The Role of Educational Experiences in Enhancing the Cultural Identity of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Undergraduate Female Students in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract
This study explored how educational experiences enhance the cultural identity of deaf and hard-of-hearing undergraduate female students in Saudi Arabia, using an explanatory design. The study methods include a researcher-made scale involving 105 female deaf and hard-of-hearing students, a focus group with 20 female students, and individual interviews with 11 female students. The individually interviewed participants were part of the scale and focus groups. Quantitative results revealed three profiles in terms of cultural identities found in deaf and hard-of-hearing students in Saudi Arabia. In descending order of prevalence these were bicultural identity, hearing identity, and deaf identity. Regarding the qualitative results, four main themes on how educational experiences affected the participants’ cultural identities emerged: educational environment, peer relationships, relationships with teachers, and communication methods. Differences in the participants’ cultural identities were found, based on different educational experiences. Thus, further mixed-methods research should be conducted to address how deaf and hard-of-hearing people perceive their cultural identities, and to discover the enhancing effects of different factors on their identities.

Keywords
experience, cultural identity, educational environment, deaf identity

Introduction
Cultural identity is an area of interest for pedagogues, researchers, and educators in general, and those interested in special education in particular. This issue has been investigated by many scholars aiming to understand the human psyche, and is one which has resulted from various forces affected by rapid changes emerging in societies with diverse cultures (Leigh, 2009). Identity encompasses a sense of individual subjectivity, where people feel the group they belong to is determined by the scope of their gender and social class, as well as their religious, political, and ideological beliefs (Erikson, 1968). Cultural identity is a complex process which refers to the feeling of belonging to one or more cultural groups and becoming acculturated to their values, trends, and attitudes. Furthermore, Phinney (2008) defined cultural identity as the way individuals are distinguished from others within the cultural contexts in which they live.

If cultural identity is significantly important for hearing people, thus forming creating a unique group identity. While this identity could be conceived of as a disability in a community where people typically communicate through verbal and audible methods, it helps create interdependence in the deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) community making use of sign language which is part of deaf culture, thereby reducing their sense of alienation from the world of hearing people (Mohammed, 2010). DHH people are sometimes separated from both deaf and normal-hearing communities, leading to them living in the hearing world, but without feeling a real connection to it (Beckner & Helme, 2018). Consequently, deafness and hearing impairment...
do not only merely represent losing one’s hearing, but also leads to joining a cultural minority group that has a distinct language, standards, and values which differ from those of the hearing majority. As this makes it easier for DHH people to distinguish their unique identity from others (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002), their cultural identity may take on multiple profiles depending on their affiliation with the DHH and hearing communities: deaf identity, hearing identity, bicultural identity, and marginal identity (Fischer & White, 2001; Glickman, 1993; Weldon, 2017).

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD; n.d.), in the United States of America indicated that the DHH community is diverse, and its members differ in many ways, including hearing condition, educational background, and cultural identity. Hence, individual classifications, according to one’s hearing condition (i.e., whether one is deaf or hard-of-hearing), may be largely affected by the cultural identity within which one classifies oneself.

Schooling also has an important role in promoting cultural identity due to the variety of educational options available, as well as relationships with peers and teachers. This is in addition to the educational, personal, and social experiences that DHH people go through in different environments which inform them of their identities, create a sense of community, and provide opportunities to strengthen or resist the cultural identities that they absorb from different home and community environments (Leigh, 2009; Palmer et al., 2014; Sari, 2005).

Modern education focuses heavily on individual educational experiences and how people coexist within educational environments, all of which directly affect their personal qualities (Webster, 2015). Thus, specialists can control the quality of DHH students’ experiences within those environments to help provide high-quality educational experiences and enhance positive identity, especially when the needs of DHH people are severely unsatisfied imposed by different profiles of identity (Leigh, 2009; Mcllroy & Storbeck, 2011; Sari, 2005; Sisia, 2012).

The situation of DHH people have received a great deal of attention in Saudi Arabia. The government has provided such individuals with many services such as a suitable education, support services, and assistive technologies. The government has also issued a comprehensive guide for special education that ensures the provision of all relevant services such as assessment, diagnosis, early intervention, and appropriate educational plans. Implementing these guidelines regulates the assignment of responsibilities, and invests resources in special education in Saudi Arabia, whether human or material (Ministry of Education, 2017). These services include providing university admission opportunities. Al-Habbeb (2012) pointed out that Saudi Arabia has made great efforts to provide opportunities for DHH students to pursue their university studies in several disciplines that satisfy their interests and abilities. Unfortunately, most of these attempts have been unsuccessful due to the lack of proper facilities. One exception is King Saud University which provides one of the leading experiences in the Arab world in terms of granting DHH students opportunities to pursue their university education on the basis of planned scientific foundations.

Many studies have explored the role of educational experiences in affecting the identities of DHH people. For example, Weldon (2017) investigated the patterns of identity and culture among 92 DHH undergraduate students, and showed that there are different identity profiles based on school experiences, type of educational environment, and communication methods. Hadjikakou and Nikolaraiz (2007) conducted a qualitative investigation involving 24 deaf people and found that school type and academic and social experiences on the part of the participants, their colleagues, and their teachers were crucial to identity development. Israelite et al. (2002) explored the issue of identity-building with seven hard-of-hearing adolescents and showed that school experiences and interactions with teachers and peers have a major impact on one’s choice of, and knowledge of, their identity.

However, there is a lack of research that addresses deaf culture in the Arab world in general, and in Saudi Arabia in particular. Yet, one can state that the culture that distinguishes DHH individuals from others exists (Al-Rayyes, 2006). Therefore, there is a need to identify the cultural identity profiles among female DHH students in Saudi Arabia, and to determine the role of educational experiences in creating their identity. Thus, in this study cultural identity has been investigated by analysing qualitatively the participants’ educational experiences by listening to them directly. Hence, in this way, the present study aimed to elucidate this issue, which cannot be determined by using quantitative research methods alone. The following questions were explored in this study:

1. What are the profiles of female DHH undergraduate students’ cultural identities in Saudi Arabia?
2. How do educational experiences help shape the cultural identities of female DHH undergraduate students’ in Saudi Arabia?
3. How do the profiles of female DHH undergraduate students’ cultural identities differ based on their educational experiences in Saudi Arabia?

Theoretical Framework

The cultural identity of DHH people has been a central issue among scholars and researchers for many years. Padden (1998) defined deaf culture as the common culture among a deaf community which uses sign language, and shares beliefs, values, customs, and experiences that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Deaf culture is part of the general culture of a society; however, it has distinct features, with some regions having sub-cultures with their own customs, traditions, and dialects. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the cornerstone of the deaf culture is the use of sign language.
Byatt et al. (2021) indicated that the way DHH adolescents perceive their identities evolves over time. They suggest that it is a flexible chain process that depends greatly on the context in which these adolescents live. Furthermore, Powell-Williams (2018) pointed out that DHH people feel compelled to prove their abilities and normalize themselves and their deafness in their interaction with listeners, which affects their identities one way or another.

The cultural identity of the DHH can be classified into the following four main profiles:

1. **Listening identity**: In this identity, individuals grow up in hearing families and are brought exposed to the values of hearing people, which emphasize the importance of speech and verbal communication. This makes them closer to listeners, and more distant from the DHH community.

2. **Marginal identity**: This type of identity can be considered as a temporary stage of immersion with regard to deaf identity. Individuals with a marginal identity are reluctant to join the DHH community or the community of listeners. Therefore, they do not join either community.

3. **Deaf/submerged identity**: In this identity, individuals grow up in families with deaf people, and they use sign language as the principal method of communication. They are immersed in deaf culture. Since they share the language, beliefs, and customs, they feel a sense of pride.

4. **Dual-cultural identity**: In this type of identity, individuals usually grow up in families with hearing and DHH members. These individuals are comfortable in both communities, they appreciate both cultures, and they use both sign and verbal languages (Fischer & Whiter, 2001; Palmer et al., 2014; Scheetz, 2012).

In this regard, McLlroy and Storbeck (2011) pointed out that the most important factors influencing the identity of the DHH are related to the school they attend and their educational experiences, since such experiences affect children’s self-perception and self-concept, which play a significant role in shaping their identities.

Although the school is one of the main factors affecting the identity of DHH individuals, it is yet to be determined how the educational experiences individuals are exposed to shape their identities at school (Weldon, 2017). Therefore, in the next section we discuss the most important educational experiences that contribute significantly to enhancing the cultural identities of the DHH at school.

**Educational Environment**

Educational environments greatly impact DHH people because they affect a child’s cultural identity from an early age, the types of social patterns that he/she experiences, and his/her self-values (Hardy, 2010; Israelite et al., 2002; Kent, 2003; Staten, 2011; Weldon, 2017). There have been many attempts to address the impact of educational experiences and environments on formulating the identities of DHH people. These attempts have mainly focused on relationships with peers, school environments, curricula, and students’ perceptions of their environment (Leigh, 2009).

Scheetz (2012) claims that the education of DHH people has undergone a major shift in the mid-1970s, from private day schools to different forms of inclusive education. Thus, DHH students were exposed to different experiences in educational environments which created challenges that affected their social interactions and contributed to enhancing their identities.

Nikolaraiz and Hadjikakou (2006) stated that participants with a deaf identity were mostly educated only in schools for the deaf, where they experienced a happy social life. While all participants with a hearing identity attended public schools, a small number of them attended inclusive environments. As for the participants with dual identities, although most of them were not provided with formal support services in public schools, they felt that they could do well academically and socially. This may relate to the beneficial role of both participating teachers and their peers listeners in public schools. In addition, Angelide and Aravi (2006) mentioned that the type of educational environment, whether it is an environment of isolation or one of integration, affects the identity of the DHH individuals, as special schools enhance sign language for such individuals and help to form groups of the deaf. This makes them more aware of their identity.

In addition, Weldon (2017) states that those who attended a regular school displayed a hearing identity, while those who attended a special DHH school carry a deaf identity, while the students who attended both types displayed a marginal identity, with some of them displaying a dual identity. Consequently, the type of educational environment experiences in early life affects the identity profile of the individual.

**Relationship With Peers**

The educational experiences provided by peers are considered to be an essential factor in terms of enhancing and defining cultural identity, especially for the DHH (Brunnberg, 2010; Hadjikakou & Nikolaraiz, 2007; Israelite et al., 2002; Kemmery & Compton, 2014; Leigh, 1999).

In this regard, Al-Ballah (2008) indicated that peer relationships are crucial for DHH individuals since they provide opportunities for communication, symmetry, and similarity in many aspects such as communication patterns, disability patterns, deaf culture, and highlight the deaf characteristics as a minority group with special needs, that differ from other forms of disability.

Nikolaraiz and Hadjikakou (2006), have pointed out that although the social and personal experiences of identity
deficient participants sometimes seem challenging with teachers, the social experiences of the DHH participants with their peers have been described as very interesting, mostly because they fall into two components: that such individuals mostly interacted with their deaf counterparts, and that sign language was used for communicate purposes, which had a positive impact on their identity. At the same time, participants with dual identities are often raised in families that promote positive attitudes toward sign language and the deaf culture, which made the families support the participants when it came to learning sign language and developing a strong bond with the deaf community. This led them to form relationships with them in addition to ones with the hearing community. On the other hand, Breivick (2005) noted that even if people have positive feelings about being in the hearing community, they also need a strong bond with the deaf community at the same time. Participants had both deaf and hearing peers, and some of them felt they wanted to associate with a deaf partner.

**Relationship With Teachers**

The educational experiences to which the DHH are exposed as a result of their relationships with their teachers are among the most important experiences which have a significant impact on enhancing their cultural identities (Hadjikakou & Nikolaraizi, 2007; Israelite et al., 2002; Kemmery & Compton, 2014; Sisia, 2012). Teachers are an important element in DHH of schools as they play a pivotal role in enhancing their dignity and building their self-confidence which helps develop their identities (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011) especially due the professional development of teachers and their mastery of sign language which contributes to designing and executing programs for the DHH and their parents or guardians (Ntinda et al., 2019).

A study by Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou (2006) found that despite identity-deficient participants’ communication problems with teachers and their social experiences, were full of words that were critical to their identity, both positively and negatively. Israelite et al. (2002) also pointed out that interactions with teachers and DHH students have a significant impact on their choice of identity. In addition, Weldon (2017) stated that since most DHH students are from hearing families, teachers need to take on the role of language models for students, which requires that teachers must participate in events related to the DHH in and out of school, so that they can understand and develop skills to support the needs of their students, because they also influence the personal identity of DHH individuals and their acceptance of themselves as a whole.

**Communication Methods**

The DHH use a variety of communication methods in different educational environments, whether it be sign language, verbal communication, or wholistic communication. Many studies have demonstrated the significant impact of the communication methods used on enhancing the cultural identities of DHH people (Najarian, 2008; Nikolaraizi & Hadjikakou, 2006; Sari, 2005; Weldon, 2017).

Some experts have associated the term ‘deafness’ with sign language. Mugeere et al. (2015) argued that the term refers to the linguistic, social, and cultural minority group that uses sign language as the main method of communication in the deaf community. Therefore, DHH people normally use sign language to satisfy a sense of belonging within the community (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011).

Accordingly, the identity of DHH people does not rely solely on the communication method used, whether it be sign, verbal, or wholistic, but rather on the quality and productivity of the communication process, regardless of the method used (Hardy, 2010). Additionally, the efficiency of communication is important for the development of cultural identity, as DHH people who are capable of using different methods of communication can develop dual-cultural identities compared with others who are not (Goldblat & Most, 2018). Hence, the socialization that a DHH person receives at home and through educational experiences at school, is considered a key element in shaping his/her future identity (Sutton-Spence, 2010).

The impact of communication methods on the cultural identity of DHH individuals varies. Palmer et al. (2014) have indicated that the use of sign language as a method of communication is closely related to deaf identity, as those who hold this identity use sign language as a means of communication among themselves, and are proud of it. In addition, Weldon (2017) indicated that all students who use oral communication methods chose an auditory identity, while students who use both sign language and oral communication tend to choose a binary identity.

**Method**

This study used a mixed-methods design; specifically, a sequential explanatory design which involved two phases (see Figure 1). The first phase used quantitative methods, while the second phase used qualitative methods to provide a deeper explanation of the findings. Figure 1 shows the design scheme of the study.

**Participants**

A comprehensive survey method was used to collect quantitative data from 105 female participants enrolled in a higher education program for DHH students at King Saud University. Female participants were selected because it was easier for the researchers to conduct face-to-face interviews with them. Due to cultural restrictions, it was difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews with male participants. Table 1 shows the participant characteristics.
To collect the qualitative data, 20 DHH students were chosen to participate in focus group sessions. Eleven of these students were then purposively selected for individual interviews. These participants were selected due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and the difficulty of conducting the study on all the members of the target population based on a particular set of criteria. Firstly, participants were selected for the focus groups first by assessing their responses to the primary data collected using the Cultural Identity Profiles Scale in order to guarantee diversity in the study variables. Secondly, participants were selected based on scores obtained on the Cultural Identity Profiles Scale, to ensure cultural diversity and to detect differences related to the impact of educational experiences on identity enhancement. Thus, 10 students with a bicultural identity, 5 students with a deaf identity, and 5 students with a hearing identity were chosen for the focus groups.

Selecting the participants for the individual interviews was also based on several criteria: firstly, the clarity and detail they had provided when answering the questions during the focus groups was considered. Secondly, diversity provided in the responses of the participants was considered. Thirdly, the impact of educational experiences on each participant in terms of educational environment, relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, and communication methods used.

**Data Collection Methods**

**DHH Cultural Identity Profiles Scale.** A Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Cultural Identity Profiles Scale was prepared by the researchers to collect quantitative data related to the four main profiles of DHH cultural identities as identified by Glickman (1993): deaf identity, hearing identity, bicultural identity, and marginal identity. To design this tool, the researchers reviewed the literature on cultural identity and DHH people (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1993; Jambor, 2009; Mohammed, 2010; Weldon, 2017). The scale comprises preliminary information and 38 phrases distributed across two dimensions: Deaf Identity and Hearing Identity. According to the correction key, each participant’s cultural identity was defined, and responses were made using a 5-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree.

**Scale validity and reliability.** To establish face validity, the researchers submitted the tool to 14 specialized professors who provided their observations on the scale; adjustments were made accordingly. The researchers also verified the internal consistency of the scale, finding correlation coefficients ranging between .8254 and .3189. These are statistically significant values at the $p = .01$ or .05 levels. To verify the tool’s reliability, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated, and an average value of .8282 was obtained for the scale as a whole. Reliability was also verified using half-segmentation, and it was found that the overall reliability factor of the scale was high at .66.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups are one type of group interview. The researchers conducted focus groups with 20 participants divided into four groups. Each group included four to six participants who were distributed among the groups according to their specific circumstances. This mainly depended on their schedules. The researchers acted as coordinators for the focus groups. The focus group participants were asked several general questions about educational environments, relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, and the communication methods they use. Thus, these questions were used to direct the discussion, gain accurate data, and obtain a better understand of the research problem with several participants simultaneously.

**Individual interviews.** The semi-structured individual interviews are considered the main qualitative data collection tool for this study. Semi-structured interviews were used to
elicit detailed data from the participants. The interviews were conducted after the focus groups since they are a suitable instrument for face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the respondent. Interviews are also flexible and can be modified as needed (Abu ‘Allam, 2007). The semi-structured individual interviews involved main and sub-questions which focused on the participants’ experiences and perceptions with regard to the following domains: educational environment, relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, and the communication methods used. The semi-structured individual interviews were held with 11 participants who had previously completed the scale and participated in the focus groups.

Qualitative data collection and analysis went through several steps. The first was preparation, in which qualitative research specialists judged the questions. After that, the data were collected. The results were then analyzed. The researchers, accompanied by a certified sign language interpreter, conducted the interviews.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted by the researchers in the presence of a qualified sign language interpreter to assist communication with the deaf participants, while verbal communication was used with the hard of hearing participants. Moreover, the opportunity was available to use any method of communication when the participants so requested.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Study Sample.

| Variable                        | Classification                          | Frequency | Proportion (%) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Hearing condition of the female students | Deaf                                    | 37        | 35.2           |
|                                 | Hard-of-hearing                         | 68        | 64.8           |
| Age                             | From 18–20 years                        | 34        | 32.4           |
|                                 | From 21–23 years                        | 54        | 51.4           |
|                                 | From 24 years and more                  | 17        | 16.2           |
| Degree of hearing loss          | 70 dB and more                          | 37        | 35.2           |
|                                 | 35–69 dB                                | 68        | 64.8           |
| Age of hearing loss             | Since birth                             | 87        | 83             |
|                                 | Acquired                                | 18        | 17             |
| The level of education at the university | Foundation year                      | 47        | 44.8           |
|                                 | First–second                            | 13        | 12.4           |
|                                 | Third–fourth                            | 17        | 16.2           |
|                                 | Fifth–sixth                             | 18        | 17.1           |
|                                 | Seventh–eighth                          | 10        | 9.5            |
| Parents’ hearing status         | Two deaf-two hard of hearing            | 17        | 16.2           |
|                                 | Two normal hearing                      | 85        | 81             |
|                                 | One is deaf/hard of hearing the other is of normal hearing | 3 | 2.9 |
| Communication method used       | Sign language                           | 17        | 16.2           |
|                                 | Oral method                             | 51        | 48.6           |
|                                 | Total method                            | 37        | 35.2           |
| Student’s pre-university educational environment | Isolated environments in special schools | 17 | 16.2 |
|                                 | Special education programs in mainstream schools | 20 | 19.0 |
|                                 | Inclusive schools                       | 61        | 58.1           |
|                                 | Isolated environments in special schools, in addition to special education programs in mainstream schools | 2 | 1.9 |
|                                 | Regular school without special support  | 5         | 4.8            |

Data analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 20) and consisted of the frequency and percentages.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the concept analysis method (CAM) in which data are examined in order to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the form of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was appropriate for the present study, as it enabled the researchers to analyze and understand the data using an inductive method that relies on creating themes from new data, rather than predetermined data. The analysis process followed the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which began with gaining familiarity with the data, the generation of initial symbols, and then the search and review of topics to produce the final report and link the findings to the literature.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative data. Objectivity and accuracy were verified according to the steps suggested by Abu ‘Allam (2007) and Al-Abdulkareem (2012). Firstly, there was triangulation, which means diversification in terms of the data collection sources, leading to enhanced validity of the results and the elimination of the inherent bias associated with a single source. The research relied on three sources for data collection: the scale, focus groups, and individual interviews.
Secondly, four professors working in Saudi universities and who specialized in education, acted as arbitrators for reviewing the questions used in the individual interviews, which was subsequently altered based on their opinions. Their feedback included removing or rephrasing some of the questions and adding some detailed questions. Thirdly, notes were coded in order to document and preserve ideas. Fourthly, the participants continuously reviewed the data as the researchers provided fully written data to the participants, and asked them to review it to verify its validity.

**Ethical considerations.** Based on the previous discussion, the study observed the ethical considerations for conducting research in the social sciences and humanities. In particular, it adhered to the guidelines and rules for conducting scientific research laid out by King Saud University. Specifically, the researchers obtained the necessary approvals to conduct the study from King Saud University’s Ethical Committee of Scientific Research for Humanities Colleges. The participants’ consent was also obtained by asking them to read and sign a consent letter which indicates that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time. To protect the participants’ identities, their names were anonymized, and a code was assigned to each participant. The participants were assured that the collected data would be used for research purposes only.

**Results**

**First Research Question: What Are the Profiles of Female DHH Undergraduate Students’ Cultural Identities in Saudi Arabia?**

To answer the first research question, frequencies and percentages were used to order participants’ responses to the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Cultural Identity Profiles Scale, according to the profiles of their cultural identities, as shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, three out of the four cultural identity profiles were identified among the participants. Bicultural identity was ranked first, with 63.8% of the total participants, followed by hearing identity with 23.8%, and deaf identity with 12.4%. No participant was identified as having a marginal identity.

**Second research question: How do educational experiences help shape the cultural identities of female DHH undergraduate students’ in Saudi Arabia?**

To answer the second research question, the researchers used CAM to analyze the participants’ responses. The qualitative data provided an opportunity to answer some of the questions related to the quantitative data obtained in the current study. The analysis revealed the most prominent educational experiences that can affect the development of DHH people’s cultural identity, as described below.

**Educational Environment**

The results revealed many factors which work to enhance DHH people’s cultural identity, as related to different stages of the educational environment. These factors were grouped into three sub-themes.

**Educational environment type.** The type of educational environment in which DHH people are enrolled is one of the most important factors that affects cultural identity. Based on their preferred educational environment, participants were divided into three groups. The first group preferred isolated environments, especially when the needs of the students required it. Most of the responses relating to the first group’s perspective were from participants with a deaf cultural identity. One of these participants expressed the following: “I think isolation is better, and integration for us is possible only with hard-of-hearing people, not with hearing people, because communicating with them is difficult” P5.

The second group, which represented the majority of the participants, preferred integrated environments, represented by attached classes in public education schools. These participants preferred such an environment because of its many benefits, such as encouraging acceptance by hearing people, developing spoken language, increasing self-confidence, and developing skills. One of the participants openly expressed the view that “I am against all forms of isolated environments in special schools because DHH people are human beings. Why do we isolate them? In the integrated environment, their confidence increases through their communication with hearing people, and their spoken language develops as well” P16.

Regarding the third group, it included participants who preferred public schools over both isolated and integrated environments, as they felt that they could be closer to hearing people. One participant stated “Public school brings me very close to hearing people and does not make me feel like there is a difference between me and them” P8.

**School curricula.** The school curricula are among the most important issues that affect DHH people’s cultural identity, because of the significant role it plays in acquiring knowledge and improving educational outcomes. Some of the
participants stated they had not faced any problems with the curricula, but instead found it to be very appropriate for their capabilities. However, most participants indicated that they preferred curricula in integrated environments over curricula in isolated environments, given that a large part had been removed, and that negatively impacted students’ attitudes. One participant stated, “The integrated environment is better than the isolated environment in terms of curricula. In the isolated environment, a large part of the curricula was removed. The teacher also explains and asks the students to answer the questions in the classroom without understanding. The teacher just requests the student memorize information rather than understanding it.” P2.

**Undergraduate stage.** For the female DHH students, the undergraduate stage was better than other educational stages, as it helped to enhance their cultural identity. Unlike other educational stages, this stage was the best in terms of providing support and services, accounting for individual differences, having a positive impact on personality, and increasing self-reliance. One participant stated, “The undergraduate stage was the best for me, in which I got a lot of support. The teachers gave us all the services we needed, which I did not see in schools” P14. However, one characteristic that distinguished the undergraduate stage was the availability of social interactions and close relationships. One participant stated, “My social relationships at the university have changed 180 degrees from what they were at school. I have been able to choose friends rightly, and my relationships with faculty members have become better than they were with female teachers at school before, due to the presence of female sign language interpreters” P18.

**Relationship With Peers**

The results further indicated that many factors related to peer-relationships had roles in enhancing DHH people’s cultural identity. These factors are significant and can be classified into the three sub-themes described below.

**Peer-support.** Receiving support from peers not only played a major role in forming and maintaining peer relationships, but also positively affected the participants’ cultural identity. According to the participants, peer support included several aspects such as cooperation, assistance, acceptance, and encouragement. This was made clear in one participant’s statement: “My relationships with peers are good. We cooperate with each other when we study, exchange experiences, and encourage each other; therefore, I benefit from them a lot” P3. In contrast, approximately 50% of the respondents reported they were bullied by their peers, particularly hearing peers. This phenomenon was described in one participant’s statement: “The normal-hearing female students laugh at me when I read, speak, or ask about something. In addition to that, the female teachers witness it and make no effort to stop them” P17.

**Feeling of belonging.** It can be extrapolated that the feeling of belonging is important in forming relationships with peers, as it contributes to DHH people’s cultural identity. For most of the participants, the reason for belonging to a certain group depended on whether they had similar interests, ways of thinking, or common communication skills. One participant stated, “I have more sense of belonging with those who are hard-of-hearing, because they are like me, and have a disability like me. I feel comfortable when I am with them, and I rejoice and feel a sense of belonging when I see one wearing hearing aids in a public place” P13. Nevertheless, some participants also expressed that they feel a sense of belonging with hearing people, because they represent their main environment. One participant stated, “I feel a sense of belonging to those with normal hearing, because they are considered my home community. I do not imagine living without them and communicating with them is better. With those who are hard-of-hearing, I sometimes cannot understand them” P18.

**Similarity in interests.** The similarity in interests among peers was found to play a fundamental role in building social relationships which, in turn, can positively affect DHH cultural identity. One participant clarified the importance of this factor by stating, “I love when my friends share my interests, personal suffering, opinions, and views. I think this is necessary to maintain a relationship” P12.

**Relationship With Female Teachers**

The results revealed some factors related to the participants’ relationships with female teachers and faculty members at university. These factors also played a role in enhancing DHH respondents’ cultural identity, and can be further categorized into three sub-themes.

**Providing support and understanding needs.** Having female teachers and faculty members who provided support and understood the participants was among the most important factors in the success of their relationships with female DHH students. Furthermore, this factor showed a significant influence on enhancing DHH students’ cultural identity. Most participants emphasized the importance of providing support which could take different shapes such as cooperation, understanding, and taking responsibility for the students’ problems, to strengthen relationships and provide support. One participant stated, “What I am concerned with, with regard to the teachers, is that they cooperate with me, care about me, assume responsibility for the female students, and are sincere while teaching. These things strengthen my relationships with teachers.” P13.

**Respect and appreciation.** The respect and appreciation between female teachers and students play major roles in the success of relationships that can positively influence DHH people’s cultural identity. Most of the participants emphasized the
importance of teachers showing respect to students, as it can positively influence the success of the relationship. As one participant expressed it, “I love it when female teachers are close to us, treat us with respect and humility, and are modest. The teaching style of female teachers can make students love and respect them” P13. A group of female participants, however, reported that respect and appreciation from teachers toward their students were sometimes almost non-existent. Instead, teachers would insult and say hurtful words, thus negatively impacting students’ attitude. One participant stated, “I always hear female teachers advising each other: make it easy for them, they are deaf, may Allah heal them, etc. They think of us as passive, as if deafness makes us disabled in everything.” P9.

Enjoying teaching competencies. The enjoyment of teaching competencies on the part of the teacher was found to have a significant impact on the success of their relationships with DHH students which, in turn, could enhance cultural identity. Most participants emphasized that diligence in teaching, the delivery of information, and the ability to teach and simplify the subject were among the most important elements in a teacher’s character. Therefore, as one participant pointed out, “What concerns me regarding the teacher is that she should understand the subject, strive to deliver the information to students, and have enthusiasm for teaching” P7. In this concern, one of the most important teaching competencies referred to by the deaf participants was sign language, which can be an essential factor in communication being either poor or successful. One participant stated, “At school before, I had no relationship with the teachers at all. I did not understand them and vice-versa, because their pronunciation was fast, and they did not re-explain things. I think the reason is that they essentially did not know sign language” P9.

Communication Methods
This study’s findings have revealed some factors which help to promote DHH people’s cultural identity and which are related to communication methods. These could be categorized into three sub-themes, as described below.

Ability to use communication methods. The ability to choose and apply the appropriate communication method is important, as the degree of hearing loss plays a crucial role. The inability to use a particular method of communication makes it difficult to further pursue one’s education, which, in turn, negatively impacts the strength of one’s cultural identity. A group of hard-of-hearing participants indicated that their ability to speak made it unnecessary to use other communication methods. This perspective was clearly expressed as follows, “I use speech only because I can speak normally, as I can hear. I do not need to learn a second way of communication, and I thank Allah I can get everything by talking” P12. The inability to communicate was also a major problem, as it led peers to reject some of the participants.

Getting used to communication methods. Habitation plays a major role in choosing communication methods, thereby influencing DHH students’ cultural identity. In this regard, some participants mentioned that because they did not use sign language from the beginning, they are not always able to use it to communicate with others. As one participant stated, “I did not use the language at school, because there were no deaf people. But when I enrolled in the university, I found deaf students, and I got used to communicating with them through sign language” P15. However, another participant stated, “I used to read lips despite the ability to hear if someone spoke to me closely, and I became involuntarily seeing lips” P14. As for getting used to spoken communication, some participants indicated that their family played the biggest role in that: “My mother had the biggest role in me not getting used to reading lips; instead, she made me get used to spoken words since I was young” P10.

Determining the quality of social relations through the used communication method. The communication method used can determine the quality of social relationships among female DHH students. A group of the participants indicated that the communication methods they used made it easier to build relationships within a particular group. One participant mentioned that “Communicating with DHH people is easier, because we have the same language, and it is difficult for those with normal hearing to understand me unless they have experience with sign language” P13. However, some participants also mentioned that their communication with people with normal hearing or who were hard-of-hearing was easier than communication with deaf people. One participant stated, “Communication methods govern me in terms of friendship. I mean, it is easier for me to communicate with those with normal hearing or those who are hard-of-hearing because they understand me quickly” P18.

Third Research Question: How Do the Profiles of Female DHH Undergraduate Students’ Cultural Identities Differ Based on Their Educational Experiences in Saudi Arabia?
To answer the third research question, the researchers applied CAM to analyze the educational experiences discussed in the qualitative sessions, linking them with the cultural identity profiles found in the quantitative data, as described below.

Educational environments. The results provided evidence that the cultural identity profiles of the participants differed according to their current educational environment. When the researchers explored the educational experiences of the participants with deaf identity in more depth, it was found that these students preferred educational environments were isolated environments in special schools. Participants with a hearing or bicultural identity preferred integrated programs
and public schools because of the many advantages that were not provided in private institutions. One participant stated, “I never support isolation, except in severe cases. When I enrolled at the university I compared myself to my colleagues who had been at private institutes, and noticed the difference between me and them in terms of language” P14. In fact, most participants preferred public schools that had no integrated programs. As far as support was concerned all the participants emphasized the importance of obtaining support in their educational environment. However, they also mentioned that receiving support, sometimes even when they did not need it, could reflect negatively on them, as they wanted to be treated the same as normal-hearing people. One participant stated, “The female teachers are giving us more help than we need, and they think we are happy with this, but it makes us feel inferior” P15.

**Peer relationships.** The results have shown cultural identity differences between the participants based on differences in peer relationships. Most participants with a deaf identity have deaf peers, and while those relationships are often strong, they are limited to only a few peers; therefore, they feel a sense of belonging with deaf people. Generally, the educational experiences of the participants with their peers were positive. None of the participants with a deaf identity mentioned any situation in which they were bullied by peers.

On the other hand, in the case of participants with a hearing identity who had normal-hearing peers, they often had superficial relationships. However, most of them felt a sense of belonging with hearing people. Generally, the participants had positive educational experiences with peers; yet, despite these positive experiences, four out of five of these participants experienced peer-bullying situations.

Most participants with a bicultural identity had a variety of relationships with both DHH and hearing people. They enjoyed close friendships that had lasted since primary school. As for a sense of belonging with peers, it varied among participants. Deaf participants felt a stronger sense of belonging with deaf people, but had no problem interacting with hearing people. Hard-of-hearing participants felt like they belonged to all groups, without differences. Generally, for participants with a bicultural identity, educational experiences with peers ranged from positive to negative. Most of these participants mentioned situations in which they were bullied by peers.

**Relationship with female teachers.** The results also revealed differences in the participants’ cultural identity profiles based on differing relationships with female teachers and faculty members. For participants with a deaf identity, these relationships ranged from superficial to non-existent, as teachers had little impact on them. Additionally, most female teachers did not respond to the diverse needs of deaf students in the classroom, and did not provide adequate support. Comparatively, for participants with a hearing identity, their relationships with teachers ranged from superficial to strong, since teachers provided them with sufficient support.

Regarding the relationships between teachers and participants with a bicultural identity, they ranged from good for five participants who received the necessary support and cooperation, to superficial and non-existent for five others. Notably, the participants’ relationships with their interpreters were stronger than those they had with female teachers and faculty members, due to the use of sign language.

**Communication methods.** The results further evidenced that the participants’ cultural identity profiles differed, depending on the communication methods they used. Participants with a deaf identity felt that sign language was their primary language, as it is an important requirement for deaf culture. However, the majority of participants with hearing identity used spoken language, which served as a distinction between them and deaf people. As for participants with a bicultural identity, they relied on different methods for communicating with others, varying between spoken language and sign language with lip-reading.

**Discussion**

The results of the present study indicated that female DHH undergraduate students have three cultural identity profiles (in descending order of prevalence): bicultural identity, hearing identity, and deaf identity. However, no participant was found to have a marginal identity. This finding is consistent with the findings of other studies that showed three profiles of cultural identity; however, it differs in the lack of a marginal identity, as some studies indicated that DHH people have four cultural identity profiles (Bat-Chava, 2000; Cornell & Lyness, 2005; Glickman, 1993).

As for the order of the cultural identity profiles, our findings are consistent with Brunnberg (2010), who indicated that the majority of the sample in his study had bicultural identity. The reason behind ranking bicultural identity first, may be because it is considered as one of the best cultural identity profiles, as shown in previous studies. Compared to those with other cultural identities, those with this identity tend to have higher levels of psychological well-being (Chapman & Dammeyer, 2017), higher self-concept (Cornell & Lyness, 2005), and more self-esteem and contentment with life (Bat-Chava, 2000).

Bicultural identity among the majority of the participants may also support Mohammed’s (2010) conclusion, in that DHH people have a desire to be part of a bicultural group because of their enrolment in integrated programs, which has helped release them from the world of deaf people and opened them up to the community of hearing people.

Finally, none of the participants had a marginal identity in this study. This is consistent with the findings of Hardy (2010) and Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou (2006), who indicated that a marginal identity was not found among their
study participants. These findings may be due to the fact that the participants who felt strong and secure in their identity and can effectively utilize communication methods, reflected the people who managed to join college undergraduate programs, especially considering the challenges those with a marginal identity face, as shown by previous studies (Chapman & Dammeyer, 2017; Cornell & Lyness, 2005).

In parallel with previous studies (Bat-Chava, 2000; Israelite et al., 2002; Leigh, 1999; Sari, 2005; Staton, 2011), the findings of the present study showed the importance of the educational experiences that DHH people have had in terms of enhancing their cultural identities, the impact of which varies according to a set of factors, including whether they join an isolated or an integrated educational environment. Other studies have shown that DHH students at isolated environments in special schools become familiar with the deaf community, culture, and sign language, and develop a strong sense of deaf identity (Angelides & Aravi, 2006; Bat-Chava, 2000; Breivick, 2005; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). However, public schools play a major role in DHH students learning the social and cultural norms of the hearing community (Bat-Chava, 2000; Israeli et al., 2002; Kent, 2003). Furthermore, such public schools also have higher educational requirements and have more intensive curricula. DHH students believe that this contributes to higher academic achievement because of the nature of the curriculum (Angelides & Aravi, 2006).

Thus, DHH students’ cultural identity profiles differed according to their educational environments. This finding is in line with those of Nikolarazi and Hadjikakou (2006) and Weldon (2017), who found that participants with a deaf identity mostly liked to attend schools for the deaf, whereas participants with a bicultural or hearing identity preferred to attend public schools.

This present study’s findings revealed the important influence that peer relationships have as part of the educational experiences, on the enhancement of DHH people’s cultural identity. This finding is in agreement with previous findings indicating that the most important educational experiences for the development of DHH people’s identity are related to their interactions with, and support from, school peers. However, this affects specific identity profiles (Brunnberg, 2010; Hadjikakou & Nikolarazi, 2007; Israeli et al., 2002; Kemmery & Compton, 2014; Sisia, 2012). The study also found that many participants were bullied, especially by their hearing peers. This finding was in line with Lund and Ross (2016), who reported that about 90% of deaf students were victimized by peers at school.

Furthermore, this study showed the importance of students’ relationships with female teachers and university staff members as part of their educational experience, in that it has an effect on enhancing their cultural identity. This finding was consistent with the findings of some previous studies which indicated that academic relationships between DHH students and teachers have a significant effect on development of the deaf students’ identities. This affects their specific identity profiles (Hadjikakou & Nikolarazi, 2007; Israeli et al., 2002; Kemmery & Compton, 2014; Sisia, 2012). However, the findings of this study also showed that receiving too much support from teachers might also have a negative effect. This indicates the need for teachers to have realistic expectations regarding their students. Luckner and Muir (2001) found that skilled teachers showed high expectations for their deaf students in public education environments, which led to these students becoming more able to interact with hearing people.

Moreover, the findings of this study showed the important effects of different communication methods as providing an educational experience that can enhance DHH people’s cultural identity. This finding is consistent with those of Carter (2015), Najarian (2008), Nikolarazi and Hadjikakou (2006), Sari (2005), Sisia (2012), Jambor (2009), and Weldon (2017), which emphasized the importance of communication methods in this respect. This affects specific identity profiles; thus, the DHH students’ cultural identity profiles differed according to the communication methods that were used the most. This was in line with previous studies which indicated that individuals with a deaf identity preferred to use sign language, as a result of which they could feel pride and a sense of belonging (Breivick, 2005; McLlroy & Storbeck, 2011; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). As for participants with hearing identity, they preferred verbal communication methods, as they had grown up with hearing people who emphasized the importance of spoken communication (Scheetz, 2012; Weldon, 2017). Therefore, participants with a bicultural identity preferred a mix of sign language, verbal communication, and combined communication methods (Weldon, 2017).

Thus, the findings of this study showed that the educational environment ranked first among the educational experiences affecting cultural identity, especially among those with hearing identity, because the environment is the primary place in which they engage in various experiences outside their family home, forming an integrated system. Communication methods were ranked almost equal with the educational environment. However, it was the most influential on those of a deaf identity, as they depend on sign language and consider it the cornerstone of deaf culture. Next were peer relationships, because of their significant impact on determining the tendencies and attitudes of DHH people, while relationships with female teachers ranked last, due to the teachers lack of knowledge about their students’ needs.

In view of the above, it may be concluded that if a DHH child is raised in a deaf family, interacts with deaf adults at isolated environments in special schools, and communicates through sign language, it is likely that he or she will adopt a deaf identity. However, if a child is raised in a normal-hearing family, interacts with normal-hearing adults at public schools, and uses verbal communication methods, it is likely that he or she will adopt a hearing identity. In some cases, individuals develop a bicultural identity, allowing them to integrate into deaf, hard-of-hearing, and normal hearing communities, and
feel comfortable with all worlds. However, some still feel uncomfortable in, and unsatisfied with, both the world of the deaf and that of the normal hearing, leading to a marginal identity (Glickman, 1993; Leigh, 2009; Nikolaraizi & Hadjikakou, 2006). Therefore, DHH people’s social experiences within schools must be promoted, which might encourage them to construct a more balanced cultural identity (Leigh, 1999).

**Recommendations, Limitations, and Implications**

This study recommends that educational decision-makers should be aware of the potential impact of the elements identified in this study on DHH students’ identities when interacting with peers and teachers. Despite the importance of these findings, it should be noted that the present study was confined to a limited number of female participants in a particular context and environment in Saudi Arabia. Due to the nature of this exploratory study, in which the design depended mostly on qualitative methods, and since the study focused primarily on revealing the role of educational experiences only in enhancing cultural identity, the outcomes require careful interpretation.

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**Supplemental Material**

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