

# Developing Intercultural Competence: The Role of Communication in the Adaptation of Saudi Women in Canada

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## Abstract

This paper explores the development of intercultural competence among Saudi women sojourners in Canadian universities, focusing on how communication, particularly language acquisition, cultural sensitivity, and non-verbal communication, plays a key role in their adaptation process. Through qualitative interviews with 13 Saudi women, the research investigates their experiences navigating academic, social, and cultural environments, analyzing the ways in which intercultural competence develops over time. The study highlights how these women balance language barriers, non-verbal communication differences, and cultural expectations to integrate into Canadian society while maintaining their cultural identity. The findings offer valuable insights into how institutions can support the intercultural competence development of international students. Recommendations for improved language training, cultural sensitivity workshops, and support networks for international students are also discussed.

## Keywords

Intercultural Competence, Saudi Women, Communication, Cultural Adaptation, Language Acquisition, Non-Verbal Communication

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background Context

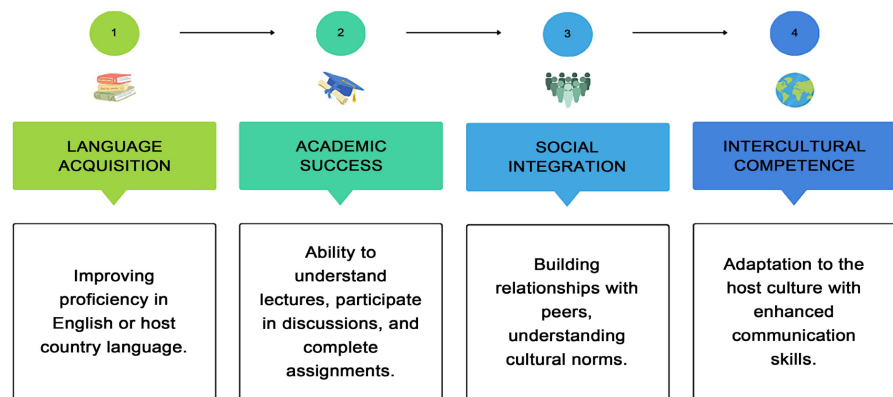
The rise of international education has brought a significant increase in the number of students pursuing degrees abroad, with international mobility programs like Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) playing a major

role in this trend. As part of these programs, a growing number of Saudi women have ventured into Western academic environments such as Canadian universities. However, these women face unique challenges stemming from the cultural and religious differences between their conservative Muslim backgrounds and the more secular, individualistic environments they encounter in Canada (Aldossari, 2015).

International students, including Saudi women, must develop intercultural competence to adapt successfully to these new environments. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations. This involves not only language proficiency but also the understanding and application of non-verbal communication, cultural knowledge, and adaptability to social norms. For Saudi women, whose cultural norms emphasize modesty, religious observance, and gender segregation, the development of intercultural competence is particularly crucial, as these norms often conflict with the more open, liberal norms of Canadian society (Berry, 1997).

Developing intercultural competence allows individuals to bridge cultural divides, adapt to new social environments, and succeed in academic and social spheres. This study focuses on how Saudi women sojourners in Canadian universities develop intercultural competence through their communication experiences, exploring how language acquisition, non-verbal communication adaptation, and the building of social networks contribute to their integration (Figure 1). While the conceptual model represents intercultural competence development as a linear process for clarity, it acknowledges the dynamic and iterative nature of these interactions, as supported by Kim's (1991) cross-cultural adaptation framework.

### Pathway from Language Acquisition to Intercultural Competence



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model of Intercultural Competence Development showing key factors like language acquisition, non-verbal communication, social networks, and cultural identity negotiation.

### 1.2. Study Purpose

This study seeks to examine the development of intercultural competence among

Saudi women sojourners in Canada, focusing on the role of communication in this process. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews with 13 Saudi women, the study investigates how language acquisition, non-verbal communication, and cultural sensitivity contribute to their adaptation to Canadian academic and social life. Furthermore, the study explores how these women navigate the balance between maintaining their cultural identity and integrating into Canadian society. By examining these experiences, this paper provides insights into how institutions can support the intercultural competence development of international students, particularly those from conservative cultural backgrounds (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 1996).

### 1.3. Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do Saudi women develop intercultural competence through communication in Canadian universities?
- 2) What role does language acquisition play in their cultural adaptation and academic success?
- 3) How do non-verbal communication differences influence their social and academic interactions?
- 4) How do Saudi women balance the maintenance of their cultural identity with the need to adapt to Canadian norms?
- 5) What support mechanisms (e.g., social networks) facilitate the development of intercultural competence?

### 1.4. Research Significance

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on intercultural communication by providing specific insights into the experiences of Saudi women in Canadian universities. While much research has focused on the challenges faced by international students in general, this study sheds light on the unique intersection of culture, religion, and gender that shapes the experiences of Saudi women in particular (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Second, the findings of this study have practical implications for educational institutions, as they highlight the importance of providing targeted support services, such as language training, intercultural communication workshops, and culturally sensitive campus environments, to enhance the academic and social integration of international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Intercultural Competence and Communication Theories

Intercultural competence is extensively examined in relation to international students' adaptation to new cultural settings. Kim's (1991) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory asserts that adaptation is a dynamic process where individuals internalize the host culture's communication patterns while retaining elements of their

original culture (Kim, 1991). For Saudi women, this involves navigating the cultural and communicative differences between their conservative Muslim background and Canada's multicultural, secular context (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). The adaptation process for Saudi women in Canada is complex due to the significant contrasts between their home and host cultures. Kim's theory provides a general framework, but the specific challenges for Saudi women are multifaceted, including adjusting to mixed-gender educational environments, different social norms regarding dress and behavior, and reconciling religious practices with secular academic settings (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). This cultural transition often requires them to reassess their cultural identity and develop new communication strategies to bridge the gap between their traditional values and Canadian academic and social expectations.

Moreover, the adaptation process for Saudi women in Canada is not merely about acquiring new cultural knowledge but also involves a delicate balance of maintaining cultural integrity while embracing new experiences. This balancing act can lead to what Berry (1997) termed "integration", where individuals maintain their cultural heritage while also participating fully in the larger society (Berry, 1997). For Saudi women, this might manifest in maintaining religious practices such as wearing hijab while actively engaging in Canadian academic discourse and social activities. The success of this integration depends on various factors, including individual personality traits, the level of support from both home and host communities, and the institutional structures in place to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and accommodation.

Byram's Intercultural Competence Model outlines the complex process of adapting to new cultures (Byram, 1997). For Saudi women in Canada, each component is vital. Knowledge includes factual information about Canadian culture and understanding social processes and representations of both cultures. Skills of interpreting and relating help Saudi women analyze and compare Canadian cultural practices with their own, aiding in deeper cultural understanding and identifying potential misunderstandings (Byram, 1997). Discovery and interaction skills are essential as Saudi women engage daily with Canadian society, enabling them to acquire and apply new cultural knowledge in real-time. Attitudes like curiosity, openness, and readiness to challenge preconceptions are key to positive intercultural experiences. Critical cultural awareness allows Saudi women to evaluate cultural perspectives, practices, and products in both cultures critically, fostering balanced views and effective intercultural communication (Yamaguchi, 2001).

Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006) provides a framework for understanding the dynamic nature of intercultural competence development (Deardorff, 2006). As Saudi women interact more with Canadian culture, they may experience shifts in their perspectives and behaviors, gradually developing the ability to navigate between their home culture and the host culture with increasing ease. This process is not linear, but cyclical with ongoing opportunities for reflection and growth. The model emphasizes the importance of both internal outcomes, such as increased cultural self-awareness and empathy, and external

outcomes, such as effective communication and behavior in intercultural situations. For Saudi women in Canada, this might manifest as an evolving ability to engage in social and professional settings with greater confidence while also maintaining a strong sense of their own cultural identity. The Process Model thus provides a valuable lens through which to examine the intercultural journey of Saudi women as they adapt to and integrate aspects of Canadian culture into their lives (Deardorff, 2006).

## 2.2. Language Acquisition and Academic Adaptation

Language acquisition plays a pivotal role in the development of intercultural competence, especially among international students navigating foreign academic environments. Ward and Kennedy's (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Model emphasizes a strong correlation between language proficiency and academic and social success (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 1996). This model underscores the importance of linguistic competence in facilitating cultural adjustment and integration. For Saudi women pursuing education abroad, enhancing their English language skills is crucial not only for comprehending academic content but also for actively engaging in classroom discussions and fostering meaningful relationships with peers and faculty members (Bochner, 1986).

The linguistic challenges faced by international students, particularly in academic and social English, are multifaceted and can significantly impact their educational experience. For Saudi women, these challenges are often amplified because of their limited exposure to English outside formal educational settings in their home country. Academic English demands proficiency in technical vocabulary, formal writing structures, and discipline-specific jargon, which can be daunting for non-native speakers. Simultaneously, social English, with its colloquialisms, idioms, and cultural nuances, presents a different set of hurdles in daily interactions and social integration (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013).

Language acquisition among Saudi women studying abroad is intrinsically linked to their overall academic performance and social adaptation. As they strive to improve their English proficiency, these students must navigate the complexities of a new educational system while simultaneously developing the linguistic skills necessary for both academic success and social integration. This process is not merely about language learning but also involves cultural adaptation and the development of intercultural competence. The ability to enhance language skills over time plays a crucial role in determining students' academic achievements, capacity to engage in meaningful social interactions, and overall experience in the host country (Deters, 2011). Consequently, targeted language support and cultural integration programs are essential for facilitating a smoother transition and fostering the academic and social success of Saudi women pursuing international education.

## 2.3. Non-Verbal Communication and Cultural Sensitivity

Non-verbal communication encompasses a wide range of behaviors and cues that

go beyond spoken words, including gestures, facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and personal space. These elements are deeply rooted in cultural norms and values, making them particularly susceptible to misinterpretation in intercultural contexts. Ekman and Keltner's Theory of Non-verbal Communication (1997) emphasizes the cultural variability of these non-verbal cues, highlighting how gestures that are considered polite in one culture may be offensive in another, or how the appropriate level of eye contact can differ significantly across societies (Ekman & Keltner, 1997). This cultural diversity in non-verbal communication can lead to unintended misunderstandings, potentially causing discomfort, confusion, or even conflict in intercultural interactions.

The impact of non-verbal communication on intercultural exchanges extends beyond mere misunderstandings, often influencing the overall perception and effectiveness of the interaction. For instance, differences in physical proximity norms can lead to feelings of intrusion or aloofness, whereas variations in facial expression interpretation may result in misread emotions or intentions. As globalization continues to bring diverse cultures into closer contact, the ability to navigate these non-verbal differences becomes increasingly crucial for successful intercultural communication. Recognizing and adapting to these cultural variations in non-verbal cues can significantly enhance mutual understanding and rapport in cross-cultural settings, ultimately contributing to more effective and harmonious intercultural relationships (Ekman & Keltner, 1997).

For Saudi women adapting to Canadian culture, this disparity in non-verbal communication can lead to misunderstandings and social discomfort. They may find themselves in situations where their culturally ingrained behaviors are misinterpreted or where they struggle to accurately read and respond to Canadian non-verbal cues. This challenge is not merely about adhering to new social norms but also about reconciling these norms with their own cultural identity and values. Successfully navigating this cultural divide requires a nuanced understanding of both cultures, the ability to adapt one's non-verbal communication style appropriately, and resilience to manage potential cultural conflicts. It also necessitates the willingness of Saudi women and their Canadian counterparts to engage in open dialogue and mutual understanding, fostering an environment of cultural exchange and growth (Gudykunst, 2003).

Recent studies on "semiotic repertoires" provide a nuanced lens to examine non-verbal communication (Kusters, 2021). This concept emphasizes how diverse cultural symbols and practices, including gestures and body language, intersect to create a repertoire of meaning that evolves in intercultural settings. Saudi women navigating Canadian environments often draw from these repertoires to mediate misunderstandings and adapt to new norms.

#### **2.4. Social Networks and Support Mechanisms**

Social networks serve as a crucial lifeline for international students to navigate the complexities of adapting to a new cultural and academic environment. These

networks not only offer emotional support during challenging times but also provide invaluable opportunities for students to enhance their communication skills in real-world settings. Yashima's Model of Social Interaction and Motivation (2002) emphasizes the significance of fostering relationships with both local and international peers as a fundamental aspect of developing intercultural competence (Yashima, 2002). This model suggests that through diverse social interactions, international students can gain a deeper understanding of cultural nuances, improve their language proficiency, and develop the confidence necessary to thrive in their new surroundings.

For Saudi women studying abroad, the composition of their social networks can be particularly influential in shaping their adaptation experiences. These networks often comprise a mix of other Saudi or Muslim students and local Canadian peers, with each group offering distinct forms of support and learning opportunities (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Through interactions with diverse individuals, Saudi women can refine their language skills, particularly colloquial and context-specific expressions that may not be taught in formal language classes. Moreover, these social connections provide invaluable insights into the nuances of Canadian cultural norms, social etiquette, and daily practices, which are often best learned through direct experience and observation rather than formal instruction (Diehl, Jansen, Ishchanova, & Hilger-Kolb, 2018). Recent studies highlight the transformative role of social networks in fostering intercultural competence (Allard, Schlaker, & Phillips Mergott, 2023; Canagarajah, 2021). These networks serve not only as sources of emotional support but also as critical sites for learning cultural nuances through lived experiences.

However, the path to establishing these vital social networks is often fraught with challenges stemming from cultural disparities. The concept of gender segregation, deeply ingrained in Saudi culture, may initially hinder Saudi women from engaging comfortably in the mixed-gender social settings common in Canada. Additionally, visible markers of religious identity, such as the hijab, while protected under Canadian multiculturalist policies, can sometimes lead to a sense of otherness or spark curiosity that may feel intrusive. These factors can create initial barriers to forming connections with Canadian peers, potentially leading to feelings of isolation or cultural dissonance. Overcoming these obstacles requires a delicate balance of maintaining cultural identity while adapting to new social norms, a process that demands resilience, open-mindedness, and, often, support from both Saudi and Canadian communities (Diehl, Jansen, Ishchanova, & Hilger-Kolb, 2018).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

This study is based on qualitative data collected from 13 Saudi women studying at various Canadian universities. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 35 years and were pursuing degrees in disciplines such as engineering, social sciences,

and health sciences. All participants identified themselves as practicing Muslims, and the majority wore the hijab. Participants were selected through Saudi student associations and snowball sampling techniques, where initial participants referred to others who met the study criteria.

The diversity of participants in terms of academic discipline, length of stay in Canada, and language proficiency allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the range of communication challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to develop intercultural competence (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020).

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in both English and Arabic, depending on the participants' language preferences. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and explored the participants' experiences with language acquisition, non-verbal communication, cultural adaptation, and social network building. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share their personal experiences while ensuring that key themes related to intercultural competence were addressed consistently across interviews.

Sample questions included the following:

- “How has improving your English skills helped you adapt to Canadian academic life?”
- “Can you describe a time when you experienced a misunderstanding due to differences in non-verbal communication?”
- “What role have your friendships with other students (both international and Canadian) played in helping you adapt to life in Canada?”
- “How do you balance maintaining your religious practices with adapting to Canadian cultural norms?”

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 14 (<http://www.lumivero.com/>) software to identify recurring themes.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify key patterns and themes in the interview data. The coding process involved reviewing each transcript for themes related to language acquisition, non-verbal communication, cultural adaptation, and social networks. Data were then organized into broader categories that reflected participants' experiences of developing intercultural competence (Church, 1982).

Key themes that emerged from the analysis included the following:

- 1) The centrality of language acquisition in facilitating both academic success and social integration.
- 2) The challenges of interpreting and adapting to non-verbal communication cues in Canadian contexts.
- 3) The role of social networks in providing emotional and practical support for cultural adaptation.

4) The ongoing negotiation of religious and cultural identity in a secular, multicultural environment (Sakr, 2008).

## 4. Results

Analysis of the interview data revealed four primary themes related to the development of intercultural competence among Saudi women in Canadian universities: language acquisition, non-verbal communication adaptation, social networks, and cultural identity negotiation. Each theme contributed to the overall process of intercultural competence development, shaping how the participants navigated their academic and social lives in Canada.

### **Theme 1: Language Acquisition as a Driver of Adaptation**

Language acquisition plays a pivotal role in the academic success and social integration of international students in Canada. Initially, many participants faced significant challenges in their academic pursuits due to their limited English proficiency, particularly in grasping technical terminology and actively engaging in group discussions. These language barriers not only hindered their academic performance but also affected their overall confidence in navigating the Canadian educational system. However, as students invested time and effort in improving their English skills, they experienced a corresponding increase in their academic capabilities and social comfort (Yakaboski, Perez-Velez, & Almutairi, 2018).

*Participant Example.* Participant 2, a health sciences student, explained that her confidence in classroom participation increased as her English improved. “At first, I felt too self-conscious to ask questions in class. But after taking language courses and practicing with my Canadian friends, I felt more comfortable speaking up.”

The importance of language support programs and informal language exchange activities cannot be overstated. These structured opportunities provide students with a safe environment to practice and refine their English skills in both academic and casual settings. As illustrated by Participant 2’s experience with the health sciences program, the progression from hesitation to speak in class to active participation in discussions was directly linked to improved language proficiency. This transformation not only enhanced students’ academic experiences but also facilitated their integration into the broader Canadian social fabric. The combination of formal language courses and informal practice with native speakers proved to be a powerful strategy for overcoming initial language barriers and building the confidence necessary for success in both academic and social spheres.

### **Theme 2: Non-Verbal Communication and Cultural Sensitivity**

Non-verbal communication posed significant challenges for participants, particularly in social interactions where cultural differences in eye contact, gestures, and physical proximity were most pronounced. Many participants noted that the Canadian norms of direct eye contact, open-body language, and frequent gestures were unfamiliar and often uncomfortable (Bochner, 1986). These differences in non-verbal cues created a complex landscape for international students to navigate

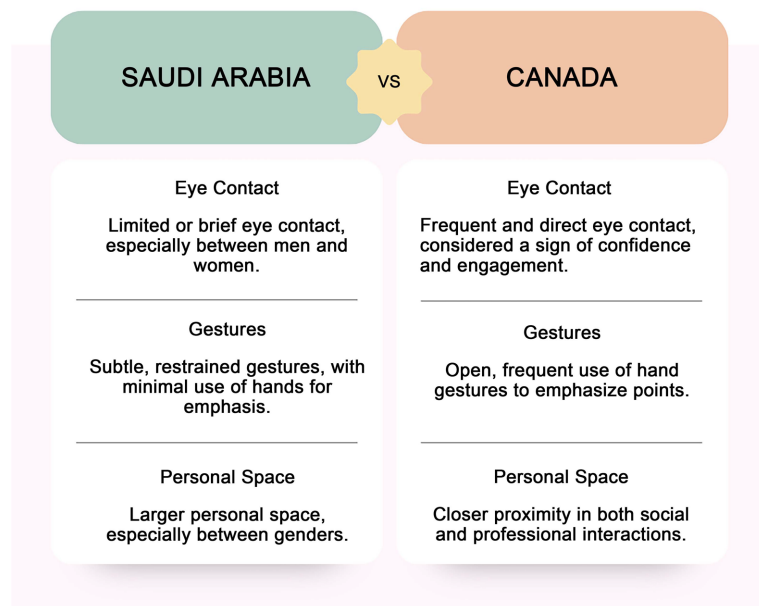
as they attempted to reconcile their own cultural norms with those of their new environment (Figure 2).

**Participant Example.** Participant 5 described feeling uneasy during conversations with male classmates due to differences in eye contact norms. “In Saudi Arabia, we don’t make eye contact with men for long periods, but here, it seems like that’s the norm, and I wasn’t used to it.”

The discomfort experienced by participants, such as Participant 5’s unease during conversations with male classmates due to differences in eye contact norms, highlights the profound impact that non-verbal communication can have on social interactions and cultural adaptation.

The process of learning to interpret and adapt to Canadian non-verbal communication norms was described as gradual and required both cultural sensitivity and the ability to navigate situations where misunderstandings occurred. This adaptation process often involves a delicate balance between maintaining one’s cultural identity and integrating it into the new social context. For some participants, these non-verbal differences created additional barriers to social integration as they felt unsure about how to interact with their Canadian peers in a culturally appropriate way (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). This uncertainty could lead to social anxiety, reduced participation in social activities, and potentially missed opportunities for cultural exchange and personal growth.

#### Comparison of Non-Verbal Communication Norms



**Figure 2.** Comparison of non-verbal communication norms between Saudi Arabia and Canada, highlighting differences in eye contact, gestures, and physical proximity.

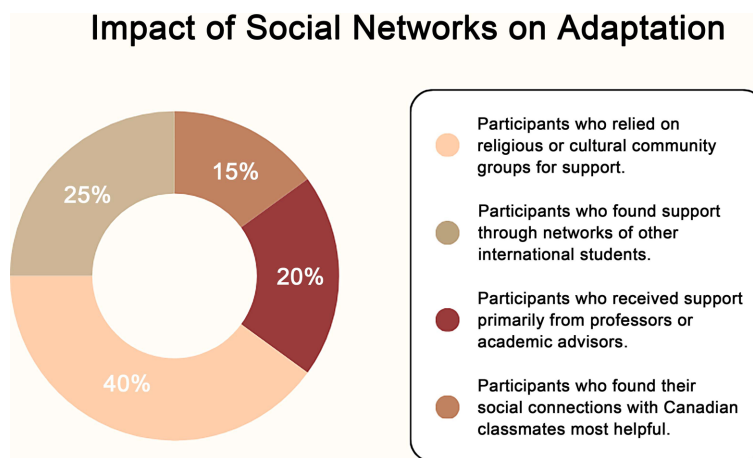
### Theme 3: Social Networks as a Support Mechanism

Building strong social networks has emerged as a crucial factor in participants’

successful adaptation to life in Canada. Those who formed diverse friendships, including both international students and Canadian peers, reported feeling more supported and confident in navigating intercultural communication challenges (Church, 1982). These networks provide multifaceted support, offering practical advice on academic systems and emotional support for cultural and religious challenges. For Saudi women, in particular, these connections helped alleviate feelings of isolation and fostered a sense of belonging in their new environment.

**Participant Example.** *Participant 8, an engineering student, highlighted the importance of joining a student organization for international students. “Joining the student group made me feel like I wasn’t alone. I could talk to people who were going through the same thing and learn from their experiences.”*

This participant’s experience highlights how such groups can create a supportive community in which students can share their experiences and learn from one another. Furthermore, relationships with other international students, especially those from similar cultural or religious backgrounds, have proven particularly beneficial. These connections helped participants feel grounded and less isolated in their new surroundings (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). The shared experiences and mutual understanding within these networks played a significant role in easing the transition and promoting the overall well-being of Saudi women studying in Canada (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Social networks as a mechanism for adaptation: This graph shows the percentage of participants who relied on Saudi peers, Muslim peers, and Canadian peers for support.

#### Theme 4: Balancing Religious Practices with Cultural Adaptation

The complex interplay between religious practices and societal expectations presents a significant challenge for Muslim immigrants in Canada. While Canada’s multicultural environment generally embraces religious diversity, participants reported challenges uniquely tied to their gender and cultural expectations, such as navigating perceptions tied to the hijab and addressing assumptions about female roles in academic and social settings (Duderija, 2007). This tension between

religious commitment and social integration is exemplified by Participant 11's experience, who felt that her hijab created a barrier to social interaction with Canadian peers, leading to a sense of not belonging.

**Participant Example.** *Participant 11, who wore the hijab, described how her appearance sometimes made her feel different from her Canadian peers. "I felt like people didn't know how to approach me because of my hijab. They were curious but also hesitant to ask questions, and that made me feel like I didn't belong."*

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability in navigating their religious identity within the Canadian context. They actively sought ways to maintain their religious practices while simultaneously integrating them into Canadian society. This included finding creative solutions to balance religious obligations with academic responsibilities, such as locating private prayer spaces on campus and negotiating with professors for flexibility during exams. These efforts highlight participants' determination to preserve their religious identity while actively participating in and adapting to Canadian social norms, showcasing the dynamic nature of cultural integration in a multicultural society.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how Saudi women sojourners at Canadian universities develop intercultural competence through communication. Language acquisition, non-verbal communication adaptation, social networks, and cultural identity negotiation emerged as key themes in this process, each contributing to the participants' ability to navigate the challenges of living in a new cultural environment.

### 5.1. The Role of Language Acquisition in Intercultural Competence Development

Language acquisition has emerged as a critical factor in both the academic success and social integration of international students. Participants who demonstrated improved English language skills found themselves better equipped to actively engage in classroom discussions, form meaningful friendships, and navigate the complex landscape of academic expectations in their host countries. This aligns with Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which emphasizes the pivotal role of language proficiency in facilitating effective communication and participation within the host culture (Kim, 1991). Enhanced language skills not only contributed to academic performance, but also significantly boosted participants' confidence in various social situations, enabling them to forge stronger connections with their Canadian peers and immerse themselves more fully in Canadian life and culture.

However, the journey towards language proficiency was not without its challenges, particularly for students who had limited prior exposure to English (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Many participants faced initial difficulties in comprehending lectures, expressing their ideas clearly, and keeping up with the pace of academic

discourse. These linguistic hurdles often led to feelings of frustration and isolation in the early stages of their academic journeys. Despite these obstacles, most participants recognized the importance of perseverance in language learning and viewed it as a crucial investment in their long-term success and integration. As they gradually improved their language skills, many reported a corresponding increase in their overall satisfaction with their academic experiences and social lives in Canada.

## 5.2. Non-Verbal Communication and Cultural Sensitivity

The challenges of non-verbal communication in cross-cultural contexts extend beyond mere differences in gestures and physical proximity. Participants often found themselves grappling with nuanced meanings behind various non-verbal cues, which can significantly impact the effectiveness of communication and the formation of relationships. For instance, the appropriate level of eye contact can vary greatly between cultures, with some viewing direct eye contact as a sign of respect and attentiveness, whereas others may perceive it as confrontational or disrespectful. Similarly, the interpretation of personal space and physical touch can lead to misunderstandings or discomfort if not properly understood within a cultural context.

Byram's Intercultural Competence Model provides a framework for addressing these challenges by emphasizing the development of cultural awareness and interpretive skills (Byram, 1997). This model suggests that successful intercultural communication requires not only knowledge of cultural differences but also the ability to analyze and reflect on one's own cultural assumptions. Participants in cross-cultural interactions must learn to suspend judgment and carefully observe and adapt their non-verbal behaviors accordingly. This process of developing intercultural competence is ongoing and requires conscious effort, as individuals must constantly negotiate between their cultural norms and those of their interlocutors. By fostering these skills, individuals can navigate the complex landscape of non-verbal communication more effectively, leading to more meaningful and productive cross-cultural exchanges.

The development of intercultural competence also involves cultivating empathy and openness to different cultural perspectives. This skill set enables individuals to recognize and appreciate the diverse ways in which non-verbal cues are expressed and interpreted across cultures. Moreover, it encourages a more flexible approach to communication, allowing for adjustments in one's own non-verbal behaviors to accommodate cultural differences and minimize potential misunderstandings. The development of intercultural competence also involves cultivating empathy and openness to different cultural perspectives. This skill set enables individuals to recognize and appreciate the diverse ways in which non-verbal cues are expressed and interpreted across cultures. Moreover, it encourages a more flexible approach to communication, allowing for adjustments in one's own non-verbal behaviors to accommodate cultural differences and minimize potential

misunderstandings.

### **5.3. Social Networks and Cultural Adaptation**

Social networks played a pivotal role in participants' adaptation to life in Canada, extending beyond mere social support to encompass cultural learning and integration. As Yashima's Model of Social Interaction and Motivation (2002) suggests, these networks provide opportunities for international students to engage with both local and international peers, fostering a rich environment for developing intercultural competence (Yashima, 2002). Through these interactions, participants were able to observe, practice, and refine their understanding of Canadian social norms, communication styles, and cultural nuances. This process of social learning not only enhanced their ability to navigate daily life in Canada but also contributed to a sense of belonging and cultural integration.

Moreover, the strength and diversity of these social networks correlated with participants' overall adaptation success. Those who cultivated robust connections across various social circles, including local Canadians, fellow international students, and co-nationals, reported feeling more supported and confident in their new environment. These diverse networks serve multiple functions: providing emotional support, offering practical assistance with daily challenges, and creating opportunities for cultural exchange. As a result, participants with strong social networks demonstrated greater resilience in facing adaptation challenges, exhibited more positive attitudes towards their host country, and showed enhanced willingness to engage in intercultural communication. This aligns with Yashima's model, which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between social interaction, motivation, and intercultural competence development (Yashima, 2002).

The impact of these social networks extended beyond immediate adaptation, influencing participants' long-term perspectives on their international experience. Many reported that their diverse social connections had broadened their worldviews, fostering a more global mindset and enhancing their intercultural sensitivity. This increased cultural awareness not only benefited their personal growth but also positioned them favorably for future international career opportunities, aligning with the growing demand for globally competent professionals in the job market. The development of these intercultural competencies through social networks aligns with Berry's Acculturation Model, which emphasizes the importance of both maintaining one's cultural heritage and engaging with the host culture for successful adaptation (Berry, 1997). Participants who actively engaged in diverse social networks reported a more balanced approach to acculturation, often adopting integration strategies that allowed them to maintain their cultural identity while embracing aspects of Canadian culture. This balanced approach not only facilitated smoother adaptation but also contributed to participants' overall well-being and life satisfaction during their international education experience.

### **5.4. Balancing Religious Identity and Cultural Norms**

The negotiation of religious identity among Muslim immigrants in Canada often

involves a delicate balance between maintaining religious practices and adapting to the norms of Canadian society. Participants reported various strategies for navigating this complex terrain, including selective adaptation of certain cultural practices while steadily adhering to core religious beliefs. This negotiation process frequently led to the development of a hybrid identity in which individuals found ways to integrate aspects of their religious and cultural heritage with Canadian values and customs (Duderija, 2007).

The obstacles faced by Muslim immigrants in this identity negotiation process are multifaceted. On the one hand, they encountered instances of cultural misunderstanding or curiosity from non-Muslim Canadians, which sometimes led to feelings of otherness or marginalization. However, they grappled with internal conflicts as they sought to reconcile traditional religious practices with the demands of modern Canadian life. This ongoing negotiation often results in a dynamic and evolving sense of identity, as individuals continuously reassess and redefine their relationship with both their religious heritage and their adopted country (Duderija, 2007). This process of identity negotiation is further complicated by the diverse interpretations of Islam within the immigrant community itself. Some individuals may adopt a more liberal approach, seeking to integrate Islamic principles with Canadian values, while others may adhere more strictly to traditional interpretations.

The process of identity formation is challenging, as individuals face pressure from both their religious communities and mainstream Canadian society to conform. Participants often feel caught between two worlds, struggling to balance their religious commitments with full participation in Canadian society. Despite these challenges, most expressed pride in navigating this complex terrain, viewing their hybrid identity as a source of strength and resilience in a diverse and globalized world. This process leads to innovative solutions and adaptations, blending religious practices with Canadian cultural norms. For instance, some Muslim immigrants modify traditional dress codes to suit the Canadian climate and workplace expectations while maintaining modesty standards. Many participants develop a nuanced understanding of their beliefs, critically reflecting and interpreting to reconcile Islamic principles with Canadian values, such as gender equality and individual freedom.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of how Saudi women sojourners in Canadian universities develop intercultural competence through communication. The findings highlight the importance of language acquisition, non-verbal communication adaptation, social networks, and cultural identity negotiation in shaping participants' ability to integrate into Canadian academic and social life. The results suggest that Saudi women sojourners face unique challenges and opportunities to develop intercultural competence during their time in Canada. These experiences contribute to their personal growth, academic success, and

ability to effectively navigate cross-cultural interactions. Future research could explore how these intercultural competencies are maintained and applied upon returning to Saudi Arabia, as well as investigate the long-term impact of international education experiences on Saudi women's professional and personal lives.

### **6.1. Original Contributions**

This study uniquely highlights how Saudi women develop hybrid identities through the interplay of communication practices and relational structures. Unlike previous research, it emphasizes their agency in navigating competing cultural expectations, offering actionable insights into targeted support strategies for female students from conservative backgrounds. The study found that identity formation was significantly shaped by relational structures. Participants with close-knit social networks of co-nationals often emphasized cultural preservation, while those forming diverse relationships displayed more adaptive identity shifts, integrating aspects of Canadian culture. This finding aligns with [Berry's \(1997\)](#) acculturation model and underscores the role of relational absence or conflict in fostering independence and self-reflection ([Berry, 1997](#)).

### **6.2. Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for educational institutions that aim to support international students. Universities can adopt a multifaceted approach to enhance the intercultural competence development of students. This approach should include targeted language support programs that extend beyond basic language skills to address the academic and social communication needs. Intercultural communication workshops can be designed to foster understanding and empathy among diverse student populations, equipping both international and domestic students with the skills to effectively navigate cultural differences. Furthermore, creating structured opportunities for social engagement, such as cultural exchange events, buddy systems, and international student clubs, can facilitate meaningful interactions and friendships across cultural boundaries.

Universities should also focus on creating an inclusive campus environment that respects and accommodates diverse cultural and religious practices. This can involve providing culturally sensitive spaces, such as prayer rooms or meditation areas that cater to students from various religious backgrounds. Accommodations for dietary restrictions in campus dining facilities and flexibility in academic schedules to observe important cultural or religious holidays can also contribute to a more welcoming atmosphere. By implementing these measures, educational institutions can demonstrate their commitment to supporting international students' well-being and academic success while simultaneously enriching the cultural diversity of the campus community. Such efforts not only benefit international students but also prepare all students for global citizenship in an increasingly interconnected world.

### 6.3. Future Research Directions

Future research could expand these findings by conducting longitudinal studies that track Saudi women's academic and professional trajectories after their international educational experiences. Such studies could examine how intercultural competence developed during their time abroad influences their career choices, leadership roles, and ability to navigate diverse work environments upon returning to Saudi Arabia or pursuing opportunities globally. Researchers could investigate whether the skills and perspectives gained through intercultural experience contribute to increased innovation, cross-cultural collaboration, and organizational change within Saudi institutions.

Comparative studies with other international student populations could offer valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities that Saudi women face in developing intercultural competence. By examining similarities and differences in the experiences of students from various cultural backgrounds, researchers could identify universal aspects of intercultural competence development as well as culture-specific factors. This cross-cultural comparison could provide tailored support programs for international students and contribute to a nuanced understanding of how cultural identity intersects with gender, religion, and national background in shaping intercultural learning outcomes in Western academic settings.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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