Rites of Passage in a Saudi University: Digital Liminality, and Cross-Cultural Re-integration

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ABSTRACT
The proper role of digital media in higher education was a question I had to confront at Alfaisal University, where students exhibited an extraordinary addiction to their cell phones. For Saudi students, immersion in their cells was a liminal phase during a university rite of passage. Digital technology exposed them to many things that would be inadmissible when they were later re-integrated into a deeply conservative society. My students wrote about living between “Western freedoms,” and a world of submission, where most of them would work and raise families. I collected student cells at the beginning of classes—an idea suggested by a prince who puts family cells in a basket, so that they are not Alone Together (Turkle, 2012). But rather than just prohibiting the use of digital devices, I used this temporary cell-free zone for students to begin to defamiliarize their use of digital technologies. Students investigated their own role as “threshold people” on the verge of a new way of life, using analytical tools to critically examine their own digitally mediated liminality, and then did presentations about the challenges of re-incorporation in a Saudi context. This paper is a progress report. I excerpt student journals, in an effort to formulate provisional answers to questions about the strengths and weakness that digital media present, as regards teaching students not only a second language, but cultural literacy.

INTRODUCTION
I used rites of passage as a framing device while teaching English at Alfaisal University 2013-2014. Saudi students were achieving separation and liminality through digital technology in ways that were unimaginable for prior generations. They were forming new identities and accessing information that could not be admitted when they were later “re-integrated” into a social order that confines its subjects in within rigid standards of appearance and behaviour, and places “severe restrictions of freedom of expression” (Al-Rasheed 2014: 353). I wanted to hear what students had to say about their in-between-ness—living between the world of “Western freedoms” (mostly American popular culture), and KSA’s world of submission, where most of them would be working, and raising families. My goal was to give students a framework to understand their role as “threshold people” people on the verge of a new way of life, and analytical tools that students could apply to the challenges of re-incorporation in a Saudi context.

When I began implementing a restructured Freshman English curriculum at Alfaisal in the Spring of 2014, I built on an understanding reached with students. When I framed the university experience as a rite of passage in the Fall of 2013, students immediately grasped that in their digitally-mediated rite of passage, both they and their society will have to change.

As of 2013, 51% of Saudis are under the age of 25. As the authors of “Where is Saudi Arabian Society Heading?” observe, “Saudi students are much more complex than the generation before them.” Although many of this generation are active in social media, and express in digital form their desire for “some form of change,” these youths “still remain socially conservative” (Ali Salam and Hunter, 2013: 145). Yet their conservatism coexists with an appetite for on-line entertainment, and a general willingness to “do as the Romans do,” when they are physically outside the Kingdom. Based on interactions with over 200 Saudi students, I would describe them as moving through a unique liminal phase, because of their acute connectedness to the “outside world” through digital media. This is not like the Amish Rumspringa, where after sowing some wild oats, most Amish youth will return to the fold, having left behind their period of experimentation (and their cells). In addition to electronic access, many Alfaisal students come from wealthy families, and have travelled widely in Europe and the U.S. Not a few have attended U.S. universities. Saudi youths may be “completely different” when they are in the West (as they freely confess), but no one imagines that they will leave their cells behind, or abandon what they have learned through their virtual and physical travels. I ask my students: are you going to give up all you have learned about technology, the lifestyles of other cultures, etc? They say, of course not. Then I ask: will Saudi society be able to accept all of your changes? They are just as definitive, answering no. Clearly, in this re-integration process, something has to give.

It is precisely that give-and-take, the difficult re-integration of linked Saudi students into a deeply conservative “religious nationalism” (Al-Rasheed, 2013) that I encouraged students to explore in their research/presentations. Their digital liminality journals were a researched extension of their auto-ethnography, their first project in semester one (Stephens 2014). I gave them readings to help them examine reflexively their investment in their cells (some of which are discussed below). The aim was to defamiliarize the relationship of students with their cells. I want them to do critical thinking about the implications of the world they are linked to through their cells, and the challenges of an attempted re-integration which is in their immediate futures.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF RITES OF PASSAGE
Rites of Passage are cultural rituals that guide a transition from one stage of life to another. The three-part typology for rites of passage was proposed by Arthur Van Gennep in Rites de Passage (1908) and later developed and popularized by British anthropologist Victor Turner (1967).

1) Separation—“cutting away” from the former self;
2) Transition—the liminal phase, re: “in-between-ness” (being between worlds);
3) Re-Integration – re-entering society with a new status.
Teaching this material to Saudi students, we reached another understanding that served as a building block: Saudi society is marked by incomplete separation. There is very little separation from family, even less so for females. The limited separation at the university is much less than what most students experience at an American university (living in a dorm, etc.) Still, the time in the university setting may be the only "space of separation" that female students in particular are able to achieve. But they are achieving their separation through other means: by their immersion in digital technologies, social networks, American entertainment, etc.

In my second semester Freshman English course, we focused on cross-cultural dynamics of digitally mediated liminality. With that in mind, let's look more closely at the three phases of a rite of passage. These served as a theoretical frame for students’ "Digital Liminality Journals."

1). SEPARATION-- This stage involves a metaphorical "death." The initiate is forced to leave behind, or "cut off" previous practices—the ways of the child, or in a university context, the routines of adolescence/ high school. The first phase requires the child to go through a separation from his family; as childhood is left behind, this involves his/her "death" as a child. One sees some instances of an un-desired cut-off from family and community in the "Digital Journals."

2). TRANSITION-- Liminal rites involve "the creation of a tabula rasa, through the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits." During transition away from childhood or adolescence, participants must pass a "test" to prove they are ready for adulthood. If they succeed, the re-integration stage celebrates the "new birth" of an adult who is welcomed back into society. As Joseph Campbell has remarked, "All children need to be twice born," to learn to function rationally in the present world, leaving childhood behind. If such "new birth" rituals are missing, then young people often remain in an extended, often infantilized adolescence.

Freshman English is itself a rite, a "test" that must be passed in order to prove that students are ready for advanced classes that will move them towards an adult career. The "ways of the child," such as the high school version of doing writing/ English, must be left behind.

In liminal situations, participants are taken outside their normal environment. In traditional societies, this might be a camp. But universities serve a similar function. Participants are "brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain." As a result, "initiands" often come to feel "dislocated and socially unstructured" (Thomassen 2006: 322). So liminal periods are destructive as well as constructive. After the pain of cutting off the old role or habits (destructive), comes creative rebirthing (constructive): scripting a new social role, which is performed for the community, or ritually celebrated/ announced during the reintegration stage.

Students in Freshman English frequently experience a similar dislocation, or perceive the coursework as "acts of pain," especially in ESL contexts—and even more in a culture of minimal literacy. By drawing parallels to the disorientation that is designed to accompany the separation phase of rites of passage, Instructors can "give meaning to their pain." If students know more about where that pain is leading (having to read, think critically, and write in a second language), then the disorientation and stress that often accompanies being a first-year student will be more bearable. It may even be enabled. This is a dynamic I explore in the "quest for freedom" themes of ENG 101, such as the quote by Frederick Douglass: "without struggle there is no progress."

Elaboration on Liminality

Liminality is a word that requires "unpacking." It comes from the Latin ĭmēn, which means "a threshold". Turner used it in his work on rites of passage to express the sense of ambiguity or disorientation felt in the middle of rituals, between roles or identities. During the liminal stage, participants "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity or community, and a new way, structured by the ritual.

Cell phones, and other digital technologies, themselves function as a sort of threshold. In their "Digital Liminality Journals," students apply this concept broadly to examine how, and to what extent, digital technologies can serve as a gateway to cultures they would not be able to access, within the confines of their traditional host culture.

Cultures can also "stand at the threshold." Societies can pass through "an in-between period between two structured world-views." This social liminality has been characterized as "an age of creativity where 'man asked radical questions’, and where the 'unquestioned grasp on life is loosened". Social revolutions are a type of political-cultural liminality, since they can lead either to a collapse of the status quo—such as the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia (Cole 2014; Owen 2014), or to significant social change (as in the U.S. Civil Rights revolution).

A "permanent liminality" can exist, as when a liminal state becomes "fixed," as Turner put it. Sociologist Arpad Szakolczai includes in this category monasticism (monks or nuns perpetually prepare and reinforce separation), and court society, "with individuals continuously performing their roles in an endless ceremonial game," re: the liminal stage. The latter has relevance for the rentier monarchies in the Gulf States (Hertog 2010; Dawisha 2013).

During political and cultural liminal periods, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved. Continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt. The dissolution of order during liminality creates a fluid situation, a flux in which new institutions and customs can become established. This broader framework has limited applicability to KSA, but cells/digital technologies do provide a window on such phenomenon. One example is the various digital technologies and social networks that went into the making, production, promotion, and distribution of the Oscar-nominated film The Square, about the uprising in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.

Let us return to the individual level, the primary focus of Freshman English. (However, I do move towards a "post-process" model which emphasizes the cultural networks in which students are embedded.) Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung and his followers have often seen the individuation process of self-realisation as taking place within a liminal space. "Individuation begins with a withdrawal from normal modes of socialization, epitomized by the breakdown of the persona.
[during] liminality." So whether social or psychological, withdrawal, and the dissolution of the old order/identity, is a prequel to a new script.

Finally, just as university life (usually) ends with graduation, all forms of liminality must eventually dissolve, since "it is a state of great intensity that cannot exist very long without some sort of structure to stabilize it," Turner thought. Usually the individual returns to the surrounding social structure—with both individual and structure transformed. But if that structure cannot integrate the transformed individuals, then in some cases these "non-normative" individuals with their non-assimilated liminality may develop their own more or less autonomous social structure. Utopian communities are an example of what Turner called "normative communitas".

In the classroom, this can be explained through dialectic theory: a thesis and antithesis struggle, then produce a synthesis, which eventually becomes a new thesis. The dialectical process of rites of passage suggests a question which I cannot pursue here: What sorts of structures in KSA, if any, can stabilize the new modes of "radically liminal" Saudi students?

3). RE-INTEGRATION—During the final stage of a rite of passage, the participant is re-incorporated into society with a new identity, as a "new" being. This is the process that students are asked to imagine/investigate, whether through readings on the impacts of social media, or the challenges of their professions in cross-cultural contexts.

Initiates come out of rite of passage experiences with a new and empowering story. They write a new script, which not only articulates a new identity, but connects them to their community. Both the community and the initiate benefit from a rite of passage. An intentional rite of passage experience provides the space for the community to transmit its core values and confer the role or responsibilities appropriate to the initiate's stage of life, thus insuring cultural continuity—a sort of knitting together of the generations.

As students do research, we also discuss another dimension of the rite of passage process, as it relates to their university career, and their investment in digital technologies. This has to do with a sort of metanarrative about various stages of life as "moving between confinements". The confinements may become bigger, but they are always there. Digital technologies give the illusion of complete freedom, but of course in practice they structure new forms of confinement. What sort of confinements do digital technologies constitute for students?

MOVING BETWEEN CONFINEMENTS

Rites of passage are a ritual means to move people between different types of confinement. They facilitate the breaking of old confinements: strict limitations placed on the movement and behaviour of children are sundered. In the romantic imagination, rites of passage are identified with the liminal phase, a socially sanctioned in-betweenness in which all prior confinements are ruptured. During liminality, possibilities seem unlimited, and identity is in flux (Stephens 2009).

Yet Victor Turner's use of the term threshold to describe liminality indicates that adolescents are on the verge of adulthood. Their temporary freedoms are only a means of breaking old habits, and preparing them to accept the responsibilities (and hence the confinements) of adulthood. There will always be another confinement, although the new confinement may give us more space to roam—or may provide the illusion of more freedom.

Picturing the different types of confinements that humans experience during the life cycle, we see a trend from small confinements, to gradually larger confinements. A baby has a crib, or is wrapped in swaddling clothes. A pre-toddler gets a playpen. The toddler faces barriers to prevent access to some rooms, or stairs. The child is confined to a yard, and then, as a student, to a classroom, or a playground. The playgrounds get bigger for the preteen, through sports, etc. When a teen or young adult moves into the workplace, the office cubicle may be quite small, although the salary enables one to move out of prior confinements. Marriage introduces a new set of confinements. Eventually, after retirement, humans will gain new freedoms, yet also face a series of tighter confinements, which may or may not include a retirement home.

Seen from this distance, every phase of life requires its own set of confinements, which are of course culturally specific. For example, in a Saudi context, many Westerners choose to live in compounds. These allow for some freedoms of dress, of movement, and lifestyle choices that would not be possible outside the compound. But the compound is also, of course, a confinement which almost assures that there will be little or no interaction with local culture.

After discussing the confinements of life stages, and their cultural specificity, I ask students to reflect on the desired, and undesired, nature of the confinements within which they live. Do what degree are they able to escape undesired confinements through digital technologies? Some of their responses will follow.

SELF-VOICE OF SAUDI STUDENTS: DIGITAL LIMINALITY JOURNALS

THE THEORY

Barnawi (2011) has argued for the utility of "self-voice" (personal narratives) for ESL students in general, and Saudi students in particular. I agree, yet in guiding students towards the construction of a narrative with thematic unity, I see that the digital technologies in which they are so invested tend to create, and replicate, a splintered sense of self. That self may have cohesion within the network of a particular social media, but it does not usually translate well beyond the medium. Creating a more unified sense of self that can be narrated to an audience outside one's own bubble is a primary challenge of Freshman English, in my view.

Knowing how to tell a story should be a building block of the university experience, which inevitably shapes character. Hanson (2013) suggests: "To understand the change that students undergo, we need to solicit stories from them." This is an eminently practical skill (Stephens 2014). Job interviews, after all, "are exercises in storytelling" (Hanson 2013).
I "solicited stories" from students about their digital liminality, but found that their self-voice was fragmented. MIT Professor Sherry Turkle, scholar of the evolving relationship of humans to digital technologies, has been a useful guide. Turkle has moved from a largely utopian perspective in The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (1984), to second thoughts in Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (1995), to a more dystopian perspective in Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (2012).

Once people become accustomed to communicating through multiple windows, or apps, then they develop “a distributed self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time,” Turkle has noted (1997, 1101). This self-distribution has had some librating elements, such as the exploration of gender roles. But the less-desirable consequences of our horizontal “distribution” have been well-documented. In an oft-cited article with the provocative title “Is Google Making us Stupid?” Nicholas Carr confessed that he had gotten the sense that “someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do” (Carr 2008).

Having confronted his “wayward brain,” Carr argued for the necessity of a “deep thinking” which digital media often seem to discourage, or disable: “In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book,” writes Car, “we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas.” What Carr wants us to consider, then, is not that we have been made “stupid,” but that we need to reserve time for “deep reading”—for the “meditative benefits,” one might say, of leisurely strolls through longer texts.18

Michael Suman at the University of Southern California’s Center for the Digital Future reports that his students have ever more trouble focusing on lectures and reading. Their messages to him are often gibberish, and they ask the same questions over and over. Even when they have turned off their digital media, they frequently cannot think through concepts and ideas. “They’re increasingly challenged to engage in deep and meaningful thought,” Suman says. “Sequential, logical, rational thinking seems to be severely compromised” (Greengard 2011: 17-18).

THE REALITY: GIRLS JUST WANT TO WATCH VINES

Reading my student Nada’s journals, I would not say that her ability to tell a story had been compromised, but that rather, that she exhibited a sort of vine sensibility. Nada’s account of her family’s spring break in Malaysia is at once a teenage diary of a digital addiction, and a Saudi variant of “Lifestyles of the Rich and hyper-connected.” Nada’s mission was to stay linked by any means necessary. During a seven-hour layover in Abu Dhabi, Dad placated daughter’s internet anxieties by settling in the VIP lounge.

I used their Internet for the whole 6 hours. I went through Path, kept myself updated with my followers and posted pictures of how bored we all were in the airport. Then I went through Vine, watched some of King Bach’s vines. Then we got on board for the flight to Pinang. There was WiFi on the plane. But my father was asleep so sadly I had to just live with the movies on the plane. After we reached Pinang safely, the first thing I asked for when we got to the motel was the WiFi password. Then I kept watching the vines I missed out on from King Batch, and then I went to sleep.

Nada’s digital investment is not really unusual for my students, but the extremes to which she took this on a family vacation were often comic (as are vines). When Nada’s family decided to “stay in and swim the whole day at the resort,” she experienced it as a frustrating confinement.

...for me as an Internet addict, it was kind of hard to just ignore my phone and swim the entire day. I kept sending Snapchats to all my friends of how nice the weather is and how tan I looked. I kept updating my followers on Twitter and Path of what I do during my day and if I had funny stories, like for example how my father pushed me into the pool because of how I made fun of his chewing when he eats. Then at around 8:00 pm we walked around the city for 2 hours. I had no Internet for 2 hours and it was bad for me.

Nada just wanted to be online. While her father was imploring her to come swim with the family, Nada had only one thing on her mind: “the new episode of the series I watch, The Walking Dead, came out and I was too excited to watch it.”

Sometimes there are more important things than rest, relaxation, and quality family time at a high-priced resort in tropical southeast Asia:

I did not know what to do so I pretended to be sick just to watch the episode. I went back to the room and got my laptop. I opened the Internet and searched for the episode. It opened and when I played the video, it began to lag and get slow with me. I was freaking out. I took my laptop and went to the lobby, hoping the Internet would be faster. Turns out that it just made everything worse, because my father was there and he saw me. He got upset. So I had to stop using electronics that day as an apology.

So Nada got grounded for a day. But “after a whole day of torment of not using the Internet” her story has a happy ending, waking up before dawn to reconnect with her “real family.”

Perhaps Nada is one of Suman’s students who are “challenged to engage in deep and meaningful thought.” Those who have read Nada’s account of vine-binging, and updates of how bored or tanned she is, will understand the challenge of taking some of the vine sensibility, and translating that into a thesis-guided narrative. (Yet far be it from me to denigrate the creativity that many vines manage to condense into six seconds). But “desperate times call for desperate measures.” If a student will go so far as to play sick in order to escape family fun, and stay in a dark motel room watching a post-apocalyptic TV horror drama, then you can imagine what they might do when left to their own devices in a classroom.

Some of my students wrote about the digital distractions that routinely go in classes. Female students at Alfasial must sit segregated in a balcony; furthermore they sit behind smoked glass. It is therefore almost impossible to monitor what female students do. One wrote:
The microeconomics class was boring so I and my friends were taking some funny pictures through snapchat. In our free time we watched a youtube channel that criticized some Arabic series in a funny way. In the biology class I kept looking at the time through my cell phone waiting for 5 o'clock which is when my spring vacation starts.

I have rarely encountered the resistance some professors report when they limit student access to cells and computers in class (Young 2006). Most students bought into the idea of a “digital timeout” as a way to improve their grades, and to practice defamiliarization.

The following excerpts from students journals have three themes: a) efforts to withdraw from, or minimize, their digital addictions; b) portraits of family life, i.e., how Saudi families are being restructured, and in some cases reconstituted, through digital means; c) critical perspectives on the rupture that physical and digital travel are causing for some students.

A). Attempts to withdraw, with varying degrees of success

“Sarah” writes that she and “Noura” have “made a bargain to stay away from the following social networks for a month: Tumblr, Path (she uses that), Twitter (I use that). Our reason for doing this is that we feel that our thoughts are no longer our own. That we’ve become like parrots, only repeating things and talking about things we find in social networks. Especially Tumblr. We can spend hours on it.” The following excerpt, from Sarah’s first entry, expressed the sense that social media can lead to a sort of group-think:

“I’ve been having this feeling recently…..like I’m sort of being dictated to think a certain way. I can no longer tell if I genuinely think like this or if it’s someone else’s thoughts I’ve memorized, like I subconsciously decided I agree with this very popular opinion.

Sarah’s thoughts reinforce Turkle’s findings (2012) about “teenagers whose identities are shaped not by self-exploration but by how they are perceived by the online collective.” Some coaches have begun banning social media use by their players, even describing it as a “social poison.” My own students estimated that they were on-line about 5-6 hours a day. While engaged in such saturation usage, it can become difficult for young people to individuate.

Sarah’s journal entry also points to research by Gardner and Davis (2013), which suggests that social media and digital apps place identity formation within a static confinement. In an interview after the publication of The App Generation, Howard Gardner observes: "Kids feel pushed into developing a public identity early, and since it has been widely posted and effectively branded, it is actually difficult to explore other forms of identity."

Students are often challenged to achieve separation from an on-line identity in which they may feel trapped by the expectations created by the presentation of their on-line self (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2012). Another student, “Hussein,” described himself as a recovering addict. He recounted how withdrawing from digital addictions opened space for exercise, and a passion for reading books. Hussein’s “confinement” is closely related to the need to “keep up with” networks on various apps, which becomes an addictive impulse:

It’s really hard to dispose of social media. It’s not an addiction anymore, but I’m obligated to use the Internet. I receive important emails, and my university forces me to use digital media, so I can’t get rid of it or else I am going to receive a bad grade. But I don’t use facebook, twitter, Instagram, kik, keek, kaak, and whatever you want to call them. I used to be a heavy user, but by avoiding these networks I noticed all the free time I had. I was very attached [so] that I felt my body was being neglected.

Hussein goes on to describe his effort, in 2013, to go one month without watching TV. After “cheating” he decided to “change the rules”:

I noticed how much time I had been wasting. I read books, went out with friends, cooked, exercised, and determined to learn the piano. My life became a stress free environment. Doing more actually made me happier. The trick to keep myself motivated was to make sure I wasn’t sitting around doing nothing. Otherwise, bad habits will come back.

One particular bad habit, globally evident, was staring into cells while in the company of friends. Turkle has described a “special vulnerability” of young people today. Their relationship to digital technology is conflicted: by turns ecstatic, and ambiguous, or resentful. In her interviews, teenagers complain about growing up “tethered” by cellphones and being required to endlessly phone home. Yet they seem to replicate this tethering, often following a familial pattern:

Although always connected, they feel deprived of attention…..Some, as children, were pushed on swings while their parents spoke on cellphones. Now these same parents do their e-mail at the dinner table. (Young 2011)

Hussein’s journal paints a similar scenario:

Wherever I go, people are very attached to their phones including me. But some people would panic if you placed them and their phones in separate rooms. I would be sitting with a friend, and the whole purpose of this outing is to catch up. Somehow he can’t help himself but to hold it, as if he needs his dosage. I am sure he means no disrespect [but it is] a nasty habit that he can’t seem to stop…..Being unavailable isn’t accepted anymore.

Hussein also shares a perspective on the digital reconstitution of family, which will serve as a transition to the next section: “When I was in America, the easiest way to contact my family was through skype.” Many of my students in Saudi Arabia either communicate with family members in the U.S. through digital means, or have lived in the U.S. and stayed in touch that way.

B). Portrait of family life

“Noura”—a student who wears a niqab—began with a detailed look at how intimate is her relationship to her cell, and how
it mediates her relationship with family members:

I always keep my cell phone next when I go to sleep, I keep checking it whenever I wake up to see if I have any important messages, also to check the time. ... My driver calls me to let me know that he’s at the door to drive me to college. Before I go to university I take my three years old sister to my grandmother’s house. Instead of ringing the door bell and waking up everyone and standing in the front door until someone open it, I use my cell phone to call her to open the door for me.

Noura’s journal uses the cell-free-zone of my English class as a reference point—a tether. But she always returns to family. Interestingly, that intimate family portrait gives constant evidence of how other cultures are “penetrating the veil”—in Noura’s case, not just American culture, but an emerging fascination with the narratives of Turkish, Korean, and Japanese dramas:

I used my cell phone after my English class - since we’re not allowed to in the middle of it- to set up the due date of this assignment. Next during a break I called my friends to see where they are. They were in an empty classroom studying for an Islamic exam except one of them was watching a Korean show on her laptop. She advised me to try watching Korean dramas. ... [Later] I called my driver to come [take me home]. My father was still at work, my mother was watching a Turkish drama, my 16 year old brother was on his laptop playing an online game [and] my seven years old brother was playing play station three, and only my little sister was playing with her toys and not on devices...... Before I went to sleep, I made sure to set up the alarm of my cell phone to not miss the prayer time.

Digital technologies constantly structure how Noura’s family comes together, and plays together. This sometimes produces some ironies:

Every Friday my aunts and their children gather in my grandmother’s house. All of us were in the living room talking [and] of course all of us having our cell phones next to us while we’re all in silence moments. All of the children [play] with devices and after almost 3 hours of playing they leave their devices to charge and they play games like racing and hiding. It is good that they aren’t playing with devices but without them they make a lot of noises to the extent where you want them to go back playing with their devices.

Whereas parents or babysitters used to park kids in front of the TV, increasingly nowadays their digital devices are the babysitters. As we become used to their total absorption into digital games, the normal sounds of kids playing can seem obtrusive.

“Maria” describes family life in a transnational space mediated by digital devices, and then reflects on the special nature of “digital liminality” for Saudia females.

Today I was snapchatting with my brother Sultan, who is [in a military academy] in New York. When we Skyped, I felt like he had just came over to visit us for an hour. He told me about a funny incident. During plebe only two students are allowed to stay in a room, so breaking the rules my brother went to his friend’s room and gathered about 20 people in one small room, mostly nonwhites. Suddenly a white American walks in and they all shouted “white is minority” and other stuff. They kept shouting and screaming till their first lieutenant caught them breaking the rules. My brother quickly hid behind the door. The lieutenant punished his friends by sticking a tape on the wall and making them do pushups till the whole room is sweaty and the tape falls down. My brother couldn’t stop laughing from behind the door, and the funny thing is, it was mainly his fault! When the punishment finally ended, his friends all drowned in sweat hugged him to wet him with sweat as a payback for what he did. As he told me the story I could barely stop laughing. I can’t wait to Skype with him again to hear what his next story will be.

In this passage we see several ties that bind Saudis to an international network: school, sweat, military training, and narratizing their stories through digital media. Maria then reflected on how for many Saudi females, participation in digital media is an escape from confinement:

The Internet has given me hours of entertainment and I can’t imagine life without it. Living in Saudi Arabia, there’s very little for a girl to do. The Internet provides us a magical window where we are given visual access to the world out there. This has added unlimited amounts of joy for me and has drastically improved my quality of life. ... The Internet in some way provides me an escape from the four walls in my room, and allows me to experience things that I wouldn’t have never had experienced.

The “sense of freedom” for this Saudi female student is structured by her confinement within four walls. My female students invariably describe digital media as an escape.

I wish to end with a reflective account by a student whose travels and explorations have left her felt cut off from some friends and family members who tried to force her confinement.

C) Dissolution and an uncertain transition

“Rima” has spent extensive time abroad, and self-identifies as a “Western Arab.” This has led to a disengagement from her Saudi context. But she rejects any suggestion that she is not fully Saudi, or a proud Muslim. Her journal indicates just how tricky the re-integration process may be as Saudis gain ever fuller access to the lifestyles and worldview of other peoples.

Digital technology gave people access to substances they lacked in their own culture, therefore making the later generations noticeably different from the previous ones. A flower doesn’t grow in the middle of the desert, because it lacks the elements which would help its survival. The flower represents my personality. It wouldn’t have flourished in the culture I was raised in, but with elements from the outside world it did develop.

Rima uses the metaphor of a flower in the desert to suggest that many young Saudi women now feel that they cannot receive adequate cultural nourishment in the “extreme confinement” of the home culture. Yet this merely feeds their
palpable hunger for nourishment. Moreover, however much they express a genuine dedication to the values of the home culture, they are increasingly convinced that the substances they need to flourish (as professionals, as humans) cannot be had at home. Their forays away from the norms of the home culture become ever longer. Being so different while abroad—or while in the space of digital liminality—has led to a growing sense of a split self. Rima describes this almost as a form of cultural schizophrenia, in which “foreign elements” become necessary for psychological survival, and yet lead to painful social conflict.

Developing a personality that is different from my family's challenged me on so many levels. I had a hard time fitting in among my family and friends. The way I speak, dress, and behave have changed over time, which discomfited some people close to me. At first I wanted to fight for who I am, but after a while winning the battle seemed impossible. I started to act differently around some relatives. I changed the way I dress, and I became very cautious of every word I say around them. This act of duplicity goes against my religion, and morals.... Some people would hide behind religion, and use it to back up their argument against certain behavior. The mix up between religion and culture is what harmed me the most.

Within the safe space of a journal, Rima comments on the "high rate of hypocrisy in the modern time." She witnesses a disjuncture between the extreme materialism and indeed smugness of her home culture, and its insular spirituality that demands conformity in appearance, actions, and even in thoughts. For those who have become accustomed to getting nutrition abroad, or in digital space, it is the demand for conformity in thought which becomes impossible to fulfill. The expression of non-conformity, inevitably, has to be confined to digital space, or time abroad. But young people increasingly have social interactions, in person, with friends who have developed new freedoms in these alternative spaces. This can lead to cognitive dissonance, or even condemnation. Rima writes that a friend commented on how “she’s so different online!” The understandable result is that Rima has become “selective about the things I share with people.” I’m less selective on the Internet, in which I share my thoughts more openly. Giving my opinion on politics is taken seriously on the Internet, but in the real world most people would show their disinterest in my opinion because of age and gender differences. I’m not less mature in the material world, but I’m not given the chance to prove otherwise.

Great art, and original thinking, tends to come out of suffering. The pressure Rima feels—trying to squeeze her larger self into a social space that still cannot accommodate her—has led her into areas of consciousness that may be unprecedented in modern Saudi Arabia. It has led Rima to feel that tradition has become a “dead weight” on her, and her generation: The problem isn't the use of technology; the problem is how previous generations are still fighting it, and imposing their traditions on the modern generation. Ibn Khaldun says, “Blindly following ancient customs and traditions doesn’t mean that the dead are alive, but that the living are dead.” A huge part of our generation is dead, and refuses to come back to life. I, like many individuals around the world have to be dead, because living is too dangerous for others around us.

CONCLUSION

I have wanted readers to consider the utility of applying a rite of passage framework to the university experience: especially Freshman English as a form of separation which is also a threshold--an embarkment on a liminal phase. The concept of “digital liminality” merits further investigation is a number of fields, I believe. Saudi students are not qualitatively different from other people in their generation, who have been the subject of studies by scholars such as Sherry Turkle, Katie Davis, and Howard Gardner. Experiential evidence suggests, however, that their use of digital technologies is quantitatively different. This "eye test" observation is not scientific. But it is a perception shared by many of my professional colleagues who have taught students in China, Southeast Asia, other parts of the Middle East, Europe, and in the United States.

The transnational investment of youth culture in digital media has revolutionized the way we do business in many ways: how new movies are promoted, for example. It is inevitably also going to change many of the ways we think about, and practice, higher education. My purpose in this essay has been to find out what Saudi students had to say about their digital liminality.

The unmeasured way in which Saudi youths are living through their cells is closely connected to the multiple confinements of their deeply conservative society. Females are confined more radically; therefore their escape through digital means is more variegated, and more passionate. Maria called the Internet a “magical window” which is so desired precisely because “there’s very little for a girl to do” within the Kingdom. Her description of the “unlimited amounts of joy” which many young women in KSA feel the internet provides is explicitly linked to “an escape from the four walls in my room.”

As such, the experiential knowledge of the “digital kingdom” for Saudi women fits within the dynamics of the romance tradition. In traditional romances, women are confined with towers, country estates, etc. The romances they consume serve as escape from their four walls, rounded tower, etc. Within those confinements, their minds can and do travel far and wide. Thus when Fiona breaks out in some romantic clichés when the masked Shrek comes to rescue her, he says: “You’ve had a lot of time to plan this, haven’t you?”

The confinements and veils of Saudi society still place major restrictions on appearance, movements, and public speech. However, these limits have increasingly become meaningless in digital space. Young Saudis, especially women, have taken full advantage of that opening. Various forms of freedom of expression in digital space that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago are in full swing now. This opening is being driven not only by the pervasive, practically unchecked use of digital media, but by the extraordinary numbers of Saudi students who are studying in the United States and in the UK. The knowledge that they are bringing back through their material and digital travels can no longer be controlled, although the degree to which they can comment outside of digital forums on what they know remains to be seen.

It is even more uncertain how much of the lifestyle choices to which young Saudis have been exposed can be enacted in
their home country. It is clear that these returning Saudis have an appetite for a wide variety of trends, ranging from alternative energy, to going to the cinema, to simply driving a car. Some of these things can be enacted, and some cannot, as of yet. What I have learned from my students is that their mobilization process is in a fairly advanced stage, on-line. I doubt that most would agree with Rima that the weight of an uncritical tradition makes the present generation zombie-like. But virtually all live in the certainly that what they have learned during their liminal phases is a subterranean force which, even when it cannot yet break to the surface, is going to make the "technological unconscious" of the Middle East a new sort of king-maker during the coming re-integration process (Beer 2009).

NOTES


6). Palmer et al, "Betwixt Spaces: Student Accounts of Turning Point Experiences in the First-Year Transition" (2009).
8). Student struggles in Freshman English are such that some instructors recommend jettisoning essay assignments as a means of easing student pain. See Rebecca Schuman, "Let’s kill the college essay," Slate (Dec. 16, 2013). Re: Arabian post-literacy, an Arab News survey found that "The average Arab child reads only "six minutes" a year in comparison to Western children, who average around 12,000 minutes a year," and that "An adult in the Arab world reads on average a quarter of a page a year compared to an American adult, who reads around 11 books." Ali Fayyaz, "Most people prefer not to read, survey shows," Arab News (Nov. 3, 2013).
18). The notion of "meditative benefits" was developed in a student personal essay about golf, in the useful "Student Essay in Progress" in Rosa and Eschholz, Models for Writers (2007: 31-40).
19). ESPN News Services, "Pitino Thinks Social Media is "poison," ESPN (February 20, 2014)
There were only about 1,000 Saudis studying in the U.S. in 2004, but in 2011, Saudi Arabia sent 66,000 students to U.S. universities. That makes it "the fastest-growing source of foreign students in the U.S., ahead of China." Ellen Knickmeyer, "Saudi Students Flood In as U.S. Reopens Door," Wall Street Journal (Nov. 8, 2012). The total number of Saudi students in the U.S. at present seems to be well in excess of 100,000.

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