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## Social barriers experienced by female Saudi nursing students while studying nursing: A phenomenological study

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## ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia has a shortage of Saudi nurses in the workforce, particularly with limited numbers of local female nurses. Social factors may influence views towards the discipline of nursing thus influencing interest of local females choosing to undertake nursing studies. The aim of this paper is to explore the lived experiences of Saudi female nursing students regarding the social barriers encountered related to studying nursing. Hermeneutic phenomenology guided by Van Manen underpinned the study. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data thematically analysed. Eight female nursing students from one university nursing school in Saudi Arabia participated. Two main themes emerged, the first, 'dealing with social factors', describes the range of social issues encountered by students. The second theme, 'social support', describes support needs and strategies used by students as they faced social issues. This study demonstrates that Saudi female nursing students could generally overcome social difficulties they confronted, particularly when they received viable social support to encourage them in their studies. Therefore, it is important to understand the social factors and experiences that may act as barriers to students completing their nursing studies. This can help in the recruitment and retention of nursing students and design of supportive programs to facilitate their studies.

## 1. Introduction

Social barriers play a role in contributing to negative views of nursing. Social barriers are described as “differences (inequalities), in gender, ethnicity, race, religion, health or socioeconomic status, between individuals or groups that prevent them from achieving or accomplishing their goals, or deny their opportunity to access resources and to advance their interests” (United States Department of Agriculture, 2015, para 1).

The most significant reported social barrier that nursing students reportedly face around the world, including Saudi Arabia, is poor public perception of nursing (Almahmoud and Mullen, 2013; Emeghebo, 2012; Neilson and Jones, 2012). The social environment must be comfortable to aid nursing students in obtaining their degrees. Pitt et al. (2012) explored factors that affected academic performance, clinical practice and attrition of nursing students. They carried out an integrative literature review of 41 studies conducted between 1999 and 2011 and concluded that social support was one of the primary factors influencing nursing students' academic progression and attrition. Thus, the family, faculty, and community all affect nursing students'

achievements in their studies. Ideally, these groups should create a comfortable environment for nursing students to study in without experiencing pressure or hearing negative impressions about their educational choices.

Nursing's negative image is a global phenomenon, rather than being specific to an individual community. In Korea, Cho et al. (2010) compared perceptions of bachelor degree nursing students and non-nursing students towards choosing to study nursing. They conducted a longitudinal study to explore the transitions of 4000 students from secondary school to their employment. One determination they made was that nursing students held negative images of the nursing profession, and non-nursing students did not opt for nursing studies due to its social reputation. They referred to the poor image of nursing within the Korean community which influenced non-nursing students to avoid enrolling in nursing programs.

In the United Kingdom, a cross-sectional study was employed with a sample of more than 1000 fifth and sixth grade secondary school students in Scotland. Those students reported that nursing studies were for students with low academic achievements and for females. This view was largely held because of influential opinions of their parents,

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friends, and career advisors. Therefore, nursing was not a common choice for future profession among these secondary school students (Neilson and Jones, 2012).

Considerable advancements have changed the field of nursing in the KSA; however, change is impeded by certain barriers. According to Almalki et al. (2011), regardless of the significant progress in education, practice and workforce in the nursing profession that Saudi Arabia has made over the past few decades, many challenges remain. These include extensive staff-shortages and an increase in the staff turnover rate. Moreover, due to the projected growth in population, there will be substantial demands made on hospitals, therefore it is essential that the number of nurses in Saudi Arabia increases. Restriction on women's movements in Saudi Arabia in the past has been largely related to social, cultural and traditional factors. However, recently the education of Saudi women has been changing and developing with high numbers of Saudi women seeking to be educated (Hamdan, 2005). Within Saudi Arabia, attempts are being made to address shortages of local Saudi nurses and hence, education of women can facilitate this. According to recent statistics compiled by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Health (2014), only 37% of nurses are Saudi nationals, and the remainder non-Saudi. In particular, there is a limited number of female Saudi nurses. In Saudi Arabia, nurses are socially perceived as at a similar level to housemaids and just follow doctors' orders. Negative perceptions held by the Saudi society can have an impact on young women who may be considering studying nursing. These attitudes contribute to a perception that nursing is a lowly field to enter (Almutairi, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to those factors that currently hinder development of the nursing profession in the country (Aboshaiqah, 2016).

Even though Saudi men sometimes receive criticism for working in nursing, Saudi females face more challenges being in the nursing profession. People oppose female entrance to nursing as they believe that nursing conflicts with religious and cultural norms (Miller-Rosser et al., 2006). Men in patriarchal societies are more likely to benefit from entering the nursing profession to obtain powerful positions in female dominant professions (Ozdemir et al., 2008). Despite the long presence of nursing in Saudi Arabia, and frequent and positive references to the profession throughout Islamic history, it continues to be poorly viewed by some parts of the Saudi community (Alyami and Watson, 2014).

Poor image of nursing is not the only social barrier faced by Saudi nursing students. Financial discrimination between nursing students and other health care students could also play a role where nursing students are remunerated less than other disciplines. According to Almalki et al. (2011), there is a need for intervention to address the financial burden on nursing students in order to encourage others to join and value nursing studies. Language is yet another reported social barrier faced by Saudi nursing students. Nursing education provided in universities is offered in English, whereas students' first language is Arabic. Most nursing faculties offer English courses during the nursing degree to assist students, and the majority of students cope well with the English language. However, this is not the case for all students, some of whom struggle with English. This situation can cause stress for those students, which if uncontrolled may encourage them to leave their studies (Suliman and Tadros, 2011). Overall, there is a potential that nursing students who suffer from social problems may be vulnerable and more likely to leave their studies.

Another important issue here is that there is a current shortage of Saudi clinical nurses, which may be worsened as nursing graduates commonly decide to follow more acceptable career paths, such as education, in line with their communities' views, which could have serious longer-term impact on the nursing profession (Aldawsari et al., 2015). There is a deficiency of Saudi studies regarding the experiences of nursing students in relation to their socialisation experiences. This is in contrast with western countries which have demonstrated the importance of such experiences and how they affect students' decisions to not select nursing study as their first choice (Elfaki and Adeh, 2015). Furthermore, there is a dearth of research exploring Saudi female

nursing students' experiences and how they seek to overcome them. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the experiences of female Saudi nursing students relating to social issues and barriers faced during their studies. Better understanding of Saudi female nursing students' experiences may enhance uptake of nursing studies by Saudi females, offer support and encouragement to female Saudi nurses and students, and reduce attrition rates in order to fill the shortfall of Saudi nurses.

## 2. Methods

Hermeneutic phenomenology guided by Van Manen (1997) was adopted to guide the conduct of the study. This qualitative method explores in depth the nature and meaning of experience and draws on the art of writing to facilitate the reader's understanding of this experience (Van Manen, 1997). In addition, it can provide sufficient interpretations of the meaning and structure of particular experiences. It is valuable when researchers want to explore the impact of gender, profession, and community on peoples' experiences (Matua and Van Der Wal, 2015). As hermeneutic phenomenology provides an understanding of the impact of social context on individual experiences, this methodology was used to understand the experiences of female nursing students in relation to social barriers to studying nursing in Saudi Arabia. The researchers set out to explore Saudi female nursing students' experiences of the social barriers in their lives during their studies through the research question: What is the lived experience of female Saudi nursing students of social barriers related to their study of nursing?

Following ethics approval from the relevant university human research ethics committee and approval from the Dean of the Faculty, Saudi female nursing students studying at one university located in the western region of Saudi Arabia were invited to participate in the study. The university was chosen as it was one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia which recruited Saudi students and for its research accessibility. All female nursing students from different year levels were invited to participate in an individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interview. The students were recruited by the first author using flyers and presentations at the end of scheduled classes. Interested students were given an explanatory statement outlining the study and nature of participation. Participants provided written informed consent prior to interviews being conducted. Interviews were arranged with students according to their location preference and availability and lasted up to one hour.

Eight female nursing students in their early twenties and at different stages of their Bachelor of Nursing studies were interviewed, representing second, third, fourth and fifth (internship) years, at which time data saturation was achieved (See Table 1). The first year of university is a foundation year and students are not allocated to a specific discipline for their future study. Therefore, no first year participants were interviewed. Data saturation is a term originating from grounded theory, however, it is commonly applied to qualitative research to ensure the researcher collects sufficient data to address the research question. In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers depend

**Table 1**  
Participants' characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age	Study year	Marital status
Sahar	20	Second	Single
Khlood	20	Second	Single
Noor	22	Fourth	Single
Maha	20	Second	Single
Lama	22	Fourth	Single
Aishah	21	Third	Single
Noha	23	Fifth (internship)	Married
Amal	23	Fifth (internship)	Single

on data saturation to indicate when to stop interviewing as the same concepts and ideas begin to emerge. This repetition gives the researcher the sense that the phenomenon's meaning has been reached (Saunders et al., 2018).

The following key questions guided the interviews. They were developed based on the literature review and the authors' discussions about what important questions should be asked to answer the research question:

Q1. Can you tell me why you entered Bachelor of Nursing course?

Q2. What does your family think about you studying nursing?

Q3. What are your experiences of relationships during your clinical placements?

Q4. What challenges have you faced from people surrounding you during your study of nursing?

Q5. If you have had any problem during your study of nursing, what support have you received to solve it?

The interviews were conducted in the Arabic language to enable fluid communication between the participant and researcher, as this was the first language of the nursing students. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in Arabic. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to maintain participants' confidentiality. Then, the transcripts were translated into English by a professional translator and back-translated into Arabic to ensure meaning was not lost. The translation was a complex and time-consuming process. The researcher needed to give adequate thought and attention during the translation to not lose the meaning of data. For example, some words in Arabic did not literally translate into English, so their meaning was translated as close as possible. Participants were provided with Arabic transcripts of their interview to confirm their information was represented as intended. Even though member checking enhances validity in qualitative research, some researchers question the value of member checking and think it is problematic transferring transcripts to some interviewees who may not be responsible to take care of the transcripts (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). However, no difficulties were encountered, and no participant requested changes be made.

Thematic analysis utilising the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed for data analysis. These steps are familiarisation with the dataset, locating initial codes, searching for themes, revising themes, describing and naming themes, and writing the findings report. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher analyses behind the texts to identify meanings of data. In addition, the researcher produces their report by separating participants' speech and their own interpretations of the data. This helps to make sense and meaning of phenomena and contributes to knowledge development. They can use reflexivity as an aid in the process where the researcher brings their background and previous experiences to analyse and interpret data (Sloan and Bowe, 2014). To ensure the trustworthiness of analysis and interpretation, the three researchers read the transcripts several times and extracted preliminary themes independently. Afterwards, they met to discuss and finalise the emerging themes and their interpretations (Sandelowski, 1986).

### 3. Findings

From the data analysis, two main themes emerged: 'dealing with social factors', which incorporated five sub-themes: *family satisfaction*, *societal views*, *religious beliefs*, *transportation* and *English language*, and 'social support' with four sub-themes: *support from close people*, *faculty staff and peer support*, *hospital personnel and patient support*, and *social media support* (See Fig. 1 and Table 2).

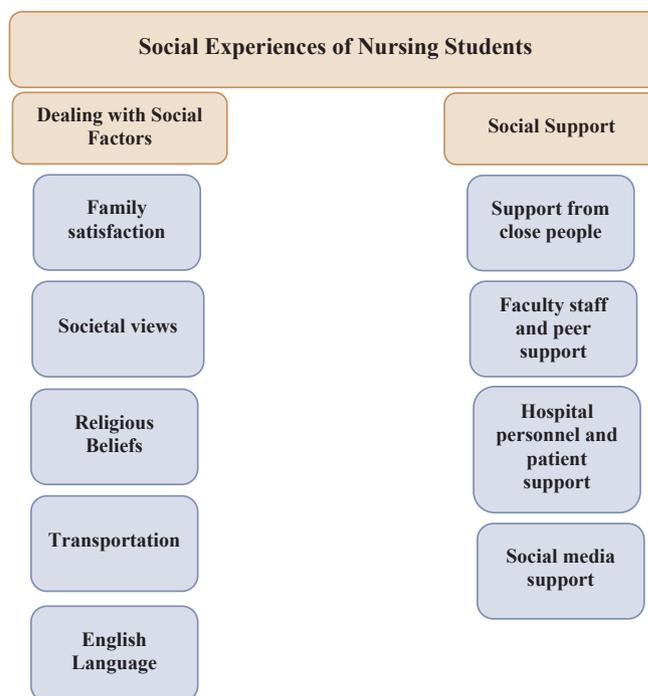


Fig. 1. Framework of the social experiences of Saudi female nursing students.

#### 3.1. Dealing with social factors

It was clear that during their studies Saudi female nursing students confronted various social issues and they needed to deal with them as members of the Saudi community that influenced them. Even though most of the students reported struggling with their families at the beginning of their studies, most were able to overcome issues and found ways to change their families' perspectives of nursing. Those students were initially unable to defend their choice of nursing as they did not have a clear idea of what was actually involved in nursing work. However, after they joined the course and understood the realities of nursing, their attitudes changed and they consequently were able to convince their families to support their decision to stay in nursing.

*... my father was not satisfied that I began to study nursing because he thought it would be very difficult for me. (Sahar)*

*"Why are you studying nursing? Now you are like a housemaid" [her father speaking] ... However, I felt I was not able to defend nursing because I was not yet satisfied with it myself. "What is in it? What is not in it? However, I tried to help my dad understand that I may have a different diagnosis than the doctor's diagnosis. I can give and negotiate with the doctor anything that he gives to the patient. (Noha)*

This theme represented participants' experiences of various societal viewpoints. People in the Saudi community have different views towards females studying nursing and towards the nursing field in general. These views influenced the nursing students in different ways, and most students faced them strongly.

*They said [her grandparents] "why does she continue in this discipline? It is hard for her, and this discipline is not good, and she will not marry ... See, our idea of nursing, is that if the girl studies nursing, she will be working with men". I feel that a female doctor would also be working with men! This is the same idea and I do not understand how this is different. (Sahar)*

*They [some people] said, "Mixing of gender, mixing of gender, how a guardian could let his daughter go to a place like this?" But those people, their thinking is superficial. Nursing is bigger than that, bigger than just what they concentrate on. (Aishah)*

**Table 2**  
Emerging themes and sub-themes.

Themes	
Theme 1: Dealing with social factors	Quotes
1 Family satisfaction	<p>'It was the worst time of my life, second year. I will tell you about the second year, it was the worst thing ... no one accepted the discipline at all ... my sister convinced him [her father] to accept my major and because of that he was satisfied ... because she is the eldest and he listens to her.' (Noor)</p> <p>'when we went to the hospital, in the beginning, they had an objection. "How will you go about, just wearing a white head scarf [the usual head scarf is black in Saudi Arabia] on your head, and just sitting with a lab [laboratory] coat? How is that ok?" They did not accept that I could go to hospital without the Abaya' [This is the usual black dress of Saudi women when they go outside their homes in front of non-related men.] (Lama)</p> <p>'My family wanted me to study medicine, any major, but not nursing, so I chose this [nursing] without telling them ... I do not want that, I want to study nursing, I like my major ... Until now nothing, but I am trying to convince them [her family] to accept my major.' (Khlood)</p> <p>'Really there was an external pressure put on my family, from the people closest around them. They told them "you are moving to Makkah just because your daughter decided to study nursing!"' (Lama)</p> <p>'For me, I saw my work as exactly the same as any work. Men will see you everywhere in the world, in the street, in the mini market. It is like when you see them in the mini market, the same thing, I do not know how it is different.' (Maha)</p> <p>'He [a medical student] got 9000 Riyals, and I got 2500 Riyals. Why? There is no comparison. It is haram [forbidden or prescribed by Islamic law]. I got tired and lifted and put the effort in [there is a heavy workload during the internship year] and yet, they do not value me ... I got 2500 Riyals, the medicine student intern got 9000. That is similar to what my salary will be when I am employed.' (Amal)</p> <p>'I feel that nurses by their own hand can change the reputation of nursing, change peoples' views towards nursing ... The nursing situation now is much better than in the past. So, I feel that time is important. I hope that with time we can change; it will not happen over a day and a night' [not within one day, it needs more time than that]. (Noha)</p>
2 Societal views	<p>'... I have prayed to my God in the holy mosque. So, whatever my God determined, it will happen. I said [in prayer] "Oh, my God, help me to enter the discipline that I will feel comfortable in." I did not specify which discipline. Thanks to Allah, I feel that I went through it [the nursing course]'. (Maha)</p> <p>'My God decided for me that I would study nursing even if I would try to go to any university ... you must be satisfied with what our God judged and wrote, and that's enough.' (Amal)</p>
3 Religious beliefs	<p>'I have a hospital in Riyadh in mind [for the internship year], but my undergraduate project makes this difficult. I will still be linked [to Makkah and having to attend university regularly]; I have to return to university. Therefore, I should choose a hospital in Makkah or Jeddah.' (Lama)</p>
4 Transportation	<p>'I was not good at English. In the second semester, I could not catch some of the medical terms, so I failed in Genetics and Bio [Biochemistry] many times. After that, thanks to Allah I passed them ... They [lecturers in the university] were excellent at explaining, they were very clear, but the course content was not clear. It is very hard for us because in secondary school all our studies were in Arabic, then suddenly at university we were faced with English and medical terms, what is this?!' (Noor)</p> <p>'All the exams were in English, I failed for that reason ... It was a shock for me; I was always the first in my class or at least in the top ten percent. So, that time it was a shock for me.' (Noha)</p> <p>'I can understand and remember, but I feel afraid to speak. So, here [in the nursing faculty], I understand, and I translate. What I translate is correct, and I can do this by myself without depending on Google. I read the slides and translate them by myself, without using Google.' (Sahar)</p>
5 English language	
Theme 2: Social Support	Quotes
1 Support from close people	<p>'My friends who studied other majors, not with me, they encouraged me. They said "it is not right that people talk like that, nursing and medicine are the same."' (Khlood)</p> <p>'I have one older sister in nursing. She is encouraging me and helping me.' (Aishah)</p>
2 Faculty staff and peer support	<p>'All the time I was sitting in the classroom I was thinking "I will transfer, I will transfer, when does the class finish, so I can talk to them about the transfer?" There was nothing else on my mind, apart from whereabouts she [the lecturer] was in her speech. Then she said "I am a doctor in nursing." This person made me like nursing. I did not know her, even her name. She just said "smile and listen to the end." I listened until the end. She told me "I am a doctor in nursing, I will teach you about nursing, and that nursing is something good."' (Amal)</p> <p>'We met students from third and fourth years ... they motivated and supported us, they were happy for us.' (Aishah)</p> <p>'I have said to new nursing students "try to find the point that makes you like it and carry on."' (Lama)</p>
3 Hospital personnel and patient support	<p>'This patient was shouting and crying and complaining about the pain, and I was sitting in the chair. I cried with her like I knew her, I do not know why. But I sat, and I cried with her ... She [a Saudi nurse] said "because you are still new, you are not familiar with these things at university. You are used to dealing with a doll, but you will see many cases like this."' (Amal)</p>
4 Social media support	<p>'On Twitter, she [the nurse] wrote in the bio "I am a nurse, and I am proud." When I was upset, I looked at her page, and I read it.' (Sahar)</p>

*When you think about it regarding the humanitarian side, I decided to do this to help people. It does not make a difference to you if this person is a woman, man, old or young. I come to do my work before I come to think. Before I think of anything else I think "how much does he [the patient] need me?" (Khlood)*

Students' religious beliefs influenced them to stay in nursing and value their studies. Some students reported praying to Allah to help them in their decisions to undertake nursing studies, and when they felt comfortable they took that to mean that nursing was a suitable choice for them. The students discussed how they looked for Allah's rewards through representing themselves socially through a good image.

*... for me it was ok, because I prayed and I felt comfortable, no problem ... We must do positive things and present ourselves in a good image. Not only for ourselves but for Allah. For a reward, something for our religion. (Noor)*

*We liked to go to the hospital, and serve them [patients] because of their prayers. (Noha)*

Transportation was another social issue that impacted students. At the time of this study in Saudi Arabia, women were not allowed by law to drive cars. Therefore, female students needed to arrange transportation frequently to serve their needs. Participants outlined how they were able to find solutions to transport problems arising in order to attend their university and clinical placements by using private drivers, yet sometimes with long travel distances this solution was reported to be costly.

*The road to the university is far away. Neither my family nor her [another student's] family accepted that we go with a driver alone, so we went together ... I got a driver because my dad works and he also must take my sisters to school. He cannot take me to university because he has a job. (Noha)*

*My friend has a driver near my home, I travel with her ... We [Maha's*

*family] applied for a driver, so we will be more comfortable. I live far away from the university. (Maha)*

Dealing with English as a second language in their learning was yet another social issue identified by these students. To succeed in their studies, and to communicate with hospital staff who were mostly non-Arabs, students were required to use English language. Although this was reported to be difficult when these participants started their studies, they reported it was not a barrier for them continuing in their nursing studies. This was because they felt their English improved as they progressed. Furthermore, they studied English and reported practising it often.

*When I entered the foundation year, it [English] was quite poor ... we studied English units for 4 hours every day. I read in English, saw movies, heard news, and all of these things helped me to strengthen my language skills. (Aishah)*

*I felt that I developed better than in the foundation year. I developed my language skills. In the past, I put it a lot of effort, and I hold the lecture papers without knowing what it was about. But thanks to Allah things are different now. In the past I was translating every word with Google ... But now it is much better. I do not translate too much. (Maha)*

### 3.2. Social support

The second theme to emerge from the interviews was that of social support. This theme focuses on social support needs and strategies reported by the students as a factor that motivated them during their studies or when they faced difficult social situations. The theme is divided into four sub-themes: support from close people, faculty staff and peer support, hospital personnel and patient support, and social media support. The students discussed their motivations for studying nursing and factors which influenced their studies, and their responses highlighted that family members and close friends had encouraged them to continue with their studies.

*The most important thing for my mum is that her daughter will study something in the field of health. My mum said "it [a nursing major] will benefit her, and there is a need for it in the job field. (Sahar)*

*Staying in nursing will be much better, you will see yourself much better suited to nursing. [her friends speaking]. (Amal)*

Support from individuals (academic staff and peers) at the university was also a key factor for participants as it changed their negative views of nursing, motivating them to continue with their studies and value their profession. Most of the students had entered nursing because of low GPAs, and did not have a clear idea of what nursing entailed. Therefore, support from individuals at the university was of advantage for them in learning about nursing and job opportunities for the future.

*They [faculty staff and students] did an orientation meeting for us ... I swear to Allah, they made us like this discipline. When I returned home, I was full of positive energy for this major, they changed my views towards nursing. (Noor)*

*On that day, two lecturers said to us "we graduated from here [nursing faculty] in 2012, and we found jobs immediately." Nursing has many opportunities, there is a scholarship opportunity too. (Noha)*

A number of participants reflected on social support that arose from people they encountered in the hospitals, such as patients and health care staff. In the main, they received positive feedback from people who appreciated their value as Saudi nursing students. Most of those students experienced positive acceptance from patients and identified that having the same culture as patients facilitated their communication with those patients.

*On that day, she [the patient] gave me a flower. We are happy if the*

*patient appreciates us. (Noha)*

*They [nurses] accepted, I did not see anybody refuse. When I come to do a procedure, or if we want to help the nurse with dressing or insert a cannula, sometimes they let us do it. (Aishah)*

Participants reported using social media such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, and gained significant social support through these media. On these platforms, the students learnt a lot about aspects related to nursing studies and the profession more generally. They reported that this encouraged them to stay in their studies. Some participants subsequently became active on these media reporting having begun to educate people about the value of nursing and share their own experiences.

*There are many accounts [in Twitter] that are activated now. There are accounts that motivate and support the students. They are students and employees in nursing, and they run these accounts. They increase the aspirations of nursing students ... they educate their followers ... they motivated me to stay in nursing. (Lama)*

*We [her colleagues and herself] created a hashtag on Twitter ... we wrote about our major, and people who are younger than us came to ask us about it, taking something from our experiences. (Khlood)*

*I always posted on Twitter, I even wrote for those who did not know me. They said "nursing suits your character; you prefer to deal with people, you are a social person" ... I wrote on Twitter. Some people agreed with me while other people have thinking as stubborn as a rock. (Noha)*

## 4. Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that these Saudi female nursing students were surrounded by a range of specific social factors during their studies. However, these were not necessarily barriers for them continuing their studies as they reported being able to manage the experiences. Students managed to convince their families of the importance of their discipline and so were able to continue studying nursing. This is in line with a recent study conducted in eastern Saudi Arabia that found that the percentage of families who were satisfied with their daughters' study of nursing was high (Almutair and Redwan, 2016). However, some studies in the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia have argued that there is a high degree of familial disagreement with nursing studies (Neilson and Jones, 2012; Almahmoud and Mullen, 2013). The findings of this study are congruent with Cameron et al. (2011) who concluded that society's general misunderstanding regarding the role of nurses contributed to the attrition of nursing students in the early stages of their studies. Therefore, educating the community about the role of nurses is essential for student recruitment and retention. No previous study was identified that examined nursing students' strategies for improving their families' views of nursing. This is an area that would benefit from further research.

The findings suggest that the Saudi society's view of nursing has begun to improve. This is compatible with recent studies carried out in Saudi Arabia, which have shown there has been a dramatic positive change in society's view of nursing from previous generations (Almutair and Redwan, 2016; Saied et al., 2016) and this is positive for the future Saudi nursing workforce. Participants in this study provided information about societal views of nursing prevalent in their communities. These views were found to be similar to the public view of nursing around the world that varies considerably (Hoeve et al., 2014).

The current finding of religious beliefs reinforcing decisions to study nursing emphasises findings of a qualitative study indicating that Muslim nurses felt the spiritual value of the nursing profession, with nurses reporting that they looked for rewards from Allah through helping people (Alboliteeh, 2015). Christian nursing students also reportedly believed that they were called by God to be nurses and were proud to offer help to people (Prater and McEwen, 2006). How nursing

students' religious beliefs impact on their decision to study nursing has been less explored by previous research and warrants further exploration.

Students in this study identified issues relating to their abilities to travel to university and clinical placements arising from Saudi rules around women being unable to drive. However, the findings did not concur with a study conducted in the USA that showed that transportation difficulties had the potential to affect nursing students' studies and increase attrition rates (Bond et al., 2008). This study also confirmed an integrative review which concluded that the requirement to learn English as a second language was not found to be related to nursing students leaving nursing school, but that it did have an impact on their academic performance (Pitt et al., 2012).

The current findings support those of Pitt et al. (2012) that social support was a factor that impacted on nursing student attrition and academic achievements. A recent study in Turkey showed that family support was a strong factor in students' completion of their Bachelor of Nursing Science degree and becoming registered nurses (Denat et al., 2016). Many studies have also found that nursing students who received faculty support were more likely to continue their studies, but in general students tended to seek support from their peers rather than members of the faculty or staff (Grainger and Bolan, 2006; Morrow and Ackermann, 2012). Furthermore, this study concurs with the findings of a study conducted in the UK which concluded that encouragement of nursing students was important, so they gained experience during their clinical placements; and this would aid them in building professional socialisation (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2011). The importance of providing a supportive environment in clinical placements has been stressed in previous systematic review studies (Alzayyat and Algamal, 2014; Jokelainen et al., 2011).

The current findings are also in line with new studies regarding the growing use of social media to support the learning of nursing students. Those studies found that social media usage by nursing students increased nursing student attention, engagement with presented activities and overall student satisfaction. It was also found to promote their resilience. There is a reported positive correlation between social media use among nursing students and students' personal and group resilience (Ferguson et al., 2017; Sigalit et al., 2017). According to a systematic review and narrative synthesis study, negative images of nursing are mainly reported by the media, which worsened the stereotypes of nursing (Girvin et al., 2016). This study emphasised that social media could positively assist in the retention of nursing students through enhancing their perception of nursing. These findings support the suggestion of Hoeve et al. (2014) regarding using social media to represent the reality of the nursing profession. This finding also reinforces Aboshaiqah's (2016) recommendation of the need to enhance the public image of nursing through education and using media. This would contribute to filling the shortage of Saudi nursing staff through recruiting greater numbers. This finding was further supported by another study conducted in Australia, which found that nursing students used Facebook to find answers to their questions and orient themselves to nursing studies. They also built relationships with peers in nursing and this facilitated their transition to university (Ferguson et al., 2016). Although the Saudi studies mainly examined the advantages of these media for learning (AlSaqri et al., 2016), it is recommended that a study to examine and explore their benefits during Saudi nursing students' transition to university and for their retention into nursing studies be carried out.

A number of recommendations arise from this study related to support strategies that can be provided to students in order to enhance their experiences while studying nursing. Nursing students require ongoing support from faculty to successfully transition to their studies. Hence, teaching strategies to help students improve their English skills should be considered in the design of nursing education curricula. In addition, nursing students need to be encouraged to access different sources of social support to help them cope with social issues that could

affect their studies. A better understanding of the motivational aspects of religious beliefs could enable nursing education staff to further recruit and retain nursing students. Furthermore, it would be helpful to provide sustainable transportation facilities to help the students attend their courses and placements.

As well as academic support, nursing students need a supportive environment during their clinical placements as these are designed to prepare them for their future nursing careers. Educating hospital personnel about the importance of clinical placements for nursing students would be highly beneficial, so that nurses can support students in meeting their learning needs. For this to occur, nurses need educational programs to learn how to be effective instructors. Finally, the public should be educated about the value of nursing to increase awareness of what nursing actually involves, the benefits for Saudi society, and its contribution to the provision of health care through different means such as media campaigns.

In this study, eight students were interviewed, and this number may be viewed as a small sample, however this is not necessarily small in phenomenology and data saturation was achieved on completion of the interviews. The experiences of participants may not necessarily reflect all Saudi nursing students' experiences because it was conducted in one university in Saudi Arabia but similar experiences may be encountered in other regions. Overall, the study enhances our understandings of what female Saudi students face during their studies.

## 5. Conclusion

Understanding the experiences of nursing students is important in promoting and growing the profession in Saudi Arabia. This study has highlighted that Saudi female nursing students confront a range of social issues during their studies that generally they can work to overcome. It is essential to understand the social factors impacting nursing students' experiences as this is an important factor that can affect students' learning, progression and retention, as well as the nursing workforce. Therefore, replication of this study in different areas around the world, particularly other areas of Saudi Arabia, is recommended. Furthermore, studies are required to describe and understand students' families' satisfaction with nursing education. It is also necessary to examine and explore the use of social media by nursing students as social support for their transition and retention into their studies and to enhance the public's views of nursing.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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