CHAPTER ELEVEN

International Student Perceptions of Libraries:

Experiences from the Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

Globalization has facilitated the movement of goods, services, people, and information across geographic borders once perceived too vast to cross. Technology has further assisted in the integration of economies and cultures, greatly changing the environment in which libraries and librarians operate. Libraries worldwide serve a more diverse population of patrons, both in-house and online with searching for, accessing, and using information. This is especially true for academic librarians in the United States, who are tasked with serving a patron population that is constantly changing due to visiting scholars and student exchange programs. The academic librarian of the twenty-first century plays a vital role in an increasingly diverse global university environment.

Cultural views toward libraries and information access may impact the way that international students and scholars use information for personal, academic, and professional purposes.[1] As such, it is important that librarians understand not only the cultural identity and experiences of their patrons but also their own so that they may question assumptions that underlie the collections and services offered by their libraries.[2] The United States has a public legacy of libraries, largely due to philanthropists, such as Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates, who established libraries and library programs that have influenced "areas of education, research and development, and professional communications"[3]

from the late 19th century to present day. As such, American librarians often come from backgrounds where libraries are established cultural institutions, however, this is not necessarily the case elsewhere in the world.

Differences between institutions in the West and Middle East are chronicled in an article by Wand,[4] which discusses the collectivist culture of the Middle East and its influence on how students learn and use the academic library. Considering linguistic and cultural differences that globally conscious librarians will encounter in serving diverse patrons, this chapter presents the findings of a qualitative case study of nine Arab students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region studying abroad at a public university in the Midwestern United States.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the types of experiences which have contributed to Arab international students' perceptions and uses of information and libraries. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how students from the MENA region perceive and use libraries and information as international students in the U.S. During interviews, participants were asked about their past and present experiences with seeking information and using libraries in both their home countries as well as during their time as students in the United States.

Literature Review

International students are a popular topic in library and information science (LIS) literature; as such, only a select few will be mentioned. Jackson and Sullivan and Koenigstein and Zimerman[5] provide an overview of challenges faced by international students (such as varying educational standards and language barriers) and methods which librarians may employ to better assist this group of students. Several studies have focused on outreach services for[6] and library instruction of international students.[7] Literature that provides some useful context to this study are those regarding international students' perceptions of libraries and the cultural and practice-based competencies required of librarians working with international students. Datig supplemented an online survey with interviews of international students to uncover perceptions students have of libraries.[8] Datig's findings revealed the broad spectrum of experiences students have with libraries, ranging from none to ongoing, regular use of libraries. Although not specific to the context of international students, additional relevant literature includes findings about students experiencing cross-cultural issues. These are issues well addressed in studies by Long[9] and Adkins and Hussey[10] regarding perceptions of libraries by Latino students as well as the role of these institutions in their lives as students.

At present, there is very little literature in the field regarding the issues and challenges faced by international students from the MENA region. However, a recent study conducted by Ibraheem and Devine investigated the academic and interpersonal experiences of Saudi Arabian students studying in the US.[11] This study revealed that many of these students struggle with language issues, the structure of American libraries, and communication with library staff.

As noted by Click et al., the field of LIS has a long and inspiring history in the Arab world; however, literature regarding LIS in the region is sparse and often outdated.[12] Relevant literature concerning libraries and library usage in the MENA region fall into two broad categories: information resources and instruction offered by libraries and qualifications required of librarians in the region.

Information resources and instruction offered by libraries in MENA varies greatly by country and by type of institution within each country. A study by AlQudsi-ghabra et al. found library services in private schools were better than in public schools in terms of the number, variety, and quality of library services.[13] In part, this was due to the influence of private, international schools with American or British backgrounds. Similarly, students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) lack exposure to libraries prior to attending university as "few public schools have functioning school libraries" and because it wasn't until the twenty-first century when public libraries were planned and built in the UAE.

Library literature is rich with articles regarding library collaboration and cooperation; however, it is important to note that it is a relatively new phenomenon within MENA, dating back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Several studies discuss initiatives for sharing resources electronically and via consortiums and interlibrary loan programs.[14] These studies emphasized the importance of library collaboration within the region due to the high cost of commercial vendors[15] and indicated there was a need to better market these resources to library users and provide more robust support for e-resources.[16] Obstacles to cooperation in the region vary by country but include budgetary concerns, discrepancies in staff training, and issues of safety and security due to civil unrest throughout the region.[17]

Linguistic obstacles are often faced by library users in the region and are a common theme addressed in the literature. Fahmy and Rifaat discussed the linguistic barriers that affect the information literacy (IL) skills of Arab students. Available information in Arabic, both print and electronic, is limited, often disorganized, outdated, of varying quality, hard to find, or absent entirely.[18] Along similar concerns regarding language, Kaba found in an analysis of academic library websites in the UAE that many library websites (80 percent) were unavailable in Arabic and often lacked live chat support.[19] Consequently, when students use the library online, they may encounter obstacles related not only to language but also the ability to ask for help. The use of the English language is used as a common denominator throughout the Gulf region and thus carries ramifications for information literacy instruction. As noted by Moyo and Mavodza, this requires deeper "pedagogical awareness to understand the way that IL messages are conveyed to culturally or linguistically varied student groups."[20] In an assessment of an online IL program, Martin, Burks, and Hunt emphasized the importance of student input on their online tutorial as the research team were from different cultural backgrounds than their students.[21] The lack of students' exposure to IL instruction prior to entering the university was also reported, although not necessarily unique to the UAE.

Lack of formal training or professional qualifications required of library professionals was frequently noted in the literature.[22] A study of health professional library users in Saudi Arabia by Khudair and Bawden found that very few library users had received any instruction or support from library staff and only half of users would ask for help.[23] Findings from this study suggested the lack of formal LIS training resulted in lower levels of confidence and knowledge of library professionals, elements critical to support library users. Similarly, Khurshid's study of non-degreed librarians in library management revealed the lack of professional qualifications of library management and the negative impact of this on the level and quality of services offered by libraries.[24] Contributing factors noted in this study include frequent turnover rates in management, lack of understanding of library policies and procedures, and superficial knowledge of library operations and services.

A review of LIS literature from the region reveals that students from MENA may have varying depths of experiences using libraries based on their country of origin and whether they attended public or private schools growing up. Although libraries and librarians in MENA experience similar challenges to libraries elsewhere, some of these issues are exacerbated by the inconsistency in professional qualifications required of librarians, language concerns that impact the use of collections, and the quality of information literacy instruction. We only discovered one study that focused specifically on library use by international students from MENA. Therefore, this study seeks to fill a gap in existing research by further exploring this issue as well as investigating how international students' past experiences using libraries and seeking information in their home countries have shaped or influenced how they perceive libraries while studying abroad in the United States.

Methodology

To learn more about the library and information-seeking experiences of Arab international students, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. To recruit study participants, an email was sent out by the university's International Center (on behalf of the researchers) to students whose home country was identified as being one of the twenty-two Arabic-speaking countries of the Arab League. Nine students were recruited as participants in this study. The interview participants came from seven different countries within the MENA region and had spent anywhere from one to four years studying in the US. Each student included in this chapter is identified in table 11.1 by their level of education and home country.

TABLE 11.1
Participant Identification

Participant	Education Level	Country
Zeinab	Undergraduate	Lebanon
Amir	Graduate	Iraq (went to university in Jordan)
Awadh	Undergraduate	Saudi Arabia
Ahmed	Graduate	Kuwait
Abdul	Graduate	Saudi Arabia
Nourah	Undergraduate	Kuwait
Riham	Undergraduate	Palestine (also lived in Jordan)
Ayoub	Undergraduate	Morocco
Pancea	Undergraduate	Egypt

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, verbatim, by the researchers. Interviews were semi-structured, but all included the following questions:
1. What is information? What is a library?
2. What are your experiences with libraries or other information centers in your home country? In the US?
3. Have you received any instruction on how to search for, retrieve or evaluate information in your home country? In the US?

4.   What do library spaces look like in your home country? In the US?
5.   Are there types of information or resources that you currently access or use in the US that you did not access before studying abroad?
6.   How do your experiences accessing information and using libraries in your home country differ from your experiences in the US?
7.   How do you feel your past experiences prior to coming to the US influenced how you think about information access and libraries?

Findings

Students did not limit their responses to academic libraries but also referenced their experiences using public and school libraries. Students did, however, primarily rely on their experiences with academic libraries in the US to illustrate similarities and differences between libraries in their home countries and their current experiences.

Collections and space

Students' perceptions of libraries were based heavily on the usefulness of their collections and resources to their information needs. The quality and composition of library resources available to students varied greatly based on the type of library. For example, every student in this study had used a public library in the past but indicated that public libraries were not well-used in their home countries due to the poor quality of resources and services. Several participants noted outdated library collections, containing materials focused primarily on "old Arabic"[25] materials such as Arabic poetry, literature, religion, and history. Language also plays a major role in the utility of library resources. Quotes from students revealed issues regarding the influence of colonizers' languages on library collections and the predominance of English as the language of scientific publication.

> Most of them [the books] are in Arabic and French since our system is based on the French since we were colonized by France. I don't speak French.[26]

> There are not many books translated from Arabic. This is the reason why most people don't use the library… it doesn't have a lot of sources about science or something, it's all in another language.[27]

Amir indicated that differences between the funding of higher education in his home country of Iraq and where he finished his bachelor's degree, in Jordan, influenced his need to use the library: "In Iraq, the education system is free, so they give you your books. In Jordan, you have to buy these…. I have to go to the library."[28] Amir's statement also reflects differences between educational systems, as it suggests that assigned textbooks are the only sources needed for a course. Amir also noted that his academic library in Iraq lacked Internet access, which greatly affected the value of the library as a resource. In contrast, Nourah, who attended a private, American high school in Kuwait, noted the similarities she saw between library resources at her private high school and the academic library she uses in the US. As opposed to the other students who referred

primarily to books as library resources, she alluded to electronic resources accessible from her school library: "I did my library research online mostly. I'd just sit at home and do the research."[29]

Nourah's response not only addressed the type of resources she accessed through her school's library (i.e., e-resources) but the library as an online space where she could retrieve information needed for her studies. Nourah appreciated the convenience associated with being able to access library resources from home. Students in this study, however, primarily focused their responses on the physical library space.

> It's [US library] similar to the one in my private [school] but not in the public libraries in Kuwait…. Even the atmosphere and the way everything is set up. That's similar.[30]

> I think it [his library in Saudi Arabia] is larger than the library here [in the US] …it has many tables and computers and you can print limited papers.[31]

> It's [speaking of his academic library in Kuwait] very formal. It is more of a learning-based facility while in the US it is more of an informal, casual thing. We can just use the Internet, read books, magazines, videos, or even just chat with your friends. There are more functions in the US [library] than what we have. The one we have is more of just books …in the US it [the library] has more broader functions, more purposes.[32]

> They [libraries] are similar…. Here it [the library] is bigger with more technology, it's more organized.[33]

Library users

Participants indicated that university students appeared to be the most common patron of libraries, both public and academic. However, students from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia noted differences in the gender of library users in their countries. Ahmed experienced an academic library that was segregated by gender, with days of the week assigned as either "male" or "female" days at the library. "We had different days for women and different days for men. But I know there is some kind of separation so all of the collaboration is either male-based or female-based."[34] Abdul noted library policies did not allow children in libraries in Saudi Arabia; as a consequence, he saw fewer women in libraries in his home country. "Some women want to come to the library but they can't because of their children and because of the rule of the library that doesn't allow children. So, women can't come to the library because of her children."[35]

Role of librarians in research

During interviews with students, students explained how librarians in their home countries often play a different role in the research process.

There are librarians there and, yeah, they teach, but they are not in the mood to teach. Like they are there to finish their mission every day and there is no helpful spirit. They will tell you maybe, "Ok, do you want this book? Just tell us its name and I will go and search for you." There's no, "Sit and I will give you this technique and you have to go and search for it." Like, even there is no spirit for helping.[36]

There is like a counter and there is a guy …you can't go access the library and look for a book. You have to tell him the name and then he's going to, like, bring you the book or whatever you need. It's not like here, you go and you look for the book you are interested in. They just give him the name and he accesses the computer and then he brings you the book you need.[37]

The main difference is that we weren't exposed or taught these kind of information search techniques. Where I come from, people expect you to find information and that is it. You don't know where or how.[38]

The above statements from students reflect differences in librarians' approaches to helping students find information sources; in some cases, this may be due to a lack of formal training or qualifications required of librarians. The type of service provided by librarians may also be in response to the library design and may reflect the reality that the traditional "reference room" and closed library stacks that we, as American librarians, often think of as a thing of the past or a format relegated to special collections and archives are still a model of service elsewhere in the world. Students expressed appreciation for their librarians in the US who taught them how to search for and retrieve information on their own. One student indicated it made her research feel more like her own. "That makes your research more accurate…. It's how I want to make this research. I reached a conclusion. It's not about the people who gave you information."[39]

Approaches to education and research

As indicated by the student statements above, primary differences in participant experiences occur when seeking information and how they have been taught to look for information. Participants noted that although they may have had research classes in their home countries, these classes occurred during high school when research meant nothing to them. Those who had these classes while enrolled at a university in their home country felt they were not being pushed to perform research.

Whatever you found on the Net, the professor would be like, "That's fine. That's okay." Here, you can see that the professor wants to know where you find it. Something from Wikipedia he would say, "Oh, that's not accurate." This is not the case back home. Back home you can bring whatever you want.[40]

The way I write my papers now is completely different. I can go to the library and find books and use it. I used to write from literature on the

Internet and that's it. Most students [in Egypt] are like, "Okay, I have a paper and I'm just going to copy and paste."[41]

The majority of participants spoke at length about the challenges they encountered when first starting out as students in the US due to different academic expectations.

In Egypt, I work harder in reading my books and studying and memorizing, but here I'm more busy with papers and research and reading a book and discussing it in class. Education in Egypt is based on memorizing information. After I get out of exams, I completely forget everything.[42]

It's based on only memorizing the thing, memorizing the idea…. But here there is kind of critical thinking. You have to read, you have to understand, and then you have a lot of choices that you have to choose the right thing from it. Or even …your research paper would be based on what you understood, not what you memorized. So, it will be more about thinking, not about listing information.[43]

My classes here, we have to write like four papers during the semester. It is nothing like that in Jordan.[44]

One student, Nourah, had attended a private, American school in her home country and experienced these challenges in Kuwait prior to coming to the US.

In a public school, you are rarely asked to get research done or an essay about something that requires research. But when I went to a private school, it was an American school…. They expected me to have research done. It's not like writing from your mind, like from what you think from your mind. Because in a public school you just write it…. You don't need resources or something to prove anything. So when I went to private school, I had to learn this all over again. Like how to actually cite stuff and where to get information from and those useful tools [for citation]. I never used them before.[45]

Research and citation skills were something almost every student noted they had to adjust to quickly, but that their work had excelled as a result. Several students shared the stories of their "first paper" in the US and how they learned about issues regarding citation and plagiarism.

I had never heard about the APA format or the MLA format. But, like, a couple of weeks ago when one of my teachers asked for a research paper, she told us it had to be in this format. I was, like, the only girl in the class who raised their hand and asked, "What is APA?" It was a new experience for me…. Maybe if I was, if I had been raised in an American school in Lebanon things would be different. But since it's public school we've never experienced this.[46]

> I didn't know. Here in US this plagiarism thing is a big thing. You have to cite your resources. It is not just copy and paste…. My first research paper I wrote my professor asked me to come to his office. I had written my paper the way I was used to back home so he made me do it over.[47]

> I do remember writing my first paper. I was, like, copying paragraphs from websites and pasting them on my paper, and my roommate and these friends of mine were like, "What are you doing?" They were like, "This is plagiarism …you may get expelled from the university." They said at least I have to paraphrase the information and to cite it…. It's really different from back home.[48]

Discussion

As illustrated in the findings above, students had very different experiences accessing information, using libraries, and adjusting to academic expectations as students in the US. Students in this study had a broad range of experiences with libraries, from those who had experienced similar libraries in their home countries to those whose library lacked Internet access. Differences in students' experiences were based primarily on the student's country of origin and the type of education they had received—public or private. This was particularly evident in the responses of Nourah, who had attended a private American school. The library in her private school in Kuwait resembled her university library in the US. The most significant differences Nourah experienced occurred years prior to studying abroad in the US when she transitioned from a public school in Kuwait to a private school.

> In my private school, all my teachers were American. It's like mini-America inside …for like a big portion of my life. We had a lot of problems with, like, conforming to the outside world [in Kuwait] …like walking around. I would go outside and had my guy friends from school and we would just go to the mall and something like that and people look at us and are like, "What are they doing? Where do they think they are living?" You know you just don't sit with guys and girls, 'cause that's not our culture.[49]

As a student from a private school in Kuwait, Nourah adapted easily to life as a student in the US. It was when she left school at the end of the day that she experienced the differences between the culture of Kuwait and the culture of the American institution she attended in Kuwait. Nourah noted the segregation of genders in Kuwait, which was also noted by two other students in this study (from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia). Although students from MENA studying abroad in the US may come from a country with gender segregation, this is something that only students from the Gulf region of the Middle East indicated was a difference they adjusted to when they moved to the US.

Despite the rich history of libraries in the Middle East, the modern history of libraries in the region varies greatly. For example, Zeinab referenced the outdated collections of libraries in Lebanon and the influence of the French in the collection due to the coloni-

zation of Lebanon by France. As noted by Moulaison,[50] libraries built under colonization were not necessarily meant to support or foster learning but to serve the needs of those who established them. Oil-rich nations such as Saudi Arabia, however, have a very different modern history of libraries due to radical changes in the development and expansion of higher education in the country.

> We started building universities, like, forty or fifty years ago. That is maybe the oldest university, and since 2004 we had seven or eight universities. But after that, after the new king, we had maybe like thirty universities, public and private.[51]

Many countries in the region have experienced ongoing periods of civil unrest and other conflicts, which have affected not just the infrastructure of libraries and academic institutions but of the very country itself. As the student from Iraq noted, "There are different priorities. I'm talking about students, they don't have food, transportation, electricity."[52] Amir's academic library didn't provide access to the Internet; however, he's the only student in this study that indicated such an experience.

Other students referred to the culture of libraries in the US as an explanation of the differences between libraries in their home country and the US.

> A library in my country is completely different from here. I think that in Egypt we don't have the library culture. Especially for youth and college students. If I told my friend, "Let's go to the library." They would be like, "Oh my God, you are so weird." Here in the US, I come to the library a lot.[53]

As librarians, we hold a unique position within an academic institution. We interact with every level and type of user at the university with an information need. As professionals, it is important that we are mindful of any assumptions we may have regarding our patrons as these assumptions may impact the type and level of service we provide. As demonstrated in this study, students from MENA will arrive at the library with varying levels of experience. Be prepared to meet these students at their point of need and be proactive about outreach to international students because, as this study learned, student perceptions and expectations of the library may be influenced by their experiences elsewhere.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the types of experiences which have contributed to Arab international students' perceptions and use of information and libraries. Students who participated in this study have done an amazing job adapting to such radically different educational standards. They all demonstrated an awareness of the information resources available to them through their university and an appreciation for the library and the wealth of knowledge it holds for both their academic and personal lives.

The experiences these students encountered in their home countries while accessing information and using libraries have laid a foundation for how they relate to information resources in the present. Their past experiences offered a means for comparing the resources they had access to in their home countries with their current access as international students in the US. Findings from this research demonstrated the diversity of experiences coming from the MENA region and shed light on a variety of factors that impact how international students engage with libraries. Elements that were found to influence student perceptions of libraries include educational backgrounds, the history of libraries in their home countries, prior experiences using libraries and seeking information, and educational expectations and standards.

A limitation of this study is that it only included a small number of students from select Arab nations and is therefore not representative of the entire Middle East; it does, however, provide a sampling of the perceptions of library and information use that incoming international students from MENA may have. The descriptions that students provided of their experiences with libraries and information may assist librarians in understanding the difficulties and transitions that international students face when introduced to higher education and academic libraries in the US.

Notes

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