

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on Communication and Language in Virtual Spaces, January 2023 Pp.275-303  
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/comm1.21>

## **Saudi Ph.D. Sojourners' Construction of Identities on Twitter: An Online-Ethnographic Study in the United Kingdom**

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Received:11/08/2022

Accepted:01/09/2023

Published:01/20/2023

### Abstract

This paper reports on a descriptive, inductive study that aimed to contribute to the knowledge of the creation of online identities among international students. It draws on online ethnographic observation of Saudi Ph.D. sojourners in the U.K. on Twitter, one of the most popular social media platforms, from May 2019 to January 2020, followed by Twitter interviews. Social media platforms have become part and parcel of the daily lives of many people. For international students, such platforms are perhaps even more essential as they are used for educational and social purposes, as well as staying in contact with family and friends at home. The study addresses three questions examining the identities Saudi Ph.D. students construct on Twitter and how and when. Previous studies of international students have focused mainly on the pedagogical use of technology or intercultural competence. This research explores how, when, and why the participants constructed and developed their different identities on Twitter. Thematic analysis of the data was employed, informed by the grounded theory approach. The findings showed that the development of identities on Twitter is complex. The participants constructed various identities comprising many dimensions and involving complex perceptions of capital, power, and social identity. The construction of their identities entailed idioms of practice, using linguistic and non-linguistic cues, and forming communities of practice through audience design.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic study, identity, international, Saudi Ph.D. students, social media, sojourners

**Cite as:** Almesfer, B. (2023). Saudi Ph.D. Sojourners' Construction of Identities on Twitter: An Online-Ethnographic Study in the United Kingdom. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* Special Issue on Communication and Language in Virtual Spaces, January 2023:275-303.  
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/comm1.21>

## Introduction

This study examined international students' construction of their online identities over a while on social media. Social media is a vast online environment that comprises many platforms accessed constantly by many people. Indeed, social media applications have become an integral part of people's lives. For international students particularly, social media applications may be a crucial part of daily life, enabling them to communicate with family and friends at home. Studying how international students express their identities in such contexts is an emerging field. A few studies, such as those of Alhejely (2020) and Zhu and Procter (2015), have looked at Twitter and Facebook, largely focusing on showing how people express online identities through language practices or how international students use these platforms. This study considers an overlooked group—international students and sojourners in the U.K.—and explores how they express their identities on Twitter. It focuses on two aspects of how identity and the self are represented: (i) through the participants' Twitter profiles, which tend to be a semi-static gate through which they introduce themselves to others; (ii) their tweets, which tend to be dynamic, making it possible to see how identity is performed over time. Little research has been carried out to date looking at international students and their identities online.

The significance of this study lies first in its theoretical contribution to understanding identity representation and construction on social media, specifically on Twitter. Second, it is significant in terms of the method and approach adopted. The study took a grounded approach and contributes to the emerging field of online-ethnographic research by incorporating various insider perspectives. It provides empirical evidence illustrating how online ethnography can be used to explore identity construction on social media.

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What identities are constructed by Saudi Ph.D. sojourners in the U.K. in Twitter profiles and tweets?

RQ2. How are these identities constructed (e.g., through images, text, and display of membership in specific communities)?

RQ3: When and how are different identities enacted in tweets?

The study examined two sites providing a rich presentation of identity—Twitter profiles and tweets—to gain insights into how the students constructed their identities.

The study was ethnographic. According to Hammersley (2017), the main force behind ethnography is the desire to find out what people do and how. This study aimed to capture the enactment of identity among a particular group of international Ph.D. students in the U.K., four male and four female Saudis living in different cities. In this study, the researcher focused on how the self is expressed in profiles and through tweets, considering identity as a complex concept. The findings reveal significant patterns of similarities in how these international students enact particular identities. Moreover, the study examines how identity can be expressed through showing affiliation with and membership in certain groups.

The remainder of this paper is as follows: The next section provides a review and discussion of the most relevant literature. The following section outlines the methods employed. Then, there is a section presenting the findings before a brief discussion. The final section concludes.

## Literature Review

This section discusses the relevant literature and theoretical underpinnings of the study under four main subheadings: identity, social and cultural identity, identity in social media, and international students' online identities.

### *Identity*

Identity is a highly contested concept, and there is no single agreed definition. Benwell and Stokoe (2006) argued that theoretical trends related to identity fall into two main categories: first, the essentialist view of identity as a product of mind, a knowable object, which was a typical view in the Renaissance; second, the constructivist view of identity as a non-fixed, socially constructed object, a view that influenced social interaction scholars such as Goffman (1990) and was espoused by Benwell and Stokoe (2006).

Generally, identity is understood to be who one is. However, as noted by Harrison (2019), Lemke (2008), and Omoniyi and White (2006), it is not as simple as this; it is complex, multiple, and unstable. In an early, highly influential work on identity that attracted the attention of conversation analysts and ethnographers alike, Goffman (1990) addressed performance as a critical aspect of identity that the interactant(s) (audience) and the environment influence. From a somewhat broader perspective, Lemke (2008) pointed to the diversity of identities, noting that time and setting can be significant influencing factors and stating that "Identities develop and change, they are at least multi-faceted if not in fact plural. Their consistency and continuity are our constructions, mandated by our cultural notions of the kinds of selves that are normal and abnormal in our community" (p. 18).

From another standpoint, Riley (2007) considered the role of social norms in identity construction, how it is possible to view the self and identity, and whether these terms might be interchangeable. Riley (2007) proposed a triangular model that demonstrates how the self and identity can come together but also the respects in which they differ (see Figure one).

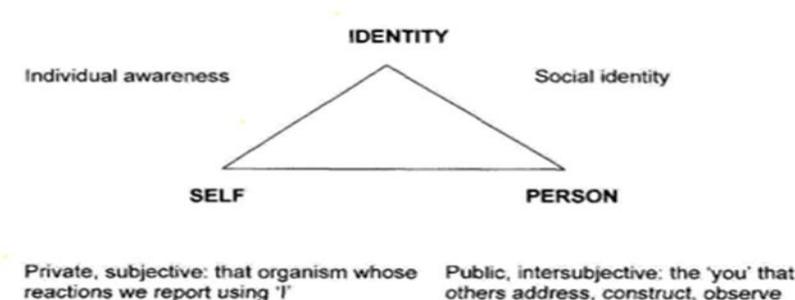


Figure 1. Model of identity (Riley, 2007, p. 87)

According to the model, identity encompasses two distinct concepts: the person and the self. While a person is a social identity that others construct about the being (“you”), the self involves a subjective awareness of the being (as “me” and “I”). This implies that the self and individual awareness are private and subjective, whereas social identity is a public quality that is attributed to others.

Building on the above, this study views identity as a plural concept that is not fixed. This is in line with Lemke's (2008) theoretical conceptualization, which encompasses a plurality of identities that can be informed by time and setting, as well as being rooted in cultural norms. This emphasizes the multiplicity and complexity of identity, arguing that identity is constructed by the individual and decreed by community perceptions of what is normal and abnormal (Lemke, 2008). The researcher also drew on Riley's (2007) conceptualization of identity, which is compatible with Lemke's (2008) approach but contributes additionally by incorporating the influence of language, culture, social aspects, and the setting. The study thus employed the works of Riley (2007) and Lemke (2008) as the theoretical lens in addressing identity, the self, and social identity and how they can be constructed and enacted online.

### ***Social and Cultural Identity***

Concerning social identity, the study drew on the seminal work of Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1982), viewing social identity as a practice of self-categorization through which individuals categorize themselves and express their membership of specific categories through their behaviors, such as defining oneself as a supporter of a football team and then wearing its kit, or as a member of the clergy wearing clerical clothing and thus communicating a particular social identity. Tajfel and Turner (2004) then expanded on this to explain intergroup behaviors and discrimination in psychology.

An contested aspect in terms of social identity is the role of culture. One's cultural identity lies in the sense of membership and belonging to a particular ethnic group and culture, with shared beliefs and norms. Cultural membership of a group entails familiarity with the language, heritage, religion, and traditions. Thus, being Saudi Arabian, for example, can be described as a national cultural identity, that is being Arabian, being Muslim, and sharing beliefs, traditions, and social values. This also reflects the different perspective offered by Jenks (2005) that integrates the cultural and the social, considering that culture can be a social category encompassing “a whole of life of a people” (p. 12).

Riley (2007) pointed to the complexity of identity as a concept influenced by culture, education, and society. While social and cultural identity can be referred to interchangeably in some instances, this is not always the case. Both identities tend to be attributed by others rather than acquired. Social identity is what others attribute to one (you) based on other social parameters, such as language, with a membership of that group demonstrated through behaviors and other signals of belonging. In contrast, cultural identity tends to be related more to heritage, religion, and language as shared aspects that define ownership of that identity. In this vein, Spolsky (2003)

and Suleiman (2019) are alike in their view of how religion and nationality play significant roles in how identity can be constructed through language. As Spolsky (2003) put it, "Islam is basically and strictly associated with Classical Arabic" (p. 84).

Riley's (2007) work is also noteworthy in highlighting two important aspects: First, how identity can be enacted as a social identity (i.e., who the person is), and second, how it relates to individual awareness (i.e., what one knows about the "self"). Riley's (2007) theoretical perspective not only highlights the differences and similarities between language and identity but also explains the correlation between them. In social identity, language is one of the main parameters.

### ***Identity in Social Media***

Identity studies have expanded their scope to cover online and social media platforms, given the powerful role they play in the daily lives of people around the world. Many studies have explored identity and self-presentation online. Dewing (2010) defined social media as follows:

The term "social media" refers to the wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute to users-centered content, or join online communities. The kind of internet service commonly associated with social media (sometimes referred to as "Web 2.0"). (p. 1)

Social media, therefore, can be used as an umbrella term to refer to many social networking websites that people can access through mobile phones and smart technology.

Furthermore, Dewing (2010) described different categories of social media, one of which is a status update service, such as the microblogging service Twitter. This category differentiates platforms such as Twitter from others, represented in their short posts and sharing or checking the updates of others.

The context of this study was Twitter, a highly popular site. Identity in this study was thus primarily explored through tweets and profiles. Marwick and Boyd (2011) contended that the Twitter identity could take different forms, ranging from the semi-static presentation of the self on personal homepages known as "profiles" to the dynamic nature of tweets. As noted by Robinson (2007), homepages are a specific kind of expression of the self that is explicit, revolving around "who I am," whereas in posts and other interactive aspects, it is more about "it is me." Therefore, tweets and profiles can be considered two different ways of presenting the self.

Marwick and Boyd (2011) also examined the imagined audience concept on Twitter and concluded that tweets could target different and multiple audiences; this they considered a unique feature of audience diversity and identity construction. Indeed, identity online, according to Barton and Lee (2013), is not only about who we are but also how the self wants to be seen by others; therefore, the management of identities and audience (as imagined) are central issues in online identity research. In addition, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) pointed out that "identity on the internet is playful, creative, impressive and limitless, and (so popular discourse would have it) an entirely different proposition from identity in the 'real world'" (p. 243). Moreover, online identity and the "social media identity" can be "unstable," or "more fluid." This is a point worth noting and thus

this study undertook ethnographic observation of eight participants' authentic, identified Twitter accounts using their real identities over eight months to address the fluidity of online identity.

### *International Students' Identities Online*

Not everyone can study abroad, but the number of international students is continuously increasing (Schartner & Young, 2020). Studying abroad has always been perceived as a privilege, given the valuable experience of globalization it offers. In this regard, Lewin (2009) pointed out:

The revolution in study abroad is thus not only numerical, but indeed philosophical. Historically, study abroad has been caught up in the pursuit of high culture. Throughout the late 19th century and during the 20th century, it was primarily an outgrowth of the Grand Tour, which began in 17th-century England, where aristocratic young men were sent to European capitals to complete their classical education. (p. xiv)

Considering this, studying abroad can be viewed as one form of social capital highlighted by Bourdieu (2011) in terms of enhancing one's educational background. In addition, Urry (2012) argued the travel experience can be globally enriching.

Many studies have researched international students. Some, such as Fabricius, Klitgård, and Preisler (2011), Kim (2001), and Schartner and Young (2020), have focused on their adaptation and integration and intercultural experience. Others, for example, Gang, Wei, and Duanmu (2010), have focused on their pedagogical and learning experience. This study concerns international students' use of Twitter, the focus of many studies in different areas. While most, such as Al-Jenaibi (2016), and Rogers and Jones (2021), have tended to explore political subjects, some, like Li, Stokowski, Dittmore, Malmo, and Rolfe (2017), have approached identity presentation in people's Twitter bios on their Profile pages.

International students use social media for various reasons, including staying in contact with family and friends at home (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014), and enhancing their academic networks and learning. Zhu and Procter (2015) found that Ph.D. students in the U.K. used Twitter and Facebook differently, employing the former to enhance and expand their professional identity and networks and the latter more "for personal use rather than research-related purposes" (p. 37). Moreover, the Ph.D. students shared several practices when using Twitter, particularly in using Ph.D. hashtags as significant markers to enact their professional identity and engage in Ph.D. encounters on Twitter.

In Gershon's (2010) terms, this could be an idiom of practice. Gershon (2010) proposed the notion to explain how different groups of people develop—mostly "unconsciously"—their own ways of using communicative media with each other. These unique practices might be observed by other groups. Idioms of practice are a potentially interesting yet overlooked subject in social media despite there being empirical data that support this theory.

In another instance of idioms of practice, Alhejely (2020) found a significant pattern in the interactions of Arab students in the U.K. on Twitter when using standard Arabic to articulate their religious practices, thus enacting their Muslim identity. This is in line with the work of researchers

such as Albirini (2011) and Alsaawi (2017), highlighting the strong connection between standard Arabic and religious discourse in Islamic contexts. Equally, an idiom of practice found in many online studies of international students is the use of English to signal their identity as global citizens (Schreiber, 2015; Tagg & Seargeant, 2012).

International students' use of social media platforms can be an invaluable means of exploring perceptions and identities. Liu (2012) advocated researching online and cyberspace as an arena for intercultural communication. However, most existing studies that have examined international students' online presence are in the sphere of education and online learning. The topic of international students and their online identities is still an emerging field. Identity can appear in many forms. For example, on Twitter, it can have a strong presence in profiles (Rogers & Jones, 2021). Studies undertaken with Twitter, such as those of Alhejely (2020) and Seyri and Rezaee (2022), have examined students and their identities but have not considered the participants' Twitter profiles. Moreover, existing research has highlighted significant issues, including language, mobility, and how the online bilingual and multilingual practices of different international students can enhance our understanding of social and cultural identities and online communities (Alhejely, 2020; Gomes et al., 2014; Tagg & Seargeant, 2012). However, we know little about the identities students are keen to portray. Is being an overseas student something visible in their presence online, and if so, how is it constructed? If this is not the case, which identities do international students construct and how?

## Methods

This study was purely qualitative, seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of how a small group of Saudi international students in the U.K. constructed and manifested their identities on Twitter through an online ethnographic approach. Thus, the study was data-driven rather than theory-driven. The approach adopted was consistent with Denzin and Lincoln's (2002) view that qualitative researchers seek to understand the phenomenon in its natural setting.

This study was undertaken within an interpretive paradigm (Bryman, 2012), considering multiple realities and accounting for different viewpoints to understand a specific, context-bound topic (identity construction on Twitter). The study adopted an online-ethnographic approach, seeking to unearth the identities constructed, and find out how and why. This entailed spending considerable time in observation (from May 2019 to January 2020), followed by interviews with four participants conducted in June 2020, and later three follow-up interviews (until 2022).

## Participants

The participants in this study were eight Saudi Ph.D. students (four males and four females) at universities in the U.K. They were all employed as lecturers by universities in Saudi Arabia and were undertaking doctoral studies on scholarships. The sample was obtained through the snowballing technique, in which the researcher identifies some participants who then help recruit others. The study setting can be described in terms of where the research was undertaken (place),

when (time), and with whom (participants). The study site was primarily Twitter, and observation of the participants' Twitter profiles and tweets took place over eight months. Table one provides demographic information.

Table 1. *Study participants*

Participant identifiers	Gender	City	Ph.D. field
Ph.D. A	Female	Sussex	Computer science
Ph.D. B	Female	Warwick	Computer science
Ph.D. C	Female	Newcastle	Languages
Ph.D. D	Female	Belfast	Medicine
Ph.D. E	Male	Scotland	Arts and media
Ph.D. F	Male	Newcastle	Languages
Ph.D. G	Male	Newcastle	Medicine
Ph.D. F	Male	Newcastle	Computer science

### **Research Instruments**

The three research questions determined the tools and procedures employed in data collection and analysis. To explore the identities the Saudi Ph.D. students constructed in their Twitter profiles and tweets, the researcher followed their accounts and observed them for eight months, capturing their Twitter profiles and tweets and keeping notes. For the online observation, the researcher used snipping tool software to take screenshots of the participants' Twitter profiles and tweets, which were date stamped according to the time they were taken. The researcher sought further insights using the direct messaging feature on Twitter to interview four participants, asking "why" questions and gaining their insider perspectives to enhance the validity of the results.

### **Research Procedures**

The researcher spent three hours each day checking the Twitter accounts and enabled notification alerts for the eight accounts to be informed whenever the participants posted. In all, 298 tweets were collected, excluding replies and retweets, associated with the 8 Twitter profiles of the participants. The researcher analyzed the various data (Twitter profiles, tweets, observation notes, and interviews) manually from June 2020 to October 2022 using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and implementing Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach to coding. Themes emerged and were generated based on the criteria advocated by Ryan and Bernard (2003), with significance determined in terms of their frequency, relevance to the research questions, and forceful presence across the datasets.

### **Results**

The data analysis revealed interesting findings about how this particular group of Ph.D. students constructed their identities while in the U.K. This section presents the findings under four main themes in response to the first and second research questions.

### Theme One: Ph.D. Identity

For Saudi sojourners, undertaking their Ph.D. abroad takes four years on average, meaning they are away from home (and possibly family) for a considerable period. The experience of living in a different country and spending many years away from the home environment is a critical aspect for international students. Being a Ph.D. student overseas was highly significant for the participants, forming a lifestyle and an aspect of identity. This was the most notable of the themes identified in terms of its frequency and re-occurrence throughout the observation period. The review of Ph.D. identity here draws on examples from the participants' Twitter profiles and tweets, my observation notes, and excerpts from the Twitter interviews.



Figure 2. Ph.D. F's Twitter profile

Figure two shows a screenshot of Ph.D. F's Twitter profile (with parts obscured for confidentiality). Participants' profiles can be seen as a gateway to seeing how the Twitter user introduces the self, showing "who I am" in a semi-static way (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In Figure two, the first notable element was Ph.D. F's bio (No. 1 in the image) and how he introduced himself as a Ph.D. candidate in the first line. Within the profile, the bio can be read as related to his identity, and this prime positioning of "Ph.D. candidate" indicates its significance. There is then further information concerning his interests, which also seem to be related to his Ph.D. identity in referencing his research topic. He also describes himself as an "occasional Twitter-er," implying that he makes only intermittent use of the platform.

Ph.D. F's profile picture (No. 2) shows his face and appears to have been taken in an office or a workplace as he sits on an office chair while engaged in writing. His Twitter header (No. 1) similarly shows various objects related to his work: a notepad, pen, and laptop. The header also includes his name and the link to his personal website. This aligns with the Ph.D. identity he constructs and the objects can be seen as further emphasizing this identity.

Thus, the most significant aspects of Ph.D. F's Twitter profile relate to his Ph.D. identity, which he constructs and emphasizes through several resources, including his bio, the header, and external links to websites (e.g., his LinkedIn profile) and his personal website. It should be

highlighted that this construction of the Ph.D. identity was present in the profiles of all eight participants in this study

Moreover, this identity was the most significant theme in terms of its frequency in the participants' tweets, being a constant presence throughout the observation period. However, the tweets constructed the Ph.D. identity in a different way: It did not appear explicitly as a statement, as in the profiles. Figure three presents an interesting example that illustrates the construction of the Ph.D identity in tweets.



Figure 3. Tweet posted by Ghassan

Ph.D. F's tweet is addressed to a specific audience, explicitly indicated in "To all the PhD folks." He advises his followers to take care of their mental health and well-being, and to remember that there is a life outside their studies. This is an interesting tweet that implies the difficulties and stress Ph.D. students experience. Ph.D. F demonstrates self-awareness and offers relevant advice to his audience of fellow Ph.D. students. The tweet acknowledges that students can become overwhelmed, feel isolated, and forget that there are other activities they can engage in. Emphasizing the need to enjoy life, Ph.D. F's tweet reminds Ph.D. students to overcome their stress by taking care of their well-being.

Ph.D. F addresses his Ph.D. audience in two ways: First, the tweet is directed to "Ph.D. folks," which can be seen as an explicit form of addressivity (Seargeant, Tagg, & Ngampraman, 2012); second, Ph.D. F adds two hashtags—#PhDchat and #PhDlife—which occurred in many of the tweets posted by the research participants during the observation period. This implies a sense of affiliation with these communities, as well as being a way of designating an audience.

Ph.D. G also constructed his Ph.D. identity by showing affiliation and engaging with the #Ph.D. community (see Figure four).



Figure 4. Tweet posted by Ph.D. G

This tweet reveals another challenging situation that Ph.D. G seems to think is common. His use of present tense suggests that it is normal for a Ph.D. student to read many articles, then struggle to write a sentence about what they have read and experience uncertainty. This tweet received 12 likes, mostly from other Ph.D. students, which implies a sense of agreement. The reply from another student also confirms the agreement. Ph.D. G's tweet suggests personal experience—that he has “been there, done that,” to put it informally. Ph.D. G's tweet recognizes such difficulties and seems to be reassuring other students that this might happen, so they should not panic. Furthermore, the Ph.D. identity in this tweet is constructed by showing a sense of association with Ph.D. communities in #PhD\_life.

The hashtag #PhD\_life indicates that Ph.D. G is aware of which sections of society will relate to this tweet, as well as demonstrating his identification with that community. Moreover, the Ph.D. identity Ph.D. G constructs in this tweet reveals the need for strength, resilience, and hard work, while simultaneously retaining a sense of humor. Although such problems can cause pain, this does not mean that Ph.D. students should be ashamed of their struggles; the tweet encourages them to keep going. The Ph.D. identity emerges in the ways Ph.D. G, as a Ph.D. student, can build resilience in response to the challenges he faces himself in pursuing his studies.

The Ph.D. identity in this study appears to have a social value for the participants, which might be one reason for its frequency and forceful presence throughout the observation timeline. During the interviews, it became apparent that being an overseas Ph.D. student was highly regarded in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in a follow-up interview conducted with Ph.D. E in April 2022, he addressed why most Ph.D. students tend to disclose that they are studying for a Ph.D. in their profiles:

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think Saudi Ph.D. students overseas feel that it is important to others on Twitter to know that about them?

Ph.D. E: Yes

Interviewer: Why is it important to know that?

Ph.D. E: They believe that most Saudis are active on Twitter and thus help establish direct links and relationships with other Saudis at home about their Ph.D. journey and specialty

Interviewer: Is it something important (socially speaking) in Saudi Arabia to be a Ph.D. student overseas? What is the importance of that in society?

Ph.D. E: It is not important but appreciated

Interviewer: What do you mean by appreciated?

Ph.D. E: I mean that it (Ph.D. overseas) has its certain appeal (in terms of personality and quality of the person) among many Saudis.

Ph.D. E: In many positive ways.

Interviewer: So, you are saying that people in Saudi Arabia see Ph.D. students overseas in a good way and it is attributed as being a good person?

Ph.D. E: A good person and future leader

(Interview with Ph.D. E, April 2022)

However, the other side of the coin was that the significance of this identity could impose some conditions on behavior. The Ph.D. students seemed to have certain perceptions about how they should conduct their interactions on Twitter. Ph.D. B explained that having to present oneself as highly educated entailed some constraints:

Interviewer: Do you think that the education level can impact the language choices people make on Twitter?

Ph.D. B: Umm I would say the education level could be one of the constraints that could limit your freedom to choose the language you want. It is not appropriate for a Professor to tweet about funny topics. I rarely see that in our culture, although it is common in western culture.

Interviewer: What about English in Saudi is it regarded as a choice of highly educated people?

Ph.D. B: Yes, especially among science academics who study abroad. You will find them speaking in English most of the time during the day.

(Transcript of interview with Ph.D. B, June 2020)

This exchange conveys interesting insights from Ph.D. B about how those who are highly educated (a categorization that can be applied to Ph.D. holders) might be expected to tweet, that is in ways that reflect certain manners. However, Ph.D. B explains that this is only in "our culture," meaning in Saudi Arabia. This suggests that these participants are aware of how to tweet in particular ways to construct their highly educated Ph.D. identity.

The observation notes showed that the Ph.D. was among the topics most tweeted about by the participants, and it was so pervasive that it continued even if they were not in the U.K. or were away from the Ph.D. environment. For example, the following notes concern Ph.D. C, after she posted a tweet about the Ph.D. when she was on a data collection trip in her home city (Riyadh).

Ph.D. C posted one tweet today when she was on a study leave for her Ph.D. for three months to collect data in Saudi Arabia. (Observation note – Ph.D. C, October 2019)

#Riyadh season events

The presence of this hashtag in this tweet about Ph.D. implies that Ph.D. C is so immersed in her Ph.D. work even when she is back home and amid this season she cannot enjoy and take a break. (Observation note – Ph.D. C, October 2019)

These notes show how the Ph.D. identity becomes part of “who I am” and “what I do” for these Ph.D. students. It is something that they cannot detach themselves from. Ph.D. C was in her home city at the time of a significant seasonal festival but she could not enjoy it as she was thinking about and feeling overwhelmed by her Ph.D. work.

Therefore, these examples illustrated how the Ph.D. identity may be constructed in various forms on Twitter, primarily through Twitter profiles and identifying the self as a Ph.D. student, and in tweets and participation in Ph.D. hashtags that imply their sense of membership of the group. Ph.D. identity in this study is a highly significant theme that has social value for the participants.

## Theme 2: Cosmopolitan Identity

In this study, cosmopolitanism emerged as another significant theme relating to how the participants constructed their identities on Twitter. Many scholars, such as Liang and Schartner (2022) and Schartner and Young (2020), have addressed how intercultural competence can enhance communication in internationalized educational contexts. Lewin (2009) explained how studying abroad can be a rich experience, offering a global or cosmopolitan perspective. Similarly, Delanty (2006) contended that cosmopolitanism entails openness and willingness to transform, i.e., being able to embrace or tolerate what is different. This theme emerged in this study in several ways, some of which are reviewed in what follows, beginning with an example tweet from Ph.D. G (Figure five).



Figure 5. Tweet posted by Ph.D. G

In Figure five, Ph.D. G announces his participation in an international conference—the European Respiratory Society (ERS). He starts by using two formulaic fixed expressions, one in English and the other in Spanish: “see you soon” and “hola amigo.” Between these, he adds two hashtags indicating where he can be seen and later uses them for the conference he is shortly to attend.

The fact that the conference is in Spain explains his use of the Spanish greeting “hola amigo” (meaning “hi my friend”). Although this is all he knows of Spanish, this gesture shows a sense of friendliness towards the country he is visiting and the language spoken there. In this tweet, Ph.D. G constructs his identity as a global citizen—an international Saudi Ph.D. student in the

U.K. who is also participating in an international congress in Spain. Tweeting about his participation is an implicit way of showing his sense of membership in international organizations.

In his tweet, Ph.D. G appears to be excited about this event. The conference was organized by an international, mainly European-based, body, whereas Ph.D. G originates from a different, non-European background, leading him to portray the cosmopolitan aspect of his identity as a mark of membership. My observation notes also reflected Ph.D. G's enthusiasm as he posted many tweets from the event:

Over the past three days (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) posted many tweets and replied to many that all have one or both of these hashtags:

#ERS2019 #ERSCongress. He was actively engaging with others who shared the same interest in that conference. (Observation note – Ph.D. G, September 2019)

His use of Spanish in the first tweet was intriguing and led to further questioning, resulting in the following exchange:

Interviewer: Can you talk about this tweet? Why did you mix here and use English and then Spanish?

Ph.D. G: That's funny. I was going to a conference in Spain and wanted to joke about my limited Spanish.

Ph.D. G: Even after coming back from the conference my Spanish didn't change. (Interview with Ph.D. G, June 2020)

In this extract, Ph.D. G describes his use of Spanish as “funny” and wanting “to joke.” Hence, he was being humorous. However, in this context, there is a sense that he was also being friendly, showing an outgoing and funny person stepping out of his comfortable linguistic and physical zone (travelling to Spain) to participate in the event. These all signal his cosmopolitan identity. Moreover, in a follow-up interview, he explained how the experience of studying abroad made him more open, or as he put it, “easy going”:

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about how you see the Ph.D. experience (abroad in the U.K.)?

Ph.D. G: I have received my Master's from the U.S. and getting a Ph.D. from the U.K. allowed me to live a different experience, specifically with differences in education and health care systems. For example, in the U.S., higher education requires students to attend regular courses and submit assignments, while in the U.K. it is more self-paced and self-learning. I was able to attend any training session I want. I am in health care but I have attended sessions related to phone applications for example. The healthcare system in the U.K. is very cost-effective and it is based on equal care for everyone, which fits very nicely with the governmental healthcare system in Saudi Arabia.

Ph.D. G: In addition to the mentioned above, my supervisor taught me many lessons in attitude and respect for others. He is very kind and always keen to help. I had extreme difficulties and he was always supportive and kind and helpful. This reflected on me deeply and now I am trying to be as good as he was with my students. Show passion and love to

my students and support them and help them learn better. Allowing open and easy communication with them.

Ph.D. G: I hope that wasn't too long. Happy to rewrite a shorter answer.

Interviewer: Not at all! Do you think this experience has changed you?

Ph.D. G: It did! Not only in knowledge and experience but more toward being easygoing with others and trying to be simple and humble.

(Follow-up interview with Ph.D. G, October 2022)

This exchange is engaging in what it reveals about how the whole experience of studying abroad can expand both the global and knowledge horizons of international sojourners like Ph.D. G. He gave a detailed response about what he had learnt studying in the U.S. and the U.K., being able to see and experience different educational systems, and find out more about the health systems (his field). He described how his experience had changed him, making him more open and better able to communicate and engage with others. This articulation of the change he underwent and the cosmopolitan identity that grew out of the study abroad experience aligns with Delanty (2006) in terms of the cosmopolitan perspective, and also Lemke (2008) concerning the constantly changing nature of identity. Ph.D. G's experiencing of studying abroad enhanced his global citizenship. In addition, these tweets reflect that Ph.D. G constructed a cosmopolitan identity in different ways, including switching to other languages, traveling, and participating in international conferences.

The cosmopolitan identity also emerged through the open attitudes participants showed toward adopting new ways of living and thinking. This is illustrated by Ph.D. B's tweet in Figure six.

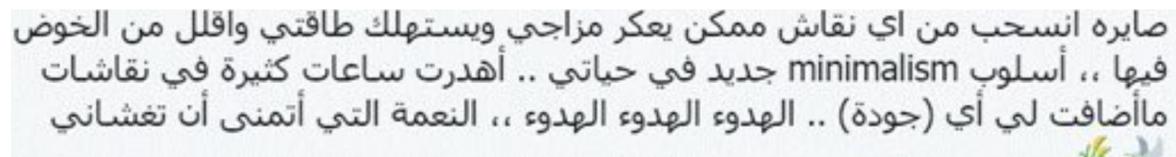


Figure 6. Tweet posted by Ph.D. B

*Translation: I have started withdrawing from any discussion that can upset my mood and use my energy and avoid them. This style of minimalism is new in my life. I wasted many hours in discussions that did not add any (quality) to me. Calmness, calmness, calmness, the blessing I wish I could be enveloped by*

This tweet reveals an approach recently adopted by Ph.D. B to deal with several issues, including wasting time on fruitless arguments. The term “minimalism” is distinctive in several ways, including that it is the only English word employed and represents an approach that has not appeared in Arabic culture until recently. The term in Arabic, “Zohd,” implies simplicity and humbleness. Minimalism (“less is more”) first appeared during the 1950s, primarily to describe sculpture, and was subsequently developed and adapted by many other fields. This tweet was intriguing and in a follow-up interview, Ph.D. B shed light on her perceptions and how she came to be familiar with the concept:

Interviewer: One more question for you: I'm just curious to know when you learnt about and started practicing minimalism?

Ph.D. B: I would say maybe after one year of my Ph.D. journey. I was in a workshop on time management and the presenter mentioned quality time and how to minimize any kind of distraction that can impact your productivity or cause more stress. I started to minimize any discussion I considered irrelevant. It was the right decision. I also cleaned my house and removed any extra things that I didn't need. Kind of a minimalism house.

Interviewer: Was this the first time you had learnt about it?

Ph.D. B: Not really. I was familiar with the term, as I had watched a documentary on Netflix. There it was explained in contexts such as home decor and clothes style. However, I learned about applying minimalism in other contexts, such as time management, after the first year of my Ph.D., as I said before. I started practicing the concept during my Ph.D. journey as well.

Interviewer: Do you think it is a common or well-known concept in Saudi Arabia?

Ph.D. B: I don't think it is a common concept in Saudi Arabia. It is somehow known among the new generation since they are more open to new Western concepts and can adopt new lifestyles.

(Interview with Ph.D. B, May 2022)

This extract indicates that Ph.D. B found she could apply this concept to her Ph.D. studies in the first year, having previously only been aware of it in connection with home décor. Ph.D. B then started to practice it in her daily life. However, the concept remains comparatively unknown in Saudi Arabia, as noted by Ph.D. B, except among the younger generation. This is significant, as it implies that Nora is a member of this new generation, with the ability to absorb Western concepts. Thus, her adoption of minimalism as a lifestyle demonstrates openness toward different ideas and views, as well as the ability to tolerate change.

Thus, the participants depicted their cosmopolitanism in many ways, but it was clear through these examples that the cosmopolitan identity involved having the ability to accept and adapt to change.

### ***Theme Three: Saudi Identity***

During the observation of interaction on Twitter—and particularly in the week commencing September 23—several participants posted tweets about Saudi National Day. The observation notes at that time revealed that most of the tweets this week, especially those posted on September 23 and 24, were about Saudi Arabia. As an insider (Saudi), the researcher was aware that this was a public holiday, memorializing the country's unification and the royal decree changing the name of the country from the Kingdoms of Hijaz and Najad to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia proclaimed by the former king, Abdulaziz Al Saud. This is known in Arabic as “alyoom alwatani,” meaning “National Day.” A representative example of the tweets observed at this time is one posted by Ph.D. B (see profile in Figure seven and tweet in Figure eight).



Figure 7. Ph.D. B's Twitter profile



Figure 8. Tweet posted by Ph.D. B

*Translation: I would give my soul and everything I own for it (green heart emoticon), who else would I love other than my beloved country (green heart and Saudi Arabian flag)*

First, Ph.D. B's Twitter profile was distinct from those of other participants, showing three members of the Saudi royal family in the header (background), with the former king, Abdulaziz Al Saud, in the middle and higher than the other figures. She seems to intend this to reflect her national identity and it differs from most other profiles, which show landscapes or personal pictures (e.g., Figure two). The header is part of how the participants construct their identities and Ph.D. B shows her strong national identity through the images of the royal family and the inclusion of the Saudi flag. Moreover, she puts a green heart beside the country flag in her bio. These are all multimodal resources she employs to construct who she is and how she feels about her country.

Looking at her tweet concerning the Saudi National Day (see Figure eight), Ph.D. B posts part of a national (Arabic) song filled with emotions of love and devotion towards Saudi Arabia (see translation), again adding a green heart and the Saudi flag. Indeed, the green heart appears twice (in the middle and at the end before the Saudi flag), in the same order as in her bio. Such non-linguistic resources play a significant role in showing her feelings of love for her country. In addition, they emphasize and help construct her Saudi national identity. Hence, Ph.D. B's Twitter profile and tweet align with each other and construct her identity as a Saudi-loving national. The tweet location shows it was posted while she was in Coventry (U.K.). Thus, her sense of belonging does not change even when away from her home country. The linguistic resources used in the tweet are also worth noting. The tweet is in Arabic (Fusha classic), aligned with the official language in Saudi Arabia, and could be an unmarked way of constructing national identity.

Choosing the song to reflect her feelings suggests an emotional sense beyond this identity (see translation in Figure eight).

It was notable that the participants posted about celebrating National Day while they were in the U.K., these posts being a significant aspect of their Twitter feeds at this time. Some attended National Day celebrations organized by the Saudi communities where they lived. Examples of this can be seen in Figures nine and ten, suggesting that the participants wanted to highlight the importance of this national occasion for them.



Figure 9. Tweet posted by Ph.D. D



Figure 10. Tweet posted by Ph.D. E

The two tweets pertain to two participants (Ph.D. D and Ph.D. E) and were both posted on the same day. Ph.D. D posted from where she was studying, in Belfast, whereas Ph.D. E seemed to be in Edinburgh preparing to fly to London to celebrate the National Day at the Saudi Embassy.

These examples demonstrate the participants' strong sense of belonging to their home country. Their Saudi national identity was constructed in various forms, including the use of non-linguistic cues such as the national flag and the green heart. Their language was also a powerful resource that expressed their strong sense of affiliation, for example, "our national day." Thus, their Saudi identity is part of how they view themselves; it is an identity that brings unification as part of a social group.

#### ***Theme Four: Muslim Identity***

Being Muslim was the fourth significant theme that emerged during the observation. Time played a strong part in how and when this identity was constructed. For example, tweets before Ramadan differed from those posted near the end of Ramadan in terms of word choice and order. Before discussing this theme and how and why the participants constructed it in these ways, we

should revisit the role of religion for this group (Saudi Arabians). Religion plays a significant role in the culture and background of Saudi Arabia. For Muslims worldwide, their religion is a sacred subject and a system of beliefs.

The participants in this study constructed their Muslim identity at marked times (during religious festivals), reflecting the importance of their religion in their lives even when away from home in a different and multi-denominational country. In addition, they did so in particular and noticeably similar ways, showing that they were aware of how this identity could be constructed and seeming to adhere to certain norms and practices. When discussing religion in this context, it is important to note that it is intertwined with the cultural background of these participants; Islam and Islamic laws are at the core of how Saudi Arabia defines its law and culture. Saudi Arabia is the homeland of Mecca and Madinah, the two most holy cities for Muslims worldwide. Hence, the researcher agrees with Rodrigues and Harding (2009) that religion may be part and parcel of how one gains a greater understanding of a given society, in this study Saudi students in the U.K.

This theme of Muslim identity appeared at marked times but not throughout the observation, as were other themes such as the Ph.D. identity. In addition, it was notable how language, predominantly classical Fusha Arabic, was utilized as the primary linguistic resource in the careful construction of that identity, illustrated in Figure eleven.

مبارك عليكم الشهر الفضيل #رمضان\_2019

Translate Tweet

1:48 AM · 06/05/2019 from Glasgow, Scotland ·  
Twitter for iPhone

*Figure 11.* Tweet posted by Ph.D. B

*Translation:* May this holy month be blessed for all #Ramadan\_2019

Ph.D. B's tweet on the first day of Ramadan is in Fusha Arabic, reading "Mubarak alaykom alshahr alfadheel" with a hashtag indicating the year and the month. In the interview with Nora, she discussed this tweet and the use of Arabic:

Interviewer: Do you think the religious occasion here has inclined you to use Arabic?

Ph.D. B: Yes of course.

Interviewer: Why do you think so?

Ph.D. B: Tweeting about religious topics in English is appropriate in my opinion unless you do have Muslim followers who speak English. I would prefer to say it in Arabic to Arabic speakers. It is the greeting that we get used to hearing since years ago.

(Interview with Ph.D. B, June 2020 )

Another informant (Ph.D. A) articulated the same sentiment regarding the use of Fusha Arabic in association with religion:

Interviewer: Does Arabic have cultural values to you?

Ph.D. A: Yes, no doubt.

Interviewer: Why?

Ph.D. A: My mother language. My religion language.

(Interview with Ph.D. A, June 2020)

This exchange reflects the strong association between language and religion, and also implies identity perception. This appears mainly in Ph.D. A's emphasis on Arabic being her mother language (meaning mother tongue), and then she adds quickly "my religion language." The use of "my" here shows a passive stance, the feeling of something that is part of "me" or "myself." This demonstrates how Ph.D. A associates Arabic and religion with each other and considers them both part of her identity.

Ph.D. F also posted a tweet showing that the Muslim identity could be a social identity, evidenced by the language used (see Figure twelve).



Figure 12. Tweet posted by Ph.D. F

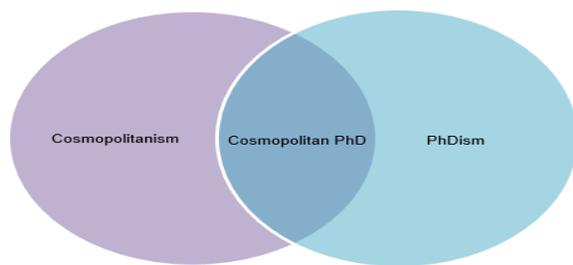
*Translation: May this month be blessed for all and may Allah accept our good deeds*

This tweet, posted by Ph.D. F on the first day of Ramadan, uses a phrase repeated in many tweets posted by the participants at this time, indicating that it is a social and cultural ritual aimed at wishing happiness on this religious occasion. Using Arabic in this ritual is normal practice and thus Arabic was the main resource these participants used in constructing their Muslim identity. There is another noteworthy aspect of this tweet and other similar tweets posted by the participants during this month, which is the image of the lantern. In Arabic, this is called "Fanoos Ramdan" and it is used to decorate homes and streets during the month of fasting. This and the use of Fusha Arabic represent the construction of a social, cultural Muslim identity, in line with Riley's (2007) conceptualization.

### ***Interaction and Interrelation over the Timeline***

The findings of this study reveal another important aspect of the multiplicity of identities, namely that they sometimes overlap with each other, which makes it impossible to establish a dichotomous distinction. For example, being a Ph.D. student and being cosmopolitan intersect in many instances. Thus, it would not be an accurate representation to suggest that the participants constructed either their Ph.D. identity or cosmopolitan identity in isolation. Indeed, it seems that the former involves the latter in many ways, an example being Ph.D. G's tweet (Figure five) about participating in the European conference, in which he presented himself as a member of the community based on his Ph.D. work and the abstract he submitted to take part. Thus, his Ph.D. identity is part of his cosmopolitan identity as it concerns the conference.

This also suggests that going abroad to study, as in the case of these Ph.D. students, could provide opportunities to take part in cosmopolitan events and enhance their Ph.D. and cosmopolitan perspectives. Indeed, this is what Ph.D. G recounted in the interview about his experience of studying abroad. This is in line with the findings of other studies, such as Lewin (2009), ALQahtani and Hezam (2015), Han (2018), and Almuarik (2019), all of which discuss how the sojourners' experience enriches their global background. The interrelation between these aspects of identity is illustrated in Figure thirteen.



*Figure 13.* The interrelation between Ph.D.ism and cosmopolitanism

The international students developed both a Ph.D. and a cosmopolitan identity. Doing a Ph.D. overseas seemed to expand their cosmopolitanism, enabling them to demonstrate openness and self-transformation (Delanty, 2006). This also aligns with the theoretical approach concerning the constant change in identities (Lemke, 2008).

The same can be said for the other two themes: Saudi and Muslim. The exchange with Ph.D. A reflected the strong association between language and religion but also implied perceptions of identity through her emphasis on Arabic being both her mother tongue and the language of religion. Ph.D. A associated Arabic and religion with each other and considered them both part of her social identity. The two themes are not only significant but also marked and timed, appearing at certain points across the observation. In addition, they are related to social and cultural perceptions of the participants' identities.

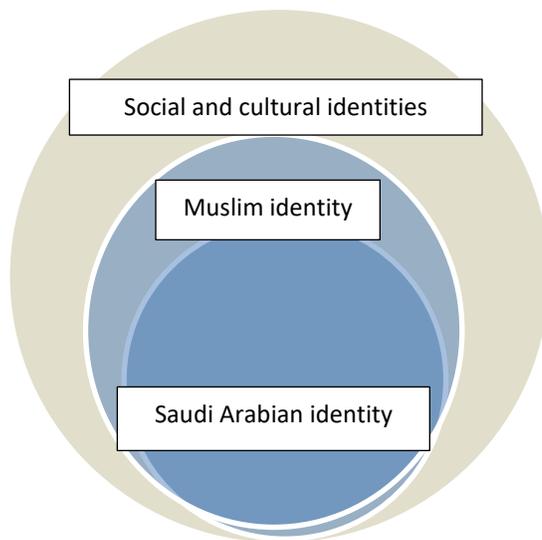
On May 14, 2019—a Tuesday—there was a notification from Twitter that three of the participants had posted about Saudi Arabia. It did not take long to gather from Twitter that there had been Hothi rebel attacks on Saudi oil facilities (see Figure fourteen).



Figure 14. Tweet posted by Ph.D. F

*Translation: Allah, protect our country and our guardians from every evil, Allah, keep our enemies from us as you see fit*

This tweet, posted by Ph.D. F, who was in Newcastle, is representative of others at the time, as found in the observation notes recording notes on similar tweets posted by other participants. He uses Fusha Arabic, asking God (Allah) to protect the country. His feelings of belonging are made clear in his use of “our country” and “our guardians,” referring to the royal family, who appear in the image of the King and the Crown Prince, and behind them, the Saudi flag. The tweet conveys a strong sense of belonging and love for his home country. In addition, it reflects how his religion and prayers play a role in conveying his strong sense of Saudi Arabian and Muslim identity. The Saudi Arabian identity constructed in this tweet is portrayed through a religious tone, which is similar to the construction of the Muslim theme using the “religious genre,” particularly of the Arabic type (Fusha). Moreover, the Saudi Arabian identity is constructed in a similar way as in Theme three, using Arabic, a sense of affiliation through pronouns, and including the national flag and pictures of the royal family. The link between the two themes—Saudi national and Muslim identity—is apparent. Being Saudi is part of being Muslim, the Saudi Arabian flag is a symbol of believing in God (Allah) as it carries the Islamic shahada (there is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the prophet of God [Allah]). The intersection is broadly inclusive, as presented in Figure fifteen.



*Figure 15.* Links between themes

Unlike the link between Themes one and two, which meet at an intersection, these two themes seem rooted together and linked to social and cultural perceptions of identity. This supports the argument made by Lemke (2008) that identity can be complex, multiple, or indeed multiplex. For this reason, examining the concept of identity on social media can be challenging and requires a flexible, open approach. In this regard, Lemke (2008) potentially offers a way of operationalizing such qualities in dealing with identity.

To sum up, the findings of this study revealed four main themes reflecting the identities this group of Saudi Ph.D. sojourners constructed. The Ph.D. identity was the most significant in terms of representation throughout the data. Another theme was the cosmopolitan identity, which sometimes intersected with the Ph.D. theme. The participants also constructed identities that reflected their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, namely Saudi and Muslim.

### **Discussion**

This section revisits the findings with reference to the research questions. Concerning the first, which addressed the identities Saudi Ph.D. sojourners in the U.K. constructed in Twitter profiles and tweets, the study identified four main identities: the Ph.D. identity, the cosmopolitan identity, the Saudi identity, and the Muslim identity. In response to the second research question, regarding how the students constructed these identities, the study revealed a range of resources, most prominently language choice and Twitter hashtags. Finally, concerning the third question, time played an important part in the construction of certain identities, such as the Muslim identity linked to religious festivals.

The data revealed that the participants constructed their Ph.D. and cosmopolitan identities throughout the observation period, unlike the Muslim and Saudi Arabian identities. These were time-constrained, constructed at certain times during the observation. The construction of these themes of identities took various forms. The “Ph.D. identity” was most prevalent in terms of its

frequency and strong presence in the data throughout the observation and interview periods. For example, the participants highlighted this identity in their Twitter profiles, constructing it dynamically through various practices but mainly through Ph.D. hashtags in tweets. Indeed, these hashtags played a significant role in constructing the Ph.D. identity. The profiles presented the Ph.D. identity as part of who the participants were in a semi-static form, while in the tweets this identity was more dynamic, showing “what I do as a Ph.D. student.” Hence, it can be argued that the Ph.D. identity moves towards the practice of Ph.D.ism. These findings align with Almuarik's (2019) contention that studying for a Ph.D. in the U.K. can be perceived as having both cultural and social capital.

The participants and society viewed being an international Ph.D. student in the U.K. as something of social value that gave the students a sense of power. The status of international students and the association with being highly educated, can be seen as a form of capital in line with Bourdieu (2011). The Twitter profiles, for example, presented an explicit portrayal of capital, using the Ph.D. as a title in the bio to introduce the self (see Figure two). This identity was also constructed implicitly as a form of capital through their tweets about Ph.D. life in general and what Ph.D. students encounter, as well as Faisal's accounts that Saudi Ph.D. students are regarded socially as having the potential to be “a good person and future leader.” Moreover, it is important to recognize how the participants constructed this capital through a system of practices, namely tweets and Ph.D. hashtags, representing idioms of practice, in line with Gershon (2010).

The cosmopolitan identity, which comprised the second significant theme, was constructed in different forms, including being global and open-minded, consistent with Delanty's (2006) notion of cosmopolitanism. According to this view, cosmopolitanism is not only about adaptation to other cultures but also involves a transformation of the self that paves the way for new cultural forms. This can be seen in the way Nora portrayed her ability to accept and indeed embrace a different lifestyle and way of thinking. It was also borne out in the interview, in which she described her shift towards minimalism, stating that the ability to learn and adapt to new and different experiences was due to her doctoral studies. In contrast, Mohammad thought that the study abroad experience had changed him for the better by making him more “easygoing.” Thus, it is challenging to provide a single definition that encompasses the cosmopolitan identity and the researcher concurs with Lemke (2008) that identity is a highly complex concept. The participants in this study constructed their cosmopolitan identity in many forms. In this vein, Urry (2012) maintained that cosmopolitanism naturally results from being abroad or traveling extensively.

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis was the Saudi identity, marked at certain times, such as Saudi National Day. The construction of this identity seemed unique, given how the participants used English in its construction. This is in contrast to the notion of “one language, one nation” and argues against the view that it is language (Arabic in this case) that conveys the sense of nation and national identity (Suleiman, 2019). This study shows that national identity can be conveyed through other languages, including English. Therefore, the theme of

Saudi Arabian identity is somewhat fluid linguistically, as the participants did not seem to subscribe to a particular language ideology.

Being Saudi Arabian was part of the participants' social and cultural identity. This appeared in different data, including their Twitter profiles, for example. The male participants in this study constructed this identity through their profile images, in which they appeared wearing the Saudi male dress. The study established that the participants constructed their Saudi identity in various ways that conveyed many ideas about how they viewed this identity. Again, this is in line with Lemke's (2008) view of identity as complex and not fixed. The participants supported this view through the many ways in which they depicted the various meanings they attached to this identity. The different examples in the data also show the importance they attached to the Saudi National Day. The tweets contain emotional expressions of belonging and love and express the significance of this theme. Despite being in a different country, this was an occasion for signifying their bond with home. Moreover, this identity was social in terms of how they established it through a sense of membership in a group and having an emotional attachment to that group or named country. The participants constructed this theme as a social identity based on who they were and their homeland.

Being Muslim was the fourth significant theme that emerged during the observation, mostly at marked times in the Islamic calendar. Time played a considerable part in how and when they constructed this identity. It is essential to consider the role that religion plays in the culture and background of Saudi Arabia. The interviews with Nora and Bushra highlight that Fusha Arabic is perceived as the main resource associated with their religion (Islam). Indeed, Nora reported the choice to use Arabic when tweeting or discussing Islam was something rooted in their culture; using another language would be "inappropriate" when tweeting about Islamic-related topics. These examples demonstrate that there is no set line between what is perceived to be part of culture and religion for these participants.

Moreover, Arabic has a spiritual value for Muslims, as found by Alsaawi (2017) in a study of imams' language practices in Jumaa (weekly sermons) in different U.K. mosques. The imams and Jumaa attendees were from different linguistic backgrounds, including English. The study concluded that Arabic has a forceful function and is described as "spiritual," even by non-Arabic speakers, as it is the language of the holy Quran. Therefore, it can be argued that the use of Arabic in Islamic discourse may be a taken-for-granted practice, in line with the construction of the Muslim identity not only for these participants but also for most Muslims. Many studies have highlighted the complex relationship and interplay between language and religion. Fishman (1966), for example, discussed how Islam reserves a single language for religious practices and as noted by Spolsky (2003, p. 84), "Islam is basically and strictly associated with Classical Arabic."

The participants not only constructed the Muslim identity in Classical Arabic but also to a great extent using the same formulaic phrases. The tweets are all clear examples showing the participants follow certain protocols: They know what, how, and when they should say or tweet using formulaic phrases at certain times. This study thus adds to the existing literature showing

that the Muslim identity can be constructed in virtual environments such as Twitter with and through diligent adherence to certain linguistic practices, mainly using Classical Arabic in relation to religious festivals. Another important aspect concerns the remarkable similarities in the construction of this identity, which suggests that the Muslim identity in this study is a practice of social identity. Riley (2007) is among those who argue that language can play a significant part in the construction of social identity. In this study, the participants manifested their Muslim social identity through Classical Arabic as a strong pillar that supported them in their tweets.

The participants construed their Muslim social identities as something rooted in “we” as a group. This is exemplified in the interview with Nora in which she explicitly considered her Muslim identity and her use of Arabic as something “we get used to.” The “we” here either references herself and other Saudis or herself and the researcher (in the interview) as Saudis. In either case, it is clear that she perceives it as something that is shared and that was part of her upbringing. Hence, the Muslim identity can again be an identity that presents both the cultural and social backgrounds of these participants; these practices might not be observed among other social groups, especially those related to what precisely should be said at certain times, such as Eid and Ramadan. In this vein, the findings agree with Jenks' (2005) perspective concerning the co-existence of the cultural and the social.

The theme of Muslim identity was manifested through particular and fixed linguistic practices, indicating the influence of a social and cultural system to which the participants adhered. This also means that the Muslim identity tends to be semi-static. Thus, it is crucial to examine how individuals use Twitter and for what – how they tweet and what they tweet – in addition to scrutinizing different aspects of their Twitter profiles when examining any aspect of their identities on Twitter. The study established that this would give a holistic and clear view and would certainly enrich the understanding of how identities can be constructed on Twitter. The relationships between the themes and how they could sometimes co-exist in what looked like mutually inclusive relationships lead to the conclusion that identity is not only complex but also multiplex, concurring with the theory of identity proposed by Lemke (2008), which offers a flexible and open approach to dealing with identity in different contexts, including the online environment, as in this study.

However, as in all studies, this has its limitations. First, the findings are not generalizable to all Saudi or international Ph.D. students abroad. This study targeted a small number of Ph.D. students in the U.K., and other overseas students in other countries might provide different insights based on new empirical data. Another limitation that might apply to all studies conducted on social media is that the platforms keep changing and adding new features. For example, late in 2020, Twitter enabled its users to tweet voice recordings lasting 120 seconds. The observation of Twitter in this study lasted eight months and concluded before this feature was added and thus it was not necessary to deal with this issue. Researchers examining social media, such as Twitter, might wish to consider unexpected changes before embarking on their research, as it might entail undertaking multi-modal analysis of texts, emojis, voice recordings, and videos. While it is possible to analyze

Twitter data and interviews through software, such as CAQDAS or NVivo, the latter has issues with Arabic script.

## Conclusion

This study focused on providing an in-depth perspective concerning identity construction by exploring the multiple realities of the insiders (the participants and the researcher). The study employed an online ethnographic approach to address three main research questions. The study provides empirical data and detailed descriptions that can add to the understanding of how sojourners, here Ph.D. Saudi students, construct their identities around four main themes: Ph.D., cosmopolitan, Saudi Arabian, and Muslim. The study contributes to existing online ethnographic research in social media. Finally, Twitter can be a rich field for further studies examining identity construction.

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