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# Cultural Identity and the Challenges International Students Encounter

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**Cultural Identity and the Challenges International  
Students Encounter**

by

Zeynab Jibreel

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

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English: Teaching English as a Second Language

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### **Abstract**

Each year, international students make the decision to go on a journey of studying abroad and many of them choose the United States as their second home. Generally, international students decide to study aboard in the hope to gain experience, learn new cultures as well as their great passion for travelling. While they are pursuing their graduate and postgraduate education in the United States, international students encounter numerous issues in both social and academic settings. Despite the fact that there is diversity in the United States, international students still face issues such as language barrier, culture shock and different types of stress caused by homesickness.

This study examines the hardships as well as cultural and identity challenges that international students encounter during their stay in the United States. The sample consisted of ten students, from ten different countries who are studying abroad in a university located in the Midwest. The researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews that lasted around an hour for each participant. The interviews were audio recorded where it was then made into narrative form, with direct quotations in some cases.

In this study, the participants shared stories about the difficulties they have been challenged with such as cultural misunderstanding, academic achievement, social acceptance, identity confusion and other societal pressures and expectations. International students encountered various problems in both their academic and social life. The findings also include information, which will better serve educators, parents as well as both local and international students.

**Keywords:** International students, host culture, cultural identity, identity crisis, third culture kids.

*This thesis is dedicated to my loving family, my inspiring professors and my uplifting friends.*

*Thank you for your endless support, love and encouragement.*

*You are truly people I will never forget.*

*Zeynab Jibreel*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction and Problem Statement**

Many international students are living in the United States in order to gain an education. Most of these students left their families back in their countries hence they face great challenges all on their own in a new country. Most international students struggle in the process of adapting to a new culture, learning a new language and understanding a new way of life so it will not be a surprise that most of them encounter countless difficulties. It takes hard work to succeed and overcome the challenges of living in different countries. Since each human being identifies his or herself with a particular group, it is important to understand the values and norms of other cultures in order for ours to be understood as well. Most would say that no human being should give up their culture, but rather should be open-minded. This is crucial if people are to acknowledge one another and establish common ground. Nonetheless, the issue that I would like to further examine is the hardships international students experience in the process of cultural and transformation and identity crisis that arise during the transition.

I conducted a study that mainly focused on 10 international students ages 18-45. This study examined the life of the international students by identifying their needs and the factors that influence their cultural transition in the U.S. The study also assesses if any of these individuals have experienced “identity crisis” which is when one becomes confused about their identity and does not know who they identify with. An individual might experience identity crisis in the process of cultural transformation, when they are making a transition from one culture to another. Thus, if they are caught up in between two cultures, one that they

have previously practiced and another culture that is practiced in the country they either live in or have lived in previously, they end up getting lost in the middle of these two cultures and often do not fit into either.

At the time that international students come to United States, they realize that they need to find ways to assimilate into the new culture. However, for many, this process becomes almost impossible in the beginning. In most cases, language barrier, cultural shock, as well as the stress caused by homesickness affects the way they perceive things. As you can imagine, it's hard to get into the mindset of living somewhere else other than where you call home. Everything appears to be foreign to international students when they first arrive in the United States. For instance, the way people communicate with one another here is not the same as the way they did in their countries. As you may know, in many countries, the way others speak to their elders is much different than the way people talk to seniors in the United States. In the U.S, it is perfectly normal to refer to elders as "Sir, Miss, and Mrs," but for someone who comes from a collectivist culture, their elders are more like their fathers and mothers and they are therefore are obligated to honor them and give much more respect. Unfortunately, when international students land in their new destination, everything, from the way they spoke and behaved with elders, teachers, classmates becomes useless to them.

As soon as international students start classes on campus, it becomes tremendously difficult for them to interact with others due to language barriers. Many often find it difficult to communicate with their fellow classmates, instructors and administrators. Others are extremely shy and uncomfortable speaking in English due to their accent. This prevents them from completing many of their daily accomplishments. It becomes challenging for them to

make friends, comprehend lectures and participate in the classrooms where the cultural dynamic is very different. They also struggle with reaching out to others as they endure hardships in their new home. Asking for help does not come easily for international students due to the fact they do not have the ability to express their needs and troubles to others because of the language barrier. Language is the key to our basic communication and it allows us to help and learn from one another so when these individuals are unable to share their experiences and express their needs, they feel trapped in their minds due to lack of expression of their thoughts.

Therefore, they are compelled to adopt these changes. In the beginning, international students go through an exciting and refreshing stage, they then become overwhelmed, concerned and frightened by the new environment, while some would rather go back home right away than to try to adjust to the host culture. Indeed, it is a challenging to change your way of life, the values, traditions you dearly valued and to easily embrace a new way of life. Due to these troubles, it is common for international students to have a tough time adjusting to host culture because it truly differs from what they have identified with all their lives. In some cases, what is acceptable in their culture might be unusual and strange in the host culture. This creates anxiety in the hearts of international students because they are constantly conscious about their surroundings. During this time, miscommunication is very likely to take place and often times; it is a burden for international students as they try to be the respectful and tolerant ones since they are the outsiders. For some, they would not prefer to be identified and referred to as an outsider as they are trying very hard to understand the new culture.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

For many, culture is challenging to understand and cultural transformation is an even more difficult task because during this process of cultural transformation, misunderstandings may occur. Also, some of the misconceptions that others have about certain cultures could also be the root of the misunderstanding. Each student identifies with a particular group, usually race, religion or social class. This means educators must understand that identity shapes their students' lives in certain ways. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how much cultural identity influences the education of students. It has always been a challenge for educators to fully comprehend the cultural identities of students as Kubota and Lin (2009) examine race, culture, language and the importance of identity in education fields in one of their work which is entitled: "Race, culture and identities in second language education". Kubota and Lin's work demonstrates how challenging it is for educators to comprehend their students' cultural identities. I will mention some of the causes of misunderstandings between educators and students as well as the problems concerning identity in schools.

No matter the country people travel to, discomfort, loneliness, frustration and dissatisfaction may occur when one lives in a country other than their own. According to Young-Chul (1996) "Suffering from all the psychological feelings and struggling with cross-cultural adjustment, expatriates may fail to fulfill their tasks and, depending on individual personality factors, become depressed". This article is useful for my topic because it emphasizes the difficulties individuals who live in countries other than their own encounter. So, what might be the outcome from of these psychological experiences? How do international students manage to adopt a new culture? Since these students are spending a

significant part of their life here in the United States, are they also forming their own identity during these years of their life? As a result, will international students become caught up in a “dual identity”? Or what we know today as “identity crisis”? We hope to find answers to these critical questions as we proceed with this research.

We acknowledge the fact that individuals have their own definitions of the term identity crisis, however, I will use Erik Erikson’s (1994) definition, which according to him, “is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself”.

Coming to a new culture can be very distressing which can harm an individual’s mental health due to the cultural shock. Research also suggests international students are even more vulnerable individuals than others. For example, a study done to investigate “a hypothesized cognitive behavioral fear of crime model” indicates that international students are in fact at risk of facing various issues within our society. The study states the following: “Drawing upon Culture Shock Theory, this study proposes that international students are a vulnerable group, showing elevated levels of fear of crime, perceived risk, and avoidance behaviors (Xiong & Smyrnios, 2013).

Even though we can infer that international students are simply frightened and scared of this new environment, those who took the survey and were interviewed also feel like outsiders according to the same study:

Results show that young and female international students express significantly higher levels of fear of crime than their older and male counterparts. International students, who report high levels of social disorder and feel as an outsider or that it is difficult to make friends, express elevated perceived risk and fear of crime. Direct victimization, perceived cultural distance, and host attitudes influence fear of crime and avoidance behavior indirectly via perceived risk. Intriguingly, international students’ perceived prejudice by local residents is a non-significant predictor of perceived risk and fear of crime. Findings suggest the importance of social integration, social disorder, cultural

differences, and attitudes of locals when it comes to international students' perceived risk and fear of crime. (Xiong & Smyrnios, 2013)

The discomfort caused by cultural differences might not always be noticeable among international students as well as immigrants that reside in other countries but what do these individuals do in order to adjust and understand these cultural, identity, and religious differences? Do they leave one culture in order to fit into another or do they manage to settle between the two? Research done by Husom (2009) explores the lives of immigrants and their struggles in the new country. This work by Husom respectfully titled 'Raising Muslim adolescents: Somali parents perceived challenges in raising their children in the public schools,' informs us about how some react to the difference:

African Muslim immigrants and refugees, because of their ethnic and religious identities, experience negative reactions in their host societies. In fact, Muslims from Africa seem to be discriminated against more than other Muslim groups because of their darker skin and stricter dress codes. In turn, some Somali students feel like outsiders and participate in acts of resistance toward not being accepted. Some of them even disown their own community and culture in an attempt to be accepted, only to meet indifference or disdain from the other students. (Husom, 2009)

Interestingly enough, even though international students and immigrant students are two different populations, their experience similar difficulties. Thus, when this feeling of "identity crisis" occurs, which, according to a psychologist (Erikson, 1994) is the failure to achieve ego identity during adolescence, it is human nature that some would leave and disconnect themselves as what they see the root of the problem. On the other hand, parents are not satisfied with this behavioral change. Oftentimes elders feel as though they cannot relate to their children anymore. Therefore, the youth feel as though they will always be perceived as "outsiders" in both cultures. They don't fit into American culture because of their cultural backgrounds, that is, being an American, you will have to one way or the other celebrate some

of the holidays in this country, yet, when many of the newcomers, especially the youth do not celebrate these holidays due to either their limited understanding of the host culture or respect that they have for their own culture then they are again seen as “foreigners”.

Therefore, to many the feeling of “foreignness” is simply the reaction to living in a new culture or culture shock which Marx (1999) defines as “the experience of foreignness”, However, Furnham and Bochner (1982) explain culture shock as “the shock of the new.”

They list six features of culture shock:

1. Strain due to the effort required to make the necessary psychological adaptations.
2. A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession, and possessions.
3. Being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture.
4. Confusion in role, role expectation, values, feelings and self-identity.
5. Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation when becoming aware of cultural differences.
6. Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment. (Furnham & Bochner, 1982)

These are very significant points of culture shock and most of these points have literature addressing them. Needless to say, international students constantly encounter misunderstandings and experience confusion caused by ethnic identity and cultural differences. Many pieces of literature discuss these misinterpretations, particularly the misunderstanding that happens between international students and western teachers. The article (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), states, “difficulties arise for many minority and international adult learners when they attempt to negotiate learning environments that have been constructed within an ethnic base of values, behaviors, beliefs, and ways of doing things that is different from their own”. Also, another article, written by three M.A. TESOL graduates in a university located in the Midwest, interviewed Somalis who recently moved to

the country. The following is what one adult stated concerning the issue of teacher/student role, referring to young Somali learners that,

They understand the respect that is bestowed upon the teacher. Confusion arises, however, when American teachers do not maintain their teacher/student boundaries that are expected in Somali culture and other non-western cultures. In order to preserve the position of deference a teacher receives from students, the two can never become friends. This would change the dynamic and make them of equal status. (Ali, Bzdok, & Rausch, n.d.)

It is understandable that students might misunderstand the teacher if he or she leans towards having a friendship relationship with them even though one can keep their professionalism and also still can be friends with their students within those boundaries. However, these three graduate students interviewed individuals and highlighted important points that need attention such as how some students have felt isolated, different and lonely in the school environment. A remarkable article entitled, “the socialized identities of Asian student”, by Kubota and Lin (2009), tells the story of Stacy, a young Asian immigrant, and how she felt when she first went to an American School. She explains, “I was a state of happiness, but within the first week, I have realized I didn’t have any friends” (Kubota & Lin, 2009). This demonstrates how some international students feel isolated while reconstructing their identity. Also, some students start out feeling excited but begin to get lonely and want to reconnect but at times the process isn’t as easy as we might imagine. Individuals who come from other countries will have to adapt to differences. Research indicates that although it is almost impossible to avoid culture shock, it can be reduced in certain situations.

What does this mean for educators? Should educators be making an effort to better understand cultural differences as well as their students? Kubota and Lin (2009), in their book, propose that, “understanding the schooling experiences of these new immigrant groups

has great implications for educators and administrators.” Hence, understanding would be very useful tool for teachers. The answer lies within the fact that mutual understanding of students and teachers helps to create a multicultural learning environment.

The struggle of cultural complications between international students and domestic teachers continues in many universities in the U.S. In some cases, some students are able to strike a balance between their native and new cultures while others do not because comes to view the host culture as a threat. Those who are able to assimilate while still holding onto their culture may still struggle. A young girl named Helen clearly explained how she encountered identity confusion in the book *Race, culture and identities in second language education* (Kubota & Lin, 2009). In the section titled “The Racialized identities of Asian Students,” Helen states, “Having no other Asian students in my school definitely affected how I saw myself. It was hard to hold on to our Asian-ness” (Kubota & Lin, 2009). This statement indicates that international students are often forced to negotiate their identity.

Discrimination is a common problem in many institutions. Due to their misconceptions and misjudgments teachers often unintentionally discriminate against their students. Students’ intelligence and appearance may be judged and their skills and abilities ignored. It is surprising how most educators automatically make assumptions about students, considering them to be irresponsible, drug addicts, violent etc. Also, according to recent literature, international students feel as though some teachers do not reach out to them as they believe these students won’t have a bright future due to language barriers, their appearance or cultural differences.

Though discrimination is everywhere, there are many ways to approach it. Educators should not ignore discrimination when they witness it in schools. Schools should provide a safe and secure environment for all students. Therefore, educators should encourage multicultural education. Again, recent studies put emphasis on how important it is to promote multicultural education in the United States as it is becoming a multicultural society. This will help prevent international students from being misunderstood.

A lot of the international students are caught up in between two cultures, one which they have practiced previously and on the other hand, another culture which is being practiced in the country in they live in, a country in which they consider their own home now. It is worth looking into Chickering's theory of identity development which according to Valentine and Taub (1999 cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) "remains arguably the most well-known, widely used, and comprehensive model available for understanding and describing the psychosocial development of college students." Also, within that model are seven vectors: The seven vectors are:

1. Developing Competence
2. Managing Emotions
3. Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence
4. Developing Mature Personal Relationships
5. Establishing Identity
6. Developing Purpose
7. Developing Integrity. (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998)

Therefore, reflecting on these seven vectors, we infer that many changes such as intellectual and emotional maturity occur. Furthermore, Students become more independent and self-sufficient where they begin to make their own personal goals and rely less on other's opinions. They then move to a stage of developing mature interpersonal relationships where

they are more tolerant with others in both intercultural and interpersonal contexts and accepting differences. Then, with respect to all of those other vectors, establishing identity comes next whereby all of them, such as competence, emotional maturity, autonomy, and good relationships play a role. Though there many students who are inexperienced and without a purpose, they tend to realize that they need a develop a purpose once they reflect on their goals in life. After clarifying their goals and forming an identity, they reach this last vector of developing integrity (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

As many of the international students form their identities, some relate to a culture that is stereotyped against (e.g., African American culture). Research shows that many international students relate to African American culture, which, in the media, is portrayed as all about music, women and generally the “music industry”. Rap and hip-hop music has been linked to oppression. Still international students from diverse backgrounds connect to that kind of music. However, to many, this type of music often represents African Americans culture as the “ghetto lifestyle” or “thug life”. It has been a lifestyle that was in fact held up to the highest standard by Tupac, one of the all-time greatest rappers. Most times, the international youth look up to these rappers who portray “thug life” as standard/everyday culture of African Americans.

Hence, international students encounter issues from both the host culture as well as their own culture and some end up living in two different worlds. This is where the identity crisis plays a big role because they are lost and wondering about who they really fit in with. International students face hardships while trying to balance both cultures on a daily basis. They try to be as American as they can be while dealing with the host culture but they play a

different role to interact with their friends or family who they share similar values and are from also from their country or even at times, they even feel most comfortable with their fellow international students. International students indicated over and over again that there is temptation while trying to stay true to their culture, identity, religion, parents, and peers.

Moreover, some international students feel torn between the two cultures and never knew which one to choose. They can't find a way to balance them by accepting both heritages. In fact, after staying here for some time, international students tend to relate to the host culture more.

The next phase tends to be a slump during which students tire of relating to their new environment on a superficial level and experience "culture shock." After a time they begin to adapt to their host culture and gain a more measured view of how that culture works in relation to their own. (Denney & Eckert, 2010)

However, Hall (1959), conversely wrote "the real job is not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own", hence we become aware of our own culture since we do not usually reflect on how we do things and the way we think an outsider would observe our own culture. Thus, the author presents cultural difference and culture shock as a positive tool, Hall (1959) again summarizes his point of view by stating "The best reason for exposing oneself to foreign ways is to generate a sense of vitality and awareness—an interest in life which can come only when one lives through the shock of contrast and difference".

Despite the fact that international students encounter countless hardships in terms of understanding a new culture and attempting to make an adjustment, studies have indicated regardless of how arduous this process can be, it is adventurous and positive in many ways. Cross-cultural researchers Bhawuk and Brislin mentioned in their article that there are no long-lasting negative results from a cross-culture experience, rather there are many positive

outcomes. Also, Bhawuk and Brislin stated that “to be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures” (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

Thus, it is also important that international students integrate, for instance, according to Furnham and Alibhai (1985) having a group of friends who are your support system is perceived as a significant part in terms of how well international students work with stress. However, international students experience difficulties related to lack of assimilation of American culture and an inability to effectively interact with Americans. A study done by Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998), examined some of the strategies that international students use during the assimilation procedure and as Al-Sharideh and Goe state international students “in the adjustment process is to establish social relationships with other persons with a similar cultural background or nationality and form ethnic communities within the context of the university”. The goal of the international students in this context is to enhance their sense of belonging and reduce loneliness and the distress that accompany it. However, when an international student has not yet formed a great relationship with people of his own ethnic background, personal adjustment is influenced by social relations with the host culture. Furthermore, Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) in the same study, concluded, “The relationship between assimilation of American culture and personal adjustment was found to be conditional on the number of strong ties established with other co-culturals whereas the establishment of strong ties with Americans was found to be independently related to personal adjustment.” Also, the authors indicated that international students who have built strong

social system have a tendency to successfully adjust to college life in their host country compared to those who have not established that social relationship (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998).

The culture, and society we are surrounded by can produce many perspectives regarding an issue that we see in today's society. One of many issues that international students experience is identity and cultural transformation. Many questions arise in regards to the concept of identity and cultural transformation through the influence of the mainstream culture.

For instance, religion is a struggle that international students deal with on a daily basis. Recently, we hear on the media that Islam is a religion that promotes terrorism hence international students who practice this religion are in constant fear and often become apologetic about their religion. According to the article 'Coping with Islamophobia: The effects of religious stigma on Muslim minorities' identity formation' (Kunsta, Tajamala, Samb, & Ulleberga, 2011), this problem has been largely ignored. The article states, "Although the identity formation of ethnic minorities in general has been a frequent topic of research, the effects of religious stigma on the identity formation of Muslims living in societies that are suspicious of Islamic beliefs have been a neglected topic" (Kunsta et al., 2011). However, international students tend to feel as though they are responsible for many of the actions that individuals from their countries have committed. For instance, Saudi Arabia has been perceived as a country in the hands of a dictator, but the majority of the population seems to not have any problems with the government, perhaps it is because they live inside the circle and they are not able to see what the outside world see. Hence, when Saudi students

come to the United States to study, they are being judged for many of things that their country has done.

**Research Question**

1. What are some of the cultural and identity challenges that international students in St. Cloud State University encounter?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In recent years, questions of identity have become extremely significant in many international students' lives. These questions regarding their identity may lead to make identity choices. When international students arrive in a different country, they realize that they are different. Often times, they also feel as though they have to fight and defend their values, goals and identity. In this study, the researcher would like to hear the stories of international students and their journey and experiences in a new country. Even though earlier studies investigated similar topics, yet, additional research is needed to deal with this particular topic hence the researcher believe that the results of this report should be valuable results. These results will be useful for present as well as future international students at St. Cloud State University. The information will also be helpful to the faculty at St. Cloud State University and will enhance their understanding of international students' lives.

#### **Participants**

The participants of my research will be made up of 10 international students at St. Cloud State University. These students can be students who are in the IEC, Coll-ESL or students who are taking regular, non-ESL course at the moment. There will be five females and five males between the ages of 18-45. I will attempt to include five international students who have stayed here in the United States for some time now and five students who have lived in the U.S for the last 1 to 5 years so I can see how time has an effect on their perceptions.

## **Procedures**

First, the ten participants had the chance to read and understand the consent form. Once they sign the form, we proceeded to the interview questions. The first part of the interview was a demographic inquiry, asking for age, gender, home culture, major and how long the respondent had been living and studying abroad. The second part of the interview inquires about the respondents' identity prior to coming to the United States. Respondents were asked to indicate how their identity is different now as compared to when they first arrived here. These questions were open ended questions, storytelling interview style which allowed the participants to share any experiences they desired to share in a storytelling form and the participants can be asked follow-up questions if needed. This gave the participants a chance to reflect on their past identity and what has changed. Questions such as "If you try to recall your past identity, can you remember how you perceived yourself before you came to the U.S?" was asked in order to understand what happened in between the two periods. Finally, the third part of the interview was asking questions about their present identity and how they came to this point. Some of the questions were very direct questions such as those inquiring about the years spent studying in the U.S, family size, etc. Some of the questions also asked about time spent with others such as people from their own cultural background, or foreign students from other countries than their own or even more specifically with local people of the host country. Participants are asked to answer these questions to the best of their knowledge and be as truthful as they can.

## Chapter 4: Interview Results

In this section, the results of the interviews are organized in the order in which participants were interviewed. These participants were from the following countries: Ivory Coast, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Spain, Sri Lanka, China, South Korea, Bulgaria, and Mali. They were also interviewed in that order.

**Ivory Coast.** Akim who took part of this study is 28 years old from Ivory Coast. He is pursuing his degree in International relations. He has been living in the U.S since 2007. He first arrived in Oklahoma and studied English there for the first year. He then moved to Minnesota in 2009 where he continued to further his higher education. This is not the first time that Akim has been away from his country and home culture. Akim has lived in France and Morocco before he arrived in United States. He has 3 brothers and 1 sister. Akim and his family celebrate Christmas together. Prior to arriving in the United States, he identified himself as an Ivorian, which to him meant being generous, hard working and time conscious.

Akim took some time to reflect on his behavior in a family, social and academic setting. He indicated that in his culture, it was an obligation upon the young to visit the old and keep ties with family members. The young have to groom themselves when the elderly are coming to visit, they have to politely welcome the elders and offer drinks to them. The elders normally look very stone-faced and the youth are expected to show respect and be on their best manners. However, in a social setting, Akim's behavior was a complete antithesis of that at home. The social setting was a place for him to be himself. He enjoyed spending time with his friends, he says; "when I am with my friends, I just have to let it go and have fun" (2014, Akim). He and his friends played soccer and video games for fun. When it comes to

the academic setting, Akim did not see himself as a good student. Furthermore, he was seen as the troublemaker who the teacher never forgets to assign a seat in the front area. Akim also mentioned that students addressed teachers with titles such as “sir, miss, mister” and never by their first name because that is perceived as disrespectful.

Akim stated that his parents spoke two different ethnic languages when they lived in the rural area, but as they moved to the big cities where French was the main language, the family began to lose their tribal languages. He stated that he spoke informal French with family and friends, but at school he spoke standard French. In Ivory Coast, the weather is normally warm therefore Akim usually dressed very casual, in a normal day, he would wear pants and a short sleeve shirt. However, in some occasions such as funerals and weddings, Akim dressed a certain way. Most of Akim’s friends were from Ivory Coast however he had some friends from couple of countries from West Africa. In Addition, Akim often took part in some religious activities at the church and the mosque with the intention to please both of his parents due to the fact that his parents were from two different religious backgrounds. However, he did not partake in any academic activities.

Akim always had a deep passion for soccer. He always dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player. Meanwhile, he failed many of his classes in high school because he spent a lot of time playing soccer with his friends after school. “I wanted to be a soccer player, I was really good at soccer, everybody knew me. Then, my dad did not want me to play soccer, he said, ‘if you get injured and sit, you are not going to do anything. So you should go to school so you have a diploma, then you can play soccer’ but he did not think that once you get older you cannot play soccer anymore. “So I got mad at my Dad and I started

doing stupid stuff, I started to fail classes ... I just wanted to play soccer and when I could not play soccer, it's like the whole world went down because I did not know anything else. I wake up in the morning, I play soccer until I go to bed, I did not know anything!" (2014, Akim). As a student, Akim always wanted to follow his dreams and his love for soccer therefore after failing his secondary classes, his parents regarded him as a failure for a long time. He then traveled to Morocco, then France, where he was involved in a bad car accident and lost a very close friend. After a year in France, Akims' family advised him to better his future by putting the broken pieces back together and start a new beginning. His father offered to help him start a new life in the U.S and though Akim was quite surprised with his father's' generosity, he agreed to go along the path in which his father always wanted him to, hence he finally arrived in the United States as an international student. I asked Akim how he perceived himself prior to arriving in the U.S and what his cultural identity was like, without a delay, Akim smiled and said, " I was very social, I liked talking to people. I know people would deceive me but then I did not really understand what it meant because I had family next to me, I was more like a family man and I liked to give a lot, yeah, that is how I was" (2014, Akim). Reflecting upon what his cultural identity was like, Akim had hard time understanding societal expectations and why he was seen a "waste" after failing secondary school. Akim said he was a dreamer and lived in his own "imaginary" world. He concluded the first part of the interview stating the following, "you have to give in order to receive and even if you are not receiving, keep giving" (2014, Akim).

Akim did not have a good experience living here in the U.S. He missed his family, friends and overall his social life. As I inquired about his present behavior in all of those

settings, all he could think of saying was, “here, there is no social life.” (2014, Akim). Akim was also betrayed by people he considered close friends and since he defines himself as a very sensitive person, he was extremely hurt by that; which changed him a lot. Unfortunately, in the following few years Akim stopped making friends, the reason being that he felt as though people use each other here in the U.S and they are not sincere about their friendship. At times, they would make arrangements with you, he mentioned but then they would disappear. In fact, one of the things he could not even understand was how people normally make appointments prior to visiting each other and he continues and says,

and you have to have a purpose for visiting, why are you here!? You can’t just show up and back home, it is very different, I don’t need to make an appointment to visit people, in fact you can stay with them for a week and they are so happy to see you. Here, you go in and they ask you for the reason like ‘oh, what’s going on?’ I was confused for the first time, so shocked! Maybe it’s a culture shock experience. (2014, Akim)

On the other hand, some aspects of the American culture were very easy for Akim to adopt. For instance, dress: Akim stated that he tries to imitate the styles he sees on T.V and when I asked him how that reflects his cultural identity, he said “It does not, not my Ivorian culture, I am adapting to the culture here, I think maybe just dress and behavior but I don’t know, like more westernized” (2014, Akim). For instance, Akim dresses more casual here in the U.S. living in a multicultural society, Akim learned to behave certain ways in certain situations because he witnessed that people here are from all walks of life hence he came to the understanding that there might be certain things that are acceptable in his culture, however, might not be acceptable in someone else’s culture. Understanding the cultural differences was a significant change because Akim stated that he realized he never had to think about cultural differences back in Ivory Coast since people there had similar traditions.

Akim spends a lot of time alone here in the U.S. He does not participate in activities on campus or in the community. One of the main reasons is due to the fact that he cannot be on schedule. He likes to be flexible, and because most people here like to plan things ahead of time, he mentioned that he gave up on that. He stays in his room most of the time and thinks about life.

Lastly, Akim collected his thoughts regarding how he identifies with other international students those who are from the same cultural background as him and others who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. He simply said that he does not share anything with anyone and therefore have nothing in common. He stated that he is an individual and he has philosophies regarding different aspects of life as well as values that he learned from people around the world. He understands that friends and students who are from his own country would assume that he is Ivorian but that's not always the case. He identifies himself as a multicultural individual.

Though Akim described himself as an Ivorian in the beginning of the interview, he latter recognized his identity has been continuously overtime and during his years in the U.S, it drastically changed. Akim described himself as a multinational individual over and over again.

**India.** Arjun is a participant of this study. He is 22 years old who is currently completing his Masters in engineering management. Arjun is from India, hence his native language being Telugu. He has been living in the United States for a year and half and this is his first time travelling abroad. Arjun does not have any siblings; his family consists of three people including his parents. Arjun celebrated many Hindu festivals with his parents such as

Diwali, which he referred to as the festival of lights, Krishna Janmashtami where Hindus celebrate the birthday of one of their favorites, Lord Krishna, as well as Pongal which has astronomical importance because the most important Hindu festivals are scheduled during this period. Arjun mentions that the Hindu calendar is full of festivals, that allows the community to come together and celebrate together more than 40 times a year.

Arjun identified himself as an Indian. He spoke the language, knew the tradition and appreciated the customs. Arjun comes from a very educated family, and due to the education level of his family; he says, influenced the way he behaves with others. He is the only child in his family, and he proudly confesses that growing up, his parents were like his friends. Arjun used to go on long car rides with his father where they would talk about various topics regarding his future. On the other hand, his Mother played a big role in his education. Arjun describes his Mother as a very open minded woman. In a family setting, Arjun would show deference to his parents. They were his best friends. Arjun was taught at an early age how to make basic decisions about his life and later in his high school years, his parents advised him to make the right choices in life.

Arjun's parents impacted many aspects of his life. They influenced the way he spoke and dealt with others. For example he reveals that in Telugu, which is Arjun's native language, there are two ways to address someone. The word "you" in Telugu is "nuvvu" however they also have another word "meeru" which is a little more formal, and indicates respect for elders. He credits his parents for teaching him to use these words. Arjun learned the different words to use while referring to others at a early age. This was due to the respect that is given to the elders and people in his communities. For example, Arjun talked about the

respect that teachers are given in India. He mentioned that in Hinduism, four people are treated as equal to God and these four lucky people are your mother, your father, your teacher and your guest. In India, when the teacher walks into the classroom, students stand up and greet respectfully, similar to when the teacher is walking out of the classroom, students say “Namaskar” which is a traditional greeting where by one brings their palms together before their face and chest while bowing down. Staying on topic, I then asked Arjun to share with me his experience on his first day in a U.S classroom. It was a few minutes to class and Arjun was eagerly waiting to meet his first teacher in the United States. Finally, there was the teacher walking in to the classroom and Arjun swiftly stood up and yelled “Good morning teacher!” The look he received from his classmates was one that he cannot forget until this day. The students quietly laughed as they whispered to each other. It was very strange and difficult to comprehend for his classmates as well as the instructor of the class himself. As it was for him to understand why they hadn’t partaken in this practice.

The majority of Arjun’s friends were Indians. However, his friends from his undergraduates were from different towns and villages in India and although they were Indians, and their culture was similar, they still had different languages, traditions and beliefs. When Arjun started his bachelor's degree, he also met two young men, one from Sri Lanka and one from Nepal. Arjun describes the times they spend together as an incredible time since he also had the opportunity to learn more about their culture. In addition to the cultural festivals Arjun took part in every year, he also participated in many academic activities at school. He enjoyed the company of other people and liked multicultural people. He competed

in creative writing courses where he won twice as well as conferences, which were held at his school.

Furthermore, Arjun had goals and strong ambition of achieving those goals. Arjun's grandfather was a respected individual in the community because he was a chief commissioner and he was a good influence on him. He had continuously advised Arjun to become a respectful citizen of the society. Because of various influences from family members and his community, Arjun feels the need to acquire a PhD degree and dreams of the title "Dr." placed next to his name.

When Arjun first came to the United States, he had a hard time understanding teachers' role in his academic life. He felt that teachers in the U.S have minimal interference in the students' life, in the sense that if a student has an issue they will not reach out to them. In fact, the students have to find the teacher's office hours, make an appointment and discuss the issue then. He finds all of these to be a burden and believes it to be the teachers' responsibility to reach out to his students. Indeed, Arjun grew up having teachers who constantly treated him like their own child and were aware of whatever that was happening in his life. In India, school was Arjun's second home and he also perceived teachers as his second parents therefore, the cultural difference appears to be very confusing for him. As a result, he still struggles with teacher student relationships here in the United States. Arjun believes students perform and care more about their education if teachers are playing an active role in their student's academic life.

Nonetheless, this confusion did not discourage Arjun. He continued to explore the culture and get to know people from the globe. Arjun has friends from China, Bangladesh,

Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Canada, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Vietnam, Europe, as well as Africa. He is astonished and cannot believe that he has diverse friends from every corner of the world. Arjun mentioned he had the opportunity to meet people who are from some of the countries on the border of India who he never had the chance to meet and intermingle with when he was in India. “After coming here, I got to see Vietnamese, I got to see Americans, I got to see Mexicans, I got to see Canadians, I got to see Africans, I got to see Europeans, I mean there are very few Europeans however, I got to see everyone, you know it was like very good opportunity to see people from every culture!” (2014). Arjun continued and said “you know in our university, when there is a Sri Lankan night, I go there, whenever there is a Nepalese night, I go there and when we have Indian night, there are many people from different cultures who come to see what the Indian night is like” (2014). Arjun elaborates on how this benefited him in countless ways. He concluded by indicating his experience regarding making friends and learning new cultures as being a worthwhile experience so far.

In conclusion, although Arjun appreciates learning from different cultures, he is still the most patriotic person you would meet. He is very passionate about informing others about his beliefs, traditions and practices. Arjun considers himself as an ambassador for his country and feels as though he is obligated to educate others about his tradition.

**Saudi Arabia.** Abdullahi is one of the participants of this study. He is a 20-year-old male from Saudi Arabia. Abdullahi belongs to a big family, 3 sisters and 3 brothers. He has been living and studying in the United States for almost 3 years at the time of the interview. Abdullahi’s native language is Arabic and he has been learning English for the past 3 years. Abdullahi was raised in a conservative Muslim household. According to Abdullahi, his family

celebrates two special Islamic holidays. These two holidays are referred to as Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. Eid Al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, which is the month of fasting for Muslims and Eid Al-Adha is referred to as the “festival of Sacrifice” which is celebrated at the end of the pilgrimage in the Islamic calendar. Abdullahi described what these two holidays meant to him and his family members. He described this period as a time when friends, families and relatives gather to enjoy traditional dishes and present various gifts to each other.

The second part of the interview was about Abdullahi’s cultural identity before he arrived in the U.S. These questions asked him about his behavior in a family, social and academic setting as well as his language, attire, activities he participated in and overall how he perceived himself before he came to the United States.

I began by asking Abdullahi how he identified himself before he arrived in the United States and Abdullahi quickly stated that he identified himself as a middle-eastern Arab man and this identity meant everything to him. He later described to me how this identity was made up of his own character and shared values with his own family and social roots. Some of these beliefs and principles that he treasured as part of his identity were his religion, culture and nationality. Abdullahi also mentioned that because he did not grow up around groups with different religions, races, traditions and languages, he often felt strong and proud about his sense of identity.

I wanted to know more about Abdullahi’s behavior in three different settings. These three settings were family, social and academic settings. We begin by discussing how he behaved in a family setting. In detail, he talked about how he grew up learning the rights and

wrongs in his culture at such a young age. Abdullahi described how respectful, obedient and well bred he would carry himself in a family setting. He further explained to me how certain behaviors were seen as disgraceful and wrong within the culture therefore, he was taught to disregard those behaviors and always keep in mind the family's honor. This meant the way he talked, where he sat in the family and how he kept in ties with his relatives all reflected upon the honor of his family.

Despite the immense pressure that emanates from keeping his family code and honor, Abdullahi also elaborated on his social life and how his behavior transitions from the family setting to the social setting. Abdullahi grew up in a society where two different genders did not mix. Consequently, all of his friends were males. Abdullahi talked about how growing up, him and his friends enjoyed many of the things that young boys around the world enjoyed. However, he stated that even as a teen, in social settings, he would always be in the best of his behavior since people knew whose son he was, he would always have to carry the honor of his family. Abdullahi mentioned how often times, he wished he didn't have to carry such a great responsibility on his shoulder at a young age. He spoke about how he would yearn to have his own subgroup which separated him from the older generation, which meant the way he dressed, talked, his language, what he valued, his interest and what kinds of activities he would participate in.

Although, Abdullahi regarded many of these societal expectations as burden, school was a getaway place for him. I inquired more about Abdullahi's behavior in an academic setting and although, Abdullahi seemed a very shy young man, he was still one of the top students in his class. However, in a country like Saudi Arabia, a student does not have to be

talkative in order to be recognized as a good student. In fact, Abdullahi talked about how he was the shy student in class and even when he had a question about the lesson, he would not ask his question in class, in front of his classmates. He elaborated on why he would not, he said, "You know, sometimes, if you have close, close friends in the classroom, they might like make a joke about you" (2014). However, Abdullahi informed me that he enjoyed going to school because he was always the kind of kid who liked school, he jokingly added that he was the type of kid who took pleasure in being smart. He continued and said that his friends never cared about acting brilliant whereas for him behaving like a bright student and showing intelligence was a great deal. He had to demonstrate his intelligence in the language that he uses, how he speaks as well as how he studies his material. Even though, Abdullahi enjoyed speaking standard Arabic and using academic words, he said using the standard Arabic in your everyday conversation sounds a bit strange to Saudis and he would often get a blank stare, especially from his friends. Abdullahi pointed out that the reactions he was getting from friends and family members regarding his language use indeed discouraged him from using academic words because his friends kept telling him that he sounds like a nerd which was associated with being old-fashioned and uptight. Abdullahi told me about one of his uncles who was an inspiration to him. He lived in the U.S and Abdullahi kept in touch with him some years ago. During these years, Abdullahi talked him about education in the U.S and what kinds of fields would be a good suit for him. Abdullahi's uncle was an electrical engineer and Abdullahi says his uncle was leading a good life, thus why he has always wanted to be like him. He talked about how his uncle advised him to come to the United States and

pursue his education here in the U.S. Abdullahi's uncle enlightened Abdullahi about the lifestyle in the U.S and he encouraged him to come to the U.S to further his education.

In addition, Abdullahi indicated that prior to coming to the U.S, he anticipated that he would face some cultural challenges and that if he decided to pursue his education in the U.S, he would have to be ready to change his lifestyle drastically. This leads to my next question, I asked Abdullahi to describe to me how he used to dress before he came to the United States. He informed me that Saudi men wear a traditional dress called the *thobe*. It is an ankle-length, long sleeved, normally white in color although darker colors are worn such as black, brown, etc. in the winter. Abdullahi has informed me that all of his friends used to wear thobe as well and they too were Saudi origins. I asked Abdullahi if he had participated in any cultural, academic or professional activities in Saudi Arabia and he instantly answered no. However, he mentioned that he would've appreciated if there were activities to participate in the community or at school.

Nonetheless, Abdullahi had so many stories to share when I asked him about his cultural identity and how he perceived himself before arriving in the U.S, I was somewhat surprised by his answer. Abdullahi stated that he perceived himself as a man from Saudi Arabia but he has never felt comfortable with the culture itself. As a matter fact, he added that he did not know the exact reason as to why he was not able to fit into the culture but he always found himself trying to learn from other cultures and religions. He said "People see me as a Saudi man however I have some issues with my culture" (2014, Abdullahi).

Now, I told Abdullahi to take a minute to reflect on his cultural identity at the moment and think about all the questions I have asked, however in a present perfect form. For

instance, I asked how his behavior has changed in a family setting, social and academic setting. How does the way he walks, talks or dresses reflect upon his cultural identity? Who are his friends now in the U.S? How do international students identify with him? How do the Saudi students identify him? Does he participate in any academic or cultural activities? Does he believe that his cultural identity impacted him in educational settings or has he encountered any hardships in his academic or social life? And finally if he feels as though he is a full member of any culture, (if any)? Lastly, I asked Abdullahi how he currently sees his cultural identity overall?

Due to the fact that life in U.S is unlike anything in Saudi Arabia, because of the various cultural differences, Abdullahi had his own challenges to face in the U.S. Abdullahi felt guilty at the time of the interview when he informed me that it's very difficult to retain a good, healthy relationship with his family due to many factors that play a role in his situation. Among these circumstances that are putting his family's relationship at risk is Abdullahi's schedule and time difference. Abdullahi talked about how difficult it is to keep in touch with his family because he is extremely busy throughout the day and very tired at night so he is not able to make a phone call to his family. He also mentioned in the interview that this is perceived as shameful due to the fact that in his family tradition and religion he is expected to keep good ties with his immediate family members as well as relatives. But even so, I still asked about his social life here in the U.S and he replied, "I don't have a lot of friends in college because that might affect my higher education" (2014). Abdullahi continued and stated, "In my country, when I walk down the street, I come across people, I used to greet them but here when I say hi to someone, they see me as a foreigner and might not respond to

my greeting” (2014, Abdullahi). I asked him whether he has any other friends outside of school and he said; “I have two older friends who are married, we have similar interests, they like to learn about middle-eastern culture and I like to learn about the American culture” (2014).

On the other hand, I was eager to learn how Abdullahi relates to the rest of the international students. How does he identify with them? What are some of the issues that they are experiencing in their quest to succeed? In summary, Abdullahi stated the following, “They are experiencing similar issues as me. When you go to a new country, you experience new language, culture and when you go back to your country, you have culture shock of your own culture. I myself experience the culture shock and when I went back to my country, everyone seemed like they were acting differently even my family and friends. But my family thought I was acting differently. They said the way I talk, the way I behaved, it’s all different. You are not the same, they told him. They said, I was not very sociable. I also think they have changed. Also, my parents tell me that I have to be and act like before. They said, you should not take something that does not belong to you. They mean you have to have 100 percent the Arabic culture. I do not have 100 percent Arabic culture” (2014, Abdullahi). Also, he says “I think a lot of international students look strange to their family when they go back to their country” (2014). Even though Abdullahi did not see himself as being a full member of the Saudi culture, he clearly stated that the rest of the Saudi Arabian students would identify him as a fellow Saudi, perhaps he said, “it’s the language and or my looks, but I cannot tell them I identify myself in a different way, they will say why!?” (2014). I was seeking for more information about Abdullahi’s time in the U.S so I have asked him if he had participated in

any kind of activities. He informed me that he has only attended Saudi night about 2 years ago and since then he has not participated in any cultural or academic events or activities.

Nonetheless, I inquired about how Abdullahi's cultural identity impacted him in educational setting, therefore, Abdullahi pointed out that he usually has a hard time understanding the material in class due to language barrier because his native language is Arabic. When it comes to academic or social hardships, he also mentioned lack of friends. Abdullahi was always very shy and he talked me about how difficult it is to make friends. He said "I do not have a lot of friends in St. Cloud which might affect my higher education because no one will give me class recommendations and which teacher to take with what course" (Abdullahi). I was curious about his social life so I have asked again if he has other friends outside of campus other than Juan and Jerry, which he previously mentioned and he informed me that he does not.

In conclusion to our interview, I asked Abdullahi if there was any culture that he believed he belonged to and he said the following statement "I don't have any specific culture that I fully belong to. I have the Arab culture but I have issues with it and I don't agree with many of the traditions and practices so I am open minded to learn about other cultures" (2014). Therefore, how does Abdullahi see his cultural identity overall? Abdullahi is an interesting character and he also has an interesting identity. He did not have the answer to that question for me that moment therefore he said he wants to continue and learn from others and he enjoys been open-minded.

**Russia.** Sofia who gladly agreed to take part of this research is from Russia. She is 20 years old and is majoring in accounting and doing a minor in Finance. Sofia has been living in

the United States for two and half years. This is the first time that Sofia is studying abroad although she had traveled abroad before. Sofia's native language is Russian, however she speaks English and French. She has a younger brother, a mother and father in her family. Sofia did not attend any traditional family gatherings other than regular holidays such as Christmas, new years; birthdays and perhaps very small family get together. Upon reflecting on her cultural identity, Sofia identified herself as a Russian. Being a Russian meant plenty of childhood memories about the streets, city, people and culture of Russia. She enjoyed the music, speaking the language and her relationships with others. This identity meant a lot to her.

Growing up in Russia, Sofia did not have much of a social life. She went out with friends once in a blue moon and she says she's never dated anyone back in Russia. She focused on school with the hope that she would go and study abroad after she completes her eleven years of school. She and her family would sit to talk and update each other once in awhile. The setting would be very casual, with no pressure of acting or behaving a certain way. However, in an academic setting, the environment was not quite the same. Sofia described to me her experience as a student in a public school in Russia. She viewed teachers to be very strict "If you do not do things in accordance with rules of the school, you can get in trouble" she said (Sofia). Sofia despised the fact that she had to wear uniform for 11 years of her life. She talked about how the girls were not allowed to wear nail polish or have their hair down. Students were also not allowed to form relationships and date each other.

As a Russian, Sofia took delight in dressing up. She stated,

Girls in Russia are very dressed up, we wear high heels, skirts, dresses, make-up and do our hair every single day, compared to America, it is different. Here, people are

more casual, wearing sweatpants, t-shirts, No! When I got here, I was like, what's going? I wouldn't be able to ever go out dressed the way people are dressed here, that's just something wow for me. And for women in Russia, we wake up two hours early before we leave the house, just to do our hair, put makeup on and find nice, colorful outfits. (2014, Sofia)

Sofia spoke about how Russian women take a lot more pride in themselves and their appearance. Even though there is no separation between genders, Sofia was mostly friends with girls who are from the same cultural background as her. In Russia, Sofia lived in a big city and even then, it was hard to find someone from a different background. She continued and said, "you might find someone from a similar cultural background, like from Kazakhstan, you know, a country south to Russia but nothing like crazy, no Americans or someone from Africa, no" (2014, Sofia). Cultural diversity did not seem to play a big role in Sofia's life as she was growing up in Russia.

There were no special events that were organized at the school that raise awareness about diversity or living in a multicultural society. Sofia did not take part in any cultural/traditional activities. However, she took part in academic competitions at her school. She was active student and she enjoyed competing with other students from different schools. These academic activities helped her become more responsible because she was representing her school as well as her city and at times, she was representing her country. This was a huge responsibility on her shoulders. Nonetheless, Sofia was someone who always wanted to achieve her goals no matter how difficult it might be. For instance, when it comes to her academic pursuits and goals, Sofia knew what she wanted to be since she was 10 years old. She described to me her academic dreams while having a smile on her face, she said,

Since I was like 10 years old, I knew exactly what I wanted to do, I knew exactly I wanted to go to the U.S, I wanted to be in some kind of business, I knew everything!

So since 10 I was slowly planning on it and my mom was very against it, me going anywhere, she wanted me to stay with her, which made sense, mothers are like that but my father, he was helping me a lot, he was helping me to just find a university, organize everything, it is a lot of work. (2014, Sofia)

After high school graduation, Sofia was able to fulfill her dreams and come to the U.S as an international student. Sofia thinks back to her cultural identity while arriving in the U.S, she said “you know even when I first got here, I felt strongly Russian, I wanted to tell everyone that I was Russian, right now, it’s not like that but my cultural identity was very important to me” (2014, Sofia).

Sofia looked into her own cultural identity and tried to understand her attitude and views regarding various aspects of culture. Sofia admires the education system here due to the freedom that students have, particularly college students. She talked about how in Russia, teachers would call home and invite your parents to school to talk about your performance. She argues that it diminishes the responsibility of an adult. She said,

Here is more like you are responsible for yourself, if you don’t want to study, no one is going to call your parents, no one is going to make you study, you are just going to get bad grades and that’s up to you. In Russia, even in universities, it’s like that. They call your parents, they complain, they talk to you constantly like ‘ you should study!, you should study!, you should study!’ here no one does that, and yeah here no one really cares, it is all your responsibility, you do what you do. (2014, Sofia)

Sofia has been going back home every summer as well as winter break and in the case of family setting, whenever she goes back and attends a family gathering, she wishes her parents invited extended family members as well. She stated that:

I like how it is here, the family is big, you invite your uncles, aunts, grandparents, everyone, your cousins and I would like to have it but I can’t change anything, that’s how my family is set and that’s how they behave so when I go to Russia, I am more like adjusting to what they are doing. I am going to Russia this winter break like I went last year, and we are celebrating with just my parents, my brother, and my grandmother and for me, I am now used to America, with seventy people of family members coming, and I want to, I want to but we don’t really talk to our relatives, we

don't communicate really, we have our own life. We don't call them ask them how they are. (2014, Sofia)

Regarding social setting, Sofia views and behaviors has changed. Sofia was friends with only girls in Russia however she has friends who are from both genders at the moment. She mentioned that she communicates equally with both boys and girls and if she goes to a boy's place, she does not feel intimidated, they are just my friends, however, while in Russia, I did not feel like it, I would be comfortable with girls, but I wouldn't be comfortable going to a guy's place, it's just a cultural thing I guess, boys stay with boys" she said. Sofia added "if a boy invites you in Russia, you presume that it's a date, but here it's more like 'oh, it's go study together' it's more like casual" (2014, Sofia).

Concerning attire, Sofia confessed that she is trying to combine American style of dressing and the Russian style at the moment while still assuring herself that she looks nice. Though she mentioned that sometimes when she wears yoga pants, she would still try to wear make up. However, when Sofia travels back to Russia, she would dress up really well in order to fit in with her Russian friends. Nonetheless, when she comes back to the U.S, she said she would then dress casual and adjust to the environment that she is in. It was interesting to learn how Sofia played both roles and was able to adjust naturally. Sofia spoke about when she is in Russia and speaks Russian, she's more shy and reserved, however she said " when I speak English, while I am here, I am more free, I can express what I think and I can be emotional you know and I don't know why it's like that" (2014, Sofia).

Sofia has a lot of friends here in the U.S. Though, she does not have a lot of American friends because she feels that American students have their circles and like to make friends with people who are just like them hence why it is hard to get in at times. They do not like

getting out of their comfort zone, she concluded. Despite her failure of making friends with the locals, Sofia loves interacting with international students. She is pleased to have this opportunity and thrilled to experience diversity. Sofia also learned how some of the other international students view this education. For instance, she talked about the difference between students whose countries are paying for their education and those who are paying from their own pocket. Sophia's parents pay for her tuition, hence she takes her education very seriously whereas some of her friends party most of the school days as well as weekends. She said the difference is, 'I know if I fail a class, my parents would have to pay for it and I don't want that,' hence she feels really responsible in that sense. However, Sofia relates to other international students in many ways. She experienced language barrier, difficulties in finding friends, understanding cultural differences. In some classes, Sofia realized that teachers assume you have background information about certain topics. For example, she was taking a business law classes and she did not know much about the law or any U.S laws however the expectation was that you already knew that information. She said to herself 'this is so unfair' because the teacher assumed that she was an American or that she had the background knowledge. She wishes teachers could be more considerate and thoughtful about other students. Nonetheless, Sofia also believes that the education that she received in Russia was outstanding though the system was very strict. For instance, when it comes to math, she felt as though she was very prepared even though language was an issue in some classes.

Growing up, Sofia was always an active student and a diligent person. Soon after she arrived, she began to get involved and take part in activities on campus as well as in the community. She was a dancer for a couple of cultural nights and she has also gone to many of

the career fairs to meet and greet potential companies. For Sofia, partaking in these activities was an opportunity she would not have found in Russia. She was also volunteering at a local adult learning centers for newly arrived immigrants and refugees who do not have the language to communicate with their fellow neighbors. Again, she spoke about how much she enjoyed being involved and being exposed to different cultures.

Sofia does not feel a full member of any culture though she feels as though she is more Russian when she's in Russia. However, when she is here in the U.S, she feels she's 50% American and the other 50 Russian. I asked her to elaborate on the above statement and Sofia explained the fact that she was born and raised in Russia, overtime she learned to hold dear to her heart many traditional values of the Russian people. But she also learned to value greatly the diversity and diverse views of others here in U.S. is beautiful in some ways and she will continue her journey.

**Spain.** Isabella is a 27 years old young female who was born and raised in Spain. She believes herself to be a third culture kid, a term normally reserved for individuals who spent a significant part of their developmental years outside of their parents culture. She assumed her first language was Korean since she was born from Korean parents. Isabella has lived in the U.S for a year and half and she is graduating with a Masters degree in teaching English as a second language now. She has two brothers, a mother and a father in her family. Isabella and her family only celebrated Christmas and New Years.

Isabella, at first identified herself as Spanish. Surprisingly enough though, when I inquired about what this identity meant to her, she could not think of a single word. She then determined herself to be multicultural or as she puts it "mixed". Isabella has a unique

background; She was born in Spain, into a Korean family. Interestingly, at 6 months old Isabella stated that her biological parents could not take care of her, for unspecified reasons and therefore she was given up for adoption. While growing up in Spain, Isabella received both Spanish and American education, though she went to an American school most of her life. By virtue of having Spanish parents, Isabella strived to be an “A” student to make her parents pleased.

Growing up, Isabella described herself as an extremely shy girl. She wore clothes that covered her body well as she did not feel comfortable showing parts of her body. She wore baggy pants and modest tops. She mentioned that she was subconscious about what others thought of her. Isabella was involved in the local church that her father lead, a church that was attended mostly by Ecuadorians. Subsequently, her friends were the kids from the church who were from Ecuador. These kids were indigenous Ecuadorians and wore the Ecuadorian traditional clothing. It was interesting that she befriended other immigrants instead of the natives, and it might have had something to do with her feeling a bit distant and culture shocked she concedes. Although she added that she did not have any friends whom she shared much with. In reality, Isabella did not have time to make close friends as she felt like she was constantly on the move. In a nutshell, her life was between school, music and church. Isabella had a passion for music hence most of the extracurricular activities she was participating in surround around music. She was in a music band at school where they would sing using American songs and she learned a lot about the American pop culture. On the other hand, she was also in an Ecuadorian choir for church where she learned about their culture, wore their traditional dresses during assemblies as well as special events.

I asked Isabella how she perceived herself before coming to the United States, in what would be one of the most difficult and hardest questions for her to answer in this interview. Isabella tried to identify herself, but she genuinely struggled to do so. She struggled with her identity as she tried to put together unclear pieces of a puzzle. As an adult, Isabella went to Korea and stayed there for almost 3 years. There, in Korea she did not fit in and could not connect to the culture that well. In fact, she felt she could not meet the expectations. Even though she accepts that Koreans would look at her and assume she is Korean in and out, she never really identified with them. She comments on why she feels that way as she states the following, “they don’t understand me” (2014, Isabella). A very simple sentence but yet so much meaning in it. On the other hand, here in America, Isabella feels as though her personality changed a lot. She is more social, and feels as though she can be herself here. She has friends who are also international students as well as Americans. She believes that people are more accepting of differences in the United States. She still struggles with the frequent “where are you from” questions that come up. A question Isabella feels is nearly impossible for someone like her to answer.

Everything considered, my interview with Isabella was short as she had a hard time finding the words to express herself. When I asked Isabella if she felt any kinship towards a specific culture, she simply said, “No, I don’t feel like I am a full member of any culture” (2014, Isabella). On the other hand, Isabella spoke about her experiences in Spain as she stated the following, “Even though I was born there, I was discriminated by Spanish people so I have this love-hate relationship maybe, like it is really hard for me to have a Spanish friend, I think because of the hardships that I had to endure” (2014, Isabella). Isabella could not find

an answer to where she could call home and surely, there is no right or wrong answer in defining Isabella's identity as she has her own unique personal experiences and stories to tell. Yes, Isabella was born in Spain from Korean parents; she was later taken to a Spanish household where she met her Spanish parents who decided to take her to an American school. All of these experiences helped shape Isabella to be the person that she is today and she is surely a third culture kid.

**Sri Lanka.** Another participant of this study was a 20-year-old named Sarah. She was born and raised in Bahrain, however her parents are from Sri Lanka. Sarah is in her fourth year of college, pursuing her degree in computer science. Sarah's parents' speak Arabic with her and her siblings though she considers English her first language. She identifies herself as Asian however being Asian did not mean anything to her, in fact, she confessed that she did not even see herself as Asian because she was part of a multicultural group. Sarah described to me how she behaved in a family, social and academic setting. Although, in a family setting Sarah was very serious and thoughtful about her manners, in contrast, her behavior in social setting was quite different. Sarah was warm and outgoing, while spending time with her friends. However, in academic setting, Sarah was the quiet kid. Due to the fact that education in Bahrain is very teacher oriented, Sarah said students rarely speak in class, "unless you are asked a question, or you are asking a question, you don't really speak in class" (2014, Sarah). Therefore, students were very obedient in class and Sarah viewed her behavior as being very passive.

Sarah spoke informal Sinhala with her parents, which is one of the official languages in Sri Lanka and English with her siblings and friends. She also spoke Arabic with the locals

who did not know how to speak English. Even though Sarah was born and raised Bahrain, surprisingly enough, she always felt comfortable around people who were from South Asia such as Indians and Pakistanis. She also had some Arab friends however she was more content with her South Asian friends. Sarah's parents were very active in a small Sri Lankan community in their neighborhood and they often stressed and encouraged Sarah and her siblings to participate in the traditional dances and songs. Though Sarah had the opportunity to attend and volunteer, many Sri Lankan cultural activities, she mentioned that she never related to the culture, in fact, she admitted with a bit of shame that she does not know the Sri Lankan national anthem.

Even though Sarah had her own dreams and goals, she admitted that as an Asian, she felt obligated to take on her parents' dreams. She continued and said, "that's what I think typical Asians do, fulfill their parents' dreams" (2014).

Due to the fact that Sarah's parents were constantly reminding her about the Sri Lankan culture, Sarah mentioned that her parents feel that when she first left for the U.S, she had a stronger sense of "identity" however, according to her understanding, she never felt strong about her Sri Lankan Identity. Even though she talks to her parents once or twice a week, she mentioned that it is difficult to hold onto to those traditional values that her parents want to her to value. Since she lives in a different society, Sarah believes that many of her views and behaviors have changed.

Sarah's friends in the United States are from a wide variety of cultures. She is friends with many international students. She mentioned that she relates to them more because they understand her struggles as an international student. Often times, Sarah said she would

“whine” to the other international students, speaking about how homesick she feels, they understand her situation because most relate to her, whereas she said “if you go and tell it to an American, they would probably not understand it so that kind of lead me to become friends with a lot of international students than the locals over here” (2014, Sarah). In fact, Sarah felt intimidated.

Even though Sarah’s Sri Lankan friends would identify her as a Sri Lankan due to the reality that she is born in a Sri Lankan family, nonetheless she relates more to the Bahraini culture. Sarah does not participate in any cultural, academic or professional activities. She is extremely busy with her classes and wants to make her parents proud.

Sarah believes that her cultural identity impacted her enormously in educational settings. Because she is an Asian, Sarah thinks that she is viewed as being “smart” hence she feels it’s obligatory to meet that expectation. Often times, she feels as though there is no space for failure.

Surprisingly, when Sarah travels to Sri Lanka, she feels left out, and even though she does not feel a full member of the Bahraini culture, that’s the closest culture she identifies with. Yet, Sarah finds it hard to understand some of the traditional practices in Bahrain. For instance, she perceives it a privilege to study at the library late at night because in Bahrain, and around her parents that would not be permissible. Nonetheless, Sarah normally tells people that she’s from Sri Lanka in order to avoid explaining her identity though she admitted that at times, she gets confused when too many questions about her identity are asked. On the other hand, she informed me that her parents would always identify her as Sri Lankan and in order to please them, in their eyes, she will always be Sri Lankan.

**China.** Cheng was one of the respondents of this study. He is 22 years old. He is originally from China and his first language is Mandarin. Cheng's family consists of his mother, father and a young sister. While in China, Cheng and his family used to celebrate the Chinese New Year hence this was the only traditional family gathering that Cheng took part in. At the time of the study, Cheng has been living and studying in the U.S for close to 4 years. He is completing his Bachelor's degree in Finance.

Cheng identified himself as a Chinese man, however, he never reflected on what it meant to him. Cheng grew up appreciating family values because it was an important aspect in his family household. Cheng's father was the provider of the household; he also managed to keep the family close to each other. Cheng's parents would normally have a sit down with their children therefore he and his sister had a close relationship with their parents. Cheng mentioned that in the Chinese tradition, family is very important and parents take the responsibility to take care and provide for their children until they get married. Hence, as a son or daughter of a Chinese household, Cheng said children regard their parents with great respect. Cheng behaved in a respectful manner with his parents and younger sister.

In both social and an academic setting, Cheng was not the loud kid. He was fairly quiet and well behaved. He mentioned that he learned from his parents how to behave well and be polite.

Cheng was going to a boarding school where he shared a room with six other students. He had to wear uniform in school, which he disliked throughout his school years. He also mentioned that the boys had to cut their hair extremely short which he truly felt terrible about. However, Cheng enjoyed after school activities. He mentioned that he and his friends

managed to normally go out, eat and play different sports despite the amount of schoolwork they had to complete.

All of Cheng's friends were individuals of Chinese descent; in fact Cheng never met a foreigner in his town. As a kid, while growing up in a small town, Cheng always wanted to be a businessman due to the influence of some of the successful business owners in his town. He wants to become a successful business owner 1 day.

Cheng perceived himself to be a very hardworking young Chinese man. He mentioned that he inherited most of his traits from his parents, particularly his father. He closely identifies with his father when it comes to many aspects of his cultural identity. Cheng was a shy individual, however, he knew his shyness would not get in his way. Cheng's parents sent him to the United States to chase his dream because he was determined to reach his goals.

After 4 years of living here in the U.S, Cheng does not believe that the way he identified himself changed a bit. He described to me that it might be the fact that his friends are all Chinese and his Chinese friends would also identify him as a traditional Chinese man. He does not feel comfortable exploring outside of his circle. Even though, Cheng knows some international students who are not from China, he feels fairly comfortable in his circle. He has few American friends but as I inquired about his relationship with them, he quickly replied, "They do crazy things that I don't do, we don't share anything in common" (2014, Cheng) as he laughed out loud. Cheng mentioned that he would normally have a short conversation with other international students regarding the classes they are taking and which professor they would recommend for a particular class.

Interestingly enough, Cheng volunteered in some cultural nights such as China night, Korean night and Japan night for the sake of his scholarship but he also enjoyed them. Cheng believes that his cultural identity in an educational setting impacted him in a negative way. He suspects other students avoid being in a group with him because the instant they see that he is an Asian, they assume that there will be language barrier. Therefore, he often times struggles with finding a group mate. He wished others would give him an opportunity to get to know him before they judge him.

Nevertheless, this does not affect how Cheng identifies himself. He believes that though he lived here for 5 years, he still feels strongly about his Chinese identity. He concluded that it might be because fellow Chinese friends always surround him.

**South Korea.** Seo-yeon is a 41 year old from South Korea whose native language is Korean. She is currently pursuing her masters in teaching English as a second language. She has lived in the U.S a little over a year now. Seo-yeon also lived in Japan and Canada prior to arriving in the U.S. She has five sisters, a mother and a father. She is the second oldest among her siblings. Seo-yeon attended traditional family gatherings such as birthday parties, wedding ceremonies and other family get-togethers. Seo-yeon identified herself as a Korean before coming to the U.S, although she admits that she never thought about what this identity meant to her. Seo-yeon was the only unmarried one among her five other sisters, therefore she lived with her parents who were farmers. However, even growing up, she had a huge responsibility. She always had to set a good example for the rest of her sisters at the home. Often times, while her parents were busy with farming, Seo-yeon had to fulfill the parent role as well. When the rest of her sisters were all married, she dedicated a lot of her time taking care of her

parents. She often described herself as the “royal daughter” due to the way in which she was expected to conduct herself in a family setting. She was a mentor to her three younger sisters for a very long time therefore, behaving like a role model became like a self-fulfilling prophecy for her.

In addition, she also described herself as the “representative” for her family because she would still be the planner of her nieces and nephew’s first birthdays. Even though Seo-yeon viewed these responsibilities as an honor, she mentioned there were times she needed to break-free when she became exhausted from all of the tasks she was handling. Those times, she would get together with her friends who she graduated with. Seo-yeon did not hang out with her sisters’ friends because that was strange in her culture and due to the societal norms of the society she was living in, Seo-yeon was only friends with ladies who were the same age as her. I inquired about her behavior in a social setting as well, Seo-yeon could not think of any specific way she behaved in that particular setting other than simply socializing with her girlfriends, and having a good time while being very respectful of each other. On the other hand, in academic setting, Seo-yeon mentioned how mindful she was of her behavior. In the classroom, Seo-yeon and her fellow classmates presumed the passive role while the teacher was viewed as “the holder of all the information” and ought to be respected (2014). Seo-yeon did not have any class discussions throughout her learning years because the education was very teacher centered. Therefore after she graduated, she became interested in the education system.

Seo-yeon began working at a local university while living in Korea where she spent most of her time, in an academic environment, which affected her language. She would speak

very formal when addressing her colleagues. Because to her culture, her language and the way she speaks depended on her surroundings, how they behave as well as their age. For instance, if she were to speak to someone older than her, she would refer to him or her as “eonni” which means older sister in Hangeul. However, in a family setting, because of the comfort level, her language was very informal.

Seo-yeon was mainly friends with Korean women who were single, however because she was working on a campus area, she also had few American friends. As a Korean woman, Seo-yeon would dress up and look nice even in small gatherings. She mentioned that she and her girlfriends would normally wear nice dresses and bright outfits overall. She also would wear heavy makeup.

Seo-yeon was someone who always wanted to give back to her community and facilitate activities for the poor; the weak and the vulnerable were a particular inspiration for her. She was a member of a group called “Women’s disabled association”. Seo-yeon was the planner of couple of activities such as skits, and educational programs within that group. She was also teaching English in the Women’s disabled association. Seo-yeon stated that this reflects her gender identity. She was passionate about social justice issues and was a candidate for the social justice group at her university. In addition, Seo-yeon participated in a few conferences that were held at the University where she was working. Overall, she was such an energetic individual and ready to engage in that which excites her spirit.

Seo-yeon was a daughter of a farmer; she came from a poor family and did not have support growing up. She worked very hard to make a living. Seo-yeon was also a teacher and taught at a local university, middle school, and institution in order to support herself and those

who were dear to her heart. In addition to her struggles, she was also facing the society pressure because it was unusual for someone her age to still be single. In fact, that is one thing she prefers about the American culture as she stated “ It’s weird for someone around my age who did not get married, but here it is okay” (2014, Seo-yeon).

In the United States, Seo-yeon had missed many of what she was doing in Korea as well as her loved ones. Although she had missed her family, friends and colleagues, she also enjoys the fact that she does not have huge responsibility and a duty to fulfill. However, she has mixed feelings about her situation. Seo-yeon mentioned that she feels free without all of the responsibility back however she added “ I feel free here but at the same time, I feel alone because there is no duty and responsibility” (2014, Seo-yeon). Seo-yeon in some ways longs for her sense of duty because that was her identity for a long time, however she also sees the advantages in her new life such as getting more time to study as well as getting to know people from various ethnicities.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Seo-yeon is opening her options and making friends who are all ages, and nationalities. Due to Seo-yeon’s outgoing personality, in a very short time, she was able to have close relationships with her roommates, classmates, co-workers, students who she tutors. However, Seo-yeon also mentioned that most of her friends are international students because they were the first people she met at the orientation. Those first few international students, whom she spent the first week with, became some of the people who she formed a great relationship with. Seo-yeon often hesitates to makes friends with the locals, as she wants to avoid miscommunication that might lead to other issues.

Seo-yeon mentioned during the interview that though other Korean students would identify her as Korean due to her appearance and language, she is not a representative of your “typical” Korean person as she referred to herself as “unusual”. She feels comfortable here in the United States. She is glad that people do not judge her even when she behaves in an odd way. She also spoke about the awareness of age in Korea. In the Korean culture, there is a saying that says; “ if you are old enough, you have to behave old enough” (2014, Seo-yeon). She feels less pressure here in U.S when it comes to age and marital status. Seo-yeon is joyful that she does not have to fulfill any traditional expectations in the United States.

**Bulgaria.** Lucas is a 31 year old from Bulgaria. He was also one of the contributors to this study. Lucas was born and raised in Bulgaria and he considers the European culture as his culture. This was not the first time he has lived abroad; Lucas also lived in the U.K for sometime. He lived in the United States for the last 8 years though, the first 2 years, he spent working; therefore, he was a student for the last 6 years. He is currently doing his masters in social responsibility. Lucas has three other members in his family, a father, a mother and a sister. Christmas and Easter are some of the early memories that Lucas has regarding traditional family gatherings.

Lucas identified himself as Bulgarian before he arrived in the U.S and this identity was important to him because as he talked about it in more detailed, he described to me how he was taught to be a proud Bulgarian due to the struggles and history of his country. You could definitely see that Lucas was extremely proud of his culture and heritage. While growing up in Bulgaria, Lucas has memories of how the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community were passed through the younger generations by word of mouth. I then

inquired about Lucas's behavior in particular settings such as family, social and academic settings. Lucas informed me about how in Bulgaria honor and respect is first given to the elders, who also make decisions for the younger ones. Lucas was well behaved in a family setting, whereas his attitude changed in social and academic settings. He talked about how he would not show a proper sense of responsibility in those settings, particularly, in academic setting, "There was not much of respect for teachers in that atmosphere" he disclosed to me. Lucas stated that the education system was a broken system, He said "most people were constantly misbehaving and showing disrespect to the teacher" (2014, Lucas).

On the other hand, Lucas perceived Bulgarians as very formal people. Greetings and basic conversations are normally in a formal language. As a Bulgarian, Lucas appreciated growing up in Europe where people valued being stylish and fashionable hence why he would often dress very well. Lucas also mentioned that people would instantly know that he is from the U.S due to the way he dresses. I asked him to elaborate on that and he said "tighter clothes, more colorful clothes, my hair style" (2014).

Furthermore, Lucas's friends were mainly Bulgarians because at the time he was growing up, he informed me that there were not any immigrants in his neighborhood. He knew few Turkish people who have lived there for generations and he says he used to play soccer with some of those individuals. But other than soccer, he says there were not any further interactions. Lucas participated in some cultural activities however he did not participate in an academic one in Bulgaria due to the broken education system. He did not have a dream of going to college at first, however after he served two monetary years in the army, he went to school for physical education and dropped out the second year of college

because he realized physical education instructors did not get paid well. Lucas traveled to the U.K and decided to take a break from school for couple of years. He then came to the U.S where he began to observe a new way of life. Lucas perceived himself as a true Bulgarian and he explains to me how perhaps the lack of diversity might be the cause. He mentioned to me how often times, other Bulgarians including himself, could be perceived as egocentric people. Many of the people that Lucas grew up with did not think about cultural difference because “there was no need to” he stated (2014). After working for two years, he made the decision that he wanted to go back to school. He said “I had to start fresh this time, but more serious” (2014, Lucas). And because he is adult now who pays for his own tuition, Lucas is more appreciative of school.

Lucas informed me that his behavior in different settings has changed a lot especially, the way he conducts himself towards others. He stated that he is more educated now and his horizons have changed pointing to the fact that his behavior in many settings are not the same as before. For instance, in classrooms, Lucas talked about the respectful manner he deals with his classmates and instructors. He also appreciates the diversity in the United States, which encouraged him to learn more about his surroundings. In the United States, Lucas has friends from all around and he takes pleasure in it.

However, Lucas does not believe that other international students who come from different cultural backgrounds identify with him because of his age group. He could not stress enough the fact that he is responsible for himself and accountable for his own actions. He stated that most of the international students do not need to worry about paying their own tuition and the consequences of not achieving that goal because most of the times, their

parents, or governments are paying for it. Another point he mentioned was how international students who are from Asia and Africa have to face a huge culture shock as compare to him due to the fact that it benefits him to be a European because the European culture is similar to the American culture. Nonetheless, Lucas faced hardships in academic settings. Most of the culture in the classroom seemed very foreign to him at first. He struggled with the American writing style for academic papers, computer use, citations and the language barrier overall. The registration system and not knowing who to go to for help is always problematic for international students, “Everything is computerized” Lucas stated. In the beginning, Lucas did not have any friends. He had to learn many aspects of the American academic culture on his own. However, he managed to adapt it.

Though Lucas stated that other Bulgarians would identify him as a full Bulgarian, he assured me that he has his own cultural identity. An identity he developed while dealing with individuals from different backgrounds. Though he said he will still be identified as a Bulgarian 40 years from now because he will still have the accent and will still speak his mother tongue, during the interview Lucas admitted that he is only full Bulgarian by passport and now he is aware of the existence of the variety of cultural ethnic groups within this society. The following statement by Lucas was very powerful, he said, “Understanding the different value systems in a multicultural society is important to me” (2014, Lucas). Lucas describes himself as having an international cultural identity.

**Mali.** Khadija is a 26-year-old of Malian origin. She was born in Gabon, which is located on the west coast of central Africa. Khadija spoke French at school and she considers this her native language. However, she also spoke Soninke; which was her parents’ native

tongue. Khadija has eight siblings as well as her parents and a grandmother in her family. She was born to a Muslim family, therefore Khadija celebrates Eid, which is a religious holiday for Muslims. She has been living in the U.S for a little over 7 years. She was studying the entire time she was here in the U.S. and she is now getting her masters in computer science. Even though Khadija identified herself as a Malian before she travelled abroad, she mentioned that this identity neither fit her nor defined her in any form or shape. She has only been to Mali for a year and did not acknowledge what being a Malian meant. She would only identify as a Malian because her parents wanted her to. In fact, even as a child, Khadija was confused about her identity. She stated that she always felt like she could neither fit in the Gabonian culture nor the Malian one and often times felt lost. Khadija's parents consistently reminded her of her origin. Occasionally, they would talk about the Malian culture, clothing and language and food while at home. However, the fellow Malians that Khadija came across always left her with the thought that she was not Malian enough. On the other hand, she acknowledged that Gabonians did not accept her either. This confusion led her to giving up her cultural identity and in her teenage years, she began to learn and discover more about faith.

Khadija went through different stages in her teenage years. In the beginning, she was rebellious towards her parents. Later in her teenage years, she then described herself as an introvert in a family setting. She learned to be more polite around her parents.

Nonetheless, Khadija did not have any friends outside of the school grounds, most of her friends were girls from her class and they were all Gabonians. It is important to mention that school related work was the basis of their discussion. Khadija felt closer to few of these

girls and would occasionally discuss non-school related topics with them. In an academic setting, though, Khadija perceived herself as the leader of the classroom. She was extremely outgoing and extroverted. However, that has changed when she started practicing her faith. She began to avoid certain behaviors that she felt were impermissible in her religion. Khadija became more reserved and self-restrained in her manners and relationship with others. In actuality, Khadija's life revolved around school therefore she began to struggle with the change and went through difficult times with her education. She continued to do her best in her studies as she was learning a whole new way of life, which in this case was her faith, Islam. At school, Khadija use to wear uniform however at the age of sixteen, while she was discovering more and more about her religion, she became conscious about her modesty. In Islam, both men and women are required to dress modestly and lower their gaze. Khadija then found that she needed to pay attention to her attire and behave in such a manner where she brought no harm but honor to herself and her faith. In the city and around the house, Khadija used to wear a traditional cloth wrapped into a type of a skirt and a loose blouse, though at times, she would also wear a long traditional dress. Khadija would normally wear a headscarf for the purpose of praying though she was not wearing it daily.

Khadija participated in some cultural events such as weddings as well as celebrations for newborn babies. Her parents would take her to these traditional events with the hope that she would reconnect to her origin and it was in these particular events that she realized she was not able to identify with Malians. She came to the conclusion that she could only identify with her religion. To her, religion was the only identity she could find for herself. It was something formed out of her thought rather than cultural status quo. She felt as though she

didn't have to fit into any cultures, she didn't have to see her life through the lenses of culture and societal identification. Rather she had settled on her own identity; a Muslim woman.

Khadija had many goals in life. She had dreams to pursue higher education, her parents were constantly reminding her that they wanted to send her to college but she admitted that she was doubtful she would go far due to her cultural background. She elaborated on this by speaking about the cultural practices where she's from. She says due to the fact that young girls are usually married off to someone, in order to build a family at an early age; rarely was education a goal. Because of this understanding of the culture, Khadija assumed she would also have an arranged marriage after she graduates from high school. When it was near graduation time, the news was revealed to Khadija that she was going to study abroad for higher education. It was a dream come true for Khadija. She soon travelled to the United States where she began a four-year degree in electrical engineering.

Coming to America was a different experience for Khadija; she was amazed by the diversity and was quickly able to make friends with people from different places. She appreciates the fact that she is able to have conversations about various topics with these individuals. She also met many Muslims from different parts of the world, something that encouraged her even more to learn about her faith. In fact many young Muslim women that Khadija met were going through the same process as her, newly learning more about their religion. Khadija felt as though she related to them and wanted to know more about their journey. Generally, Khadija felt at ease while spending time with other international students because she believes that what they all share in common is the very thing that makes them

relate to each other. And when asked what this was, Khadija again brought the word Multicultural back to the discussion.

Khadija feels that she's criticized consistently by her friends who share the same cultural background as her. They do not see her as a Malian due to the traditional practices which she's missing. She also mentioned, that they normally tease her, and refer to her as being too "conservative". It is important to realize that they also share the same religion with her but they see her views as being too conservative. Khadija was an active member of the Muslim student association where she took part in preparing various activities such as weekly meetings, Islamic awareness week and MSA functions. Khadija acknowledges that her religion has been associated with a negative image and she strives to change that by answering questions that people have about her faith and having events on campus such as the Islamic week awareness where Muslim students like Khadija provide and present important information. Khadija was also involved in Society of women engineers where she was helping high school girls get into the science field. This student run organization provides scholarships and inspires young girls to pursue degrees in the engineering field. The organization was very important to Khadija because she feels as though she too, was in the shoes of these young girls at one point in her life.

Overtime Khadija feels that she has become an opinionated individual in some ways but also learned to respect other people's views. In reality, Khadija does not feel a full member of any culture. She identifies herself as a Muslim and she stated that this religion is as a way of life for her. She also added "It gave me a way of life that I value a lot and that makes a lot of sense to me, more than my parents' culture did. It's a way of life to me, from

the way I talk, the way I sleep, the way I eat, the way I dress, it's all of that for me and I feel more comfortable with it than any other way of living" (2014). As Khadija explained to me the bond between her and her faith, I have come to understand that Islam plays a big role in her life. She implements the teachings of Islam into her everyday life.

## **Discussion**

International students come to the United States with their domestic cultural identities which is based on deep-rooted values, which are also commonly shared among the people of their culture. Thus, as we know, values and traditions play a significant role on the way in which people interact and interrelate. Individuals' morals and principles determine the way they behave around others as well as how they perceive the behavior of others which either might or might not initiate building a relationship with others from different backgrounds. However, we have to understand cultural identity is not a clear concept that can easily be understood. In the book *Identity: Community, culture, difference* by Jonathan Rutherford which is a collection of essays, Stuart Hall (1990) wrote a part titled "Cultural Identity and Disapora". In this piece, he tries to explain the complexity of identity, as he states,

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (1990)

Interestingly, most of the participants of this study fit in this definition of the ongoing process.

According to the data, 8 out of 10 participants viewed their identity as a course of development. In the case of Isabella from Spain, Serah from Sri Lanka, Khadijah, from Mali, Abdullah, from Saudi Arabia, Seo-yeon from South Korea, Akim from Ivory Coast, Sofia

from Russia, and finally Lucas from Bulgaria, all highlighted that they have experienced some kind of identity transformation. Although Arjun from India and Cheng from China have not felt or experience a major change, they also had their moments of culture shock. Generally, most participants in this study have a lot in common regarding what they faced in the process of cultural and identity transformation. Some of the participants such as Abdullahi, Sofia, Seo-yeon, Serah, and Akim all felt left out in social settings and even in some cases, academic settings. Abdullahi elaborated in the interview that while in his country, he would often times greet people and they would reply, however, he says “but here when I say hi to someone, they see me as a foreigner and might not respond to my greeting” (2014, Abdullahi). Furthermore, he worries that it might an impact on his studies as he stated “I do not have a lot of friends in St. Cloud which might affect my higher education because no one will give me class recommendations and which teacher to take with what course” (2014, Abdullahi). Sofia, a 20-year-old from Russia expressed her thoughts in regard to her feelings of being isolated by the locals. She described how tough it can be to get into circles of friends who share the same values and interest (2014). In the following extract, Serah, another 20-year-old from Sri Lanka compares the value of her friendship with the locals and international students, she states: “if you go and tell it to an American, they would probably not understand it so that kind of lead me to become friends with lots of international students than the locals over here” ( 2014). In this quotation, Serah was referring to someone who understands her better when she complains about how homesick she feels and as we can witness, she does not believe that American students are able to accommodate her in that sense. Seo-yeon on the other hand also hesitates to make friends with the locals as she wants to prevent any miscommunication from

happening many times during the interview, these international students have indicated the lack of communication with the locals as some fear to be misunderstood.

Nonetheless, the fear of miscommunication can lead to isolation by developing an intense dislike of the environment or even simply negative views of the locals. There is an insightful article written by the University of California-Irvine, addressing culture shock and how to prepare oneself. The article states, “When we deal with people who share the same basic cultural attitudes as ourselves, the system works well: the differences in attitude between two Americans, broadly speaking, are far more likely to be of the specific and personal kind than the cultural kind. When we interact with people of different nationalities, however, the problem arises. Communications break down because their cultural attitudes are fundamentally different than ours, and the results are often feelings of confusion and hostility on both sides. This situation is called ‘culture shock’ (Regents of University of California, 2011). We see this in the case of Akim from Ivory Coast. Akim expressed his general thoughts about the American people. Although Akim liked everything about the United States in the beginning, he then mentioned that he went through a stage of loneliness, where he abandoned all of his new friends because he came to the conclusion that they were all hypocritical and two-faced people. Due to this experience, Akim decided to take everyone he meets as an acquaintance but never a true friend. Due to the fact that Americans appear to be very friendly in the start confuse many of the international students and leave them with bewilderment. Seo-yeon, one of the participants believed that she could not trust and rely on her American friends, whereas if she called her friends in South Korea, guaranteed, they would assist her. Moreover, Akim was also so confused about the ways certain things are

handled here in the U.S, for example, he describes his experience of visiting a friend without a notice as follows, “Here, you go in and they ask you for the reason like ‘oh, what’s going on?’ I was confused for the first time, so shocked! Maybe it’s a culture shock experience” (2014, Akim). Here, Akim highlights the difference between the American culture and his home culture as he states people here in the U.S would ask ‘what’s going on’ with a surprise if you simply show up on their door steps without informing them whereas in Ivory Coast, he says you could visit without a notice and even decide to stay with them for days.

It is difficult for international students to understand the norms that applied in their home culture are possibly different from those in the U.S. Therefore, international students go through a stage where adjusting seems to be unbearable. It is possible that other factors such as ethnic background, cultural exposure, age, and language ability can all play a significant role in the assimilation process. For example, in the case of Cheng, he often talked about his comfort around the students from his own country. He believed that he did not have any mutual interest with the American students as he expressed it in the following statement, “they do crazy things that I don’t do; we don’t share anything in common” (2014, Cheng). When he elaborated on this statement, he discussed his limited experienced in house parties, going out to drink and the way in which some of those few American friends he knew have behaved in those situations. Cheng here tried to function within culturally different social environment though, unfortunately, it was not a success in his situation. The majority of participants in this study can all recall their experience as they went through different stages. They often recall what strike them the most. For instance, most described how they were quickly able to observe the behavior of others and how it differed from the way people behave

in their countries. Thus, the social skills that worked in their countries did not seem to be useful here. This led to disappointment, anxiety, depression and extreme homesickness in the cases of some of the participants.

International students might not realize that culture shock is a process and though they might go through different stages, they need time in order to adjust to a new social and academic life. A world-known anthropologist by the name Kalervo Oberg introduced four stages of culture shock in one of his renowned works. Oberg (1960) defined the four stages involved in culture shock as honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. As we can see, the first stage is the honeymoon, which for some can last a few days, weeks, or even several months. On this stage, everything appears to be amazing, breathtaking, attractive, and the people are kind, welcoming and polite.

After some time, the reality hits them and international students meet many challenges in regard to making friends, miscommunication due to language barriers, food, academic concerns and many more. Unfortunately, several of the participants believed that the locals were not as sympathetic and caring, as they perceived them to be in the beginning but they wish they were more understanding of their situation. At this point, many of them felt rejected and developed negative thoughts and images of the host culture. In fact, some of the strong opinions regarding the locals were based on generalizations such as ‘Americans are crazy’ (2014, Cheng) or ‘the locals will not understand me’ (2014, Sarah). According to Oberg (1960), this aggression and frustration might be in the case of “there is maid trouble, school trouble, language trouble, house trouble, transportation trouble, shopping trouble, and the fact that people in the host country are largely indifferent to all these troubles. They help but they

just don't understand your great concern over these difficulties. Therefore, they must be insensitive and unsympathetic to you and your worries. The result, "I just don't like them. You become aggressive, you band together with your fellow countrymen and criticize the host country, its ways and its people" (Oberg, 1960). According to Oberg, this is the crisis stage where he predicts that the individual "will either stay or leave" (Oberg, 1960).

Therefore, assuming that one stays, then the third stage starts as the individual begins to learn the language and function well in different situations within the new culture such as being able to manage his/her day-to-day routine. Although, he/she accepts the good and bad of the new culture, instead of criticizing, they will often joke about the struggles they faced in the host culture. Also, they might still be experiencing hardships, but they will have positive attitude towards it. However, individuals will still have the idea that their culture is better than the host culture. On the bright side, the individual feels comfortable enough that he/she would desire to train a new comer as Oberg states "And there is also the poor devil who is worse off than yourself whom you can help, which in turn gives you confidence in your ability to speak and get around" (1960). This is the recovery stage.

We then reach our final stage according to Oberg. This is the adjustment stage where though, due to cultural differences, the visitor does not comprehend all of the social circumstances that are happening in his/her surroundings but as Oberg says,

the visitor now accepts the customs of the country as just another way of living. You operate within the new milieu without a feeling of anxiety although there are moments of strain. Only with a complete grasp of all the cues of social intercourse will this strain disappear. For a long time the individual will understand what the national is saying but he is not always sure what the national means. With a complete adjustment you not only accept the foods, drinks, habits, and customs, but actually begin to enjoy them. When you go on home leave you may even take things back with you and if you

leave for good you generally miss the country and the people to whom you have become accustomed. (1960)

Oberg argues that at this stage, there will still be some worry and it will only vanish when the visitor masters the signals of social interaction. It's important to mention that an individual can experience different stages at one time or may revisit an earlier stage during a particular stage. Also, an individual might not proceed to the final stage before returning home. This is a very interesting point because, although Cheng, a young man from China kept insisting that he did not experience cultural transformation, he also stated that he might noticed it when he returns home due to the behavior of others.

Although many argue that a sense of identity is necessary and crucial for our well being, we have to acknowledge that it's not a simple concept for everyone. Therefore, it is not very surprising that people who grew up in a culture other than their parent's, such as third culture kids struggle with questions of identity. David Pollock, an American sociologist and Ruth Van Reken who is a second generation of third culture kid wrote an excellent book together titled *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. In this book a Third Culture Kid (TCK) is defined by the authors as: "a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). But, "although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experiences, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background." Nonetheless, they form a third culture of "shared commonalities of those living an internationally mobile lifestyle." What this means is that their identity is neither with their home culture nor with the host culture.

Interestingly enough, the above statement is a great example of three of the participants in this study. Isabella, a 27-year-old, whose biological parents are Korean, born and bred in Spain, Serah, a 20-year-old who was born and raised in Bahrain but due to her parents' strong cultural identity preferred to refer to herself to as Sri Lankan, and Khadijah 26-year-old who born in Gabon however, identified herself as Malian are all an example of TCK's. Serah and Khadijah did not classify themselves as third culture kids. Perhaps they were unaware of the existence of the term. On the other hand, Isabella clearly identified herself as a third culture kid. It is interesting to see the distinction between the three, because their journeys still differ. Serah and Khadijah were both exposed to their home cultures while growing up in Bahrain and Gabon, though they both reported they have never felt connected to or relate to their "home" culture. In fact, in many of the traditional events they have attended with their parents and siblings, they were both completely out of place. Khadijah went to Mali once for a year, and a second time for a period of 2 weeks. Serah made couple of visits to Sri Lanka with her family as she was growing up and yet every time she visited, she felt like an outsider. She mentioned some people would instantly see the Arab behavior in her character and suddenly treat her as a foreign, while others would assume she is Sri Lankan and expect her to behave how a traditional Sri Lankan would behave. Ruchika Tulshyan, a *journalist and content strategist* who is also a third culture kid wrote the following article, "*An Expat from 'Nowhere': For This 'Third Culture Kid,' Home isn't a Simple Concept*". Ruchika, the author of this article was born and raised in Singapore by Indian parents, and lived in London, Mumbai, and multiple U.S. cities. In her writing, she reflected on her own experience as a TCK as she stated,

Indians tended to swiftly reject me when I opened my mouth. They were drawn to me by the color of my skin, but felt awkward when I couldn't relate to their experiences of growing up in India. People from other races were skeptical of why I wasn't being assimilated into the Indian group, even though I looked like them. I consistently felt like I couldn't live up to anyone's expectations, whichever side I was on. (2013)

Though TCK's live in the hope that people will understand them, they often experience otherwise. Isabella with frustration said following, "in Korea, they see me as Korean because of my face and their expectations of me are so high, they don't understand me" (2014). In the beginning and throughout the interview, Isabella was confused about questions that directly inquired about her identity and interestingly, Tulshyan had also discussed the question 'where are you from' in her writing as she reported, "Where are you from" is not a simple answer for everyone. "And there are many moments of confusion, frustration and alienation, when I don't quite know which box to tick. But the way I see it, I can either belong nowhere, or belong everywhere. I choose the latter" (Tulshyan, 2013). It is very difficult for third culture kids to have an established identity of where they are from or even more what nationality they truly are. Khaidjah, the young lady from Mali talks about how the fellow Malians whether be here in the U.S or Gabon consistently judged her for either not being a Malian enough or an extremist representative of their culture.

Unfortunately, third culture kids are not accepted in the cultures they grew up in as well as the ones their parents are from. This creates frustration for them. A young writer named Mary Bassegy describes the confusion she went through as she was growing up in different parts of the world. Mary was born in Nigeria, however spent a significant amount of her time in Canada and the U.S. She never acknowledged or heard of the term "third culture kids" hence, growing up, she had accepted that she was the only one going through this

identity crisis. In college, she signed up for an anthropology course where she finally learned about her identity. In shock, Mary states the following in her writing,

I had no idea that the last day of class would leave me in tears because I finally understood the inner struggle I was having with my cultures. Dr. Ayers, my professor, said I was a third culture kid. It was at that moment I knew that there was a name for you. Sure enough, I Googled that term and videos of other TCKs came up. I'm surprised I didn't suffer whiplash at that moment because I found myself nodding to the experiences I had been saying all of my life. Except, this time, those experiences weren't being spoken by me. They were being spoken by other TCKs. (Bassey, 2013)

She then expresses her anger and rage regarding this identity of hers; she says

You're the reason why I vent to my first culture kid friends about how much easier they have it since they don't have to deal with cultures that are so opposite from each other. All they could do was feel sorry for me. You're the reason why their feeling sorry for me was not cutting it for me. I desired to be understood, not pitied. (Bassey, 2013)

Mary Bassey was born in one culture just like Serah, Isabella, and Khadijah but they were all raised in among other cultures, and to them "nowhere" seems to be home. As Mary states, "You're the reason why I feel slightly un-American because of my Nigerian and Canadian identities. You're also the reason I feel like an outsider every time I visit Nigeria because of my Western identities" (2013). Despite the fact all four individuals grew up in different parts of the world, it is very clear that they are fighting the same battle. They all experience consistent culture shock, rejection, and identity crisis. These individuals feel most comfortable and accepted by those raised like them, in an international world, because they understand their grief. Mary Bassey was fortunate enough to learn more about her identity however many others who are in her shoes are always questioning and bemused about their identity uniqueness but they might not be as lucky as Mary Bassey. It is important for these

individuals to understand that they are different in order to be able to embrace their cultural identity. Mary describes her gratitude in regards to getting to know her identity as she stated,

I didn't know I was a TCK until I met you in that class. And to be honest, I hate you. But I also love you. And I couldn't imagine my life making more sense without you. Thank you for showing me I'm not the only one going through this identity crisis. Thank you for the support group of TCKs and expats I have encountered thus far and the ones I will encounter in the future. Thank you for giving me the courage to speak out what I have kept silent for many years and for making me feel okay for being different. (2013)

The distress of third culture kids is often invisible. They are told what cultures they are suppose to be part of and they are constantly trying to adjust and meet people's expectations without parents and educators acknowledging their inner struggles.

Generally, whether TCK international students or regular international students, they experience many difficulties while attempting to integrate. There are different stages that they go through as many of them also relate to each other's experiences. In most cases, these international students find comfort within other international students. Therefore, at times, this makes it difficult for them to assimilate into the host country. Nonetheless, some successfully go through the different stages while others spend longer periods in those phases.

## Chapter 5: Results

During their visit to this foreign country, my informants have experienced more challenges than the average American college student does. They had to adapt to the new environment and the way people interact with one another, making it difficult to settle in. Sooner than later, the pressure of having to overthink everything they said or did started to get to them. As I have previously stated that, many of their customs and traditions are very different than the American culture and when they try to assimilate, issues start to arise. Here, college students are given more freedom to find out who they want to become and what kind of career they want because, in most cases many international students need to have a good grade, study hard, and focus on their academic in order to meet family expectations.

Despite the issues that international students experience in their host country, they are still pressured by family members back home. Some of the participants discussed their anxiety level and the burden they have to endure regarding their academic performance. For instance, Serah, a 20-year-old from Sri Lanka believed that most Asian parents live their dreams through their children's lives. Hence, parents who were not able to achieve college education or pay for their children's education due to their economic state or family needs, make it difficult for their children to pursue the degree they desire. She also mentioned that there is no place for failure in Asian parents' eyes. Unfortunately, the academic site was not an escape for Serah either. She felt that instructors have already preconceived idea about Asian students and believe that they are exceptionally smart. Serah wished educators on university campuses would offer more support and provide their students comfort while encouraging them to achieve their academic goals.

In addition, many of the international students have learned to accept that teachers here are more concerned about following the curriculum than building relationships with their students, making it hard for them to understand the sole purpose of these teachers in their lives. One point of view is of Arjun, which is that he had a difficult time understanding why teachers do not make it their duty to reach out to students who are not meeting their academic needs. Many of the respondents of the study come from countries in which the teacher-student relationship is more based on a personal level of understanding one another. In the United States, the participants of the study perceived teachers as individuals who have very little interference in their students' academic lives.

Some of the international students have experienced difficulties in the classroom, which is built upon the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the United States. Sofia, a 20-year-old from Russia expressed her frustration in some of her finance classes where the instructor bases his lesson on what the majority of the students learned in American high schools instead of acknowledging that there are students who are not from this country in the classroom. Thus, Sofia hoped for instructors to be more mindful about who are in their classes and think of ways they can accommodate their lesson instruction for all students. This way, Sofia suggested, students who are from the host country will also understand that there are students from different backgrounds in their classrooms. Undoubtedly, this acknowledgement will create awareness and a friendly environment within the classroom.

On the other hand, some of them see their religion as part of their identity. This means the way they dress, behave and certain principles they practice. International students often feel as though they are constantly judged by the way they talk, act and dress. Many of them

believe that this impacts their academic and social life due to the lack of making friends from the host culture. For example, some of the students from the Muslim world are afraid and feel that they are normally associated with the media image of their religion, Islam, which is linked to terrorism in the recent years. Though they condemn the actions of the extremist groups and understand they do not represent them and their religion in any way, it is still challenging for many of them to communicate and discuss with others about this particular topic, as they believe that it is very sensitive.

Moreover, international students come from different backgrounds and cultures. Some international students grew up in two different cultures and it is hard for them to identify with a certain group. These individuals who are referred to as TCKs deal with great amount of anxiety due to the pressure they receive from their surroundings whether be parents, educators, fellow classmates and friends regarding cultural identity. In fact, their notion of home and where they really belong is not an easy theory. Nonetheless, it appears to be easier for them to adapt and understand the cultural difference than the other international students. This could be due to the fact that they were raised in numerous different cultures and environments.

Overall, these international students had their own struggles while living in the U.S and they still fight different battles as they try to understand the new environment. Some feel that the locals should put more effort to understand them better as others feel that teachers could play better role in their academic lives. However, generally, international students feel more accepted among other international students.

## **Limitations**

The data results of this study are subject to some limitations. The first limitation that I have been concerned about throughout my interview is language barrier. Often times, I have wondered if I have conveyed their message accurately. Even though some of the participants spoke very good English and were able to express their thoughts without any burden, there were a few who struggled with stating their viewpoints and observations. This led to my struggle of finding it difficult to interpret some of the vague terms and phrases they have used in their answers. Fortunately, I was able to clarify with those few participants after their interviews were recorded and inquired whether I have misrepresented their responses in any way. While I was able to overcome some of the limitations, there were some I was uncertain about their validity such as my own prejudice.

Secondly, being that my family and I came to this country as immigrants, my previous experience in public schools and making friends with locals were rather similar than different with most of the respondents. Therefore, while I was interviewing the participants, I found myself being very compassionate about the topic and sympathetic with the respondents. I understood their obstacles and complications as international students in fact I was more sympathetic with the third culture kids and relate to their experience unquestionably as I grew up in four different countries myself. I recognized their identity confusion because they grew up navigating between cultures. This is where I debated whether I partially represented their point of view and missed important points because I was caught up and amazed by their unique stories. Due to this uncertainty, I managed to communicate with the participants

through messaging to correct any ambiguity I encounter in our conversation and they were all very cooperative individuals as they answered by questions instantly.

Finally, as a researcher, during the interview, I felt the pressure to find answers to my research question, which might have affected the way I presented my interview questions. Occasionally, I might have been slightly biased while interviewing the participants. There were occasions where I was not prepared for certain topics that respondents brought up and I end up overlooking due to my lack of understanding the significance it holds for international students. Last but not least, these were some limitations; it does not affect the overall results of this study.

## **Conclusion**

This study was involved in discovering some of the challenges that international students are challenged with as well as their cultural identity transformation during their stay in the United States and whether they experience identity crisis in some cases. Truly, interviewing the participants made me acknowledge the difficulties that come with being an international student as well as the gap between different cultures and peoples' philosophical understanding of those practices. The participants were willingly and respectfully able to provide me some meaningful and fascinating stories about their individual experiences in the United States as students, their personal struggles with the host culture as well as their cultural identity transformation over time. In addition, the participants reflected on their day-to-day practice, some of the changes that took place and how this reflected on their cultural identity.

Truthfully, before conducting the interviews, I predicted that international students would report various different issues, however, I did not realize that most would also share common matters. In particular, I noticed similar behavior and experiences more than differences. This was due to the way these individuals conducted themselves. In this study, I interviewed ten international students, some of them who have stayed here for 1-5 years and others who have stayed in the United States for over 5 years. During the interview, I had a personal one on one conversation with each individual. While answering the interview questions, they shared their personal experiences with me as I audio recorded our conversation. I then took some time to listen to their stories from the recorded audio files and was able to express their stories through my writing. In addition, I analyzed everything they conveyed which also allowed me to show their own unique backgrounds.

In this study, I, as the researcher chose semi-structured interviews because I understand the benefits of having an open discussion. I also see the advantage of allowing individuals to express their views and observations without restricting them in any way. This method allowed them to bring new ideas and comments to our discussion as the interview continued.

After conducting this study and absorbing the results, I would like to see further research which deals with some solutions regarding the trails that international students face in their day to day routine. As we have seen in the results, some common challenges were feelings of loneliness and stress due to culture shock, the lack of friends as a result of avoiding miscommunication as well as family pressure and their own inner battle of their identity. Undoubtedly, each of these areas is significant and deserves future research. Many of

the participants similarly expressed their academic needs and the need to build a strong relationship with their instructors, acknowledging the fact that their previous relationships was not the best one due to cultural differences. Some of future research can perhaps address and encourage teachers to finally start to prepare their lessons based on the needs of every student in their classroom. This will be beneficial for both the instructors and the students as they will acknowledge diversity in the classroom as well.

Some of the international students identified issues that they encountered in their classrooms. They stated that U.S. professors ask questions that are asking the student about a cultural aspect of the American culture that they may not have ever heard of. This then causes the students to be confused and anxiety in terms of how to answer such questions. These questions can range from a type of food, clothing, drink, car or even a country's history and written laws. A student would not be able to answer such a question if they have not been equipped with the proper knowledge of the American culture and history. It is beneficial to familiarize a student with the culture in which they are writing about or either to write for students from a multicultural perspective in which the questions can somewhat relate to them. Having said that, the issue is not limited to the cultural context of materials, but also language barrier as well lack of communication and misunderstanding of teacher-student relationship in a U.S. classroom context.

Thus, the study includes some pedagogical implication for both English language learners and U.S. professors in American classrooms. Since the issue with language barrier is a big problematic with international students in American classrooms, another helpful technique which, I, the researcher would recommend to U.S instructors in order for their

international students to succeed could be reducing linguistic complexity considering how instructors word their assignments. And of course this will not change the overall context of the material but however simplicity of the text will help English language learners to understand the important information without rereading the material several times or misunderstanding the text itself.

Furthermore, I would advise instructors to acknowledge the significance of a good communication with their students. Instructors should accept and understand that every student communicates differently. Thus, the likelihood of having students who will not raise their hand to ask or answer questions simply because they are shy or embarrassed to do so is higher in your English language learners classroom. Consequently, when one encounters this situation, encouraging your students and creating a safe environment where mistakes are accepted is helpful and can comfort the students who are nervous to participate. It is necessary that instructors to establish a respectable relationship with their students because this leads to creating a friendly environment for them. Instructors should also consider the different cultural backgrounds that their students are from and how this might affect their relationship overall as some students come from cultures where students and teachers have a close relationship. Overall, it is important that we consider how much of an impact that we have on our students as instructors, and regardless of what we teach, and how we educate our students, we are leaving them with an experience of a lifetime so let's concentrate on enhancing their self-esteem and motivating them to succeed academically.

Finally, this study is meaningful as it sheds light on some serious issues that need to be addressed among students, parents and educators. It is important that educators understand

the best interest of all students, as international students also need to acknowledge the different environment and better communicate with their teachers. This study should also assist administrations while they are preparing for orientation week for the international students and consider addressing some of the challenges as well as solutions for them. Indeed, our understanding of these issues will as a result enhance our ability to provide sympathetic, supportive services to international students.

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## Appendix A

### Student Information

1. Background information
  - a) Gender:
  - b) Age:
  - c) Home culture:
  - d) Major:
2. How long have you been in the United States?
3. How long have you studied in the United States?
4. Is this your first time living abroad?
5. What is your first language?
6. How many members do you have in your family?
7. Did you have any traditional family gatherings that you normally attend?

Think about your cultural identity before you came to the U.S:

1. There are different ethnicities, such as American, British, German, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Japanese-American. How would you identify yourself before you arrived in the U.S?
2. What did this identity mean to you before you came to the U.S?
3. How was your behavior like in a family, social and academic settings?
4. What was your language like?
5. How did you dress?
6. How did you speak in a family, social and academic setting as well as other professional contexts?
7. Who were your friends back home?
8. What cultural, academic or professional activities did you participate in? How did that reflect upon your cultural identity?
9. What academic pursuits and/or aspirations did you have?
10. Can you recall how you perceived yourself before you came to the U.S? If so, what was your cultural identity like?

Now, think of your cultural identity at the moment:

1. Do you think your behavior in family, social and academic setting has changed from before? If so, how so?
2. How does the way you walk, talk, or dress reflect your cultural identity now?
3. Who are your friends in the U.S now?
4. How do you think your friends in the U.S who come from a different cultural background identify with you?
5. How do you think your friends who share the same cultural background with you would identify you?
6. What cultural, academic or professional activities do you participate in now? And how does that reflect your cultural identity?
7. How do you think your cultural identity impacted you in educational settings?

8. Have you encountered any hardships in your academic or social life?
9. In what culture (if any) do you feel like you belong or do you feel as a full member?  
And why?
10. How do you currently see your cultural identity overall?

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent**

I am inviting you to participate in a research study about identity crisis and cultural transformation among international students at St Cloud State University. You are selected to participate in this research because you are a good fit for this study due to fact that you are an international student at the moment, hence you are the targeted population for this study and will be able to provide appropriate data for my study. This research project is being conducted by Zeynab Jibreel in order to complete the requirements of a Masters Degree in Teaching English as a Second language at St. Cloud State University.

#### **Background Information and Purpose**

Recent years, questions of identity have become extremely significant in many international students' lives. These questions regarding their identity may lead to make identity choices. When international students arrive in a different country, they realize that they are different. Often times, they also feel as though they have to fight and defend their values, goals and identity. In this study, the researcher would like to hear the stories of international students and their journey and experiences in a new country. Even though earlier studies investigated similar topics, yet, additional research is needed to deal with this particular topic hence the researcher believe that this report will be successful in producing helpful results. These results will be useful for present as well as future international students at St. Cloud State University. The information will also be helpful to the faculty at St. Cloud State University and will enhance their understanding of international students' lives.

#### **Procedures**

Participants will answer questions about cultural and identity transformation as well as some of the effects this might have on international students. The interview has three different parts. The first part of the interview is a demographic inquiry, asking for age, gender, home culture, major and how long the respondent had been living and studying abroad. The results will be presented in aggregate form with no more than 3-4 descriptors presented together. The second part of the interview inquires about the respondents' identity prior to coming to the United States. The third part of the interview will be asking questions about the respondents' present identity. The researcher will be using audio recorder to record the respondents' interview answers. An audio recorder is a tool that researchers normally use to record interviews in a qualitative research. Also, direct quotations from the interview will be used in this research hence as a participant, you should not say anything that you do not want to be published.

#### **Risks**

There are no risks involved in participating this study. The participants' information will be kept in locked boxes where the researcher only has access to. The data will be kept confidential and the researcher will destroy it after a period of three months upon the completion of this Thesis.

**Benefits**

The participants do not receive any benefits in this study and the research is voluntary. However, the outcome of this research will be helpful for educators at St. Cloud State University, students who are from the host culture as well as international students who are attending the university. Again, you will not receive any monetary compensation for your participation in this study however, your participation will be appreciated.

**Confidentiality**

Only, I, the researcher will have access to your name. It will be kept confidential, and will never be published in any version of the report. I guarantee you that there will be no indication of your identity in the thesis and everything that you say that is quoted in the thesis will be entirely confidential.

**Research Results**

You may contact me at [moze0901@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:moze0901@stcloudstate.edu) in order to receive the results of this research. Also, you will be able to find my thesis on file at St. Cloud State University's Learning Resources Center when I complete this research.

**Contact Information**

If you have questions right now, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me at [moze0901@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:moze0901@stcloudstate.edu) or my advisor, Dr. Robinson at [jhrobinson@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jhrobinson@stcloudstate.edu). You will be given a copy of this form for your records as well.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, the researcher, or your status in anywhere on campus. Since you have decided to participate voluntarily, you are free to withdraw at any time without a penalty.

**Acceptance to Participate**

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you have consent to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without a penalty after signing this form.

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 Printed Name

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 Email Address

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 Signature

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 Date

## Appendix C

### Additional Resources

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