose as responses to the most significant changes participants experienced after moving to the UK. The responses revealed a common thread among all participants, which emphasised that they had become more self-reliant, self-sufficient, and autonomous. While these changes were more reinforced to some participants, others experienced them for the first time. Concepts such as self-reliance and self-dependency were encompassed within the broader term “autonomy,” as participants used these terms interchangeably. Despite variations in their expressions, participants collectively defined autonomy as the ability to make decisions independently without family interference or control. This definition aligned with findings in the existing literature (Alshareef, 2017; Alfurayh, 2021). For instance, a common expression of autonomy was avoiding the need to inform one’s family, akin to what Alshareef (2017) referred to as “hidiers” — those who concealed information from their families to circumvent seeking their permission, exemplifying autonomy within the narratives of Saudi women.

The twenty-nine-year-old PhD researcher, Asmaa, recounted the experience of obtaining a driver’s license in the UK. Asmaa’s unique journey involved moving to the US and then the UK before the legal right for Saudi women to drive was established, necessitating her to keep her driving a secret from her family until it became permissible. Asmaa disclosed that only her husband, who served as her legal guardian in acquiring the necessary official driving license documents, and her sister were informed of her driving and car ownership. She explained that, given her family’s conservative and tribal background, they would not have embraced the idea of their daughter being the first woman to drive. When queried about the reasons for concealing her accomplishment, Asmaa revealed her desire to celebrate exclusively with those who would genuinely share in her joy, devoid of any condescending judgments. Asmaa said,

“I remember when I got my licence, I shared it on Snapchat with a limited audience [...] I would have loved to share it with them [her family] if I knew they would not give me a headache. Besides, it felt so good to be able to do something for me without consulting or taking permission from anyone.”



Figure 23: I finally did it (Asmaa, 2020)

Asmaa’s accounts highlighted the elevation of her sense of autonomy following the acquisition of her driver’s license. Asmaa frequently emphasised that engaging in actions that might have caused family discord back in Saudi Arabia brought her a sense of excitement, empowerment, and capability—a direct interaction between her identity and autonomy. This interplay empowered Asmaa, as it made her more accountable for her choices and life decisions. Similar dynamics of this interplay were evident in the narratives of Aseel, who often chose not to inform her family about aspects of her life to relish her capacity to make decisions, take action, and evade unwarranted comments.

The study’s findings revealed that most participants derived satisfaction from their newly acquired or strengthened autonomy. While they frequently expressed their autonomy through avoidance of familial confrontations, which represented figures of power and authority in Saudi Arabia, distinctions between married and single participants were noteworthy. For the married

participants, their husbands often served as an extension of their Saudi families, providing occasional support. In contrast, single participants had to navigate their lives with sole reliance on themselves. Those who moved abroad with their husbands highlighted how autonomy influenced their self-perception by reshaping their roles as wives and women. For instance, Souheila, who portrayed her husband as supportive and open-minded, discussed how he consistently encouraged her autonomy, stating,

“My husband always had my back as a woman; he sees me as a friend and a partner. So, my independence or autonomy has never been an issue for him [...] he always says: if something happens to me, I want you to be able to live, not survive. If that is not support, I do not know what is”.

Souheila's excerpt demonstrates the supportive role her husband played in her experience of autonomy and freedom to navigate and make choices in her life as a woman and wife. Lamia, on the other hand, experienced autonomy differently when she moved to the UK. She often referred to her father's role in managing their household in Saudi Arabia. When Lamia and her husband relocated to the UK, she initially felt uncertain about how to handle various responsibilities. With her husband's assistance, Lamia gradually learned and began taking on more household duties, particularly after they had children. Although her husband was initially hesitant about her independence, he eventually accepted it, viewing it as a response to their new environment and expecting her to revert to her former self upon returning to Saudi Arabia. However, Lamia's identity development was a forward, not a backward, process, as she asserted. In this regard, Lamia noted,

“My husband does not resist me being more in charge of our lives because he thinks it is temporary. He always mentions that, eventually, we will go back to Saudi Arabia and that I will go back to the old me, which will never happen. I have changed, even if it bitters me sometimes to admit it, but I did.”

Lamia's idea of change, as mentioned in her excerpt, included her clothing style, religiosity, socialisation patterns, and autonomy. It is noteworthy that Lamia emphasised the enabling and facilitating environment that contributed to her self-exploration, including her physical distance from her extended

Saudi family and her husband's non-resistance to her evolving identity. Lamia's experiences were in line with the findings of Alfurayh and Burns (2020), who conducted a study on Saudi women in Australia. Some of their participants noted that their husbands were more accepting of their changing identities and increased autonomy, primarily because they believed their time in Australia was temporary and they would eventually return to Saudi Arabia. Consequently, these husbands did not interfere with their wives' self-exploration. Furthermore, Alfurayh and Burns (2020) observed that the living conditions in Australia, which exposed women to greater autonomy, had a significantly positive impact on their lives and identities. They shared responsibilities with their husbands, sometimes even assuming more responsibilities out of necessity, which amplified their voices in decision-making processes.

Notably, the findings of Alfurayh and Burns (2020) were in alignment with other research examining the experiences of Saudi women abroad, such as Alqudayri and Gounko (2018), Almuarik (2019), and Winkel et al. (2021). These studies consistently indicated that Saudi women enjoyed increased autonomy and decision-making independence when living abroad in comparison to their experiences in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, these newfound levels of autonomy prompted the participants to reevaluate their understanding of power. Similarly, the findings in this section revealed a shift in the participants' perspectives as they moved from a position of reliance on their families or husbands to greater self-reliance. Such a transformation bolstered their self-confidence, encouraged them to openly express their thoughts and opinions, and reassured them about engaging in activities they once considered socially unacceptable.

Furthermore, the participants' autonomy played a pivotal role in redefining their roles as social agents. Through their enhanced control over their lives and decisions, facilitated by their language skills, they broadened their opportunities in the host country, leading to increased social engagement. Consequently, they became more attuned to contemporary women's issues

and events, actively participating in women-related open days, functions, and workshops, either through organisation or volunteering, as exemplified by the twenty-six-year-old MA student, Lobnah, who participated in a breast cancer awareness event in Leeds (see Figure 24). In this regard, Lobnah said,

“We do have something like this in Saudi Arabia, but very few women show up because the culture of cancer is very negative there. It is considered a curse or something, but it was very different that day. I felt so involved as a woman and an artist, especially in such a big crowd, and I was so surprised at how both men and women were numerous present.”

Lobnah’s excerpt reflects how, in a context where social norms and religious guidelines were not as influential as in Saudi Arabia, women had the opportunity to dispel misperceptions and misconceptions, allowing them to explore various aspects more comprehensively. For instance, Lobnah emphasised how her participation in social events clarified her identity as a woman capable of creating art and gaining recognition without the fear of transgressing social norms. Her experiences mirrored the findings in Alfurayh’s (2021) work, where Saudi women abroad ventured out of their comfort zones by engaging in unfamiliar activities and navigating new environments. These experiences increased their self-confidence and enabled them to overcome personal and social barriers, ultimately positively influencing their self-perception and self-presentation.



Figure 24: I did it and nailed it (Lobnah, 2021)

Many narratives highlighted a shift in the participants' autonomy upon moving to the UK, particularly in terms of the absence of family support and the responsibility of household chores and childcare. In Saudi households, the presence of housekeepers and drivers was commonplace due to extended family living arrangements, but relocating abroad required participants, especially married ones, to take on these tasks. Furthermore, the restriction on women driving in Saudi Arabia until 2017 necessitated reliance on male guardians or hired drivers for transportation (Pharaon, 2004; Long, 2005; Almuarik, 2019), a limitation lifted upon moving to the UK. Consequently, the newfound freedom of mobility contributed to heightened autonomy among the participants.

8.6 Conclusion

While the perceptions of "home" varied among participants, reflecting their backgrounds, beliefs, and convictions, the presence of a home or the struggle to construct one influenced how participants perceived and expressed their identities. At-homeness provided them comfort in being true to themselves, but for those who struggled to find this sense of belonging, it hindered their self-expression. Furthermore, Geographical relocation from Saudi Arabia to the UK brought about changes related to agency, dress codes, and the redefinition of family power and authority. Overall, this relocation positively impacted the participants' identities, offering them a space free from social pressures to explore different life options and reevaluate the sources of power in their lives.

The challenge of adapting to mixed-gender interactions, the norm in the UK, posed a significant identity challenge for the participants, involving compromises, self-reflection, and tangible changes in behaviour. It also challenged their understanding of appropriateness, gender segregation, principles, and morality. While a few participants felt comfortable in mixed-gender situations, most repositioned gender segregation as an inconvenience

that limited their access to opportunities in the host context. Moreover, language proficiency was also a crucial aspect of change that interacted with the participants' identities, primarily impacting their self-esteem, sense of accomplishment, and empowerment. Those with strong English language skills thrived and felt more empowered, while those lacking proficiency felt challenged and isolated, reducing their chances of overcoming linguistic barriers.

Loneliness and autonomy were closely intertwined as feelings and outcomes of change. The participants' loneliness often stemmed from their struggle to belong in the host context, leading them to seek autonomy as a means to enhance their sense of belonging. However, for some, excessive autonomy led to feelings of loneliness. Despite the often-distressing language used to describe these experiences, loneliness and autonomy had a positive impact on most participants' identities. These emotions pushed them out of their comfort zones, reduced emotional and physical dependency, and transformed them into resilient, self-reliant social agents.

To conclude, this chapter revolved around the central theme of change as an outcome of belonging. The participants' eagerness to belong often conflicted with their long-lasting and rigid social thoughts, beliefs, and convictions, leading to inner conflicts and moments of binary choices between old and new identities. Their struggle was between remaining loyal to their previous selves or critically evaluating alternative options. Ultimately, the participants grappled with the challenge of belonging in the context of making choices and decisions that aligned with their evolving identities.

9 Chapter Nine: General Conclusion

This thesis set out to gain an insightful and detailed understanding of the interplay of Saudi women's identity and context change during their experiences of living in the UK, with a particular focus on the social and religious contexts to address the knowledge gap in the research on Arab Muslim women's identity abroad, particularly Saudi women. This final chapter is a central moment of reflection and synthesis of the data obtained through the voices of the participants to answer the research questions. Accordingly, this chapter offers a holistic and inclusive examination of the emerging data and findings by outlining how the research questions were answered by the participants' nuanced stories and insightful accounts. Secondly, it revisits the research limitations and lists a few suggestions for future research. This chapter ends with a concluding statement, reflecting on and ending the research journey.

9.1 Research Questions Revisited

This research aimed to identify the various areas in which Saudi women's identities intersect with social and religious context changes in the UK. Based on a thematic qualitative analysis of data obtained through in-depth interviews and photo elicitation, it can be concluded that the change in social and religious settings between Saudi Arabia and the UK significantly affects Saudi women's self-understanding and identity negotiation and presentation. The results indicate the intersection of the participants' identities with gender, Saudi social and tribal norms, and Islam in their experiences of transnational mobility. These results have answered the research questions, as they will be addressed in the following sections. This chapter starts first with the sub-questions to successfully build a foundational path, eventually leading to answering the main research question and providing a clear and coherent "map" for the entire study.

9.1.1 Sub-question One

How do Saudi women abroad define and perform their identities?

The findings concluded that many participants struggled to define themselves or discuss identity in general either because of the novelty of the process of self-defining, the related emotional and psychological fatigue, or the social risk resulting from disclosing identities. Moreover, the findings established the relevance of 'context', which referred to levels of emotional security with the interviewer, comfort and discomfort within the interviews, and the formal/informal nature of the interview settings. Its relevance lies in its influence over the participants' responses. The more the participants' needs for emotional security, comfort, and informality were fulfilled, the longer, expanded, and more detailed their answers were, reflecting how rapport was successfully established between the researcher and the participants.

Social roles—in both the public (occupational, relational, educational roles) and private spheres (familial and motherly roles) —were fundamental to this research participants' identity-defining and negotiation. This conclusion reflects the tenets of the Role Identity Theory (Stryker, 1968, 2002; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Stets et al., 2020; Burke and Stets, 2023), which posits that individuals develop a sense of self and build their identity from their roles within various social contexts. The participants used their social roles to form their self-understanding; they attached meanings to these roles based on the internalised expectations of others (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Pope et al., 2014; Burke and Stets, 2023). Thus, participants enacting their roles as employees, students, wives, and mothers reflected the degree to which they internalised those roles.

This research also concludes that gender, national, ethnic, and religious identities are within Saudi women's higher identity prominence hierarchy (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Identity prominence hierarchy refers to how individuals understand, define, and perform themselves more frequently according to their higher identities in the hierarchy, indicating how these

identities are more important, valued, and central to who they are (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Gender identity and womanhood findings were ingrained into the participants' experiences with their biological and social bodies, marriage, and migration. The findings concluded that attitudes towards the physical changes affecting female bodies were foundational to the participants' self-understandings, that the more negative their attitudes, the more uncertain they felt about who they were and could not express themselves. This conclusion reflects the participants' struggle to reconstruct a healthy relationship with their bodies after their migration while negotiating a long-lived unhealthy social image of the female body and beauty standards. The complex and continuously changing reconstruction of their relationships with their bodies influenced how they redefined their identities as women, especially in light of the differences between where they started (Saudi Arabia) and where they were being reconstructed (the UK).

The participants' understanding of their social status as women bound by patriarchal social norms and expectations was another significant element affecting how they defined and performed their identities abroad. For many participants, womanhood began when they could locate themselves socially in their Saudi communities as future wives and mothers; these early experiences with womanhood influenced their self-understanding and identity development, which they carried along in the UK. The alignment of the participants' unique experiences of womanhood with social norms and expectations highlights the intersection between identity formation and social constructs. This discussion echoes the thoughts of both Western and Islamic feminist theorists, particularly De Beauvoir (1949), Crenshaw (1990), Moi (2008), Lazreg (2011), Collins (2015), Fatani (2020), and Saleh (2020), who contend that women, including Saudis, negotiate their identities amidst complex, often patriarchal social constructs.

This research also concludes the significance of Saudi national and Arab ethnic identities in shaping Saudi women's self-introductions and social interaction with others abroad, which reflects the intricate interplay between

identity and social perceptions. Two distinctive patterns of approaching national and ethnic identities were identified in this research. The first represents Saudi women who deliberately incorporate their national identity in their self-introductions, indicating the performative aspect of this identity. According to the findings discussed in Chapter Four, the participants who included their Saudi belonging in their self-presentation did so to express a genuine part of their self-identity rather than to conform to perceived social norms and expectations of individuals from a Saudi origin.

On the other hand, the second pattern represents women who are compelled to avoid or disregard their national identification from their self-introduction because of their negative experiences with others whose perceptions of Saudi women were stereotypical. This pattern reflects how social constructs and stereotypes governed the interactions of the participants abroad and how participants were aware of the impact of these interactions on their self-understanding and representation. Both patterns draw attention to the distinction between self-understanding and identity representation or performance, which accords with the findings of Cole and Ahmadi (2003), Shaheem (2014), and Alfurayh (2021). While some of the participants in these studies deliberately hid their national and ethnic identities to avoid discrimination, others denounced them for the sake of a 'Western' identity. Furthermore, the intersection between the participants' gendered, Saudi national, and Arab ethnic identities accentuated the multi-layered nature of identity and how it is constructed and shaped within a social interactive environment and negotiated in light of identity security (Ting-Toomey, 2015). The security or insecurity the participants felt regarding their identities influenced their choices to embrace or reject certain aspects of these identities.

9.1.2 Sub-question Two

How did the participants' identities develop during their stay abroad?

The research concludes that the participants' identities underwent substantial transformations upon their relocation to the UK, as elucidated in Chapter Eight. These changes touched upon six key domains. The change in the concept of "home" profoundly affected the participants' identities. Its connotations as a state of mind, a specific geographic locale, or a community of individuals highlighted Saudi women's need for a sense of "at-homeness" (Cuba and Hummon, 1993) in order to genuinely express their true selves. For many participants, this state was a "privilege," symbolising the challenges they faced in the process of belonging.

Defining "home" as a state of mind implied its mobility, which granted participants more ability to adapt to British society and integrate into the newly established homes. Conversely, confining "home" to the geographical location of Saudi Arabia hindered a few participants' abilities to integrate; it provoked feelings of homesickness, challenges to adapt to the new host society, and persistent longing for their home country. These challenges highlighted their struggle to formulate new place identities in the UK that could influence and potentially reshape their self-identities (Proshansky et al., 1983; Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Peng et al., 2020; Procentese et al., 2021). Furthermore, the research concludes that the sense of comfort derived from a state of "at-homeness" enables Saudi women to feel secure enough to define, perform, and evolve their identities abroad. However, women whose comfort was disrupted by their relocation to the UK struggled with disrupted manifestations of "at-homeness" (Cuba and Hummon, 1993) and a disrupted sense of self, which accords with Ting-Toomey's (2015) concept of identity security.

Language has a vital role in developing Saudi women's identities abroad. The results of this research conclude that the participants' identities underwent a transformative process influenced by their use of the English language, which manifested in various dimensions. Notably, a substantial number of

participants leveraged their proficiency in the English language to navigate opportunities within the UK, exercise greater agency, and cultivate an enhanced sense of accomplishment. This observation is congruent with Norton's assertions in her works (1997; 2013) that identity is a construct subject to development, preservation, and negotiation through language. Furthermore, these findings are in accordance with Alfurayh's (2021) recent research, which highlights the role of the English language in empowering Saudi women residing abroad to better position themselves within social contexts. This improved positioning affords them increased respect, independence, and a more esteemed identity within their host country.

Moreover, a subset of participants regarded the Arabic language as a distinctive marker of their identity, which symbolised their loyalty to the Saudi community and a dedication to upholding traditions while living abroad. Consequently, they restricted their use of the English language to situations of necessity as they viewed excessive usage as a potential signal of unwelcome change and assimilation. The findings advanced that these participants were influenced by significant social pressures originating from their immediate environment, both in Saudi Arabia and the UK. These findings align with the research of Winkel et al. (2021), which highlights the challenges faced by Saudi women possessing advanced English language proficiency upon their return to Saudi Arabia. In such cases, these women experienced a profound sense of alienation as their adeptness in English constantly reminded others around them of Western influences, further corroborating this study's results.

These findings are also consistent with Almuarik's (2019) study, which delved into the experiences of Saudi PhD returnees. Her research posited that the participants' reluctance to openly embrace the English language can be traced back to their recognition of how linguistic disparities could impede their societal integration. Furthermore, Almuarik's work highlighted that the use of English and the presence of linguistic distinctions were frequently met with stigmatisation in Saudi Arabia, prompting Saudi returnees—whether their

return was permanent or temporary—to conform to prevailing social conventions as a means of circumventing criticism. This conformity, in turn, caused a notable struggle in their self-identity. Notably, these conclusions stand in contrast to the perspective offered by Mustafa (2017, p. 149), who contended that English language proficiency in Saudi Arabia is highly esteemed and is regarded as a pivotal factor in securing employment and achieving economic prosperity for women.

The results of this study also shed light on the significant impact of the English language on participants with limited linguistic proficiency and their ability to build a stronger sense of self and accomplishment. Their challenges in mastering English had repercussions not only on their social interactions and communication in the UK but also on their self-esteem, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Mustafa's (2017) research highlighted that English is widely seen as a tool that enhances Saudi women's self-awareness, facilitates the expression of their ideas, promotes greater autonomy, and bolsters their social integration. Consequently, those participants who struggled with English proficiency found it challenging to attain these benefits. Furthermore, this research uncovered a link between the participants' English language skills and their social and religious upbringing, where English had always been considered a 'foreign' language (Mustafa, 2017, p. 149) and the language of the *Kufar* (non-Muslims) (Elyas and Picard, 2010). This connection highlights the significant role language plays in shaping the participants' identities and experiences, particularly when English is viewed through a specific cultural and religious lens.

The findings of this research also emphasise how the participants' identities underwent significant transformations influenced by their experiences of loneliness and autonomy, which were deeply interlinked as outcomes of change. These experiences enabled the participants to reassert and embrace their agency, a facet of their identity that had been significantly concealed by the prevailing patriarchal social norms and expectations, which surpass even religious guidelines. These findings align with prior research conducted by

Alshareef (2017), Alfurayh and Burns (2020), and Alfurayh (2021). These studies collectively concluded that Saudi women's experience abroad heightened levels of autonomy and decision-making independence, in contrast to their experiences in Saudi Arabia. This newfound autonomy often prompts them to critically evaluate power dynamics, their social positioning, and their overall self-understanding, which often results in increased self-confidence. Consequently, they become more assertive in expressing their thoughts and opinions and actively engaging with their social environment abroad.

9.1.3 Sub-question Three

How did the participants position and negotiate their social and religious beliefs abroad?

The research findings affirmed the pervasive influence of social norms, tribal traditions, and religious guidelines in shaping the identity negotiation processes of the majority of the participants abroad. These influences extended to various aspects of their lives, including tribal engagement, adherence to social norms, mixed-gender interactions, religiosity, and the practice of wearing the hijab. Notably, the findings challenged the conventional perception that women have limited involvement in tribal matters, revealing how they actively participated in ways that might not always be immediately evident, often due to cultural norms like gender segregation, which highly accords with the findings of Maisel (2014). Furthermore, the research highlighted how tribal engagement abroad depended on factors such as age, marital status, and evolving priorities. It also emphasised the intricate interplay between tribal norms, marriage practices, and individual agency for Saudi women living abroad. This interplay draws attention to the unwavering significance of these norms in shaping personal identities and relational dynamics within Saudi female diasporic communities, thus influencing various aspects of their lives, from social and cultural participation to fundamental life decisions.

Furthermore, the research findings highlighted the significance of social acceptance to many participants, whether in Saudi Arabia or within Saudi communities in the UK, as it plays a vital role in validating and upholding their self-understandings and views. These findings align with Swann's Self-Verification Theory (1987), which suggests that individuals often seek external validation of their self-perceptions to maintain a stable and legitimate self-image, enabling them to effectively navigate social environments. Moreover, the research findings highlight the importance of adhering to social norms as a means of gaining social acceptance, particularly within Saudi society, where this acceptance carries a significant weight of honour and respect, especially for women residing abroad. The majority of the participants made concerted efforts to uphold their families' reputation and honour, striving not to bring disgrace or tarnish these values. These findings are in accordance with Alwedinani's (2016) research, which underscores how Saudi women prioritise their families' honour in critical life decisions, including matters like marriage, even when living abroad.

The research findings illustrated how the participants' understanding and commitment to religion fluctuated abroad. Some individuals embarked on personal journeys to reconstruct their religious identities, emphasising individualisation and reclamation of their faith (Bendixsen, 2013). Conversely, others reported a decline in religious practice, attributed to factors like time constraints, busy lifestyles, and increased responsibilities following their relocation to the UK. These findings align with Alfurayh's (2021) research on Saudi women's religiosity in Australia, which also noted a decrease in religious practice due to similar factors. The research further revealed that, although relatively rare, narratives of atheism were present among the participants. This finding informs that contrary to the common belief that all Saudis are Muslim, there exists a small community of non-Muslims who found a more accommodating environment in the UK to openly express this aspect of their identities. While this finding may carry social and religious sensitivities within Saudi communities, it mirrors the narratives presented by Khatib (2017), who discussed the discrete presence of atheism in Saudi Arabia.

The research delved into how participants grappled with social and religious aspects, particularly mixed-gender interactions, the hijab, and male guardianship while shaping their identities in the UK. Notably, male guardianship emerged as a salient theme, significantly influencing the participants' self-understanding both in Saudi Arabia and abroad. This system, consistently discussed by participants, wields authority over various aspects of women's lives, including education, marriage, and employment. Some participants contended that male guardianship represents men's legitimate legal and religious rights, which aligns with the assertions made by Alharbi (2015). However, not all participants held this perspective. Many regarded male guardianship as more of a traditional than a strictly religious practice, which accords with arguments presented by Al-Rasheed (2013), Tønnessen (2016), Bunch (2020), and Begum and Varia (2021). These scholars have contended that the male guardianship system is deeply rooted in the patriarchal nature of Saudi society and rests on an extremist interpretation of the Quran. This interpretation, they argue, hinders women's freedom, autonomy, and agency.

Mixed-gender interactions are less socially condemned because the governmental social reforms and the social media environment have significantly mitigated the historically negative connotations associated with these interactions, making them a routine and normalised aspect of daily life (Balelah, 2020). However, the research uncovered varying perspectives among the participants regarding mixed-gender interactions. While a minority of participants openly embraced these interactions, the majority adhered to and conformed to social and religious norms governing mixed-gender encounters, particularly when residing abroad. Notably, some participants shared a prevalent concern that engaging with non-relative men could lead to shame and damage their reputation within both the Saudi community in the UK and Saudi Arabia. These findings resonate with the work of Song (2018) and Alfurayh (2021), which underscores the persistence of conservative social norms and religious values that deter many Saudi women living abroad from engaging in mixed-gender interactions. Despite the differing social contexts

outside Saudi Arabia, these individuals continue to prioritise adherence to social norms and religious principles in their interactions with the opposite gender.

The dress code, particularly the hijab, played a pivotal role in the identity negotiation of the participants with their religious beliefs and adherence to social norms. Although the majority of the research participants were veiled, their perspectives on the hijab varied. For many, the hijab was perceived as an integral extension of their identity, a symbol they carried with them wherever they went. In contrast, some regarded it as a customary Saudi attire primarily designed to promote modesty. Within this framework, these participants explored diverse styles of hijab-wearing that did not necessarily conform to traditional Saudi standards. This nuanced approach to hijab adoption aligns with the findings of Barnawi and Ohkura (2019), who observed that many Saudi women, free from social pressures abroad, embraced alternative clothing styles that resonated with their aspirations rather than conforming to traditional norms. Additionally, these findings are consistent with Alamri's (2023) research on hijab practices in Saudi Arabia, which highlights how women abroad often adopt a dual approach to hijab, maintaining two distinct styles—inside and outside—depending on the prevailing social and religious context they inhabit.

9.1.4 Main question

How does the change in social and religious contexts affect Saudi women's identities abroad?

By analysing the changing identities of the research participants in light of their migration to the UK, this research has shown that the change in the social and religious settings has, directly and indirectly, affected the identities of the Saudi women interviewed in the UK in the following ways:

- The participants engaged in a process of profound self-reflection, identity redefinition, reconstruction, and negotiation in direct response

to the prevailing stereotypes of Saudi women in the Western context and to the social pressures to maintain a specific image, which they experienced from fellow Saudis in the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia.

- The participants actively negotiated their domestic and professional social roles in terms of the meanings associated with these roles, the social expectations intertwined with them, and their relative significance. Notably, while some participants accorded greater importance to their roles as wives and mothers, aligning with prevalent Saudi gender expectations, others emphasised their academic and professional identities.
- The participants reconstructed their conceptions of womanhood, notably by challenging entrenched notions of unhealthy beauty standards, perceptions of femininity, and social representations and the pervasive social stigma associated with the female biological and social bodies.
- The participants exhibited varying degrees of conformity to social and tribal norms, with an increase observed among some and a decrease among others. The first group was primarily motivated by the desire to uphold their families' honour and reputation, alongside a national duty to maintain the prevalent portrayal of Saudi women as pious, conservative, and obedient. In contrast, the second group found motivation in the absence of substantial social authority, control, and pressure, which afforded them the opportunity to explore lifestyles that did not necessarily align with the nature of the Saudi social code.
- For some participants, commitment to religion was fortified as they undertook a journey of individualisation and reclamation of their Islamic faith. This process involved challenging the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran, which, in turn, empowered them to comprehend and express their identities within an Islamic framework abroad. In contrast, others reduced their commitment to religion due to several factors, such as busy lifestyles, heightened responsibilities, the adoption of a

more 'modern' approach to religious practice, or the absence of family religious observance, which traditionally motivates other family members to engage in religious activities.

- Family, social, and tribal norms, as well as religion, were redefined as fundamental authorities in the dynamics of power. While a substantial number of participants retained their loyalty to their Saudi lifestyles and maintained strong connections with their families in Saudi Arabia, some intentionally restricted their interactions and associations with both their families and fellow Saudis in the UK. Additionally, these individuals also curtailed their engagement with religious practices.
- The participants' priorities were redefined based on their social and tribal backgrounds, marital status, age, and religiosity. Notably, single participants reevaluated their perceptions of marriage and adjusted their criteria for selecting potential spouses in light of their exposure to diverse life choices. Similarly, married participants embarked on a redefinition of their roles as wives and mothers, challenging the established Saudi gender roles and asserting their equal significance and indispensability alongside their husbands.
- The Participants' sense of belonging intensified abroad as it was closely linked to their perception of "at-homeness." This feeling of "at-homeness" was considered essential for them to genuinely be themselves and express their true identities. However, it is important to note that not all participants experienced this sense of being "at home," which challenged their integration, fitting in, and ability to construct place identities.

In summary, the participants' migration to the UK provided them with a relatively unfettered environment, free from the constraints of Saudi social and religious norms, expectations, and pressures. This newfound freedom enabled them to explore, reconstruct, and navigate diverse interpretations of womanhood, femininity, beauty, potential, social identities, social roles, religious identities, agency, autonomy, freedom, aspirations, and individuality.

9.2 Research Contribution

This research contributes significantly to the knowledge of Saudi women's identities in the diasporic context. As many studies have mainly examined the Saudi female student community in the UK and the relevance of their national and cultural identities to their learning experiences, this research responded to the gap in academic works on Saudi women's identity intersection with other social constructs, mainly, gender, social norms, and religion. Furthermore, considering the scarcity of research on Arab Muslim women's identities abroad in general, the finding of this research offers a framework for similar studies. This research also contributes to the ongoing academic activism challenging the emancipatory discourse on Saudi women. It offers a holistic lens to explore Saudi women's sense of belonging in non-Saudi societies.

Using intersectionality theory, Islamic feminism, and INT, this research provided a multi-layered and nuanced understanding of the interplay of social and tribal norms, traditions, religion, and Saudi women by piecing together their voices, narratives, and experiences of international mobility. This study provides a different perspective regarding the relations and power dynamics between social norms, religion, gender, and women's identities, which is informative and structural in theory formulation and research design on this topic, as it emphasises the heterogeneity of Saudi women, and the need to consider the differences between social and religious contexts of Saudi Arabia and other contexts when making academic inferences.

9.3 Research Limitation

This study exhibits several limitations. First, the limitation lies in the data collection method and sample size. While the sample size was aligned with the qualitative data collection methods employed, thus facilitating an in-depth analysis that served the research objectives and answered the research questions, it remained relatively small. Consequently, the findings, while valuable for elucidating the study's subject, cannot be broadly generalised to

represent all Saudi diasporic communities. Additionally, the study, although informed by intersectionality theory, which brought into focus gender, social norms, religion, and identity, did not include the full spectrum of Saudi women's social backgrounds due to the challenges in accessing this demographic.

Another limitation is the scarcity of literature that delves deeply into the research topic. Existing academic works on Saudi women abroad have predominantly concentrated on students and their experiences within educational settings or second language acquisition. This lack of literature rendered it challenging to validate the research findings by comparing them with similar studies and identifying areas of consensus or contrast. Moreover, the research faced difficulties related to cultural sensitivity and rapport-building due to national, cultural, and social disparities between the researcher and the participants. Another significant limitation arose from the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in delays in the data collection phase and consequently impacted the timely completion of the research project.

9.4 Research Recommendations

The present study provides comprehensive insights into the process of identity negotiation among Saudi women in the UK, particularly in response to changing social and religious settings. Nonetheless, a thorough review of the literature and data analysis revealed certain areas warranting further investigation, exceeding the scope of this research. Notably, this study did not exclusively centre on the religious dimension of the participants' religious identities abroad, particularly with respect to the hijab. This shortcoming prompts the need for additional research examining Saudi women's engagement with the hijab overseas, considering its dual role as both a religious identity marker and a clothing style.

Additionally, this study encourages future scholarly endeavours to explore the experiences of Saudi women in diverse countries and regions, offering valuable insights into the influence of varying cultural and social contexts on

their identities. Furthermore, given that the research participants have resided in the UK for a duration exceeding five years, I recommend the pursuit of longitudinal studies to monitor the evolution of Saudi women's identities over time. This research initiative can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term dynamics of identity formation among this demographic.

An area of research that warrants further investigation pertains to how Saudi women navigate and construct transnational identities. This research focus can illuminate the processes by which they integrate elements from both their Saudi and host cultures and, in turn, how this integration impacts their sense of self. Additionally, this study encourages more intersectionality-focused investigations, wherein factors such as age, marital status, socioeconomic background, and educational experiences are incorporated into the analysis. A comprehensive understanding of how these multiple dimensions of identity interact can offer a more holistic perspective on the identity profiles of Saudi women living abroad, including the various legal, social, religious, and cultural challenges and barriers they encounter. Given the significant relevance of the theme of loneliness among the research participants, further studies are recommended to explore the connection between identity and mental health among Saudi women residing abroad. These investigations can delve into how identity-related stress or conflicts influence their well-being and the coping strategies they employ to mitigate these challenges.

9.5 Concluding Statement

At the end of this concluding chapter, I cannot help but emphasise how my doctoral research journey was a unique and instructive emotional roller-coaster. As a novice researcher, the entire process of conducting this study was a profound learning experience that impacted both my capacity as an academic and as an individual. Throughout this research, I have sought not only to understand Saudi women's narratives in the UK but also to draw parallels between their experiences and my own as a fellow diaspora in this

dynamic host country. As a novice researcher, I bear a dual responsibility: one pertains to my duty as a research producer, wherein I strive to produce high-quality scholarly work in alignment with my chosen field of study, and the second involves functioning as a research consumer, who critically engaged with a vast plethora of literature on Saudi women, Islam, Saudi Arabia, gender, and social norms. To effectively fulfil these dual responsibilities, I had to acquaint myself with an array of foundational constructs, concepts, terminologies, and philosophical perspectives that form the underpinnings of this research paradigm.

My pursuit of knowledge heightened my awareness of how both my cognitive processes and the ideas expressed by the participants influenced the decisions I made. Moreover, my understanding has been consistently tested and refined by the multitude of suggestions, questions, and remarks put forth by my supervisors, which have been instrumental in uncovering my own biases and identifying shortcomings in the design of my study. Furthermore, while this research concludes the profound impact of cultural exchange, the intricacies of identity negotiation, and the contextual nuances that significantly influenced the participants' sense of self, it encourages us to delve deeper into the intersection of gender, culture, and religion within our adopted nations. It also compels us to recognise the common challenges we face, offering opportunities for mutual support and solidarity in our shared quest for empowerment, self-realisation, and the harmonious coexistence of our diverse identities in a foreign land.

As an Algerian woman living in the UK, I extend my hand in solidarity with the Saudi women whose stories built this research. Together, we embarked on a journey of understanding, unity, and appreciation for the multifaceted nature of our experiences as women from Arab Muslim countries in this intercultural society. Our paths may differ, yet they converge in our shared aspiration for individual growth and the collective fostering of diverse identities on foreign soil.

10 Appendices

10.1 Data Collection Tools

10.1.1 Ethical Approval Form

The Secretariat
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT
Tel: 0113 343 4873
Email: ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Amina Boukheloua
School of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT

**Business, Environment and Social Sciences joint Faculty Research Ethics
Committee (AREA FREC)**

30 September 2023

Dear Amina

Title of study: Young Saudi Women in Britain: Context Change and Identity
Ethics reference: AREA 19-028

I am pleased to inform you that the above research application has been reviewed by the Business, Environment and Social Sciences joint Faculty Research Ethics Committee and following receipt of your response to the Committee's comments, I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

Document	Version	Date
AREA 19-028 BOUKHELOUA Amina_UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM_.docx	2	23/10/19
AREA 19-028 BOUKHELOUA Amina_PARTICIPANTS INFORMATION SHEET_.docx	3	18/11/19
AREA 19-028 BOUKHELOUA Amina_CONSENT FORM_.docx	2	23/10/19
AREA 19-028 BOUKHELOUA Amina_CONSENT FORM_Individual_Interviews.docx	1	23/10/19
AREA 19-028 BOUKHELOUA Amina_CONSENT FORM_Focus_Group_Interviews.docx	1	23/10/19
AREA 19-028 BOUKHELOUA Amina_Fieldwork_Assessment_Form_low_risk_.docx	2	18/11/19

Committee members made the following comments about your application:

- On the Risk Assessment form, it is stated that interviews will be held in coffee shops, but on the participant information sheet it states that participants can choose where to be interviewed. Please revise whichever is incorrect.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAmendment>.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation and other documents relating to the study, including any risk assessments. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited. There is a checklist listing examples of documents to be kept which is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAudits>.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Blaikie
Senior Research Ethics Administrator, the Secretariat
On behalf of Dr Matthew Davis, Chair, [AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee](#)

CC: Student's supervisor(s)

10.1.2 Consent Form

School of Sociology and Social Policy/ Faculty of Social Sciences



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Consent to take part in the PhD project titled:

Identity and Context Change: Case Study of Saudi Women in the UK

Individual interviews

Please tick in the box if you agree to participate in the presented research project.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [29/08/2019] explaining the above research project, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason until [..././...] and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that interviews in which I wish to participate will be audiotaped; records obtained will be stored and retained for the use of this research only.
4. I understand I have to provide any desired visual materials (photographs) for the sake of this research project and that these materials will be used strictly for this research only.
5. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
6. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly **anonymous**.
7. I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an **anonymised form**.
8. I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.
9. I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.

Name of participant	signature	Date	Lead researcher	Signature

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

10.1.3 Information Sheet

School of Sociology and Social Policy/ Faculty of Social Sciences



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Name of the researcher: Amina BOUKHELOUA

Name of the first supervisor: Yasmin HUSSEIN (Y.Hussain@leeds.ac.uk)

Name of the second supervisor: Nick PIPER (N.Piper@leeds.ac.uk)

Title of the project: Identity and Context Change: Case Study of Saudi Women in the UK

The following is an invitation to participate in a research project. You must understand specific research-related points prior to any decision. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if anything is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The Purpose of the Project

The following project is for the fulfilment of a PhD degree in Sociology and Social Policy, investigating Arab Muslim women's identity in a different society than that of their home. The conduction of this project is designed to last three years; however, the data collection is designed to last three months.

Participants Recruitment

The present project recruits around thirty participants having the following criteria:

- Born between 1991 and 2000 (approximately aged between twenty and thirty).
- Born in an Arab Muslim country, have lived there for a considerable number of years, preferably till the age of eighteen, then have travelled for a while to European countries.

None of the participants' marital status, educational level, social class, regional origin, religiosity, and ways of dressing (veiled/unveiled) are considered as criteria of selection.

It is up to the participant to decide whether or not to take part. If they decide to take part, they will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form), and they can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that they are entitled to in any way.

What will participants be asked to do?

Participants will be interviewed once for ninety minutes (depending on the flow of the interview). They will be asked:

- First, to decide if they want to be part of the individual interviews or the focus group interview
- To decide upon the place where they want to be interviewed (the choice is up to participants to guarantee a comfortable setting for them)
- To provide visual materials (photographs) that represent their identities the best prior to interviews.



- To answer the interview questions with both open and closed answers depending on the questions and the topic related.

The research project explores the way Arab Muslim women express themselves and negotiate their identities when changing the social and religious context. Accordingly, questions asked, and topics interviewed relate to participants' identities as women, Muslims, and Arabs, styles of living in both their home and host societies, their aspirations towards these societies, their religion and veil, and the way they express themselves.

Participants are expected to engage with the questions, discussion, and debate during the interviews, given that they will be stimulated via the use of photographs.

Risks and Benefits

There are no foreseeable discomforts, disadvantages or risks resulting from taking part in the project unless seen otherwise by potential participants. Any inquiry about an uprising discomfort is welcomed to be further clarified prior to deciding. Likewise, there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project; however, it is hoped that this work will provide an opportunity for the participants to express themselves within an academic context.

Dissemination, Storage, and Anonymity

All participants should know that:

- Both individual and focus group interviews will be audiotaped (no visual taping). The audio recordings of participants' activities made during the research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.
- All their contact information collected during the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data.
- The data obtained will be used strictly for this research; any further reuse requires obtaining the participants' consent.
- Data will be stored on the researcher's personal and professional computers with denied access to any external parties to the research.
- Data will be retained for three years as a reasonable period in case the researcher needs to refer to them for clarification within the same research.
- Pseudo-names will replace their real names to maintain a level of confidentiality and anonymity. Steps will be taken wherever possible so that participants will not be identified in any reports or publications.

For participants wishing to be part of the focus group interview, consent is required to cover the limitation that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed on behalf of the other focus group participants.

School of Sociology and Social Policy/ Faculty of Social Sciences



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Contact for Further Information

For any further inquiries or information, please refer to the following contact points:

- Email address: ssab@leeds.ac.uk
- Phone number: +447741920715

Finally....

I want to thank you for taking the time to read through the information, consider participating, and participate (if possible). All participants will be given a copy of this information sheet and, if appropriate, a signed consent form to keep.

Amina BOUKHELOUA

29/08/2019

10.1.4 Interview Questions

The following questions are divided according to the data required to answer the research questions; they cover areas of personal, social, national, and religious identity, ways of self-expressing, religion, Saudi social norms, travelling abroad, and changing contexts.

Opening Questions

1. Please introduce yourself briefly.
 2. How long have you resided in the UK?
 3. Could you please provide some background about yourself, such as education, employment, and family status?
-

Identity:

4. When introducing yourself, what aspects of your identity and life journey do you consider important to include?
5. Could you elaborate on your personal understanding of what it means to be a woman?
6. In your view, what factors or influences shape a woman's perception of herself?
7. Has your perception of womanhood evolved or remained consistent since your relocation to the UK?
8. How do you define and interpret your Arab identity?
9. To what extent do the opinions and approval of others impact your self-identity and self-worth?
10. How do you navigate the intersection of multiple aspects of your identity, such as being a woman, an Arab, and a resident of the UK?
11. Are there any cultural or familial traditions that play a significant role in shaping your identity as a woman?

12. Have you encountered challenges or opportunities in embracing and expressing your identity as a woman while in the UK?
 13. Can you discuss any empowering moments or personal growth experiences related to your identity as a woman since your move to the UK?
 14. In your interactions with others, how do you balance preserving your personal identity while trying to fit in within your new environment?
-

Impact of Religion:

15. Could you elaborate on your personal understanding of what it means to be a Muslim?
16. Are there any differences between your understanding of Islam and that of your parents or older generations?
17. Could you describe your religious practices and rituals, including aspects like dress and daily prayers?
18. In the UK, do you feel at ease and comfortable practising your religion, including activities like dress, prayer, and social interactions?
19. Could you provide insights into your experiences as a Muslim woman in Saudi Arabia, focusing on religious practices and societal expectations?
20. How does your experience as a Muslim woman in the UK differ from your experiences in Saudi Arabia?
21. To what extent do you believe that religion plays a role in shaping how women define themselves and their roles in society?
22. Have you noticed any changes in your Muslim identity as a result of residing in the UK?
23. Are there specific challenges or opportunities you have encountered in expressing your religious identity in the UK?
24. Can you share any experiences where your religious beliefs have influenced your decisions or interactions in the UK?

25. How do you perceive the role of religion in the broader context of gender identity and social expectations, both in Saudi Arabia and the UK?
 26. Have you found any support networks or communities in the UK? that have helped you maintain your religious identity and practices?
-

Impact of Social Norms:

27. Are you a member of a specific tribe, and if so, how does this tribal affiliation affect your life and identity?
 28. In your opinion, do social norms and expectations significantly influence how women perceive and define themselves?
 29. Could you elaborate on the importance of cultural traditions and social norms in your life and how they impact your self-expression?
 30. How do you perceive the general portrayal of Saudi women in society?
 31. In the UK, how do you believe Saudi women are portrayed, and have you personally encountered any stereotypes or misconceptions?
 32. Have you experienced any instances of misunderstandings or misinterpretations of your identity in the UK, and how did you handle them?
 33. How do you navigate the balance between preserving your personal identity and adapting to the new contexts of the UK?
 34. Can you share any experiences where norms or expectations from both Saudi and British societies have clashed or converged, affecting your identity?
 35. Have you noticed any differences in how Saudi women's identities are discussed or represented in the media and public discourse in the UK compared to Saudi Arabia?
 36. How has your perception of gender roles and expectations evolved or remained consistent since your move to the UK?
-

Context Change:

37. Do you feel that your connections to your home society have strengthened or weakened since your move to the UK?
 38. How would you describe your interactions and relationships with people in the UK, within the Muslim community and with non-Muslims?
 39. As a woman, what specific challenges or obstacles have you faced in Saudi Arabia, and how have these experiences shaped your identity?
 40. Similarly, in the UK, have you encountered unique challenges related to any aspect of your identities, and if so, what were they?
 41. Were there any practices or aspects of daily life in the UK that have significantly impacted your sense of belonging or identity?
 42. Drawing from your migration experiences, do you believe that changing your environment and social circles provides more freedom for self-expression and personal growth?
-

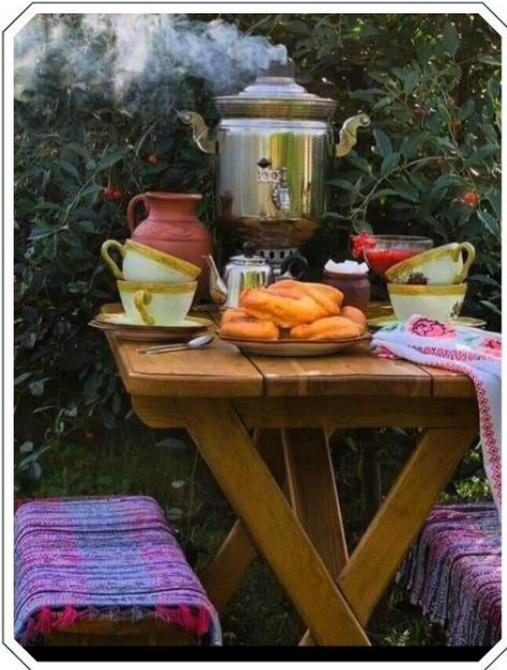
Concluding questions

43. Based on my questions and your responses during this interview, how would you summarise the influence of your experiences in the UK on your sense of identity?
44. Looking ahead, how do you envision your identity evolving as you continue to live in the UK or potentially return to Saudi Arabia?
45. Have there been any unexpected or surprising aspects of your identity development during your time in the UK that you would like to share?
46. What advice or insights would you offer to other Saudi women who are considering studying or living in the UK regarding maintaining a sense of identity and belonging?
47. Is there anything else you would like to share, comment on, or say?

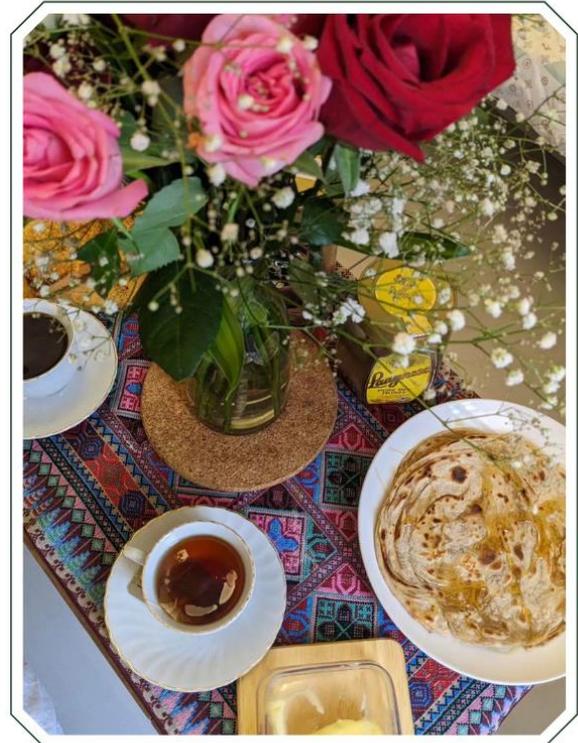
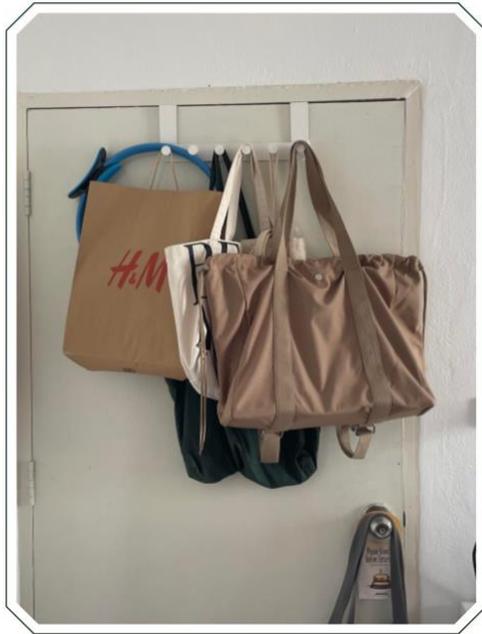
10.2 WOMEN Gallery



1. Top left – *My first Winter* (Lamia, 2021)
2. Top right – *Socialising is always good* (Asmaa, 2019)
3. Bottom right – *A taste of home* (Aseel, 2021)
4. Bottom left – *A cute little Arab girl* (Khalida, 2020)



5. Top left – *A Lonely Birthday* (Sawsan, 2021)
6. Top right – *Always Saudi* (Djihan, 2021)
7. Bottom right – *It smells like home* (Farah, 2021)
8. Bottom left – *My first best pet* (Asmaa, 2020)



9. Top left – *My home* (Lobnah, 2021)

10. Top right – *One picture, endless stories* (Khalida, 2020)

11. Bottom right – *Saudi National Day, even in the UK* (Ibtihal, 2021)

12. Bottom left – *Friends always make it better* (Souheila, 2020)

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