HIJAB AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: FEMALE SAUDI STUDENTS EXPERIENCES OF ADJUSTMENT IN THE UK

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Abstract: In recent years, Saudi universities and government sectors have become increasingly eager to send their female staff abroad for study purposes. Saudi women belong to a culture that involves a complex mixture of religious, tribal and cultural principles. The Hijab "veil" is considered as a fundamental part of a women's identity. Adapting to a western culture involves changes and adjustments which might be experienced as challenging by female Saudi international students.

The research aim is to investigate how Hijab as a part of the identities of Saudi women reflect in their experiences of adjustment while they are studying in the UK as an international student.

A qualitative methods approach was used, 25 female Saudi PhD students were interviewed and the data was analyzed using thematic analysis

The main themes were 'academic' and 'social'. The results showed that all the participants continued to wear Hijab throughout their stay in the UK although they changed the way they wear it. Being accepted academically was the most common reason for the change .

This study found also that the participants believed that Hijab represents multiple identities for them. They described it as being a significant and distinct symbol of their Islamic identity, as well as their cultural and national identities, which may make them a target of racial behavior or financial exploitation. This was the motivation for some of them to change the way they wear the veil. However, the changing of the Hijab style caused an identity crisis for 4% of the participants.

The majority of the participants reported that being veiled did not affect their overall adaptation in the UK. Both negative and positive points emerged in the academic and social themes. Although 22% of the sample thought that wearing hijab has led to discriminatory treatment, limited academic opportunities and reduced willingness of others to help them when they needed help, 88% of participants reported that wearing Hijab was not a barrier to their academic achievement. They felt that this was driven by several factors, including, policies of the universities which emphasizes the equal opportunities, the nature of the town/city and the presence of a Muslim community. Socially, wearing the veils did not prevent them from developing social relationships and friendships with local community/ people.

Keywords: Adjustment, Culture, Identity, Cultural Identity, Female students, Saudi International students , Saudi Students