“The Road Not Taken…”A critical perspective on exploring the lifeworlds of non-traditional students in online transnational higher education

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DECEMBER 15, 2024
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December 2024

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of Educational Research

Lancaster University, UK

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary research that integrates cultural and social psychology, sociology of education, sociocultural analysis, and comparative education in the field of transnational online higher education, aims to explore from an intersectional and critical lens the lifeworlds of non-traditional students studying in UK-based, transnational programmes residing in Nigeria, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom or being citizens of these countries. The term ‘non-traditional’ indicates underrepresented groups whose participation in higher education is constrained by structural barriers, such as students from minority ethnic groups, mature-aged students, or students from low-income families. The context chosen is the online, international postgraduate programmes of three universities in the UK, which provide a ‘data-rich’, multicultural learning environment in which the students study in their own countries. The countries are selected to mirror a global online classroom.

The scope of the study is to uncover the multidimensional nature of inequality varied by geographical and national context, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, previous educational cultures, and gender and how these inequalities become visible and intersect through student voices. The research applied hermeneutic phenomenology, and lifeworld studies in the methodology as well as intersectionality and critical pedagogy as theoretical frameworks to address issues of empowerment and agency, marginalization and cultural domination, privileges, stereotypes, the development of critical consciousness, social presence or absence, and cultural inclusion or the lack of it in online transnational education. The methodology provides rigorous and evocative data presentation methods that generate cognitive and emotional understanding, which is one of the original contributions of this study.

The findings reveal that unequal socioeconomic and cultural conditions shape online learning experiences in unequal ways and highlight that any form of overgeneralization or overcategorization in research, policy, and educational practice is mistaken. A precise analysis of highly situated realities is necessary for nuanced understanding, improved policy

making, and a more tailored practice that truly recognizes and deals proactively with inequalities. Students' online learning experiences have just as many varieties of sounds and meanings as the music and poetry in different parts of the world. Female and male voices are not the same in all parts of the world. The intersection of geographic location, socioeconomic status, and gender or previous educational culture creates patterns in the narratives of non-traditional learners and determines power dynamics, experiences of privilege and subordination, marginalization and empowerment, oppression and agency. Age and ethnicity provide further nuances to the picture. In contrast with previous qualitative studies, this thesis offers a detailed and nuanced representation of the diversity of female voices in the Global South and Global North, through which online learning is becoming a new form of female resistance against being silenced, but in various ways depending on the cultural context. The study demonstrates that the importance lies in the detail: every concept about learning is culturally situated and bears a different meaning depending on who says it and in which cultural context. The given cultural contexts create unequal learning conditions that can no longer be ignored. Without recognizing the unequal conditions, non-traditional online students are forced to assimilate into the dominant Western educational culture, which represents a form of cultural hegemony imposed on them.

Keywords: online transnational higher education, hermeneutic phenomenology, critical pedagogy, intersectionality, comparative pedagogy, sociocultural learning theories, social justice

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment

I express my gratitude to all the participants of this research who took the time to share their stories, songs, poetry, and lifeworlds with me. I thank my ex-colleagues at Laureate Online Education and the academic staff at Lancaster University who helped me operationalize this research. I am also grateful for the mind-provoking discussions on interpretative qualitative research with my colleagues at Utrecht University, which helped my critical reflection process.

I would like to thank my supervisors at Lancaster University: Dr. Nicola Ingram for helping me embark on the adventure of finding the right theoretical frameworks, Dr. Murat Öztok for the subject matter expertise, and Professor Murray Saunders for his immense wisdom in preparing me for the final stage of the doctoral journey.

Special thanks to my husband and son for providing me with space and time to work on this study in the evenings and weekends. Last but not least, I would like to dedicate this study to my father, without whom I would not be who I am. I miss you, Dad.

Apukámnak

(To my Dad)

"The world and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction." (Freire, 2017, p. 24)

Chapter 1: Introduction and background

1.1. Lifeworld: the situatedness of learning

The focus of this research is to demonstrate the multidimensional nature of inequality varied by geographical and national context, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender, and how these inequalities become visible and intersect through student voices. Other studies (Finnegan, 2014; Öztok, 2020) have a similar focus, however, Finnegan is preoccupied primarily with the European educational landscape in face-to-face higher education, whilst my study, similarly to Öztok, focuses on transnational online higher education in the global landscape. Öztok (2019, 2020) looks at educational inequality from the perspective of online identity representation and cultural discourses in the classroom. My study has a broader scope and focuses not only on cultural identities and discourses in the classroom, but broader learning challenges experienced in online multicultural classes. It highlights the nuances of highly situated learning conditions when attempting to describe lifeworlds of non-traditional students from different cultures, ages, classes, genders, ethnicities, and geographic locations to demonstrate how macro-level factors infiltrate online learning and how the various forms of inequality intersect and overlap in higher education and society. The term 'non-traditional students' indicates underrepresented groups in higher education whose participation in higher education is constrained by structural barriers, such as students from minority ethnic groups, mature-aged students, and students from low-income families (Finnegan, 2014).

In the study, I often use the phenomenological term 'lifeworld', which according to Ashworth (2016, p. 21) is defined as "the whole subjective situation in which the individual is engaged while he or she is experiencing the specific event or phenomenon with which the research is concerned". Accordingly, the overarching research question is related to exploring how situated the learning is for Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British online learners in transnational online education. The research questions were first very broad to allow a full phenomenological lifeworld exploration, which was useful also to avoid biased questions or topics that I as a researcher would have been interested in exploring. Guided by the emerging topics that the participants brought to the table, the research questions were further narrowed down after the phenomenological data analysis concluded. The finalized research questions are as follows: how do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the influence of their cultural identities and learning routines on their online learning experience? And,

how do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the impact of online learning on their cultural identities and learning routines?

The sub-questions are the following: a) what are the continuities and discontinuities between their local educational cultures and the online educational culture? b) how do they communicate in the multicultural online classroom? c) how do their learning routines and roles change in the online learning environment? d) what are the barriers to online education considering their local cultural and Western educational contexts?

Intersectionality is used in this research, together with Critical (Digital) Pedagogy (CDP) as theoretical frameworks to progressively focus the huge data generated on students' lifeworlds into central themes that intersectionality and CDP are concerned with. The focus stays on students' lifeworlds, learning experiences, and identity formation. Adapting the intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Bolitzer et al., 2023), and the perspectives of CDP (Freire, 2013, 2017, hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2020; Koseoglu et al., 2023), the study explores how the categories of socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, age, ethnicity, and previous educational culture interact within non-traditional online learners and groups of learners to create exceptional learning experiences. It uncovers how the complex identities of online students and groups of online students from Great Britain, Nigeria, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter referred to as KSA) are constructed in a particular social, historical, political, and economic context, locally and globally, with a focus on power dynamics. It aims to discover how the participants of this research as individuals or as a group experience simultaneously oppression, marginalization, agency, and empowerment throughout their online studies.

There are few qualitative research studies conducted in the three countries under examination (Nigeria, KSA, and the United Kingdom) that explore how students perceive their online learning experience and how their local or previous educational cultures influence their learning behaviour and communication style in online programmes. As of yet, no qualitative study has explored these three distinct cultures at once with the intent to find continuities and discontinuities in students' learning experiences and educational backgrounds, as well as provide a systematic approach on how to deal with the challenges arising from the presence of all these cultures in the international online classroom. The present research project aims to fill this gap by using a hermeneutical phenomenological methodology and intends to bridge the gap between theory and practice by opening up a democratic process of inquiry and allowing students with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to express their

perspectives about the learning environment from the point of view of their local educational culture (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Mason, 2012; Friesen et al, 2012).

In a broader picture, the study aims to explore learning experiences concerning social justice and cultural identity in the newly emerged field of seemingly borderless and accessible online international higher education. Is it borderless? Is it accessible to everyone? Does it deal effectively with issues of equity or intersectionality? Does it recognize the impact of diverse cultural identities on the learning process? Do social structures transform in the online learning environment, and if they do, how?

For those who are working in international higher education, this study may provide insights into some of the main challenges students from diverse cultural backgrounds face when joining online transnational programmes, and hopefully find concrete remedies on how to develop further their courses to enhance culturally responsive teaching and learning practices. I also hope that the stories of these students will enlighten the academic audience about the situated nature of learning that leads to issues of inequity in online learning environments. The aim is to reveal whether the current system recreates the existing social inequalities in the global educational society and to invite online higher education providers and policymakers to rethink course development and policies to develop a just and equitable online community of learning.

1.2. The importance of the sociocultural context of adult learning

While dominant theories on adult learning (Knowles, 1990; Mezirow, 1991) promote the Piagetian individual perspective of learning and with it, a Eurocentric worldview, this study looks at adult learning from a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky 1997; Rogoff, 2003; Alfred, 2002, 2009; Rogoff et al, 2018) and considers learning as socially and culturally situated. Earlier research in online and distance education profiled students as a unified body and disregarded culture and the meanings that individuals create in their online practices (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012; Öztok, 2020). The individualist view on learning did not consider the positionality of the instructor, the student, and the institutional culture that influences the learning experience in higher education (Tisdell, 1998). However, the situated nature of learning shifts the focus from the individual dimension towards “the individual in interaction with and within a larger sociocultural context” (Alfred, 2002, p. 4) and looks at individual development as learning that “cannot be separated from its social and cultural-historical

context" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50). This perspective offers a more dynamic view of learning and can better answer issues of positionality as well as transcultural lived experiences of minority groups and non-traditional learners by emphasizing the importance of sociocultural context in adult learning.

Transnational higher education consists of all types of "programmes or educational services delivered via a variety of platforms (distance learning, teaching partnership, off-shore campuses, MOOCs) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one in which the awarding institution is based (Marshall, 2019, p. 224). Successful learning in these asynchronous learning systems depends on many factors, such as technology, content, student motivation, and "cultural representations students and teachers bring to the learning situation" (Uzuner, 2009, p. 1). Interaction with students from different cultures is challenging, considering the meaning-making, interpretative cultural processes that affect communication (Hannerz, 1992, Bruner, 1996), hence also online communication. Students live in their local society and remain physically and socially attached to their own cultures, whilst interacting with students and instructors from all over the world in the virtual learning environment. When they study, they are expected to step out from their own local culture and enter the culture of online learning in which the education providers generally regard learning as an individual phenomenon (Moore, 1993; Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). As meanings are culturally constructed in every human being, online interaction may result in miscommunication and misinterpretation of meanings between culturally diverse learners and instructors due to the limitations of body language or paralinguistic clues and the usage of communicative norms and tools, that are not necessarily effective in a Western-type online educational environment (Anderson, 2008). Transnational, UK degree programmes designed and created in highly developed Western countries expect students to follow norms and values that may be significantly different from their local cultural and educational environment (Szilagyi, 2014; Anderson, 2008; Beckloff, 2008; Leask, 2006; Hall & du Guy, 1996; Scollon, 1995).

In the Nigerian context, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and IT infrastructural factors are some of the challenges to online learning mentioned in the analysed literature, but research remains scarce in exploring the depth of these challenges, and the remedies are also limited. In the Saudi Arabian context, the analysed literature reports that the e-learning sector has developed significantly in the past decade, in which US and UK international partners played a significant role. More female students and other marginalized groups from remote areas

participate in online programmes. Explorative qualitative research remains scarce in identifying the learning challenges students from KSA face when enrolling in inter- and transnational higher education.

1.3. **My interest and positionality**

One of my interactions with a Nigerian student during my work experience is very vivid in my memory. After many email and phone interactions, we finally managed to meet and she greeted me saying: 'God bless you, sister Anna!' It took me some time and reading about the Yoruba culture to understand what a huge compliment this was to me: based on her Yoruba cultural values, this, meant, 'thank you, Anna, for all your help, I will never forget it. Please stay my friend'. In fact, after more than a decade, we are still connected in social media. During my professional experiences as a student counsellor in online international programmes, I heard unbelievable and unforgettable stories of brave men and women fleeing from war, surviving traumatic kidnappings, shootings, and risking their lives to find an internet connection so that they could submit their assignments. At the same time, I also remember students from the Western world asking for extensions because their home internet was not working, and they had to walk two minutes to the internet café next door to submit an assignment. All of them had the same time to read, write, and submit the assignments. However, there is a whole world of difference between them when we look at their circumstances, socioeconomic realities, life experiences, learning and communication styles, beliefs, attitudes, and backgrounds. The personal stories of those non-Western students encourage my writing: I have the responsibility to preserve them, even though the institutions that deliver these online programmes may vanish with time.

The current higher education policy discourse that highlights the importance of student experience tends to put students into pre-defined categories, underestimating the diversity of the student population and their learning needs. In my professional experience at a for-profit educational provider, when I was asked to give a presentation about the diversity of the online student population and their diverse needs, I met numerous times with ignorance, colour-blindness, and an attitude of oversimplifying the student experience. When a senior leader from the US asked me to describe the profile of an international student in contrast to a US student, in an attempt to find a simple recipe for how to help them, she overlooked the diversity of both, international and US students, unaware of how deeply she just insulted all students on the Earth. I tried to hide how personally offended I felt, being an international

online student aware of how different my learning experience and learning needs are as a European, white female, mature student, living in Amsterdam compared to a fellow Christian, Igbo, male student living in Lagos or a female, Muslim student in Riyad or a white British, male student in London. The only answer I could give is that if she was able to show a country called '*internation'* on the world map, I would surely be able to describe and provide a more or less accurate picture, but as we do not have an '*internation'*, we must make the effort and look into each student's specific cultural and educational background and analyse the intersection of their diverse cultural identities. There is no simple recipe. As a researcher, lecturer, and counsellor, I feel that my active role is to fight this type of ignorance and help people learn how to change their cultural lenses.

I am a white, female researcher and university lecturer originally from Central Europe, currently living in the Netherlands. I am not British, Nigerian, or Saudi Arabian. I am not Christian (anymore) or Muslim. Seemingly there is nothing common other than lots of physical and social borders between me and those who hopefully will have a voice and speak their truth in this research project, but we do share some commonalities: we are all online students, non-traditional learners in British international higher education; some of us far from our home country and experiencing the first time how to study online in a UK institution. We all have many cultural identities that make our lives extremely fulfilling, seemingly borderless, but complicated sometimes. The intersection of these cultural identities determines how we perceive our learning experience and the challenges we face.

> "Intersectionality is a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias." (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278)

I am not writing my personal story of online learning or how the intersection of my white female, mature learner experiences shaped my online learner identity, but I have to be crystal clear about who I am and where I come from, to be able to differentiate the meanings and assumptions I create about online learning from those of the students I intend to write about. I respect them as a person and I must be trustworthy as a researcher in documenting faithfully their experiences:

> "Before we can create democratic communities of multicultural learners, as educators, we must first acknowledge our sociocultural histories, identities, biases, and assumptions, and understand how they shape our worldviews, our behaviors, and our interactions with members of diverse communities" (Alfred, 2009, p. 143).

1.4. The structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical context to the research and introduces the most important key concepts and theories from educational psychology, sociology, comparative pedagogy, and sociocultural analysis that come into play when exploring social justice in transnational and multicultural education in the UK higher education context. It will introduce the topics of internationalization and marketization of higher education in the UK to explain the drivers of British higher education institutions in creating global, transnational programmes with a trend to homogenize the student experience reinforcing eventually social inequalities rather than promoting inclusion and diversity in higher education. The chapter will continue introducing diversity and multiculturalism in the online classroom to explain that the student experience is divergent. There is no one-size-fits-all. This section will focus on the Nigerian and Saudi Arabian educational and cultural contexts, as the research participants are situated in Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British educational cultures. This section is followed by the introduction of the main concepts and debates around cultural diversity and social justice in offline and online higher education, including debates on equity, equality, and inclusion with special attention to underrepresented groups in online higher education. The literature review will conclude by introducing the sociocultural nature of online learning.

Chapter 3 will describe in detail the ontological and epistemological background of the research explaining how knowledge creation and learning are perceived in this research. The realities under investigation are subjective in this research and that requires one to approach the topic with openness and creativity to write about truth (science) and justice (moral) with taste (art). Phenomenological lifeworld studies aim to explore the whole subjective situation in which the individual is engaged while he or she is experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. Hermeneutic phenomenology is chosen as an overarching philosophy and methodology for this research because it allows me to study student experiences as they are lived and structured through consciousness together with their meanings. The intention is that phenomenology is seen and felt between the lines from the first to the last letter of this study. Intersectionality and critical digital pedagogy (CDP) are applied as theoretical frameworks to progressively focus the explorative, constructivist, and interpretative process toward issues of equity and social justice in the online, transnational classroom. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce lots of sensitizing theoretical concepts and frameworks. It is necessary to step back and forth between these theories and cross disciplines because there is no one theoretical framework or discipline that could interpret all situations described in the specific lifeworlds of students.

Chapter 3 will also explain the choices for the research design, data generation, analysis, and presentational methods including the relationship between the diverse data sources.

The fourth chapter, 'The lifeworlds of online non-traditional learners', presents the result of the phenomenological data analysis by describing the identified main topics, patterns, continuities, and discontinuities through their experience. I chose an integrated approach to present big chunks of qualitative data with my explanatory text that connects the data to relevant theories. This integrated approach of data presentation and explanation was necessary due to the robust and multidirectional nature of the data: the explanatory text helps the reader comprehend and contextualize the storylines. The sub-chapter, 'Lived body as transformation and change' presents feelings (heart), thoughts (brain), and communication (mouth) in the online classroom. 'Lived space' is seen as a transitional place from marginalization to recognition in which having a voice in online education, barriers to accessing education, and experiences in a multicultural classroom will be elaborated. 'Lived relations' will reveal the different nature of learner-learner and teacher-learner relations in online education and the desire for a sense of community. 'Lived time' will describe the everyday routine of non-traditional adult learners balancing life, work, and studies. The presentation of the textual data will be intercepted with poetry, music, and images chosen by the participants to describe their feelings and thoughts.

Chapter 5 is an extended discussion focusing on intersections and power dynamics. It elaborates on the themes deriving from the phenomenological data analysis that are meaningful for the tenets of intersectionality and CDP. Not all phenomenological lifeworld themes are analysed: due to the robustness of the data a choice was made to progressively focus on the themes that concern intersectionality and CDP. Other phenomenological lifeworld themes will be explored in future publications.

Chapter 6 brings the attention back to the scope of the research by answering the research questions and elaborating on the new contribution to academia. The "Road Not Taken" symbolizes the current state of a dichotomy of online education for online learners and institutions. Both face the relatively unexplored field of online learning with cultural assumptions and biases. Students who socialize in different cultural environments bring study routines and values from their local educational culture. Western institutions providing online courses wear their Western cultural lenses when developing their courses. This creates a dislocation between the lived learning experience and the learning goals set by the

institutions. Unequal socioeconomic and cultural conditions shape online learning experiences in unequal ways. Without recognizing the unequal conditions, non-traditional online students are forced to assimilate into the dominant Western educational culture which represents a form of cultural hegemony imposed on them. The chapter concludes by elaborating on the implications for theory, research, policy, and practice and advocating for the introduction of culturally responsive and trauma-sensitive pedagogies in online learning environments.

Chapter 2: No one-size-fits-all. Student experiences and social justice in the UK transnational, online, higher education context

2.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical context for the research and introduce the most important key concepts and theories from educational psychology, sociology, and cultural studies that come into play when analysing social justice in transnational and multicultural education in the UK higher education context. The literature search process was narrative, cyclical, open, and flexible, allowing the data generated over the years to inform the research in any moment. At the first stage, I searched for peer-reviewed qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods empirical studies in international journals and books via Google Scholar and the online library of Lancaster University around broad key concepts such as international higher education, internationalization of higher education, transnational higher education in the UK, multicultural higher education, online education, adult learning, critical pedagogy and phenomenology. The reference list used in these sources helped me further deepen my knowledge of these concepts. This initial search strategy was intentionally broad in line with phenomenological principles that invite the researcher to keep a "tabula rasa" attitude by not letting the mind be limited or biased by the existing, mostly Western literature. At the same time, qualitative researchers must have an "open but not empty mind," and indeed, my practical experience at work and the initial readings allowed me to draft the initial research questions and design (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 52). However, similarly to Ritchie et al. (2014), who state that in qualitative research, the relationship between data, design, and theory must be dynamic, some theories in this research are tested, others emerge from data. As the data analysis progressively focused on the tenets of intersectionality and critical pedagogy, so did the literature review. After data analysis, the final key concepts were redefined, adding many new theories that emerged from the phenomenological data generation process.

Section 2.2. will start with general issues around the internationalization and marketization of higher education in the UK to explain the drivers, rationale, and motives of British higher education institutions in creating global, international, and transnational programmes including the challenges, dilemmas, and academic debates around how these programmes are designed and how they tend to homogenize the student experience which eventually reinforces social inequalities rather than promote inclusion and diversity in higher education.

Section 2.3. will dive into how students from diverse cultural backgrounds experience transnational higher education (TNHE) to explain that the student experience is divergent depending on where students reside, and what kind of (educational) cultures they were exposed to. There is no one-size-fits-all. This section will focus on the Nigerian and Saudi Arabian educational and cultural contexts, as the research participants are situated in Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British educational cultures.

Section 2.4. introduces the main concepts and debates around cultural diversity and social justice in offline and online higher education, including debates on equity, equality, and inclusion, with special attention to underrepresented groups in online higher education. To explain inequitable learning conditions in the online classroom, this study will also take a look at the broad area of sociocultural analysis and refer regularly to a French social philosopher and critical sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) theoretical work that considers universities as places of reproducing the existing social order. An overview of his theoretical work will be introduced in section 2.4.3.

The literature review will conclude with section 2.5, by introducing the sociocultural nature of online learning and Raymond Williams' (1921-1988) sociocultural analysis of the concept of culture, change, and hegemony as a framework for decoding the macro-level cultural processes of internationalization of education. Section 2.5.2 will summarize the most relevant sociocultural learning theories supported by sociolinguistic approaches and Alexander's comparative pedagogy to highlight the critical literature that supports the situated nature of learning and teaching. Finally, it will offer a review of differentiated, critical, inclusive, and culturally responsive pedagogies as a way of dealing with the cultural situatedness of learning and acknowledging that students' diverse and multilayered lifeworlds, in which systematic and structural inequalities shape their learning experiences, require pedagogical differentiation.

2.2. UK higher education and the homogenization of the student experience - Examining the argument that students are at risk of marginalization at the mercy of a marketized higher education system

In the European context, the Bologna Process (1999) and the Lisbon Strategy (2000) determined the framework in which the past 25 years of education were interpreted in Europe and the UK. This framework promoted European Higher Education to "enhance its worldwide attractiveness and competitiveness", but practices around internationalization took

different directions in the UK and continental Europe from the ’90: in the continent, aid was directed to exchange programmes of students and teachers and curriculum development, in the UK aid shifted to trade charging full tuition fees for international students and developing branch campuses in Asia, Africa and the Middle East (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 3). While this commercial approach started to gain traction in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden, recently it has been identified that the marketization of higher education needs to be regulated better to avoid jeopardizing academic quality and reputation, and to make sure that ethical considerations are linked to the internationalization policies to “ensure sustainable development not only in the higher education sector but also in the society as a whole” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 6). As a result, issues around quality control, accreditation, internationalization of the curriculum, adequate support for international students, and study abroad facilities for national students are gaining more attention in the European-level policy frameworks, and recently also in national politics.

In the past decades, neo-liberal ideologies promoted competitiveness and high performance at individual, institutional, and national levels in UK higher education (Middlehurst, 2014; O'Regan & Gray, 2018). Within this neoliberal educational policy elaborated in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the main focus remains to find a balance between research and teaching, improving teaching quality, linking education to employment, reputation and, world ranking, developing high level, transferable skills and applicable knowledge to the business and the industry (Middlehurst, 2014). Student satisfaction, graduate employment ratio, and staff-student contact time became the measures of teaching quality (Tomlinson, 2018).

The entry of for-profit educational providers and the concept of the student as a customer reflect the extension of market principles in the higher education sector (Neary, 2016, Tomlinson, 2018). The appearance of new, private providers and new ways of accessing education, including ‘borderless trends’ and ‘transnational education’ in this competitive market increased the level of diversification and internationalization of the sector (de Wit, 2015; Middlehurst, 2014). These changes allow researchers not only to address questions about technologies of learning but to analyse “how new technologies are changing intercultural relations, identities, and beliefs” (Middlehurst, 2014, p. 1481).

Using the concept of symbolic violence of Bourdieu, Tomlinson et al. (2018) argue that, whilst the TEF aims to address social inequalities and include disadvantaged populations by

introducing the student-consumer responsible for making the right choices, it makes students responsible for their learning outcomes as individuals rather than attributing their success or failure to their advantaged or disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances. Neary (2016) adds that student mobility and increased access advocated by increasing student numbers are undermined by high tuition fees and the credit and mortgage facilities that put students at risk of marginalization at the mercy of a marketized system. In the name of empowering students and by treating them as consumers and universities as producers of human capital, TEF legitimizes social differentiation, instead of re-inforcing ideas of inclusive excellence, promoting cooperative forms of teaching and learning, seeing the student as a partner in the democratic process of learning, as well as understanding the value of learning for a wider purpose of study rather than a pure market transaction (Neary, 2016; Tomlinson, 2018).

Unfortunately, the oversimplifying attitude towards the international student experience is present in practice as well as in the wider policy discourse. Sabri (2011, p. 658) demonstrates that in policy discourses "the student experience is inextricably connected to the assumption that all students have the capacity for free rational choice, unimpeded by the limitations of social and cultural background or financial resource". The discourse on student experience "promotes the illusion that students' educational experiences and chances of attainment are unconstrained by class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion" or socioeconomic status and homogenizes their learning experience despite of the very different levels of support education institutions provide to these students (Sabri, 2011, p. 664).

2.3. The cultural dissonance in British transnational higher education (TNHE)

TNHE is a product of the internationalization of higher education in which institutions award their degrees to students located in different countries (Yafei et al., 2023). According to Marshall (2019, p. 224) it "consists of all types of higher education study programmes delivered via various platforms (distance learning, teaching partnerships, off-shore campuses, MOOCs) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one in which the awarding institution is based". Francois (2016, p. 5) states that TNHE concerns a) cross-border "educational activities or programs whose implementation requires regular and sustained academic contact between learners and academic providers, across national borders of a provider's country and one or more host countries; b) scholarship reflecting trends or patterns across nation-states; and c) learners located in a nation-state that is different from that of the providing institution".

In some studies (O'Mahony, 2014; Tran et al., 2022), the benefits of TNHE for international students are listed as high-quality higher education, and the value attached to a UK degree and that of the learning experience – whatever this simplistic term may mean -, whilst challenges seem to be cultural issues, communication, teaching, and learning routines which the literature often confuses with 'teaching and learning styles'. From an educational psychological point of view, learning styles do not exist, they are rather an educational myth as there is no scientific evidence of learning styles that are set at birth predicting academic and career success (Nancekivell et al., 2020). In this study, I will use the term teaching or learning routines to emphasize the sociocultural nature of learning, which does exist and will be explained in detail in the upcoming sections.

International students in TNHE may experience a cultural dissonance due to the new educational culture they enter and challenges with academic English: they are exposed to new ways and routines of learning and new academic conventions - e.g., referencing rules (Marshall, 2019, p. 225). The benefits of TNHE are the international diversity, use of English as a language of instruction, occasionally double degree certificates, and access to online libraries and technological resources, while challenges for Chinese students were reported regarding the constructivist active teaching and learning methods and active participation in the classroom (Che, 2023).

There are very few research studies about international student experiences in TNHE, and whilst some cover aspects of the learning challenges of international students (O'Mahony, 2014; Yafei et al., 2023; Che, 2023), there is no research conducted on how British students experience TNHE and what are the benefits and challenges of this type of education for British students. Similarly, even within the studies that deal with international student experiences in TNHE, there is almost no research conducted about the lived experiences of Nigerian and Saudi students in these multicultural transnational online programmes. The current study intends to fill this gap by exploring the lifeworlds of students from predominantly three educational cultures: Nigeria, the KSA, and the United Kingdom.

2.3.1. The Nigerian educational context for TNHE: conflict between cultures, pedagogies, and learning routines

Nigeria provides the third largest international student population in UK transnational educational programmes after China and India: in 2020-21 there were 21.305 Nigerian students enrolled in UK higher education, mostly in master programmes. (Eley, 2022).

Approximately 5400 Nigerian students are studying for UK qualifications via TNHE, in distance, flexible, or distributed learning courses (Eley, 2022). Access to higher education in Nigeria has significant constraints: “Globally, Nigeria has one of the lowest gross enrolment rates in tertiary education at 10 percent, significantly below the world average rate of 39 percent” and market research suggests that transnational education can play a role to absorb the demand and provide education to those who are left behind (Eley, 2022, p. 14). However, inadequate infrastructure, high tuition fees, unsafe environments, limitations in teacher training, and gender-based discrimination against women are major barriers to accessing higher education in Nigeria (Aja-Okorie, 2013; Orisadare & Osinubi, 2018; Ossai, 2021).

In terms of teaching and learning practices, schools tend to teach students that what they learn in the classroom is universal, objective, and historically accurate. However, national or international educational standards may be forms of colonialism, a way of imparting white, Westernized conceptions of enlightened thinking (Roithmayr, 2018). Intellectual property rights or critical thinking are concepts deeply rooted in the Western educational system. “Western colonial values may be translated by Nigerians differently, and certain concepts, such as originality, criticality, and academic integrity, are positioned differently in their cultural context” (Szilagyi, 2014, p. 173).

The analyzed literature (Szilagyi, 2014; Szilagyi, 2013; Babalola, 2012; Aluede et al., 2006; Alutu & Alutu, 2003) supports that there is a common characteristic among Nigerian students, namely the common ‘non-understanding’ of notions such as plagiarism or academic integrity. Babalola’s study (2012) conducted in an undergraduate private Nigerian university demonstrates that most students did not have a good understanding of plagiarism and aspirations for better grades, poor knowledge of referencing rules, time pressure, and easy access to information through the web, which developed a ‘copy-paste’ culture among students, were common factors that increased the likelihood of committing plagiarism.

In terms of argumentation and critical thinking strategies, Okoye & Okechukwu (2012) point out that low student performance in science education in Nigerian schools is due to the traditional teaching methods that do not encourage practical scientific methods such as concept mapping and problem-solving. Lack of resources and well-trained teachers may also contribute to this outcome. Concerning plagiarism practices, the online learning environment is particularly vulnerable. Students and teachers equally perceive a higher tendency to

commit plagiarism and breach academic integrity rules in an online class (Chiesl, 2007; Vie, 2013).

Another challenge for Nigerian learners in the online classroom is a lack of participation at the beginning of the programme (Szilagyi, 2013). The social-constructivist online learning environment generates diverse reactions from students depending on the previous learner experiences and the different communication rules across cultures (Chang & Lim, 2002; Zhu et al, 2009). Passive student behavior may be misinterpreted by an instructor, assuming that the student lacks motivation or knowledge. However, non-participation may be a result of particular cultural norms coded in the local society, where the individual lives. Analysing the meanings of silence from an ethnolinguistic perspective Medubi (2010, p. 28) confirms that "perceptions of silence vary from one society to the other, even within specific national cultures" and that in all three major ethnic groups - Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo- in Nigeria, silence is perceived as a sign of respect towards elders or authoritative figures: the Igbo communicative practice is motivated by the sense of solidarity, the Yoruba are driven to maintain the social order and the integrity of the family or community, whilst in Hausa context action is defined by obedience to the tenets of religion (Szilagyi, 2014; Szilagyi, 2013; Agulanna, 2011; Usman, 2010; Akinyemi, 2003). Abdulmajeed et al. (2020) mention socioeconomic, sociocultural, and IT infrastructural factors as challenges to online learning in the Nigerian educational context, but their study remains vague in exploring the depth of these challenges, and the remedies are also limited. There is a need for in-depth qualitative and explorative studies to understand the structural and educational challenges that Nigerian students face in TNHE. The current study intends to shed light on how Nigerian students perceive some of these structural and academic obstacles that impede Nigerian students' access to TNHE.

2.3.2. The Saudi Arabian educational context for TNHE: tradition vs. modernity

The UK is the second most popular destination for higher education studies for Saudi students (Alzaghibi, 2022). In 2020-21, approximately 14.070 Saudi students were connected to UK higher education, of which 11.850 were studying in UK institutions, 2000 were registered in distance, flexible, or distributed learning, and a small percentage were involved in studying in overseas branch campuses (Alzaghibi, 2022). In 2020-21, most of these Saudi students were studying at the BA level, 1805 students were studying in MA programmes, and 95 were in doctoral programmes (Alzaghibi, 2022). In the past 20 years, the number of public

and private universities in KSA increased from seven to 42, and these universities established a great number of international and transnational educational partnerships which are considered valuable for their assurance of high-quality higher education and the extensive cultural exchange that students are exposed to (Alzaghibi, 2022). Accreditation and recognition of degrees are one of the challenges of TNHE, particularly for the online or hybrid components in these educational programmes, but the Covid-19 pandemic improved the acceptance of online education in KSA (Alzaghibi, 2022).

In terms of teaching and learning practices in the classrooms of TNHE, students in the Middle East face cultural challenges due to previous learning experiences in their local context; therefore, students and teachers have different expectations in TNHE, causing a mismatch (Yafei et al., 2023). Similarly to the Nigerian educational context, implementing Western ideas of criticality and academic integrity is somewhat problematic also in the Saudi context. One of the challenges in developing TNHE in KSA is that Saudi public universities are used to traditional didactic, lecture-based, teacher-centred interaction. Their curricula are often outdated or irrelevant to students' career paths and they continue to use memorization and passive learning practices (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Hamdan, 2014). Hamdan's study (2014, p. 312) describes that in the Saudi Arabian school system, knowledge and truth are fixed concepts, and "what is taught in school is unquestionable", which does not facilitate the development of critical thinking skills or the appreciation of diversity. As opposed to this, online learners in KSA have free access to educational resources, online libraries, and online forums that facilitate intercultural communication between students from all over the world and with the other gender as well. "This unprecedented openness to new educational resources and cultural perspectives is leading KSA's younger generations to become less traditional and strict in their views" (Hamdan, 2014, p. 310).

Responding to women's demand for desegregation, Saudi Arabian universities have attempted to facilitate women's access to higher education since the '90s by using online delivery methods. Videoconferencing at King Saud University has allowed Saudi Arabian female students to attend a male class without meeting face-to-face or having any conversations with male peers (Nakshabandi, 1993; Mackey, 2002). This method of learning, however, has not been particularly successful due to the lack of group discussion and female participation. (Baki, 2004) Al-Fahad's study (2010) conducted on female learners' satisfaction regarding online learning at King Saud University confirmed that although students felt more isolated, they appreciated the flexibility that e-learning provided, not

having to travel to the institution. They also liked that the online course was focused on learners' interests, something they had not experienced in the traditional Saudi Arabian learning environment. Aljaber's study (2018) indicates that the e-learning sector has developed significantly in the past decade, in which the US and UK international partners played a significant role. This study (Aljaber, 2018) as well as my earlier study (Szilagyi, 2015) reports more female students and other marginalized groups from remote areas participating in online programmes, which aligns with the government's aim to diversify the skilled population in KSA. Explorative qualitative research remains scarce in identifying the learning challenges students from KSA face when enrolling in TNHE.

2.4. Tolerate or respect each other? Contesting terminologies around cultural diversity and social justice in (online) higher education

Multiculturalism and interculturalism in education are relatively new research fields that correspond to the growing cultural diversity of the student populations as a result of the globalization and internationalization of higher education. According to Banks and Banks, multiculturalism in education is a "philosophical position and movement that assumes that the gender, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of a pluralistic society should be reflected in all of the institutionalized structures of education including the staff, the norms and values, the curriculum and the student body" (Banks and Banks, 2013, p. 355). In another publication, Banks further defines the term as "an approach to school reform designed to actualize educational equality for students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, social-class and linguistic groups. It also promotes democracy and social justice" (Marshall, 2019, p. 183). According to Gollnick and Chinn (2013, p. 24), the fundamental beliefs underlying multicultural education are: (1) cultural differences have strength and value; (2) schools should be models for the expression of human rights and respect for cultural and group differences; (3) social justice and equality for all people should be the most important in the curriculum design; (4) attitudes and values necessary for participation in a democratic society should be promoted in schools; (5) educators working with families and communities can create an environment that is supportive of multiculturalism, equality, and social justice. To achieve these principles, Banks (2016) argues that cultural diversity should be acknowledged and integrated into the curriculum and teaching practices to create inclusive learning environments and empower all students. Similarly, Nieto (2009) highlights the socio-political

context of multicultural education and emphasizes the importance of affirming diversity in schools.

UNESCO proposed a more simplified and less progressive definition: “Multicultural education uses learning about other cultures to produce acceptance, or at least, tolerance, of these cultures” (Marshall, 2019, p. 183). This term is used mostly in the US and UK educational context while in continental Europe the term intercultural education is used as a response to the criticism that multicultural education has not addressed adequately issues of racism and is limited to the study of superficial topics such as including cultural aspects into the learning environment such as food and music (Marshall, 2019). According to Grant and Portera (2011, p. 20) intercultural education encourages “dialogue and relationship on equal terms so that people do not feel constrained to sacrifice important aspects of their cultural identity”. Based on the definition of UNESCO intercultural education is shifting the focus towards respecting the learner’s cultural identity through the provision of culturally appropriate quality education for all, providing every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitude, and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society and enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups (UNESCO, 2006, p. 32).

Few studies conducted in online transnational education explore the multicultural environment and its effects on students' learning experiences. The current research aims to make a first step in exploring learning experiences from three very distinct cultures and comparing the main challenges and disjunctures.

2.4.1. How to create the ‘school for all’? The dilemma between equity and equality in multicultural higher education

The concepts of equity, equality, and social justice are terms used in the critical literature to explain and find solutions to a global problem in higher education, the achievement gap. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) found that less than 60% of students who enter tertiary programmes from across its 34 member countries graduate with a first degree. In the post-pandemic era, online or blended learning models are popular because they remove the bounds of a physical classroom. At the same time, they resuscitate a critique of traditional modes of course delivery at the ‘ivory tower’ university, driven by market-driven and neoliberalist educational policies predominantly in the US, the UK, and to a certain extent in some Western European countries in which students function

as consumers and higher education programmes are seen as products to be mass-produced (Haynes, 2023, p. 1).

Gumport (2000) suggests that to maintain a competitive edge, higher education institutions must respond to the growing cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of today's higher education student population through innovations in teaching. Learners from different age groups and diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds are best served when learning speaks to their experiences, cultures, backgrounds, and aspirations (Gay, 2002, 2018). Only by seeing, hearing, and knowing students, can institutions and instructors counterbalance the racial and economic inequities deeply imprinted into higher education policy and practice in its three main levels: the micro-culture including classroom-level teacher-student relationships, classroom management practices, the meso-culture comprehending institutional policies and measures on an institutional level and the macro-culture that includes national, transnational or global higher education policies that regulate higher education (Sublett, 2020; Alexander, 2001b). "Institutions realize that the *how*, rather than the *what*, that is being taught matters as they learn how to perform as multicultural organizations"(Cassidy & Jackson, 2005 in Haynes, 2023, pp. 1-2).

When discussing social justice in higher education, current higher education research differentiates equity referring to justice or fairness in a given learning context, and equality, referring to sameness in the sense that all students are treated by the institutions as the same and go through a standardized study experience (Öztok, 2019; Amaral, 2022). The concept of equality for its objective, same-across-the-board approach in educational policies is criticized by critical race theory (CRT) and critical pedagogy (CP) because it promotes colour-blindness on an institutional and cultural level. (Beachum, 2018; Delgado, 2017, p. 28). Pretending that colour, race, and gender do not exist results in colour-blind and neutral approaches in education with the risk of "assimilating to the point of losing self-worth and community connection" and allowing discrimination to exist in less tangible ways (Tatum, 1997, in Beachum, 2018, p. 11). CP and CRP embrace the idea of 'color talk' instead of colorblindness, understanding that color, race, gender, and cultural identity are important dimensions in one's life and study experience (Beachum, 2018). CP is an important cornerstone of this study. Its key concepts will be discussed later in this chapter and the next chapter on Methodology, since CP is both a pedagogy and a philosophy and is used as one of the theoretical frameworks in the data analysis process of this research.

In this study, I aim to illustrate the lifeworlds of non-traditional online students and the structural and academic impediments they face to highlight that merit-based assessments and same-across-the-board policies rooted in the principles of equality are not the best way to keep these students on track toward succeeding in online higher education. Together with other critical pedagogues, I will argue against equality-based policies to highlight that a more nuanced, culture-sensitive understanding is needed in online education, recognizing that using students' cultural experiences in teaching improves the quality of their educational outcomes and opportunities (Gay, 2002). This research will highlight that the cultural situatedness of students determines, to a great extent, how they respond to certain pedagogies and that their lifeworlds require differentiation in pedagogic approaches. Intersectionality - discussed in detail in the next chapter on Methodology, as it is used as a theoretical framework for the data analysis - will highlight how systematic, structural issues shape students' conception, perception, and meaning-making in a particular pedagogical moment. There is a multilayered explanation of why particular behaviours manifest in multicultural online classrooms, and these multidimensional learning experiences necessitate the introduction of notions such as differentiation and situated learning because there is no one-size educational system that fits all. The term pedagogical differentiation is used in this study to contribute to the debate on creating an inclusive 'school for all'. Pedagogical differentiation means adopting diversity in the approach to teaching and learning within a heterogeneous classroom, addressing everything that teachers should do to offer a variation of instructions, content, workload, tempo, class activities, and assessment to accommodate diverse students' learning needs (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022, Tomlinson, 2017). It is further defined as "all the intentional, systematically planned, and reflected practices that enable teachers to meet the needs of all learners in heterogeneous classrooms" (Letzel-Alt & Pozas, 2023, p. 10).

Policies on the supranational level are also shifting the emphasis from equality to equity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly (10 Dec 1948) Paragraph 1 of article 26 declares that "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (Amaral, 2022, p. 24). In 1998, the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action proclaimed that "in keeping with Article 26.1. of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, admission to higher education should be based on merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance, and devotion, shown by those seeking access to it, and can take place in a lifelong scheme, at any time, with due recognition of previously acquired skills. As a consequence, no discrimination can be accepted in

granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender, language or religion, or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities" (Amaral, 2022, p. 25).

In 2008, the International Association of Universities (IAU) in a statement on Equitable Access, Success and Quality in Higher Education defined that the goal of access policies should be successful participation in higher education as access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise, and argued that equitable access and academic excellence were essential and compatible aspects of a quality higher education. IAU proposed that different institutional models, flexible programmes of study, as well as a variety of delivery modes must be available to allow individuals at all stages of life to move through higher education in a manner that suits their needs (Amaral, 2022, p. 25). In 2008, the OECD report declared that "equitable tertiary education systems are those that ensure that access to, participation in, and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals' innate ability and study effort. They ensure that the achievement of educational potential at the tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability (OECD, 2008). OECD, 2008 considered that equity has two components: fairness which implies that personal and social circumstances do not hinder achieving educational potential, and inclusion, which means that everyone can attain a basic standard of education (Amaral, 2022, p. 26). A similar definition is adopted by the European Commission that states "educational outcomes will be the result only of the effort of individual students, not being influenced by other circumstances outside their control" (Amaral, 2022, p. 26). The report on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions of the European University Association (EUA, 2019) establishes a distinction between equality and equity: "The term equality is linked to the idea that everyone has the same rights and should thus enjoy equal treatment and non-discrimination" (Amaral, 2022, p. 26). However, its translation into practice is questionable, particularly when it is coupled with the widespread assumptions that educational institutions are culturally, politically, and racially neutral places, perpetuating a dehumanization process in education that creates inequitable learning opportunities, especially for minority students (Martinez et al., 2023).

Differentiated pedagogies connecting with situated learning and equity-based approaches take into account intersectionality in students' lifeworlds. Therefore, the concept of equity goes further and includes needs-based support to level out relative disadvantages and it often comes along with measures such as positive action or positive discrimination (EUA, March

2021). Clancy argues that it is necessary to consider both relative changes in access (fairness) and absolute changes (inclusion) (Clancy, 2001, in Amaral, 2022, p. 28). With the massification of higher education systems, there has been an increase in the number of students from deprived backgrounds entering higher education. However, diversification of the systems, usually by creating lower value opportunities (vocational programmes, short cycles, non-university institutions, etc.), has changed the nature of the game, and the competition is no longer to enter a higher education institution but to enter the best institutions and the best programmes. It is possible that inclusion policies, by promoting a progressive increase of people with higher education degrees, will contribute in a less contested but slow way to progressively lower the present level of inequity (Amaral, 2022, pp. 40-41).

2.4.2. How we teach matters. The lack of differentiation in online higher education

When it comes to online higher education, especially in the post-pandemic era, politicians and school leaders are drawn to the potential cost-efficiency, while technology vendors and entrepreneurs are motivated by the market potential. Faculty are increasingly comfortable teaching in online environments (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019). Part of the promise of new educational technologies is their potential to expand access to education to groups currently without access to high-quality learning opportunities (Farley & Burbules, 2022). Online learning environments offer multiple modalities using technologies to provide alternative pathways and media through which learners, including those who cannot study on campus full-time, can pursue educational opportunities better suited to their needs, interests, situations, and learning preferences (Farley & Burbules, 2022).

Although a wide range of literature discusses online learning as course delivery, few touch upon the course content, teacher-student relationships, and the ways online modalities are delivered. How it is delivered can raise their own access and equity issues, and we need to recognize and address them, as new technologies are creating new inequalities (Farley & Burbules, 2022). As institutions are increasingly using this method of delivery in fully online or blended versions, and as more students depend on remote learning, higher education has an imperative to ensure equity is delivered along with learning outcomes (Sublett, 2020).

Most of the fully online courses are taught asynchronously, in which communication does not occur in real-time but through email correspondence, discussion forums, or learning

management systems (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019). Sublett's (2020) study with students of color in online higher education and Lephalala and Makoe's research (2012) on sociocultural factors that play a role in the educational experience of African students in the South African educational context demonstrated that this often leads to a greater social distance hindering the development of authentic, trust-based relationships. When it comes to minority or underrepresented students, biases, power inequalities, mistrust, and a sense of "otherness" proliferate in online courses as long as the courses are poorly organized, culturally irrelevant, expose hegemonic narratives, and are not in tune with student support (Sublett, 2020, p. 9).

At the root of unequal learning conditions are structural and instructional impediments that challenge equal access to online education. Structural impediments are technical, institutional, and environmental factors that set a baseline of conditions under which learning exists, including access to technology (devices, quality network connectivity, and circumstances of living that make it easier or harder to study online), living in remote or urban areas, different historical gender roles, marital status, and family structure, as well as academic preparedness (Farley & Burbules, 2022). Especially for historically underrepresented students, instructional impediments include a lack of culturally responsive structures in course design, materials, and instruction that often lead to lower course satisfaction and motivation in online classrooms (Farley & Burbules, 2022). Lack of cultural inclusion in course content, that of social presence coupled with microaggressions experienced in predominantly 'white' institutions are the biggest challenges for their engagement (Sublett, 2020; Farley & Burbules, 2022). Further challenges include limited special assistance to multilingual learners as they need to use more cognitive strategies than native English speakers (Markova, 2020) or adherence to dominant Western academic writing in online discussion forums (MacKinnon & MacFarlane, 2017).

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, "equity is not about providing a point of sameness among individuals, but about enabling them to become agents of their learning by appropriating the learning repertoires they need to fulfil their potential" (Öztok, 2019, p. 2). Similarly, critical race theorists agree that generic instructions that are supposed to work for all students, may not achieve the desired result and that is not the fault of the student, but that of non-personalized advice given by university staff (Ladson-Billings, 2018). Students should be able to receive the support that they need, whilst policymakers have to "recognize that the playing field is unequal and attempt to address inequality" by providing differentiated support

based on their social identities or the intersection of these identities (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2018; Beachum, 2018, p. 3).

Structural challenges are outside of the control of the educator and involve a broader societal commitment to provide access and more equitable learning conditions (Farley & Burbules, 2022, pp. 4-5). Instructional impediments are resolvable within higher educational institutions by providing personalized support. The structural challenges are a reminder for educators to be sensitive to the difficulties that some learners are struggling with, to be aware that what a course appears like from the instructor's perspective, or for the majority of students, may not be how it is experienced by other learners, especially with disadvantaged backgrounds (Farley & Burbules, 2022). The higher education institutions, educators, and instructional designers think they are delivering the 'same course' to everyone, but seeing it through the lenses of a diverse student population, they do not provide the same learning opportunities for all (Farley & Burbules, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2018). Access without success is not an equitable practice in online higher education.

Ignoring schools as agencies of social and cultural reproduction, online education research has so far ignored how various social, economic, and political interests intersect with classroom life: frameworks for participation, collaboration, and equity disregard the societal dynamics, power struggles, and ideologies (Öztok, 2019, p. 4). According to Öztok, deterministic approaches give too much importance to technology as a driving force of the modern world in the name of affordability and cost-effectiveness, while opponents of this framework disregard the potential offered by technology (Öztok, 2019). The reality is somewhere in between: it "provides virtually limitless possibilities while simultaneously being subject to discourses of the cultural context in which it is being employed" (Öztok, 2019, p. 5).

Higher education institutions therefore must take a step forward in improving educational access and opportunities for diverse learners by providing personalized learning through differentiated learning and teaching, diversifying educational pathways, providing course material in different ways, using new technologies and media, allowing for individual learning, as well as socially mediated collaboration, moving away from a single learning environment or a single model of the learner, to a more flexible and inclusive way of learning (Harris and Wood, 2020; Sublett, 2020; Farley & Burbules, 2022; Eikeland & Ohna, 2022). When instructors integrate a critical multicultural framework with technology, online

learning has the potential to produce transformative learning experiences (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012; Farley & Burbules, 2022). Failing to address these factors disproportionately hinders certain groups of learners, especially underrepresented groups (Sublett, 2020; Farley & Burbules, 2022). Performance gaps between demographic groups are observed in face-to-face classrooms and they are exacerbated in online courses (Lephalala & Makoe 2012; Farley & Burbules, 2022). If this pattern continues in all educational sectors, it implies that the continued expansion of online learning could strengthen educational inequality (Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

The previous section aimed to highlight that in the post-pandemic era, decisions to expand online learning must be driven by research on student success and equity. The current research project contributes to the debate on equity and success of non-traditional students by illustrating their lifeworlds in cognitive and emotional ways with an intention to re-live the student experiences and look at online transnational education from their perspectives. In doing so, it will fiercely argue that equity and social justice in online education can and must be improved by applying efficiently differentiated and culturally responsive pedagogies to address the achievement gap in online higher education.

2.4.3. Equity through the lenses of Bourdieu's sociology of education

To explain inequitable learning conditions in the online classroom, Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) theoretical work in the broad area of sociocultural analysis is essential which considers universities as places of reproducing the existing social order (Bourdieu, 2014). Influenced by Husserl, he intended to ground scientific practice in social action and the lifeworld, viewed school learning as instrumental for social integration, and was sceptical about "the self-fulfilling and self-legitimizing discourses of objectivity" in education (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 32). His key sociological concepts (Bourdieu, 2014) are habitus, capital, and field, and their relations can be described in the following equation:

PRACTICE = [HABITUS, CAPITAL] + FIELD

One's practice is a sum of the relationship between one's dispositions (habitus) and one's position in the field (capital) within a social arena (field) (Bourdieu, 2014). Habitus is an "embodied culture where ideas, practices, and ways of being in the world are in play" (West, 2014, p. 40). It is structured by one's past and present circumstances (family, educational experiences, etc..) and helps shape one's present and future practices by focusing on one's

ways of acting, feeling, thinking, and being (Bourdieu, 2014). Habitus comprises dispositions that generate certain perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours in accordance with its own structure (Bourdieu, 2014). These dispositions determine how one internalizes unconsciously what is expected of them in the particular field of education (West, 2014). It has links between past, present, and future and between the social and individual; in this way, our "life experiences may be unique but also shared with others of the same social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, nationality, etc…" (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 52). The field - in this case education - is the arena of social life in which some dominate, others are dominated, and in which individuals strive to improve or maintain their position by accumulating capital (Bourdieu, 2014). This is a place of constant and permanent inequality between the actors who play within (Bourdieu, 2014).

The notion of capital is a "tool to understand the enduring impact of social inequality in students' lives" (West, 2014, p. 40). Bourdieu defined four forms of capital: *economic capital* - related to financial status -, *cultural capital* - related to knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values -, *social capital* – concerned with social connections linked to a complex of shared norms and values that promote social cooperation -, and *symbolic capital* – things that can be exchanged in other fields, for example, credentials (Bourdieu, 2014). Minority students may struggle in higher education because their cultural and social capital and dispositions may be different, and their qualities may be unrecognized or less valued by the higher education institution (West, 2014). These forms of capital influence individuals' educational pathways, creating diverse modes of inequality, and hence influence equity in access to and success in higher education (Amaral, 2022). One's cultural context, therefore, influences one's chances to succeed in education.

2.5. The sociocultural nature of online learning

2.5.1. 'The meanings of a particular way of life'. The analysis of culture

Similarly to Bourdieu, Raymond Williams connects a social dimension to the definition of culture. He approaches culture "as the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored" (Williams, 1995, p. 13). He identifies three inseparable general categories in the definition of culture: firstly, culture is "the ideal", "a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values", secondly, culture is "the body of intellectual

and imaginative work, in which in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded"; thirdly culture is "a description of a particular way of life" (Storey, 2010a, pp. 44-45). This social definition of culture introduces three new ways of thinking about culture: firstly, from an anthropological position it sees culture as a description of a particular way of life, secondly, it proposes that culture expresses certain meanings and values, thirdly, it claims that cultural analysis has the task of clarifying the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, in a particular culture (Storey, 2010a). The social definition of culture and the three new ways of thinking about culture and cultural analysis – culture as a particular way of life, culture as an expression of a particular way of life, and cultural analysis as a method of reconstructing a particular way of life - pave the way to the general perspective and procedures of culturalism (Storey, 2010a). Therefore, from the sociocultural viewpoint of Williams, cultural analysis aims to understand the experience through which a particular culture is lived, a particular community of experience, and "the structure of feeling", including the shared values of a particular group, class, or society (Storey, 2010a, p. 45).

Influenced by Williams' sociocultural analysis and referring to the online streaming cultures, Arditi (2021b, p. 6) argues that "culture is a process through which people make symbolic meanings out of everyday things": meaning-making happens through a shared understanding of symbols, which can be words, signs, or objects. We interpret these symbols individually and collectively, within fluid communities, and our understanding of the symbols can change over time, in a specific context, through our interactions with other people. Therefore, culture is not static, and meanings change as we interact with others (Arditi, 2021a, p. 6). Rogoff (2003) and Rogoff et al. (2018) state that culture is considered a way of life for generations of people in communities, inclusive of their ways of thinking and orienting, shaped in the community: while participating in a community, children transform their ways of being and continue those cultural practices, or are constrained by them. Whilst few studies are concerned about the online learning environment from a sociocultural perspective, it can be presumed that this new learning environment has its own culture, and interacting with it becomes part of the cultural milieu of online learners, but following Bourdieu's key concepts it is clear that how this online cultural milieu is perceived and interpreted emerges from one's cultural context.

Related to the topic of the internationalization of education, it is important to mention Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which also influenced Williams' work. The Gramscian

hegemony refers to a political process in which “a particular social group seeks to present its own particular interest as the general interest of the society as a whole”, and the subordinate groups actively support the values, cultural and political meanings that “bind them to, and incorporate them into, the prevailing structures of power” (Storey, 2010b, pp. 79-80).

Influenced by this concept, Williams’ macro-level, sociocultural analysis distinguishes three aspects of the fluid process of cultural change: dominant, residual, and emergent cultures (Arditi, 2021b). Dominant culture represents the hegemonic cultural norms within society. Hegemony, in this sense, is a societal power that establishes order and structures our lived experiences, and through which society establishes norms and practices accepted within a society (Arditi, 2021a). The dominant culture is normative because it functions as the everyday life practice for most people and seems almost unobservable. This can then contribute to confirmation bias since the dominant culture fades into the background due to its ubiquity (Arditi, 2021b, p. 125). Residual culture is an active force opposite to the dominant culture. It reminds us that things can be different and that culture is not static (Arditi, 2021b). Emergent culture means for Williams “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships that are continually being created” (Arditi, 2021b, pp. 126-127).

Often, residual and emergent cultures express opposition to the dominant cultural order. Through the process of appropriation, the dominant culture eliminates oppositional tendencies and allows them to function within the dominant order. As a new cultural form emerges, it usually does more than offer alternatives, it contains a critique of the dominant order. However, as emergent culture becomes more visible, it also loses its oppositional content (Arditi, 2021b, pp. 126-127).

These concepts will often reappear in the current study as it will analyze the online learning experiences from the perspective of the sociocultural analysis of Bourdieu and Williams, exploring the meanings and values that non-traditional online learners from different cultures attribute to their online learning experiences and how residual and emergent educational routines owned by non-traditional online learners are changing, fading away, or being appropriated by the dominant British educational culture.

2.5.2. Learning is situated. Online learning in the light of sociocultural learning theories

Concerning the online learning environment, students are expected to step out of their own education culture and temporarily enter into the dominant educational culture of online educational providers who "tend to view learning as an individual phenomenon" (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012, p. 1). This view of learning does not take into consideration the positionality of instructors and learners, the classroom culture, and how the dominant institutional culture influences the experiences of online learners (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). However, from a sociocultural theoretical standpoint, the construction of knowledge has a social dimension alongside the cognitive aspect, and the interaction of social, cultural-historical, and individual factors has a significant role to play in the learning process (Gay, 2002; Tisdell, 2006; Alfred, 2009). Vygotsky states that learning is not just an individual phenomenon but is a social and cultural act: individual development is culturally conceptualized by activities in an interaction with the self (Vygotsky, 1978; Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). Rogoff argues that the sociocultural context of students is dynamic and shaped by personal, interpersonal-social, and community-level institutional phases (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff et al., 2018). Learners with different cultural backgrounds construct meanings in different ways, according to what they have learned in their own socio-historical and linguistic context (Alfred, 2009). The ways we teach and the ways we learn are mediated by our own cultural experiences and our own cultural identities (Alexander, 2001a; Gay, 2002; Alfred, 2009). Garcia highlights that during teaching and learning activities, we construct knowledge from unconscious assumptions based on our cultural perspectives: "What students learn and what teachers teach are ultimately filtered and strained through their cultural sieves" (Garcia, 1991 in Gay, 2002, p. 618).

From the perspective of cultural psychology - based on the Vygotskian (1978) theory of learning - the social factor highlights the importance of a learning community that provides intellectual stimulation for the learner, while the cultural-historical element emphasizes that learning is deeply connected to the learner's cultural and historical context and the way learners interact with their worlds. Rogoff (1995, 2003) argues that sociocultural theories incorporate individual, social, and cultural dimensions of learning, and therefore also traditional learning theories while acknowledging multiple ways of knowing. Tisdell (2006) highlights the importance of building a learning community, instead of isolated learning, and engaging in collaborative projects in the classroom to facilitate social transformation and transformative education. The sociocultural theory has an individual dimension as well: the

characteristics that the learner brings to the learning environment such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, beliefs, abilities, motivation, learning routines, and previous learning experience (Alfred, 2009, Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). Learners from the same ethnicity or with the same citizenship may demonstrate huge behavioural differences due to the diversity of this individual dimension (Alfred, 2009).

The cultural aspects of learners' development – such as learning routines, community values, ways of guidance, and gender roles, which may take many different forms - are essential to understanding their lived experiences (Rogoff et al. 2018). The authors (Rogoff et al, p. 7) highlight further that the challenge of educational and developmental psychology nowadays is that it still treats separately the cultural contexts of everyday life from individual characteristics, and therefore fails to understand "people in context and context in people". The authors criticize the lack of cultural differences in sample populations in educational psychology research and the general attitude of overgeneralization from one cultural group, mainly white, middle-class people, to all human beings (Rogoff et al., 2018).

Low performance in the physical or online classroom cannot be attributed only to the students' cognitive and social abilities since the context of learning is much more diverse: it includes factors such as history, race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability of students, teachers roles, prior knowledge, course design, curriculum, the learning environment, as well as history, culture, and structure of the educational institutions and many more (Alfred, 2009). In her study about physical adult education in two higher education institutions, Tisdell (1993) found that the overt and hidden curriculum of the classes favoured the student experience of white male learners and was oppressive for white female learners and students of colour, confirming that the sociocultural history of learners has an impact on their student experience.

The educators' preparedness and knowledge about the cultural traits, behaviours, values, and attitudes that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds bring to the classroom also have an impact on their learning experience (Gay,2002; Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). Minority students are often misunderstood and their learning behaviours are "misinterpreted as deviant and treated punitively" (Gay, 2002, p. 617). Tutoring systems rooted in Western learning models may not work in every sociocultural context (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). In the Nigerian, more precisely Yoruba ethnic context, respect towards elders and authority is deeply rooted and manifests in many ways in their communication styles and learning routines (Szilagyi,

2014). The lifeworlds presented in Chapter 4 will provide a detailed account of how cultural traits manifest in the multicultural online classroom.

Basil Bernstein's concepts on the sociology of language and the formation of language codes are closely related to this subject: he identified a relationship between social structures and the principles underlying different forms of communication in the classroom and found unequal educational outcomes as a result of social structures manifesting in the communicative practices used by students rather than in students' innate abilities or merits (Barrett, 2024). For Bernstein people "speak" the social, their communicative practices reflect the communication forms experienced in their primary socialization in the family (Barrett, 2024, p. 14). Similarly, Labov's variationist sociolinguistics connects language with the individual situated in a social context (Bell et al., 2016). Bernstein's and Labov's sociolinguistic analysis relates closely to this research and represents an analogue set of considerations. However, the sociolinguistic dimension is itself a robust research and is not a central part of this thesis, therefore, whilst I acknowledge its importance, I will refer to it as an alternative and future research line.

Closely related to sociocultural learning approaches, but from a comparative pedagogical lens, Alexander's (2001a) groundbreaking five-nation comparative study on classroom cultures and practices in primary education, in which the author compares relationships in the micro-culture of the classroom, classroom activities, curriculum, and instructions, lays the foundation of systematic qualitative and comparative studies in comparing educational cultures. In Alexander's view (2001b, p. 507) "pedagogy is the act of teaching contextualized within a culture's discourse in which it is embedded, about the purpose of education, the nature of childhood and learning, and the structure of knowledge". From this perspective, there is no teaching without pedagogy or pedagogy without teaching, and comparative pedagogy, explores similarities and differences in pedagogies on a concept, discourse, and practice level, teasing out what is universal and what is peculiar and culture-specific (Alexander, 2001a, 2001b). In this study, I will adopt some, of the concepts that Alexander introduced, especially the six versions of teaching across cultures, which include: (1) teaching as transmission in which teaching is considered as passing information and skills and uses rote learning and recitation (e.g. primary education in India); (2) teaching as disciplinary induction in which teaching is seen as "providing access to a culture's established ways of inquiry and making sense" (e.g. primary education in France, Russia and India, sometimes England and USA); (3) teaching as democracy in action, in which teaching is perceived in a

context where knowledge is reflexive, and teachers and students are characterized by joint 'enquireness' following John Deweys and Jean Piaget educational theories (e.g primary education in the USA); (4) teaching as facilitation in which teaching means respecting individual differences and responding to developmental readiness and needs (e.g. primarly education in the USA and England); (5) teaching as acceleration where teaching practice follows Vygotskian theoires and consist of "outpacing 'natural'development rather than following it"(e.g. primary education in Russia); and (6) teaching as a technique following the Comenian tradition in primary education mostly in continental Europe, emphazising structure, graduation, economy, consciousness and rapidity, introducing highly structured lessons, and breaking down learning tasks into small gradual steps (Alexander, 2001b, pp. 519-520).

The critical literature on sociocultural learning theories and sociolinguistics advocates for greater attention to learners' lived cultural experiences, and for creating more inclusive learning communities by dismantling the elitist and hegemonic relationships and renegotiating relationships to be more inclusive and embracing the diverse sociocultural realities of learners and teachers (Alfred, 2009). By paying attention to values, norms, and practices established in a learning community, educators and researchers get a glance at the process of validating certain learning behaviours and marginalizing others. Therefore, the wider questions for sociocultural learning theories are what the cultural differences and similarities among the different learning communities are and how educators can establish multiple worldviews in adult education (Alfred, 2009; Rogoff, 2003, 2018). However, before we make these big steps, the academic world needs to better understand the power dynamics in adult education, which learners are empowered, and which are silenced based on their race, culture, gender, nationality, physical orientation, or other differentiating factors.

If online higher education providers intend to eliminate the barriers and inequitable conditions of underrepresented groups, online learners' socioeconomic diversity and cultural context must be recognized and reflected in policies and classroom practices (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). The examined studies that use the sociocultural lens call for detailed qualitative studies on how students' situated, socioeconomic, gendered, and cultural experiences can be fully integrated into classroom activities and policy measures. The current study will attempt to provide a better picture of the learning experiences of non-traditional online adult learners and the power dynamics in online classrooms from the perspective of students with British, Nigerian, and Saudi Arabian educational backgrounds.

2.5.3. Creating inclusive learning environments. Introduction to differentiated, critical, inclusive, and culturally responsive pedagogies

Differentiated instruction (DI), as well as critical, inclusive, and culturally responsive pedagogies, are gaining more attention as classrooms become increasingly heterogeneous due to accelerated globalization and internationalization of education. Differentiated instructional strategies include tiered assignments, an intentional composition of student working groups, tutoring systems within the learning group, non-verbal learning aids, mastery of learning ensuring that all students achieve the minimum standards by closely monitoring and scaffolding the learning process and granting autonomy to students making them responsible for the learning process by diversifying the activities and letting them choose their preferred forms of learning (e.g. project-based learning, portfolios, etc…) (Letzel-Alt & Pozas, 2023)

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is an educational approach that recognizes learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences and seeks to create inclusive and engaging learning environments. It emphasizes the need for educators to incorporate students' cultural identities and perspectives into the teaching and learning processes (Ladson, Billings, 1995). This way culturally responsive pedagogy aims to improve academic achievement, promote positive self-identity, and foster critical thinking among learners (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

Inspired by similar critical literature and drawing predominantly on the work of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and Peter McLaren critical and inclusive pedagogies (CIPs) have asserted that teaching and learning are deeply interrelated and that the knowledge construction process must confront dominant ideologies and stimulate praxis (McLaren, 1998). The application of CIPs can transform the teaching and learning process and promote more equitable educational outcomes among all students, especially racially minorized students (Haynes, 2023; Moreu et al., 2021). Inclusive pedagogy is traditionally associated with the education of students with disabilities, and is often used internationally to define a broader aim to provide all students access to learning (Villegas et al., 2017).

Instructors are prompted to evaluate who is being included in and excluded from the learning process while teaching fails to consider the varying social, psychological, physical, and or emotional needs of students (Haynes, 2023). CIPs encourage teaching practices that expose the relationship between knowledge and lived experience (Haynes, 2023). CIPs not only promote deep learning among students but also better equip instructors to attend to the needs

of diverse students (Villegas et al., 2017; Haynes, 2023). According to Danowitz & Tuitt (2011), CIPs seek to create inclusive learning environments by a) prioritizing the intellectual and social development of students; b) fostering classroom climates that challenge each student to achieve academically at high levels, c) recognizing and cultivating the cultural and global differences that learners bring to the educational experience, d) engaging the "whole" student (e.g. intellectually, spiritually, emotionally) in the teaching and learning process. Villegas et al. (2017, p. 136) describe six characteristics of an inclusive teacher which are as follows: (1) sociocultural consciousness, (2) affirming views about diversity and students with diverse backgrounds, (3) committed to acting as change agents in schools and advocating for students, (4) understands how learners construct knowledge, (5) has the curiosity of knowing about students' lives, (6) uses insights into students' lives to help them build bridges to learning.

Class activities that involve cultural imagination contribute to the exploration and better awareness of cultural assumptions and existing power relationships based on social inequalities in society, creating a greater appreciation towards others' cultures and greater equity in the classroom (Tisdell, 2006). Cultural imagination exists on personal, structural, political, spiritual, and artistic levels and can be activated the best through music, poetry, art, dance, drama, and storytelling: through their cultural exploration process, one can go through deep "emotional experiences of oppression and privilege that affect who they are and how they think" (Tisdell, 2006, p. 20). Educators as healers in this process of awakening should encourage learners to use these means to express their distinctive cultural identity (Alfred, 2009).

CRP and CIPs rely heavily on storytelling practice and counternarratives, arguing that "the social reality is constructed by the formulation and the exchange of stories about individual situations and use storytelling technics because the "voice" of the marginalized "provides a way to communicate the experience and the realities of the oppressed" (Ladson-Billings, 2018, pp. 15-16). Such stories heal the wounds of the oppressed and confront the oppressor with his or her actions (Freire, 2017). Lifeworld studies and hermeneutic phenomenology - described in detail in the next chapter - arrive at the same conclusions by representing the whole life circumstances and the authentic voice of the silenced (Todres & Galvin, 2008; Friesen et al., 2012). The story illustrates the lifeworld but from the point of view of critical race theory and critical pedagogy this is not enough: in the learning process, the teacher, the student, and the researcher must be able to go beyond the stories and develop further the

understanding of inequalities and injustices embedded in education structures (Dixson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Therefore, Sleeter (2012) highlights the importance and need for teacher preparation programs to address the overwhelming presence of whiteness and provide teachers with the necessary tools to navigate culturally diverse schools. Howard (2006) argues that central is the critical self-reflection of teachers on their own cultural biases and assumptions. CIPs and CRP require ongoing teacher reflection and self-awareness, and the development of knowledge and skills to effectively address the needs of culturally diverse students (Savage et al., 2011). By embracing these pedagogies, educators can create classrooms that empower students, promote academic success, and foster a sense of belonging and respect for all (Florian & Pantic, 2017; Caingcoy, 2023).

CRP and CIPs need to focus on all of the following areas: critical cultural consciousness, culturally responsive, caring, and supportive classroom climate, multicultural curriculum, and culturally responsive instructional strategies as well as the use of learning communities (Gay, 2002). Firstly, teachers need to be conscious about their own cultural identities and how their own cultural experiences affect their teaching, and what their cultural attitudes, assumptions, prejudices toward other cultures are; secondly, they need to be knowledgeable about the cultures, communication styles, and learning behaviors of the students in their classrooms (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2006; Alfred, 2009). When teachers create a warm, supportive, and antiracist classroom climate by removing "stereotype threats" (Gay, 2002, p. 621) from the classroom and including visual or multi-media tools that encourage diversity, demonstrating role models from students' own cultures, students feel that they are valued, can be themselves and their learning becomes an exciting journey of discovery. In terms of curriculum and instructions, it is important that learners, marginalized by social inequalities based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation, are provided with real-life narratives from different cultural groups, and readings in which they can find representatives of their community to which they can relate to (Tisdell, 2006). Communities of learning are also important, firstly, to recognize that learning is not isolated but a collaborative effort, and secondly, to learn how to work with people from different cultural backgrounds. It also gives them more sense of responsibility to be socially engaged and be active ambassadors for social change (Gay, 2002; Tisdell, 2006; Alfred, 2009; Villegas et al., 2017).

2.6. Summary of and takeaways from the chapter

In the 21st century, the world is becoming highly diverse due to globalization, migration, and internationalization of higher education: the heterogeneity of the student population is further intensified by global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, wars, and climate change. Classrooms mirror this diversity. However capitalist and neoliberal educational policies reining British higher education, focus on competitiveness and tend to homogenize student experience: they make student-consumers responsible for their learning outcomes as individuals rather than attributing their success or failure to their advantaged or disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, ethnicity, gender or educational background, reinforcing social inequalities rather than promoting inclusion and diversity in higher education.

The homogenizing trend has also been present when exploring international student experience in transnational, online programmes, both in practice and policy discourse. In reality, international students experience a cultural dissonance due to the new educational culture they enter and the challenges with academic English, but explorative qualitative studies remain scarce to unfold the multifaceted nature of their learning experiences. The analysed literature on the Nigerian educational context reveals that Nigerian students are caught at the intersection of cultures, pedagogies, and learning routines they appropriated in their local learning environments, which constitute structural and academic impediments in the online British educational culture. Saudi Arabian students are at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, choosing desegregated online classrooms to gain more up-to-date knowledge, without knowing what to expect from the new learning culture. There is no literature on the transnational online learning experiences of non-traditional learners from Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, and no comparative qualitative studies explore the differences and similarities in the online learning experiences when students are situated in the Global North and the Global South.

Due to the increased diversity in the classrooms, the past decades have produced an abundance of literature with contesting terminologies around cultural diversity and social justice. The debate around how to create the ‘school for all’ places the focus on the achievement gap and the structural and academic impediments of underrepresented and minority students. The critical literature calls for differentiated pedagogies to recognize the heterogeneity of the student population. Bourdieu’s sociology of education and Williams’

sociology of culture are important macro-level sociocultural theoretical frameworks that will be applied in the next chapters to analyse inequitable learning conditions and hegemonic relationships experienced in the online British learning culture.

Sociocultural learning theories and an introduction to Alexander's comparative pedagogy further highlight the situated nature of learning and explore how the intersection of lifeworlds (see the next chapter that introduces the definition of intersectionality and lifeworld) influences the learning experience. These theories advocate for creating differentiated and inclusive learning environments that recognize these intersectional and multilayered realities and sensibly respond to students' heterogeneous, multidimensional learning needs via differentiated, critical, inclusive, and culturally responsive pedagogies. Sociocultural learning theories express the need for extensive explorative and comparative qualitative research in international education to discover lifeworlds and unfold intersectional, multilayered, and situated learning experiences of underrepresented students to then include them in policy discourse and create inclusive classroom practices in online higher education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter will describe in detail the ontological and epistemological background of the research, explaining how knowledge creation and learning are perceived in this research. The realities under investigation are subjective in this research, and that requires one to approach the topic with openness and creativity to write about truth (science) and justice (moral) with taste (art). Central to my ontological and epistemological considerations are the concept of culture, especially the social dimension in Raymond Williams' cultural analysis, introduced in the previous chapter, and that of 'lifeworld' as a basis for the phenomenological data generation and data analysis processes. Hermeneutic phenomenology is chosen as an overarching philosophy and methodology for this research because it allows me to study student experiences as they are lived and structured through consciousness together with their meanings. The intention is that phenomenology is seen and felt between the lines from the first to the last letter of this thesis.

Intersectionality and critical pedagogy are applied as theoretical frameworks to progressively focus the explorative, constructivist, and interpretative process toward issues of equity and social justice in the online, transnational classroom. The chapter will elaborate on the phenomenological data generation and data analysis procedure and describe the presentational methodology applied in Chapter 4. The chapter ends with considerations of ethics, quality standards, reflexivity, and positionality in line with the phenomenological, intersectional, and critical lens.

3.2. Ontological background. Writing about truth (science) and justice (moral) with taste (art).

Having already completed a doctoral study in the interdisciplinary field of literature and music, I consider academic research not only a scientific but also an artistic product. My ambition is to understand phenomena with the brain and the heart and to go beyond understanding 'experiences behind their perceptible expressions'. I intend to show both sides of the same coin and create a reading experience that is beyond and above science because it has the emotive power that makes the reader feel something similar to what the interview participants feel. I will intentionally steer away from conventional structures, labels, and abstract academic language because that would limit the understanding of the reader.

Diversifying the channels of communication in different parts of the research - e.g. data generation and data presentation - will provide the potential to express the inexpressible (Finlay, 2012).

Yet how could we define what is inexpressible? Musicians have often confronted the frustrating reality of feeling wordless after making music because the emotions the music creates are inexpressible by words. Singers use a peculiar communication channel, the human body as an instrument to express the essence of a dramatic situation or an emotion. When we sing, we become the emotion, otherwise, no one would believe us. You try to describe the feeling, but you are never really satisfied with your verbal description. Paradoxically, a traditional qualitative thesis uses primarily narratives as an information source, which is a narrowing of expression forms in research. Using more diversified communication channels involving arts will evolve emotions and therefore a more comprehensive, indescribable understanding of the phenomenon.

The previous chapter highlighted that the focus of this research is understanding the multilayered and intersectional nature of the learning experiences of a highly diverse and heterogeneous student population. Differentiated strategies may be required also in data generation methods to unfold these multilayered realities since English is not the mother tongue of all the participants of this research. For this reason, participants were asked to share an image, poetry, or song that best describes their experience which will be essential to understanding their 'lifeworlds'. Some students (especially in computer sciences) did not opt to send a song, poem, or image, because they did not feel comfortable with adding artistic products to their statements, but they expressed vividly during the interview how they felt. Furthermore, in Chapter 4 which presents the findings and preliminary discussion, I use evocative language and include all these diverse data sources – songs, lyrics of the songs, poetry, and images – in addition to the descriptive text and their explanation, with the intention to touch the reader's emotional as well as cognitive understanding (Todres and Galvin, 2008).

Whilst I am taking courageously, with fear and hope a big step towards a "Road not taken" by exploring new ways of qualitative and interpretative researching, scientific rigor remains as important to me as the freedom of artistic expression. They are not excluding but rather completing each other in this research. I intend to write about truth (science) and justice (morals) but with taste (art) (Habermas, 1990, Galvin & Todres, 2012). Why? Because I

believe as a researcher-artist that only an unlimited variety of words, sounds, and colors can present multivoiced and multifaceted realities of students' lifeworlds (Finlay, 2012).

Similar ideas appear also in Connor's (2000, p. 2) notion of cultural phenomenology from a cultural anthropologist perspective: he describes cultural phenomenology as "a style of writing and thinking about culture that allows itself to stay closer to the grain of experience and that bypasses the categories and rubrics under which culture was generally investigated". According to his view, cultural phenomenology diversifies the study of culture by avoiding "abstract social and psychological structures, functions and dynamics" (Connor, 2000, p. 2). He actively encourages cultural phenomenologists to keep being irritated by the boring and "monochrome conformity" of academic language and strive for "murkier writing mauled by doubt and discovery" demonstrating that "thinking could go in moods and modes". Finally, he warns the researcher to "be prepared to be unprepared" by avoiding labelling individual experiences in traditional categories such as gender, ethnicity, power, and identity (Connor, 2000, p. 5).

These principles appear in practice in the hermeneutic phenomenological study of Langeveld (1983b) and his phenomenologically evocative description of the lifeworld of a child. Why is it so important the emotive knowledge in such studies? From a cognitive phenomenological perspective, traditional science avoids dealing with experiences of thoughts and emotions and delegates this study to phenomenologists and poets (Clore, 1992). Clore (1992) argues that while emotion can occur without doing, thinking, or saying, it cannot occur without feeling anything; therefore it is paradoxical that the experiential aspect of emotion and social cognition is not studied, since affection and cognition are at the centre of human judgment, decision making, and action. From a hermeneutic phenomenological point of view, Langeveld adds that "we seek the essential meanings in the human encounter, rather than in pure reflection or speculative theories" (Langeveld, 1983a, p.6), and "from this phenomenological understanding of the human lifeworld in all its possible forms, we come to an understanding of ourselves, or our being and of the meaning of the being of our being […] Phenomenology permits us an understanding of the lives of those for whom we bear pedagogic responsibilities" (Langeveld, 1983a, p. 7).

To re-emphasize, Raymond William's analysis of culture – introduced in the previous chapter -, and in particular the social dimension of his definition that regards culture as a particular way of life expressing certain meanings and values, cultural analysis from this position has

the task of clarifying the meaning and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, in a particular culture. Phenomenological lifeworld studies are one way to do just that. A central concept to phenomenology and this research is 'lifeworld'. Alfred Schütz defined 'lifeworld' as the "taken-for-granted, common-sense reality of the social world as it is lived by ordinary individuals" (Harrington, 2006, p.341). Similar thoughts appear in Ashworth's study (2016, p.21) in which lifeworld means "the whole subjective situation in which the individual is engaged while he or she is experiencing the specific event or phenomenon with which the research is concerned". This definition of lifeworld will be applied in the present research project.

This definition is analogous to Anthony Giddens's structuration theory in which he argues for the duality and recursive relationship between structure - external forces, such as rules, resources, and macro-level social systems - and agency – the capability of the individual to make a difference in the micro level (Oppong, 2014). Giddens' theory underscores that structure and agency are important and equal in their influence on the individual and that there is a complex interrelation between human freedom (agency) and determination (structure), "where individual choices are partially constrained, but remain choices nonetheless" (Oppong, 2014, p. 113). This view is also consistent with Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1977) which states that person (human agency) and environmental factors (family, school, culture) determine human behaviour, and human behaviour also reciprocally affects the human agency and the environment (Oppong, 2014). This triadic relationship is captured below in Figure 3.1.:

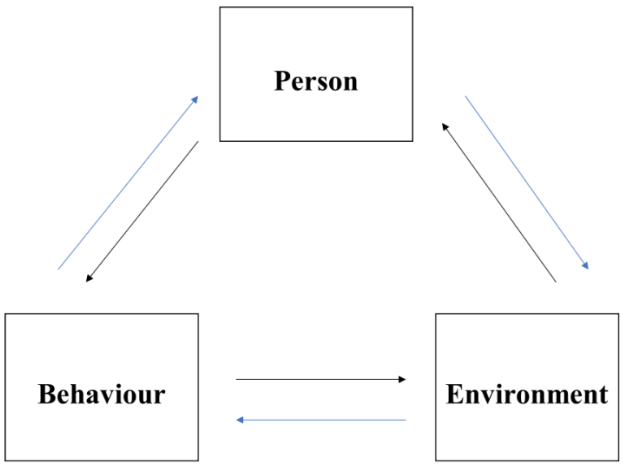


Figure 3.1.: Triadic relationship between agency, structure, and behaviour based on Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997).

The combination of Bandura's social-cognitive theory and Giddens' structuration theory suggests that the learners' educational experiences and perceptions of it are influenced by learners' individual practices and the surrounding learning environments. Figure 3.2. illustrates this relationship as follows:

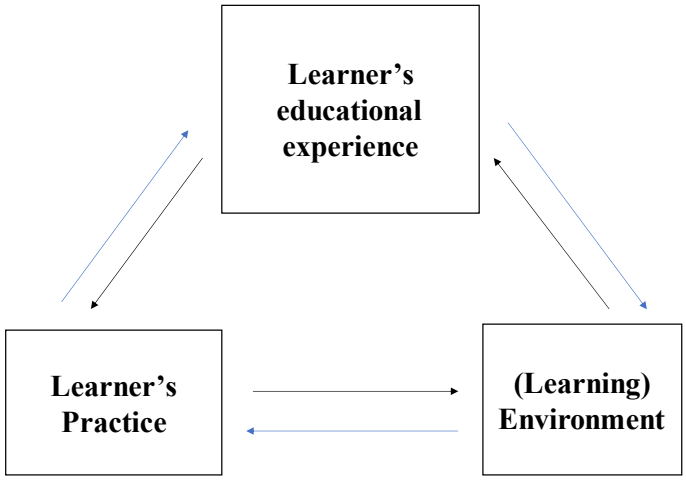


Figure 3.2.: Giddens's structuration theory (1979) and Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) applied to the perception of learning experiences.

According to Giddens (1976, p. 160), “Men produce society, but they do so as historically located actors, and not under conditions of their own choosing”. In his stratification model of consciousness, which includes unconscious motives, practical consciousness, and discursive consciousness, practical consciousness means “tacit knowledge that is skilfully applied in the enactment of courses of conduct, but which the actor is not able to formulate discursively” (Giddens, 1979, p. 57). This type of knowledge is not unconscious but taken for granted and as such cannot be expressed on the level of discourse, whilst “discursive consciousness involves knowledge which actors are able to express on the level of discourse” (Livesay, 1985). Similarly to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, Giddens' theory of structuration “highlights questions of practical consciousness, agency, intentionality, and the power of social actors to reflect on their experiences and thus to perform consciously and knowledgeable in the conduct of their everyday life” (Giddens, 2005, p. 120).

Examining lifeworld in light of Giddens’ structuration theory and exploring how online learners navigate between unconscious, practical, and discursive consciousness in their narratives, helps me as a researcher unfold the perceptions of the participants who, whilst constrained by the environment around them, have capabilities and limitations in being agents of their learning experience.

3.3. Epistemological background: Head (thinking), hand (doing), and heart (feeling) come together in harmony

Considering all the above, hermeneutic phenomenology will be used for the research design because it will allow me to study student experiences “as it is lived and structured through consciousness” together with their meanings (Friesen et al., 2012, p.1). Choosing hermeneutics which is the science of interpretation is a conscious and well-considered decision for this research positioning myself in the group of phenomenologists who believe that the essences of experiences cannot “be isolated outside the researcher’s cultural background”, who constantly interpret and re-interpret the meanings during the research by challenging taken-for-granted attitudes, who are “open to literary and poetic qualities of language” and who “encourage aesthetically sensitized writing as both a process and product of research” (Friesen et al., 2012, p.1). As Moustakas argues (1994, p.17), heuristic research is:

> “a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process, and while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the

> researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries".

Thus, my presence as a researcher via self-reflection and self-discovery is allowed and necessary to eliminate bias and remain trustworthy by being constantly aware of my beliefs and questioning them while creating a snapshot in different moments of the learning process and different 'corners' of the virtual and global classroom. As Giorgi (1994, p. 205) argues:

> "Nothing can be accomplished without subjectivity, so its elimination is not the solution. Rather how the subject is present is what matters, and objectivity itself is an achievement of subjectivity".

In this way, hermeneutic phenomenology will allow me to create a missing link between theory and practice, in a self-reflective, expressive, and innovative language. Following Ricoeur's thoughts, experience and language are inseparable and as such, I must use not only the descriptive functions of the language but also its expressive and emotive power (Ricoeur, 1991; Galvin & Todres, 2012a, 2012b).

As opposed to scientific practice, hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to re-invent Aristotle's notion of a way of being in which knowing, doing, and valuing are fundamentally inseparable by reintegrating the three main domains of knowing: science (truth), morals (justice), and art (taste), which were separated institutionally since the end of the eighteenth century (Habermas, 1990; Galvin & Todres, 2012). As such, art can be used at any stage of the research as part of data generation, analysis, and writing-up (Finlay, 2012, p. 27). Different ways of expression will help bring innovative, unusual, emotive, vital, and energetic language to my writing. Visual representations, poetic language, and song lyrics will appear in different stages of the research, during data generation, data analysis, and the writing-up of the research.

In terms of the validity of such research, I would like to apply Gadamer's and Todres' & Galvin's (2008, p. 580) notion of validity which is always 'on the way': different readers have their own personal and distinct understanding, and, in this sense, validity is not an "abstract unit of agreement", but it is relevant for application in ambiguous realities. Understanding is never simply cognitive; it is the intersection of cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional presences that represent different "moods, qualities, and multiple intersubjective and cultural contexts" (Galvin & Todres, 2012b, p. 6).

If phenomenology follows the postmodern framework of being open to the ambiguity of multiple meanings and methods, in the age of post-postmodernism "new experimental works will become more common, as will more reflexive forms of fieldwork, analysis, and

intertextual representation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994. p. 15). Such reflexive forms will allow me to unfold taken-for-granted attitudes and see online students' lifeworlds in their richness from a 'bottom-up' perspective in a "seamless way of being in which the head (thinking), hand (doing) and heart (feeling) come together in harmony" (Galvin & Todres, 2007 in Henriksson, 2012, p.134).

3.4. Research Questions

The phenomenological research project offers room for students who are citizens or residents of Nigeria, the KSA, or the United Kingdom to express democratically their personal opinions and individual perspectives related to their online and face-to-face educational environments and using various communication channels. It aims to explore the following research questions:

How do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the influence of their cultural identities and learning routines on their online learning experience?

And

How do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the impact of online learning on their cultural identities and learning routines?

The sub-questions are as follows:

a) What are the continuities and discontinuities between their local educational culture and the online educational culture?
b) How do they communicate in the multicultural online classroom?
c) How do their learning routines and roles change in the online learning environment?
d) What are the barriers to online education considering their local cultural context and the Western educational context?

3.5. Theoretical frameworks

3.5.1. Critical (Digital) Pedagogy (CDP)

According to Freire (2017, p. 82), "human beings are because they are in a situation". Critical pedagogy (CP) is a self-reflective and dialogical educational philosophy and practice that resists oppression and authoritarianism in a political and pedagogical sense, with a

commitment to understanding ourselves and the world better through connection with other people (Koseoglu et al., 2023). Similar to the Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff et al., 2018), CP sees learning as socially constructed as the cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities, the personal struggles and aspirations influence and shape educational processes and outcomes. CP is informed by critical social theories such as feminism, postcolonial and disability studies and examines critically the ways classrooms function as modes of political, cultural, and social reproduction, especially when the goals of education are defined under the tenets of economic growth and technical mastery by unrevealing subaltern, intersectional narratives, class struggle, racial and gender inequalities, and injustices (Giroux, 2020).

Freire introduced the term humanizing pedagogy in which pedagogical instruction ceases to be an instrument by which teachers can manipulate students; rather the educator engages in the quest for mutual humanization with their students, a process fostered through problem-posing education where students are co-investigators in dialogue with their teachers (Freire, 2017). Building on Freire's philosophy, del Carmen Salazar identified five principles that constitute humanizing pedagogy: (1) the full development of the person is essential for humanization. (2) To deny someone else's humanization is also to deny one's own. (3) The journey for humanization is an individual and collective endeavour toward critical consciousness. (4) Critical reflection and action can transform structures that impede our own and others' humanness, thus facilitating liberation for all. (5) Educators are responsible for promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical principles and practices (Martinez et al., 2023, p. 135).

The use of digital technologies in higher education employing online, open, or blended forms of education necessitates a more nuanced, reflexive, and critical thinking about whether these new learning environments address effectively or perpetuate further the persistent social inequalities and recognize once and for all that culture interacts with learning and technology (Bradshaw, 2017, Arditi, 2021a). In digital higher education CDP is concerned with the following interrelated themes: (1) relationships in the classroom by developing shared learning and trust and challenging hegemonic teacher-student relationships and practices; (2) development of critical consciousness; (3) change; (4) hope (Freire, 2017, Giroux, 2020, Koseoglu et al., 2023). By dealing with these central themes, CDP honours the plurality of learning experiences and advocates for democratic learning environments in which students can learn in different ways, times, and places to express their understanding of the material in

ways that resonate with them (Koseoglu et al., 2023). CDP will be applied in this research as a theoretical framework in the data analysis process to progressively focus the research from broad phenomenological lifeworld themes to the central themes that CP and CDP are concerned with. A detailed description of how this is conducted will be introduced in Chapter 5.

3.5.2. Intersectionality

Intersectionality rooted in Critical Race Theory and used extensively in feminist scholarship through various disciplines, is "a critical analytical lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality" (Crenshaw, 1991 in Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 347). Intersectionality uses a critical lens to describe "how the multiplicity of identities within individuals and groups is shaped by social structures that determine the individual's power and position in society" (Bolitzer et al., 2023, p. 26). It distinguishes five major tenets. These are as follows:

(1) Multiple categories of identity such as race, class, nationality, gender, language, sexuality, ethnicity, and culture, among others, interact within individuals and social groups and across groups to construct peculiar experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Rooney, 2018; Bolitzer et al., 2023).

(2) The complex identities of individuals and social groups are situated and constructed in a historical, social, political, and economic context, locally and globally and power has a central factor in shaping them (Crenshaw, 1991; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Bolitzer et al., 2023).

(3) Individuals and groups can simultaneously experience oppression, marginalization, agency, and empowerment (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008; Bolitzer et al., 2023).

(4) Recognizing the intersectional and multifaceted nature of identities gives political and intellectual voice to multiple marginalized individuals and social groups whose experience would otherwise be excluded from mainstream society (Crenshaw, 1991, Bolitzer et al., 2023).

(5) Intersectional research must go beyond understanding experiences of subordination and privilege by promoting social justice and change through implementing concrete practices in higher education (Harris & Patton, 2019, Bolitzer et al., 2023).

As researchers, we must "go beyond the analysis of a single identifier to multiple identifiers that interact simultaneously" (Chung Hearn, 2012, p. 43). Whilst the concept is useful to understand the interconnectedness of identities and their influence on power relationships, studies about intersectionality must go beyond description and aim to "critique structures of power and domination, produce transformative knowledge, inform praxis, and work toward social justice" (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 354).

The intersectional lens is relevant in this study to acknowledge and further analyse that "no person has a single, unitary identity" and that the combination of race, gender, class, residence, national origin, age, and ethnicity, among others, creates different study experiences and learning challenges (Delgado, 2017, p. 30). A female student of colour living in Saudi Arabia might have different challenges during her studies than a white male student living in London or a male Yoruba student living in Lagos. Students and teachers perceive differently the online classroom based on how they construct meanings and categorize what they experience in the classroom. The educator's role is to help uncover the unconscious, implicit meaning-making processes and help learners deconstruct any categorization that discriminates against others (Chung Hearn, 2012).

The artificial historical construct of 'citizenship or 'nationality' becomes multidimensional when it comes to issues of learner identities and inequalities documented through student voices in global online higher education. Variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, residence, and sexual orientation make these experiences multifaceted. Looking at the intersection of these variables through these student voices and questioning the categories in which students are traditionally viewed, highlights "the multi-dimensional matrix of inequality and allows us to highlight the easily forgotten differences or similarities across groups." (Cole, 2009 in Finnegan, 2014, p.21).

Intersectionality was used in this research, together with CDP as a theoretical framework to progressively focus the huge data generated on students' lifeworlds into central themes that intersectionality and CDP are concerned. The operationalization of these frameworks into data analysis procedure is explained here and in Chapter 5. In the case of this project, the focus stays on students' lifeworlds, learning experiences, and identity formation. Adapting the intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Bolitzer et al., 2023), and the perspectives of critical (digital) pedagogy (Freire, 2013, 2017; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2020; Koseoglu et al., 2023), the extended discussion in chapter 5 explores how the categories of socioeconomic status,

geographic location, gender, age, ethnicity, and previous educational culture interact within non-traditional online learners and groups of learners to create distinctive learning experiences. It uncovers how the complex identities of online students and groups of online students from Great Britain, Nigeria, and the KSA are constructed in a particular social, historical, political, and economic context, locally and globally, with a focus on power dynamics. It aims to discover how the participants of this research as individuals or as a group experience simultaneously oppression, marginalization, agency, and empowerment throughout their online studies. Empowerment in this study is defined by Freire's critical pedagogy in the educational context as a process in which "learners develop the knowledge and skill they need to undo oppressive structures and achieve liberation" (Saunders, 2020). It is closely related to Bandura's concepts of agency or self-efficacy which is defined as "the belief that one controls one's life and that one can make positive changes in one's surrounding environment, including in politics" (Broom, 2015, p. 80).

The study also attempts to spotlight how the online learning environment provides space to recognize the intersectional nature of student identities and give a political and intellectual voice to multiple marginalized, non-traditional learners or groups of learners. Last but not least it explores the experiences of subordination and privilege in this online learning context to highlight what needs to be changed to create a more equitable learning environment. The complex concept of privilege is defined in this study based on the following definitions: McIntosh uses the term privilege as "unearned circumstances and conditions" and Case as "automatic unearned benefits bestowed upon perceived members of dominant groups based on social identity" (Minarik, 2016, p. 55) Minarik (2016) prefers the term privileging to address that the term is not static and given, but dynamic and continuously socially constructed and enacted between people.

There is a strong relationship between intersectionality, CDP, and the data generation and analysis procedures of this research, where sensemaking is almost a retrospective dimension after the themes and categories emerged from the phenomenological data analysis. The participants' voices are foregrounded throughout the whole study, creating centrality to the experiences and utterances expressed in the interviews. Then connections were made to relevant theoretical considerations that these utterances evoked. Power was shared between the interviewer and interviewees during dialogic interviews (Knight & Saunders, 1999) and often given to the interviewee to shape freely the topics. This type of interviewing is interventionalist in the sense of fostering the construction of tacit to explicit (Knight &

Saunders, 1999). The broad questions and the use of artwork and metaphors in the interview invited the participants to tell stories and anecdotes about their lives: such storytelling techniques in interviews help give an authentic voice to silenced and marginalized experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2018). Analogically, hermeneutic phenomenology (Todres & Galvin, 2008; Friesen et al., 2012) supports that in the data analysis, it is important to go beyond these stories to develop a critical understanding of inequalities in education structures.

3.6. Data Generation

3.6.1. Participants

The sample is chosen via purposive sampling (Ritchie et al., 2014) from the online, international, doctoral, and master's programmes of three universities based in the UK. At the time of the interview, participants were in the middle of their modular or dissertation/thesis studies: students at this stage of study already comprehended the online learning model, developed learning techniques on how to be successful, and could self-reflect on their challenges with a more distant view.

In total, 28 students have been interviewed: nine with British citizenship, eleven with Nigerian citizenship, and eight with Saudi Arabian citizenship or residency. Three Nigerian students and four Saudi Arabian students were interviewed in 2012 as part of the research grant I conducted for the company responsible for the online delivery of the international programmes for two of the examined institutions, to improve retention rates of Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students studying in these online programmes. The rest of the interviews were completed in 2017 and 2018. I've received ethical approval from all involved institutions to conduct this research, including permission to use the research data from the research grant. New data was collected only after the Ethics committees of all three universities approved the study. Two participants who were earlier interviewed for the research grant were re-interviewed to test whether their recollections of events and feelings had changed significantly. By comparing the first and second interviews, it was clear that their views remained similar despite the six-year difference. Other students who were interviewed earlier agreed by email to use their interviews and confirmed that their views have not changed since then. The double interviews and the member checks reassured me to use the earlier interviews for this research. The names and personal data of the interviewees are known only

to the researcher. Personal details are number-coded. Future articles, conference papers, and the doctoral thesis include pseudonyms or numbers only (see Appendix 1 for the demographic details).

Four female and five male British students were interviewed between the ages of 31 and 65; seven were in doctoral studies, and two were in master studies. Four declared to be non-religious, two atheists one Buddhist, one Christian, and one Muslim. In terms of their ethnicity, seven are white Caucasian, one Hausa, and one is Asian. live abroad (in Azerbaijan, Japan, and Saudi Arabia), and six live in England or Scotland. All of them studied previously in UK higher education at BA or MA level, and four studied beforehand in online higher education.

Ten Nigerian students were interviewed: three women and seven men, aged between 36 and 50. In terms of their religion, nine were Christian and one was Muslim. Concerning their ethnicity, four Igbo, two Yoruba, one Igala, one Idoma, one Afemai, and one Bini student shared their learning experiences with me. Seven lived in Lagos, one in Abuja, one was working and living in both Lagos and Abuja, and one lived abroad, in Afghanistan. Three of them studied in doctoral programmes, and seven were in master programmes at the time of the interview. Two followed their master's studies online, and at the time of the interview, they studied in online doctoral programmes. Only two had experience with UK higher education before their studies, and only one had previous online learning experience with a UK institution.

Seven individuals were interviewed with Saudi Arabian residence: three Saudi Arabian, two Egyptian, one Emirati, and one Lebanese, four male and three female students between the age of 26 and 49. All of them were Muslim by religion, but one of them confidentially admitted that he considered himself non-religious, even though his passport states otherwise. By ethnicity, six of them were Arab, and one was Caucasian. Two were studying in doctoral programmes, and five were at the master's level. Two had previous experience with the UK higher education system, and the rest studied in traditional universities in their respective home countries in the Middle East. One recently graduated from an online international university based in the UK and was admitted to an online Ph.D. programme in the U.S.

3.6.2. Procedure

Data generation included the collection of individual student narratives through in-depth, semi-structured, topical, and dialogic interviews via Skype/Microsoft Teams that lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and explored the areas of online and face-to-face education by asking open-ended questions. Although face-to-face interviews and observations are preferred for ethnographic or phenomenological studies, the online interviews, in this case, did not constitute a limitation, since the participants were online learners and used to online platforms. Dialogic interviewing was necessary as the meanings of online learning are socially constructed. Dialogic interviewing, "in which both interviewer and informant undertook a process of meaning construction" (Knight & Saunders, 1999, p. 147), helped "informants bring their tacit understandings to the forefront of consciousness" (Knight & Saunders, 1999, p. 145). The complexities around the concept of culture and the constructivist paradigm, as well as a need to make the implicit explicit necessitated not only listening carefully to the participants of the research, but "helping them to be more explicitly aware of the cultures" and cultural identities "they constructed and lived" (Knight & Saunders, 1999, p. 147).

Before the interview, the participants read the participation information sheet and signed the consent form that informed them about the aims of the research. (These documents can be found in Appendices 3 and 4.) The participants were asked in advance to share by email some demographic details, reflect on their learning experience, and find an image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song that described the best how they felt on the first day of the online class and possibly another one to describe how they felt on the first day of a traditional classroom in graduate or postgraduate level. They were asked to share the images, poetry, songs, or lyrics of songs with me before the interview. The participant came to the interview with their chosen images, poetry, or songs in mind. The first question was related to the images, poetry, or songs that the student brought to the interview. The use of these diverse communication channels is vital in this research because it helps explore students' lifeworld. English was not the native language for most of the participants, therefore non-verbal communication tools helped diversify and facilitate the transmission of meanings they constructed about the phenomenon. Furthermore, as the research aims to unfold unconscious beliefs and assumptions during the individual meaning-making processes about their online learning experience, the usage of non-verbal communication and art for the description of their experience is a useful tool to look beyond the words and see what the unseen is. The use of

artwork and metaphors also facilitates the introduction of storytelling techniques in the interviews, in line with the applied theoretical frameworks, intersectionality, and CDP.

During the interviews, we explored the four fundamental lifeworld themes that concern hermeneutic phenomenology: lived space, lived time, lived relation, and lived body (Langeveld, 1983; van Manen, 1997; Friesen et al., 2012) concerning online learning. In other words, students reflected on the ways they experience the online classroom, the online learning time, their own 'bodies' or online presence in the classroom, and those of others, their ways of communication, gestures, and their lived experience, relationship with others charged with feelings and flavour (Friesen et al., 2012). During the interview, they were often asked to compare this with their experience in the face-to-face local classroom. This allowed a comprehensive exploration of their lifeworld. Some questions were more difficult to answer than others and produced high diversity in the way interviewees responded. When it was necessary, the interviewer broke down the questions into smaller units to help explore the individual's cultural identity and the tacit meanings constructed around their experience. (The interview protocol can be found in Appendix 2.) An example of converting a key concept and the main research question into interview questions is visualized in the following table:

Key concepts	Research question	Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (lifeworld) (Friesen et al., 2012)	Interview Questions
Lifeworld	What are the continuities and discontinuities between the local educational cultures and the online educational culture of Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British online international students? What are the barriers to online education considering their local context and the Western educational background?	Lived space	1. How do you feel about living in your country (name country of residence) and studying online at a UK institution? 2. Where did you study before your online studies (home country/abroad)? If abroad, why? 3. How can you describe the differences or similarities between your experience of learning in a traditional classroom and learning online? 4. What does it mean for you being (name the culture/ethnic group the student belongs to)? What does it mean for you in the online class? 5. What type of factors, and situations affected your online learning experience? 6. How did other cultures in the classroom affect your online learning experience?
Learning challenges	How did the learning routines change in the	Lived time	1. When do you study online? When did you study in the traditional classroom?

	online learning environment?		2. How do you study online? How did you study in the traditional classroom? 3. What is your preference for your learning?
Cultural identities	How do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the impact of online learning on their cultural identities? How do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the influence of their cultural identities and learning routines on their online learning experience?	Lived body	4. What are the basic values of your culture? If you share these values, how do they manifest in your communication style in your country and the online classroom? 5. What meaning does online learning have in your life? What are your goals with online learning? 6. What makes you successful in your online studies?
Learning challenges	How do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students communicate in the multicultural online classroom?	Lived relations	1. Tell me a little about your relationship with your parents. What did you learn from them? How did they raise you as a child? Do you share their beliefs? Is there any difference between your and your parents' views? 2. How could you describe your learning experience and your relationship with the instructor/tutor in the online learning environment? And in your previous studies, in a traditional classroom? 3. How could you describe your learning experience and relationship with your classmates in the online class? And in your previous studies, in a traditional classroom?

Table 3.1.: Example of converting key concepts and research questions into interview questions.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and a transcriber who received only the recordings and signed a confidentiality agreement for transcribing the data. The personal details of interview participants were not shared with the transcriber or stored in online storage places. All files (audio, Word, or Excel) were encrypted, each with individual password protection. The laptop used for the research is also password-protected, and only the researcher can access it. The audio files were shared with the transcriber in a password-protected Google Drive, and the password for each encrypted file was sent in a separate email to guarantee full confidentiality of data.

3.7. Data Analysis Procedure

The transcripts were analyzed with rigorous hermeneutic phenomenological and first-person research methods (Langeveld, 1983a, 1983b; van Manen, 1997, 2007; Roth, 2012; Friesen et al., 2012; Giorgi, 2012).

Giorgi's (2012, p. 10) pre-transcendental descriptive phenomenological research method is followed because it is interested in "how a human consciousness relates to a specifically human world". He calls this method descriptive because the researcher describes in his/her own words what the interview participant said to reach the desired expression that is missing and to do that, the researcher must reflect and revisit the same units of meaning to find the right words. In a broader sense, the description is interpretative because they are the researcher's interpretation of lifeworld events, which are bigger than just the understanding of these events (Giorgi, 2012, pp. 7-8):

> "Even though the description is from another, a researcher can reflect on the presented meanings obtained in the description, perceive their unity, and come up with an understanding of the world of the other." (Giorgi, 2012, p. 7.)

The transcripts were coded in NVivo, and the bracketing phase started with the identification of units of meanings categorized into themes and sub-themes. Giorgi's research method is holistic, it is the "study of the whole person" (Giorgi, 2012, p. 3; Todres & Galvin, 2008), therefore the analysis starts with the reading of "the whole description to get a sense of the whole" (Giorgi, 2012, p. 5). The second stage of the coding is to create meaning units by re-reading the description and marking any transition in meaning. The third step is the transformation of data with the help of "free imaginative variation" into "expressions that are more directly revelatory of the value of what the subject said" (Giorgi, 2012, p. 5). Todres and Galvin (2008, p. 576) break down further steps on how to find the right words. Firstly, the researcher needs to be "present to others' stories"; secondly, he/she must be able to enter into "alive meanings"; thirdly, he/she will need to reflect further, digest, and hold the meanings to form them.

Coding procedure	**Giorgi (2012)**	**Todres & Galvin (2008)**	**Example**
Step 1	Reading the whole description	The researcher is present to others' stories by listening carefully	Your self-motivation, your discipline, and your focus will make you succeed. (Student 50) The way I muscled my way through an internationally recognized Ph.D. will

			summarize what determination is about. (Student 6) In online studies, you have to discipline yourself. (Student 36) You have to be personally driven. You have to be very good at time management, you have to be very self-motivated. (Student 18) The online experience requires you to be self-focused and to take more initiative…The focus is on what your assignments ask you to do. (Student 26)
Step 2	Creating meaning units	The researcher enters live meanings	Determined, focused, disciplined, driven & self-motivated
Step 3	Transformation of data with the help of free imaginative variations into more directly revelatory of the value of what the subject said	The researcher reflects, digests, and holds the meanings to form them. They re-word the meaning to facilitate intersubjective understanding of the phenomena.	Characteristics of online learners

Table 3.2.: Coding procedure based on hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis (Giorgi 2012; Todres & Galvin 2008).

There are two main principles in this type of aesthetic, hermeneutic, phenomenological data coding: firstly, listening carefully to the interview participants to "carry forward" and understand the meaning of their words; secondly, re-wording their words to facilitate "intersubjective understanding" of the phenomena (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 569). This kind of aesthetic writing or "embodied interpretation" is inspired by Gadamer's and Gendlin's theoretical work and has two aims: firstly, the researcher must "enter the experience" and find his/her understanding of the whole and the parts of the description; secondly "re-emerge into language" and communicate to the reader the meanings in faithful, rigorous and also evocative ways, so that "the reader can relate to the understandings in personal and unique ways" (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 575). In this sense, the aim is not only to let the researcher follow his/her aesthetic preference of writing but to evoke and "re-enliven the phenomenon for public purposes" and see what the impact of the writing on the reader is (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 577).

Based on these guiding principles and the emerging themes and sub-themes constituted by the single, meaning units, I reconstructed their stories, focusing on the research questions.

Nothing was changed or added to their original narratives; only stylistic and grammar mistakes were corrected to make the story more coherent.

3.8. Presentational methodology

Chapter 4 will present the results of the phenomenological data analysis described in the previous section with an integrated approach that includes data presentation and analysis of the experience (Giorgi, 2012; Todres & Galvin, 2008). The collected data, including poems, musical compositions, songs, lyrics of songs, and descriptive texts, are not purely illustrations but are treated as the embodiment of the lifeworlds of students under investigation. These embodiments are then interpreted to help the reader focus on the essence of the experience by connecting the experiences to the various theoretical frameworks used in this study.

To provide structure and rigor to the presentation of the phenomenological data analysis, I adopt part of the systematic inductive approach to concept development used by Gioia et al. (2012), in their grounded-theory study inspired by Van Maanen's (1979) concepts of first-order and second-order analysis in ethnographic studies. Van Maanen describes first-order concepts as "facts" and second-order concepts as "theories" that the researcher uses to "explain the facts" (Van Mannen, 1979, p. 540). He argues that first-order "facts" have descriptive properties but also situationally, historically, and biographically mediated interpretations of members of a group under investigation (Van Mannen, 1979). The descriptive properties of the "fact" and their interpretations are both considered first-order concepts and therefore differentiation needs to be made between operational data that deals with an observed activity (e.g. behaviour) or presentational data that are interpretations, "normative abstractions used by members of the studied group to describe and account for their behaviour" (Van Mannen, 1979, p. 544). As this phenomenological study did not include observations, the textual data presented in Chapter 4 are considered first-order presentational data.

However, since this is a phenomenological study focusing on presenting the lifeworlds of the participants, the representation of cognitive and emotional knowledge is essential and complementary to each other, as reason and emotion are inseparable in the construction of knowledge (Holland, 2007). Therefore, the first-order presentation data has distinctive functions depending on the various data sources used in this study:

(1) extracts from the interviews provide a thick textual description of the meaning-making of the participants on their online learning experience, primarily addressing cognitive knowledge;

(2) artwork, such as images and extracts from poems and song lyrics, including the link to the songs, are chosen by the participants as 'metaphors' to describe their emotions or their online identities in the online learning environment, and therefore they are considered self-reflective data of the participants revealing emotional knowledge.

(3) extract from interviews that illuminate the personal meaning of these metaphors which complement and explain the emotional knowledge construction.

The second-order data which is my researcher-centric text, has two functions:

(4) my thematic analysis based on the principles of phenomenological data analysis, and

(5) my conceptualization and sense-making of the data derived from the applicable theoretical frameworks.

The visualization of the functions of the diverse data sources and text descriptions can be seen in Figure 3.3.

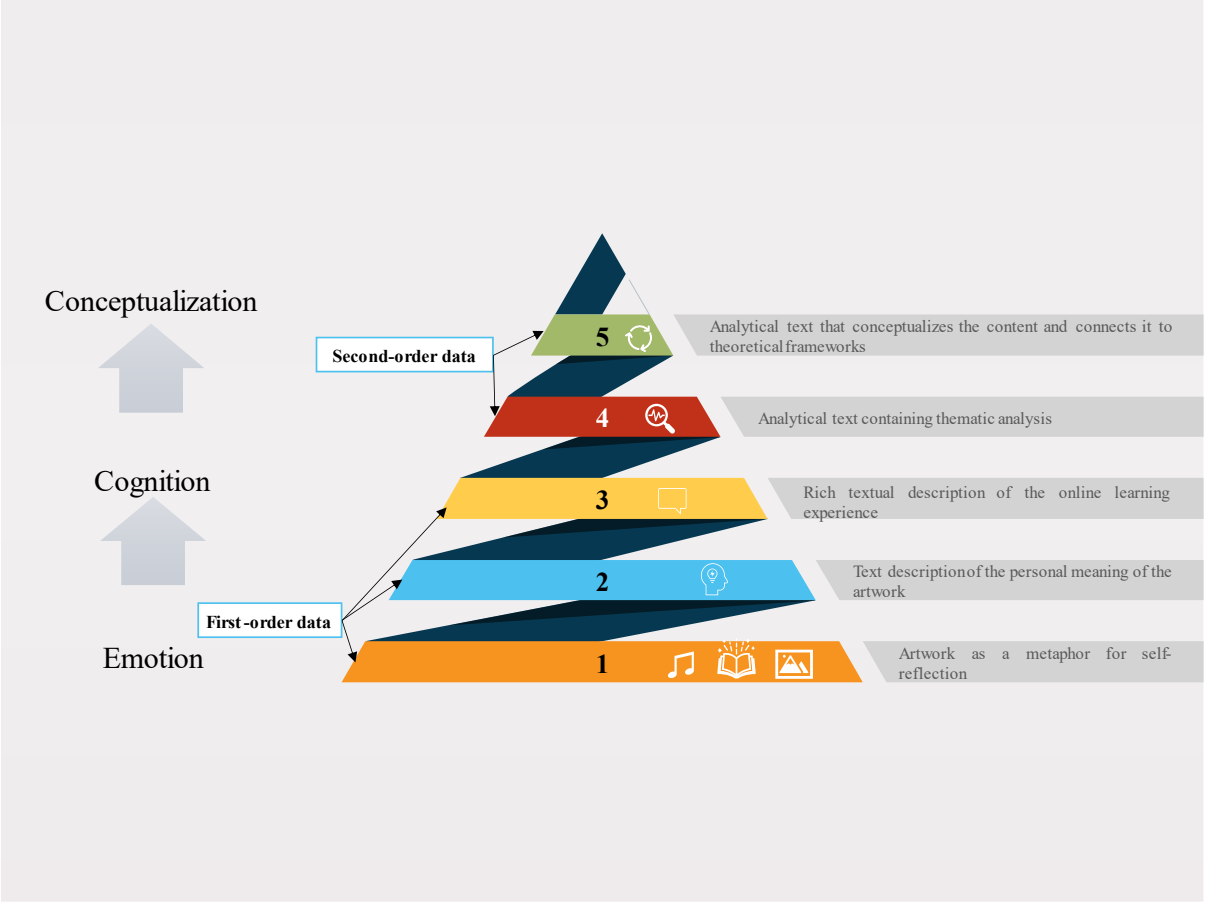


Figure 3.3.: Visualization of the functions of the diverse data sources and descriptive/analytical text in the data presentation.

The diverse sources in the first-order data are often interconnected and integrated because participants explain their artwork as metaphors for their online learning experience. The systematic presentation of first-order analysis using terms and codes described by the participants of the interviews, and that of second-order analysis using researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions are useful for me as a researcher to keep clarity on the emerging themes, subthemes, and concepts that will create the bridge to the theoretical frameworks and ultimately to theory building (Gioia, et al., 2012). They are also helpful for the reader to see the rigor of the coding and concept development process. In the first-order analysis, I tried to adhere faithfully to the terms that the participants used. Similarities and differences were found among the first-order codes or meaning units that, in my second-order analysis, led me to look for deeper structures on the theoretical level, formulating underlying questions and focusing on concepts and tentative relationships. The emerging second-order themes are then distilled into second-order aggregate dimensions in an attempt to describe the phenomena of studying online.

3.9. Enacting reflexivity and positionality

As introduced in Chapter 1, I am a non-traditional, female, and mature online learner, which makes it difficult to detach my experience from that of the female and mature non-traditional students presented in this study. During data generation and data analysis, I made extra efforts to separate my experience from theirs by self-reflecting after every interview, reflecting together with other researchers about my data, following strictly the steps of phenomenological data analysis, and writing a personal journal of my own learning challenges and identity transformation. Comparing my personal, reflective journal and their stories helped me understand the differences in our learning journeys. As I hold a Ph.D. in Literature, it was tempting to use a critical metaphor analysis approach (Charteris-Black, 2004) consisting of metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation when analysing the metaphors the participants created for their online learning experience. I decided not to do so, as it would be against phenomenological principles. Instead, I asked them during the interviews to interpret and explain the meanings they attach to their chosen metaphor (artwork) of online learning. In this way, I made sure that this remains their story and not mine.

In terms of my cultural background, I am an outsider to their experience, and while I read and knew a lot about the local cultures of the participants of this study, I made a conscious effort to use a 'tabula rasa' attitude, which I find very important in phenomenological research. I reminded myself before every interview that my participants are the experts in their culture and learning journey, and I am here in this interview to learn from them. This inquisitive attitude and the semi-structured, dialogical interviews in which I constructed carefully very general questions without bias or assumptions, allowed them to navigate freely in their mind and heart, and express what they find important to talk about their learning experiences. Hearing their sometimes-shocking stories helped me unfold my assumptions about their cultures that I was unaware of. This concerns general personal safety and security issues, access to education, the quality and structure of education they received in their local communities, the role of women in their society, and the challenges of expats. Their new perspectives made me feel very fortunate about my own lifeworld, and despite all my personal challenges and late-night study shifts, it made me even more certain that I must finish this research, so their stories will be shared with a wider audience.

When I started to collect data, I was still employed as a manager at a for-profit educational organization that provided an online learning environment for two-thirds of the interviewed students. At that time, my motivation to learn about their circumstances was to help them succeed in their studies, which was in line with my job description and the commercial target of the organization to retain more students. Once I left the organization, I became freer to think about the broader picture of the relevance of their stories, and this is why I chose the critical approach, CP, and intersectionality for the theoretical lenses of this research.

3.10. Quality Standards of the Qualitative Inquiry

In terms of within-project verification (Morse, 2018), the phenomenological methodology is reflected coherently in every chapter of the research. The multi-theoretical research perspective ensured that the research focuses on "interconnections and relationships" among diverse experiences of online learners with the aim of bringing "qualitative inquiry closer to the complexity that resembles reality, unpacking the social theory that shapes the world" (Morse, 2018, p. 804). The transcendental phenomenological data analysis procedure was followed step by step, including bracketing meaning units. Data was generated until saturation, when no new patterns emerged, and similar meaning units started to reappear.

Trustworthiness and authenticity defined by Guba &Lincoln (1994) were followed and respected during data generation and analysis. Credibility was established by prolonged engagement and persistent observations in the field, including building trust with the participants (Creswell, 2007). In the case of students enrolled in the online programmes of two universities participating in this research, my role duality as a manager and academic counsellor (besides the researcher role) was helpful because, due to my supportive role in their studies, the trust already existed even before conducting the interviews. I've learned about the cultures under investigation and checked for misinformation, assumptions, and bias through a reflective journal and a position statement written in the thesis, which informs the reader about the researcher's position at the beginning of the study, including personal worldviews and assumptions that may impact the interpretation and approach of the research project. The criteria of transferability were established by peer debriefing with external researchers during which detailed notes were created, by following the steps of the phenomenological data analysis procedure and by creating a clear coding structure that can be used also in other research contexts. The principle of dependability which means that the results are subject to change in context and that of confirmability which serves to establish

the value of the data were safeguarded by writing a reflective journal. I would bear the reader to go through the self-reflections that I documented in the past seven years. Here I would like to provide an example of my journaling. During this research process, I composed a list of my presuppositions to help me bracket out my own assumptions. Some are included in Appendix 5. (Presupposition list) for illustration. An Audit Trail (see Appendix 6) was created based on the audit procedure described by Akkerman et al. (2008).

3.11. Summary of and takeaways from the chapter

This chapter detailed the overarching research philosophies influencing this research and the applied qualitative research design. Hermeneutic phenomenology and lifeworld studies were introduced as well as their implications for data generation, data analysis, and presentational methodology. The next chapters will visualize this by providing rich and diverse data to unfold the integrity of the analysed lifeworlds. Chapter 4 will keep the phenomenological lifeworld categories as lived body, lived space, lived relations, and lived time, while Chapter 5 will progressively focus attention on the central themes that concern intersectionality and critical pedagogy.

Chapter 4: The lifeworlds of online students. Data presentation and preliminary discussion

4.1. Overview of the chapter

This chapter presents the results of the phenomenological data analysis described in the previous section with an integrated approach that includes data presentation and analysis of the online learning experience of the participants. During the phenomenological analysis, I attempted to "enter the experience" and find my understanding of the description, then "re-emerge into language" and communicate to you, the reader, the meanings in an authentic, rigorous, and evocative way by inserting the songs, compositions, artwork, poetry that the students shared with me (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 575). The purpose of Chapter 4 is to "re-enliven the phenomenon for public purposes" (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 577), therefore please click on the links attached to songs as you reach there in your reading.

As described in section 3.8., the data presentation procedure follows the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012), inspired by the phenomenological principles of first- and second-order analysis introduced by Van Mannen. Figure 4.1 illustrates the constructed first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregated dimensions.

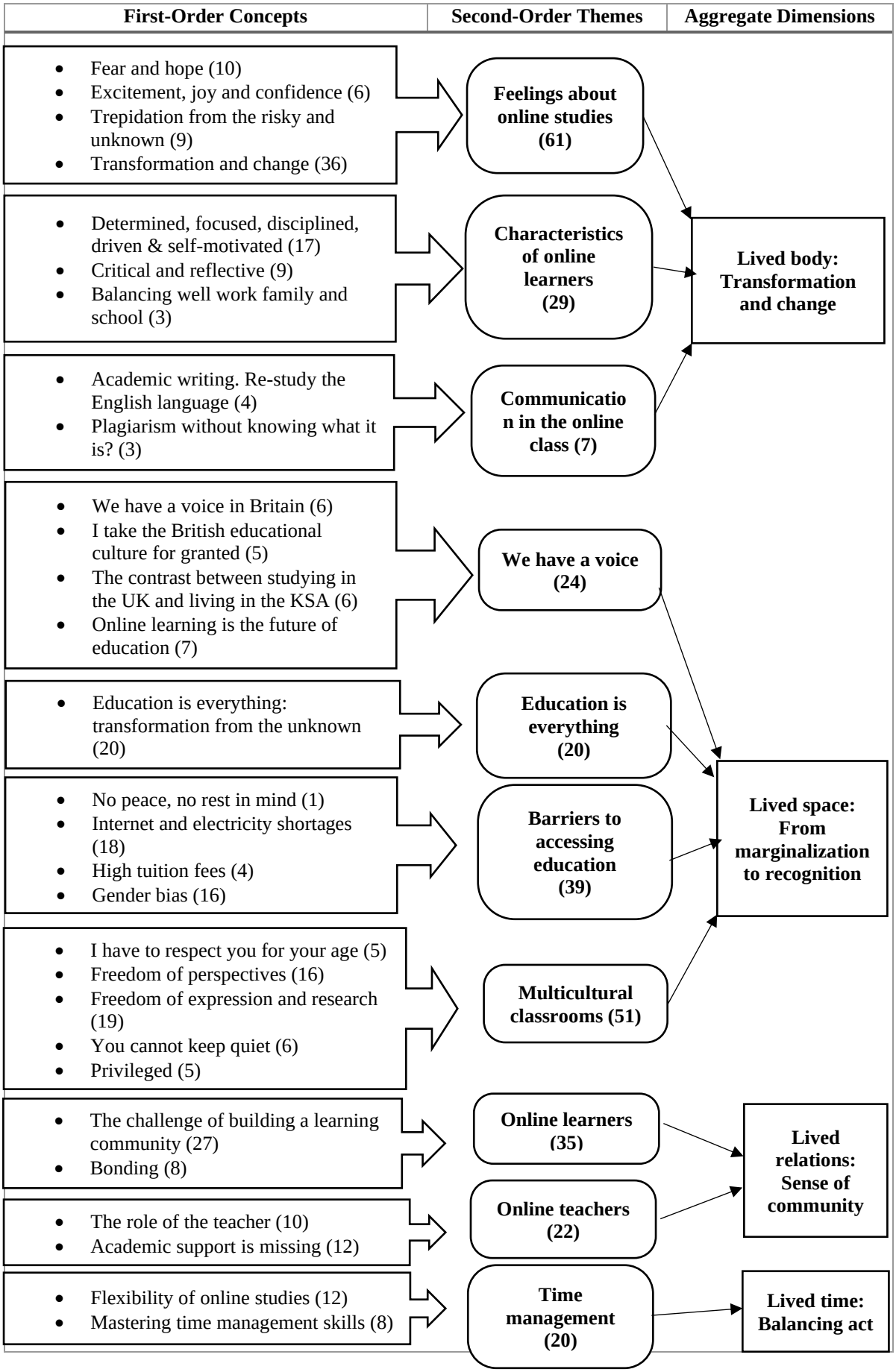

First-Order Concepts
Second-Order Themes
Aggregate Dimensions
Fear and hope (10)
Excitement, joy and confidence (6)
Trepidation from the risky and unknown (9)
Transformation and change (36)
Feelings about online studies (61)
Determined, focused, disciplined, driven & self-motivated (17)
Critical and reflective (9)
Balancing well work family and school (3)
Characteristics of online learners (29)
Lived body: Transformation and change
Academic writing. Re-study the English language (4)
Plagiarism without knowing what it is? (3)
Communication in the online class (7)
We have a voice in Britain (6)
I take the British educational culture for granted (5)
The contrast between studying in the UK and living in the KSA (6)
Online learning is the future of education (7)
We have a voice (24)
Education is everything: transformation from the unknown (20)
Education is everything (20)
No peace, no rest in mind (1)
Internet and electricity shortages (18)
High tuition fees (4)
Gender bias (16)
Barriers to accessing education (39)
Lived space: From marginalization to recognition
I have to respect you for your age (5)
Freedom of perspectives (16)
Freedom of expression and research (19)
You cannot keep quiet (6)
Privileged (5)
Multicultural classrooms (51)
The challenge of building a learning community (27)
Bonding (8)
Online learners (35)
Lived relations: Sense of community
The role of the teacher (10)
Academic support is missing (12)
Online teachers (22)
Flexibility of online studies (12)
Mastering time management skills (8)
Time management (20)
Lived time: Balancing act

Figure 4.1.: Visualization of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions of online learning based on Gioia's (2012) systematic inductive method to concept development. The numbers in the brackets indicate the number of times the interview participants mentioned the particular meaning unit. First-order concepts are meaning units derived directly from the generated data using the words that participants used. The second-order themes and aggregated dimensions are the results of my conceptualization process based on phenomenological data analysis.

4.2. Lived body: transformation and change.

4.2.1. Feelings about online studies

The first theme emerging from all interviews is various feelings about online studies described mostly by songs, poems, images, and descriptive text. By presenting these emotions and their contexts, we can grasp continuities and discontinuities in their feelings about studying online in different contexts, and understand better how online learning affects their cultural identities and how their learning routines and roles change in the online learning environment. Eventually, they all lead to personal transformation and change.

Fear and Hope

Fear of coping is overturned by high hopes and determination to finish what has started especially in the Nigerian context "with many challenges: coming from where I am, with internet challenges, I have to be highly skilled to manoeuvre the system" (Student 5, Nigerian, female learner) and characterized in the song Hope from Faith Evans:

♪♫

Faith Evans: Hope

Take this music and use
it, let it take you away
And be hopeful, hopeful,
and He'll make a way
I know it aint easy but –
that's okay
Just be hopeful.

Figure 4.2.: Song (Hope by Faith Evens) as an expression of hope provided by Student 5 (Nigerian, female learner).

For a younger, male, British student (student 16) starting an online Ph.D. was intimidating because:

“I couldn’t see anyone and had fears of failing the course, not being able to balance work and the course at the same time, and not being good or intelligent enough to grapple with the different concepts in a more elevated level of learning.”

A middle-aged British man wanted to follow this programme to find “my true me.. a glans of purity and hope. I wanted to feel that I am human. I felt this humanity during the doctoral course”(Student 2). He choose Telemann's concerto for two chalumeaux:

“The orchestra is very static and stable and the harmony moves from a single chord while the chalumeaux express a wide range of emotions. I am the chalumeaux within the strict structure of the doctoral course confines. The third movement is a dialogue between the two chalumeaux. I see these chalumeaux as my former and future selves with the orchestra being my family. The ending of this movement is not a happy resolution. My family life is quite happy, but at the start of the course, I was not too sure of how things would unfold.”(Student 2)	Telemann Concert in D minor for Two Chalumeaux 

Figure 4.3.: Telemann’s Concerto in D minor for Two Chalumeaux to express Fear and Hope provided by Student 2 (middle-aged British learner).

Excitement, joy and confidence

Male participants across all three countries reported feelings of excitement, joy, and confidence when starting the online programme. A Nigerian student compared his feelings to the image of a happy monkey seeing a banana:

“Have you seen the photo of a monkey when it sees a banana? So happy to see what he wants to eat. I felt this joy and happiness because online learning is something I had never done before. It was my first time.” (Student 36)	

Figure 4.4.: Image expressing joy and happiness provided by student 36 (Nigerian, male learner).

A British middle-aged man described being: “excited, joyful, and confident to be in the online university” (Student 1). Similar ideas were expressed by a Saudi Arabian mature, male student with an image that describes how much control he felt over his online studies:

“I want to do it, I am going to do it and I am going to finish it.” (Student 4)	

Figure 4.5.: Image over control and confidence provided by student 4 (Saudi Arabian, male learner).

Trepidation from the risky and unknown

A British middle-aged woman (student 17) chose the song Don’t Go of Hothouse Flowers to express trepidation and a feeling of “maybe I shouldn’t do it: after leaving academia, going into the real world, getting married, having kids, get a job, maybe I should just stick my toe in the water and not doing something new.”

♪♫

Hothouse Flowers - Don't Go

And it's filling up my senses
And the sun is shining down
On the blossoms in the avenue.
There's a buzzing fly hanging
Around the bluebells and the daisies
And there's a lot more loving left in this world.

Don't go
Don't leave me now now now
While the sun smiles
Stick around and laugh a while yeah.

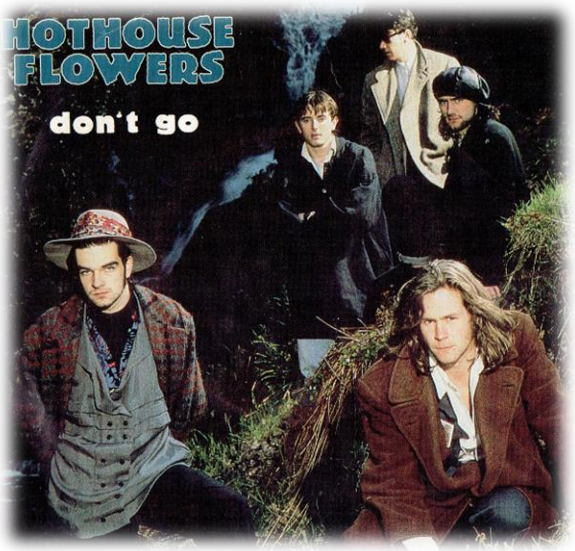


Figure 4.6.: Song (Don't Go by Hothouse Flowers) to express trepidation from the risky and unknown provided by student 17 (female, British learner).

Another middle-aged British woman evoked the song Miracle of U2 to express: "this is my miraculous last chance":

“I thought ‘Oh, I wonder if I should do this’. I applied. Hoping, but I didn’t think it would happen. And when I got that letter from my supervisor, saying that you’re the ideal student, we’d love to have you, it felt like a miracle. That record came out around that time as well. From then on that record I always associated with doing this Ph.D. That it was a miracle, and it felt very much like it was something I had to do, and it was a bit scary. I just thought it really summed it up, and I always felt like I wasn’t quite finished with the education, which is where the chorus comes in. I always used to think that I’m not done. I am not done. I am not finished. I change the words in my head when I hear it. That’s where it came from, it coincided with being accepted on this course and it seemed like a miraculous last chance, to do something academically. And I enjoyed it.”

(Student 18, female, British)

U2 – The Miracle

I was chasing down the days of fear
Chasing down a dream before it disappeared
I was aching to be somewhere near,
Your voice was all I heard
I was shaking from a storm in me,
Haunted by the specters that we had to see
Yeah I wanted to be the melody,
Above the noise, above the hurt.

I was young
Not dumb
Just wishing to be blinded
By you
Brand new
And we were pilgrims on our way

I woke up at the moment when the miracle occurred
Heard a song that made some sense out of the world
Everything I ever lost, now has been returned
In the most beautiful sound, I'd ever heard.

We got language so we can communicate
Religion so I can love and hate
Music so I can exaggerate my pain, and give it a name

We can hear you
We can hear you
We can hear you

Your voices will be heard
Your voices will be heard

Figure 4.7.: Song (The Miracle by U2) to express the “miraculous last chance” provided by student 18 (female, British learner).

Other female students emphasize the unknown and risky element of online learning: a British female student in her “40s and a student in her ‘30s from KSA chose the same poem, The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost.

"In the Middle East people usually don't go for online classes as face-to-face classes are easier and more familiar. For me, choosing an online class was a big leap because I challenged myself to go outside of my comfort zone".

(Student 33, a female student living in KSA).

"Doing online study is a more risky and unusual route. Slightly going into the unknown. There is no building you arrive at, you can't see your colleagues. The habits and patterns of turning up at university are not there… And I felt I had chosen the less trodden path by choosing the online route"

(Student 19, British female student).

Robert Frost: The Road not taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves, no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Figure 4.8.: Poem (The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost) to express the 'unknown and risky' provided by student 33 (female learner living in KSA) and by student 19 (female, British learner).

They were both struck by the unusual way of learning in online education. The Saudi Arabian student similarly to other female Saudi students felt out of their comfort zone and challenged by their environment for choosing online studies:

"Studying online is not as common thing as in other countries, so it's a challenge for me actually: I wouldn't be able to find help if I needed help with my studying because no one would be able to help with this kind of study. The other thing is the environment itself, the encouragement from people: when they hear that I'm studying online, they [ask]: Are you sure you're going to get credentials from this studying? Is it an accredited university? They ask if the management in higher education here is going to accept my degree after I finish or not, so it's challenging. The good thing is, that my workplace accepts such a degree, even if I got it through online study, so that's a little bit encouraging for me." (Student 42, female, Saudi student)

The interpretations that British and Saudi students created about online learning are quite different: they bring their social experience from the real world into their social presence online. Saudi students emphasized the lack of encouragement and support in their external environment, while British students referred to the different learning experience that occurs in an online university, compared to a face-to-face programme. In Bourdieuan terminology,

the field of online learning is unusual and in the view of these Saudi female learners, the lack of social capital (family support and connections) makes it challenging, whilst for the British female student the lack of cultural/symbolic capital (dispositions and skills in online learning) makes it a difficult path to choose (Bourdieu, 2014; Aitken et al., 2019).

Transformation and change

Feelings about starting online studies were dominated by the theme of transformation and change. 13 students experienced a significant change in their learning habits when studying online:

"This song describes changes that occur after you see the clouds: after the rain there is calm. We made many mistakes in the first module and my critical writing improved incredibly."

(Student 24, British, male, mature student living in Saudi Arabia)

Smokie - Have You Ever Seen The Rain

Have you ever seen the rain?
Someone told me long ago
There is a calm before the storm
When it is over so they say
It'll rain on a sunny day
I know shining down like water
I want to know
Have you ever seen the rain
Comin' down on a sunny day…

Figure 4.9.: Song (Have You Ever Seen The Rain by Smokie) to express change provided by student 24 (British male student).

For another younger British male student (Student 16) transformation in online studies is symbolized by the song, Silent All These Years of Tori Amos:

“The mermaid represents the transformation that I have experienced as part of the process of participating in the online doctoral course. Excuse me refers to me as I need to ask permission to be part of the group: be kind to me, and don’t judge too harshly when I make mistakes as a beginner researcher. The anti-Christ is my inner voice, my ego telling me that I am not good, clever, and intelligent enough to be here. I recognize him yelling at me again as this anxiety has been something I learned to deal with in life through exposure to difficult and fearful situations. The garbage truck represents the process of getting rid of insecurities and fears: I must not care so much about what others think, especially in academia where your work is open to peer review and criticism. The mermaid is my endpoint: fully formed, knowledge deepened, research credentials formulated and more complete than before.”

(Student 16)

Tori Amos: Silent all these years

Excuse me but can I be you for a while
My dog won’t bite if you sit real still
I got the anti-Christ in the kitchen yellin' at me again
Yeah I can hear that
Been saved again by the garbage truck
I got something to say you know
But nothing comes
Yes I know what you think of me
You never shut up
Yeah I can hear that
But what if I’m a mermaid
In these jeans of his
With her name still on it
Hey but I don’t care
Cause sometimes
I said sometimes
I hear my voice
And it’s been here
Silent all these years
So you found a girl
Who thinks really deep thoughts
What’s so amazing about really deep thoughts
Boy you best practice that I bleed real soon
How’s that thought for you?

Figure 4.10.: Song (Silent All These Years by Tori Amos) to express transformation provided by student 16 (male, British learner).

For this younger British student, the topic of becoming a professional and a person has central importance:

> “At the start of the course, I found it harder to take criticism and had to understand that you learn a lot from either getting things wrong or having people challenge your ideas because that is an important area of learning. You have to be emotionally intelligent, and open-minded to take criticism and to offer feedback in a way that is fair, non-judgmental, supportive, and helpful.” (Student 16, British, young, male student)

Older British students notice that they have to "juggle with multiple identities" and the sense of becoming is less important with age: "As a doctoral student it is difficult to say what I am becoming because that won't change much. I will still be a father, a husband, I hope, and a professor" (Student 2). The notion of becoming is extremely powerful at a younger age, but it is not necessarily a question for a doctoral student at an older age. Older students highlighted different learning methods such as fluid learning in which learners use open learning practices, making their own decisions about what they learn and creating new knowledge (Falconer & Littlejohn, 2013; Blaschke, 2014; Blaschke & Hase, 2015):

> "I don't use paper, pen, notebook, or open book. I read online other people's posts on the class forum, look at websites… This is a very different way than what I got used to." (Student 17, British, female student in her '40s)

"Online forums are much more informative [than face-to-face classes] because you have a long time to think about what you want to say. Then you write it down, and others consider it and add their contribution. These are long and informative discussions. It allows you to think deeper and be careful about how you present your idea. Because it is there on the screen forever. Doing this on keyboards can lead to so many misinterpretations of how you felt or what you meant. You can always go back and read it all and this way deeper, two-way learning takes place. I find the flexibility very useful because it allows me to dedicate all the time I want to my children and then when they are in bed, I can study." (Student 18, British female student in her late '40)

Younger students also enjoy flexibility, which at the same time is also a source of procrastination:

"With more flexibility in the online class, you have the freedom and at the same time room for procrastination: you don't have to do it right now, and you tend to leave it for later because you have long working hours and commute a lot. It is not easy to find time to study." (Student 33, student in her '30s living in Saudi Arabia)

So far, the presented data informs us how important the intersection of age, gender, and the physical environment of the learner is in determining how their cultural identities change during their online studies: while older students document new learning routines, younger students express personal growth and a sense of becoming. For female students, the unusual way of learning gives a sense of trepidation alimented by a lack of social or cultural capital depending on the physical environment in which learning takes place.

4.2.2. Characteristics of online learners

This theme presents the characteristics of successful online learners based on the perceptions of the interviewed students. It shows similarities but also significant differences in their meanings depending on the socioeconomic context and physical location.

Determined, focused, disciplined, driven & self-motivated

11 students stated that an online learner must be disciplined, driven, and self-motivated to succeed in online programmes: "Your self-motivation, your discipline, and focus, knowing what you want and going for it, will make you succeed" (Student 50). Some mentioned also family support as part of the success.

British, male students emphasized the intensive learning element and focus in their approach:

> "Focus. I'm pushing myself to be the best, which means I have to find time somewhere to study and contribute. I am putting myself under pressure. That is pure because I set myself high standards. You have to manage your time and your coursework and everything. The online classroom makes you more responsible. You have to be your own teacher in a way." (Student 26)

British, female, mature students emphasized how important is to organize your life and make space for online learning:

> "This only works if you are very driven, self-motivated, and very regimented to organize your entire life around it. You have to be very personally driven. Because you have to be very good at time management, you have to be very self-motivated, because nobody is telling you when to learn, or what to learn." (Student 18) "One of the tutors said right at the beginning: you need to be involved in something you believe in because that's what will keep you going when things get difficult. And I think that was a very good advice." (Student 19)

Determination from a Nigerian perspective reveals another perspective: moving out of poverty with the means of education:

> "An Igbo man has a high level of determination. I am using myself as an example: the way I muscled my way through an internationally recognized Ph.D., summarizes what determination is all about. My father died at the age of 52 and I was destined to be a carpenter. I sold on the streets… but out of determination, I attended a polytechnic, then an MBA in Nigeria. Then an online MSc and now an online Ph.D. with a British university. This is determination." (Student 6)

The meaning that this Nigerian student constructs about determination is very much connected to social inequities experienced in his society. Through his world, the experienced inequalities in the outside world determine how he perceives his cultural identity and presence in the online class. Using the Bourdieuan theoretical framework, it is visible here that the playing *fields* – his society in Nigeria and the online learning space – are different and his *habitus* structured by material conditions of existence must acquire the necessary *cultural capital* – in this case, determination - that will be useful in the online learning *field* to guarantee a successful learning *practice* (Bourdieu, 2014). In his society education is a means for survival; if he fails, he loses much more than others coming from more developed countries and with higher socioeconomic backgrounds. So he must be determined and do everything to fit in the new online society and create an online identity that will make him successful in the online learning society. This is in line with Öztok's findings (2020, p. 19) which state that "inequitable learning conditions can occur when individuals identify

themselves with non-dominant perspectives". In this situation, students with a non-dominant perspective assimilate into the dominant discourse making the cultural hegemony of the dominant (in this case British) educational culture visible and constraining the non-dominant individual into inequitable learning conditions (Öztok, 2020).

Critical and reflective

Seven students reported that a good online learner is "critical and reflective" and explained it by highlighting different aspects of criticality to apply the reflections to their everyday professional life:

> "I am trying to infuse the ideas that I learn [during my online studies] like a herbal tea into my life, into my reflections and apply it into my identities" (Student 2, British, male student)
>
> "People must learn to use knowledge. We must not just learn because we want to pass an exam, but to justify our ideas." (Student 47, Nigerian, male student)

Students living in the KSA interpret it a bit differently:

> "You need to write what you are thinking. My peers from Saudi or similar cultures are waiting for the approval of the instructor as if there was a barrier between what they think and what they should do." (Student 24, British Muslim student living in Saudi Arabia)

This comment highlights that critical thinking is a *cultural capital* that is not owned by each student in an equal way: Saudi and Nigerian students may have less exposure to critical thinking in their earlier education and cultural environment than British students. These results are in line with my previous findings (Szilagyi, 2014) stating that critical thinking, questioning, and argumentation practices were not common characteristics of the previous educational experience of Nigerian students.

Balancing well work, family, and school

All interviewed Saudi Arabian, female students found it important to "manage their personal life: social, family, working and school life together" (Student 42). Mature, female British students also felt the importance of managing well their responsibilities:

> "I'm busy with my kids and family, and [the doctorate] is something that I aspire to have as one of my biggest achievements. I love studying." (Student 17) "I can sit nicely in my safe little world, in my office upstairs and I'm expanding my learning and feeling more connected to things I'm interested in." (Student 19)

Their experience is in line with Finnegan (2014) who states that for younger female students university is a transitional space between family, woman- and adulthood whilst for mature female students education is a space for being someone else than mother, wife, or partner.

4.2.3. Communication in the online class

Academic writing. Restudy the English Language

One of the most significant differences between British and Nigerian/Saudi Arabian students and is therefore a testimony of discontinuity between their local and online educational cultures regards the level of academic English and the rules of academic integrity. Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students reported overwhelming challenges with academic English.

"The international online studies were a different bargain: the use of English, the way I used to combine words. My instructor had to tell me that I needed an editor. But eventually, I was able to painstakingly re-study the English language. I use online facilities and Grammarly." (Student 6)

Plagiarism without knowing what it is?

Confirming my previous findings (Szilagyi, 2014, p. 182), Nigerian students took the plagiarism warnings as a personal offense because cheating in their cultures is a crime, but they were not taught in their previous studies about the importance of academic honesty and proper referencing rules.

"The learning process was very different…I was charged with plagiarism because I didn't know at all what is it. In the traditional class, we didn't have such an experience. We were given hand-outs, and you submit word [by] word just like that. I felt very bad, and I learned from the experience. And from then I set up a new standard…this is wrong, it's from my background because I didn't know all this, I never learned [it] from my past. You are not allowed to quote everything. If you have to, you have to reference them and give credit to that writer; you repay like that." (Student 5)

"I think culturally we believe in honesty and integrity. Cheating is frowned upon seriously and the implication of that can become quite upsetting particularly when you haven't done it. In the Yoruba culture, a child that lies will steal, and a child that steals will commit adultery. So it is scaled up [as a] mark on your integrity and it can go further. If you are a liar, you can also be very easily called a thief. You can also be very easily called an adulteress and even a murderer. For me, telling me that I lied or cheated… I took it very seriously because even though the percentage was low and she later realized that the accusation was false, it was not something I was prepared to accept." (Student 39)

Saudi Arabian students also reported that they were ignorant about the Western referencing culture:

"We don't have this [Western referencing] culture over here. I didn't hear about academic integrity until I started studying at international institutions. And so, when I started working on the first module, it was the same way I used to work with the university over here. I got an article and I took it as a reference... I didn't consider that it's cheating or anything...we don't have this understanding here.[…] I can go to certified officers to help me write the whole assignment for the [local] university here. In the online [university], we can't do that. We have to do original work." (Student 42)

Analysing these situations with the Bourdieuan theoretical framework, both Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students reported overwhelmingly a feeling of being a 'fish out of water' in the new *field* of the British, online educational context: the academic writing rules in this new field were something they have not experienced before in their previous educational experience in Nigeria or KSA and therefore they lacked the *cultural capital* that would enable

them to play in this new *field*. In line with Reay et al. (2005) and Finnegan (2014), these student testimonies demonstrate that the *field* of British higher education was unfamiliar and created disjuncture that generated change but also anxiety, disgust, ambivalence, and insecurity.

On the other hand, British students were generally well-versed in academic writing and noticed that other cultures have challenges with the instructor role and the British educational norms:

> "My African classmates sometimes complained to the academics about not getting enough teaching. I don't think African students understood the concept of online learning, where a lot of the initiative is actually on the student: to seek out information to read and to manage themselves. They used to complain to the academics about that a lot. And I used to see the academic also post on the forum [things like] 'you need to stick to the word counts', 'you need to make sure you are writing in higher education quality, academic English when you respond', 'you keep your information on one document, which I thought would be common sense." (Student 26)

In line with Öztok (2020), these testimonies also demonstrate the process of how the British cultural hegemony becomes visible and forced on non-dominant students. The plagiarism warnings like red cards on the football field forced the non-dominant students to either learn and appreciate these rules or leave. The values and rules they learned in their previous educational setting were devalued in an instant in this new educational field forcing these students to assimilate into the dominant discourse. This itself creates an inequitable learning situation: whilst Nigerian and Saudi students have to learn a new learning repertoire, British students already have it as they learned it as part of their previous, undergraduate British educational culture.

4.3. Lived space: from marginalization to recognition

4.3.1. We have a voice

We have a voice in Britain

British, white, male, mature students felt confident and equal when they started the international online doctoral programme: In the online class, I see myself as an equal." (Student 1). As described earlier, they felt excitement, joy, and confidence when starting their online studies and these feelings are expressed in the song, Hold Your Head Up from Argent, chosen by student 1:

♫

Argent: Hold Your Head Up

And if it's bad
Don't let it get you down, you can take it
And if it hurts
Don't let them see you cry, you can make it.
Hold your head up, women
Hold your head high
And if they stare
Just let them burn their eyes on you moving
And if they shout
Don't let it change a thing that you're doing.
Hold your head up high.

Figure 4.11.: Song (Hold Your Head Up by Argent) provided by student 1 (male, British learner).

This was not the case for a younger, white, British man:

“The words, silent all these years are powerful. Arriving on the Ph.D. course has been a long journey, I have been a shy, queer kid uncertain of his place in the world - growing up in a world feeling marginalized, looking for a voice, afraid to speak out, worried about the opinions of others, wanting to fit in but at the same time keen to rebel. Through the master's course and now the Ph.D. I feel my confidence in my voice and opinions getting greater and greater, I feel that now I can disagree with others without being disagreeable and that is the crucial fact - I suppose I had a need to please others and perhaps fit the mold of what they expected me to be. However, taking on deeper critical thinking through the master's course and the Ph.D. I have started to find my own voice and what's more, confidence in my own opinions and in challenging the opinions of others without worry for consequences and an understanding that this is a natural way to excrete one's opinions in the world, thus taking me to the other side of the silence I have felt all these years.”

(Student 16, male British student)

Tori Amos: Silent all these years

Hey but I don’t care
Cause sometimes
I said sometimes
I hear my voice
And it’s been here
Silent All These Years…

Figure 4.12.: Song (Silent All These Years by Tori Amos) to express the process of “finding my own voice” provided by student 16 (male, British learner).

He felt “silent all these years”, and the song he chose expresses it so vividly: the singer singing in a box expresses the struggle of feeling marginalized and afraid to speak up. He “wanted to fit in but at the same time rebel”. For him, the doctoral course is a game-changer, that liberates him from the boundaries of the box, and helps him “find my own voice and confidence in my own opinions and in challenging the opinions of others without worry for consequences”.

For mature, male students, the sense of “becoming something else” was less important, as they had already achieved what they wanted: loving families, successful careers, and self-confidence. However, their “feeling of self-development is very important” (Student 2).

Whilst mature students arrived already confident to the doctoral course, a closer look at the lifeworld of a British, white, male mature student living in Japan highlights the struggle and feelings of marginalization in a country that he labels “racist”, and where he has to experience every day the tension of “not fitting in” and that “my existence in this country is uncomfortable for many”:

“Japan is an incredibly racist country. The racism is so obvious that no one hides it. it is just pretty clear. Generally, two kinds of foreigners can live here: the kind that is trying to be Japanese and trying to fit in, they generally have a tough time with Japanese. The people like me in the other camp, recognize that they are not like them… and that my existence in this country is uncomfortable for many. I represent the outside world which is something that most Japanese would like to avoid. So, I can become happy by recognizing that and doing my own thing. The doctoral course gives me a way to the European mind again. […] It has taken me 18 years to start a doctoral course. The time in between gave me the experience, the confidence, the ability to understand my feelings much more and to be reflective in a linguistic sense. So when I started the doctoral course, I was very excited, very able, ready, very willing and I really wanted… Telemann’s concerto for two chalumeaux perhaps sums up the feelings I had. There is quiet optimism and a soft persuasive force in the writing. I love this. It is so pure. The purest sound it is. I wanted to find my true me. A glans of purity… it is about hope. I wanted to feel that I am human. This is what it reminded me of.”

(Student 2)

Telemann Concert in D minor for Two Chalumeaux

Figure 4.13.: Concerto in D minor for Two Chalumeaux by Telemann to express “finding the true me…purity… and hope” provided by Student 2 (British, male student living in Japan).

For him, the doctoral course is a solution to finding “a way to the European mind again”. His experience of racism, in which he as a British white man feels different and alienated from the majority of Japanese society resonates with Frantz Fanon’s concept of double consciousness indicating that colonized people are forced to view themselves through the

colonizer perspective (Black, 2007). His feeling of discomfort and unhappiness is a natural reaction to alienation and racism, and according to Fanon's view these negative feelings can be re-directed towards positive, proactive, and systematic change in the direction of equity and justice as opposed to reducing or trying to control the feeling of discomfort (Hoffman, 2022). This student finds comfort in immersing himself in his online studies within a British institutional culture that represents the values he feels belong to. In Bourdieuan terms, he chose to study further in the British virtual environment to feel like a "fish in the water" to escape the feeling of being a "fish out of water" in Japan (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 56). Yet again, twenty years before, at a younger age, when he was less academically prepared, in the face-to-face British educational environment he felt like a "fish out of water". He needed almost two decades of preparation to acquire "the experience, the confidence, the ability to understand my feelings… and to be reflective in a linguistic sense". When he started the online course, he felt "very able and ready". As he has a master's degree in music history, he was very sophisticated in his choice of music, and in his self-reflection, in which he explains why he chose this music to symbolize his feelings about the online course. Telemann's concerto for two chalumeaux is "the purest sound it is. I wanted to find my true me… I wanted to feel that I am human." For him, the doctoral course has a transformative power to find hope and happiness whilst he feels an outsider in an often dehumanizing physical social reality. The third movement brings a new topic, The two solo chalumeaux represent "my former and future selves with the orchestra being my family". The ending of this movement is not happy and indeed, he felt also uncertain about how his family life would be affected by his studies. However, the concluding minute brings back the feeling of hope and optimism.

For young and mature, white, male British students, doctoral studies were a way out of feeling marginalized: for the younger by developing new *capital*, critical thinking skills, and confidence in themselves, for the older by returning to their European educational roots to find humanity and hope. For both, the online educational environment provided a transitional space, a "place and time for self-reflection on one's identity" in which they both struggled with their learner identities confronted by other identities in their lives (Merrill, 2014, p. 77). Whilst Merrill discusses transitional spaces from a feminist biographical approach, giving voice to female students of different ages and backgrounds as well as highlighting the importance of the higher educational institution as a transitional space in their identity formation, the experience of non-traditional male students in different age groups shows similar feelings of marginalization in a society in which the educational institution becomes

the transitional space for identity transformation. It also demonstrates that the experiences of white male students are extremely diverse: in this case, age and residence make their life experiences very distinct. Yet, in this multifaceted reality, one in common: the feeling of marginalization and online education acting as an escape room from being marginalized.

I take the British educational culture for granted

The stories of mature British, female students reveal that on the individual level, acceptance into the doctoral programme feels like "a miraculous last chance, to do something academically". "Your voice will be heard" in Miracle of U2 chosen by one of the students means accomplishing a personal dream that, comes true finally in this particular age ("I always felt I am not done with my education"). This is echoed in the findings of Merrill (2014, p. 78) which confirms that for many mature women, education is "tied to issues of gender and class: completing education, doing something for themselves, developing a new self and identity, a better life." According to Winnicott's self-development theory and Honneth's ideas, self-confidence is "facilitated by the recognition provided by significant others", thus being accepted by university authorities, "help legitimate a new sense of self" in a new transitional space, which then creates new forms of psychological capital. (West, 2014, p. 42).

On the collective level, "Your voice will be heard" signals also that mature, British, female students are confident to "have a voice, freedom of speech and free access to information in Britain":

> "There is a high level of tolerance and respect in British higher education. I do feel that access to everything might be a value that the British have. I just feel very free and open and able to have my opinion, to be able to back it up, with any research that I have access to. I know other people don't necessarily have that access or the freedom to express themselves or be able to think about the rights and wrongs of education in different situations […] We have a voice in Britain, to exercise social justice and have a valid voice, and say, this is right and this is wrong. We have got the freedom of speech, the freedom for everybody to have their opinions and back them up, the access to information, the internet, libraries … I think that is very valued. And valuable." (Student 19)

> "I know some of the people that we were talking to. […] He was over in Qatar, and I think he had issues with some sort of connections to academia […] I think in some respects, because I'm not being exposed to it a lot, or I hadn't beforehand, I didn't understand necessarily the restraints that other cultures around [the world have], particularly women. I didn't appreciate access to information when I first started [the programme] that other people had these issues and I think that was an eye-opener for me. Other people were trying to do what I took for granted under a lot more constraint and I came to appreciate how valuable education was, particularly online. Because with the internet and technology now this [is] more available to more people and I think it is really important, that we can change the culture and the value of people across the world by using these wonderful computers." (Student 18)

The doctoral programme was an "eye-opener" and made them appreciate their "taken-for-granted freedoms" when seeing the struggle of other female students in their online class,

who, based on their perception, did not have the same rights, whilst living in other cultures in the world ("Beforehand I didn't understand necessarily the restraints that other cultures around have, particularly women."). The online University is thus an important transitional place for identity formation. Similar to Merrill's (2014, p. 76) findings, in which personal stories of British women revealed that the university offered them a "temporary space, a safe haven away from the struggles of everyday life" to "explore who they once were, who they are now, and whom they want to become". The online university was an ideal place for reconstructing their identities and to self-reflect on their gender, race, ethnicity, and the rights and freedoms that they enjoy within their communities and the British educational system.

The contrast between studying in the UK and living in KSA

In contrast, the moving stories of Saudi Arabian female students tell a lot about the struggle of women in a man-dominated society: they always start with a summary of how life is for a woman living in the KSA. Such a cultural summary did not come up with British students so naturally. However, Saudi and Nigerian students always started introducing their cultures as if they got used to foreigners who knew little about their realities. The struggle for having a voice and basic human rights infiltrates almost every aspect of the lives of women in the KSA including decision-making, work, study, and career choices:

> "Saudi culture is very strict and conservative. It's a religious-based culture. For everything that we have to do or make a decision about, we have to check the acceptance or the permission from the religion first, before we decide to do that. It's a man-dominant community. It doesn't matter as a female how much you are educated or how broad-minded you are or how intelligent you are; as a female, it's still not acceptable that you are a leader, for example, for men. You can't make decisions on your own, you have to go back to your male guardians to help you with the decisions." (Student 42)
> "I feel estranged because of my social status: being single is not a norm here, and people don't find it easy." (Student 33)

> "At work, it's a struggle to prove myself and demonstrate that women can do as much as men do. There are specific professions they cannot study, like an engineer. They can be internal decoration engineers, but they cannot be civil engineers, The most common jobs for women are teachers, and nurses. They can work in banks, but it has to be a female bank or they can work in the airport, but it has to be only [in] female sections. I am a nurse in a paediatric unit. It's difficult sometimes, because even if professional people accepted this fact and they worked with me as an equal, it's difficult for the people, for the patients, the parents... Sometimes they would come and say: 'Can we talk to a male?' Sometimes we have very conservative and religious parents, they don't accept seeing a female working in an open environment, and making decisions. It's difficult for them to accept it. Even if [the relative of the patient] is female, if she is a religious person, it could be difficult for her to accept me as a female working in an open environment. [When I talk to them], I have to be very serious. I shouldn't talk with a higher voice, I shouldn't be smiling, I shouldn't be...wearing makeup if I am going to talk to them because they look at these things and sometimes they even complain to [the] administration [saying] that I, the female, was not respectable because of the way I talked to them or the way I was sitting... I shouldn't be closing the office door, I have to open it or have someone else sitting with me if I want privacy. I cannot just close the door only with a father, I have to close the door but I have to have someone else sitting with me in the same office plus the father. I'm trying my best to do this because I know this is the only way that I can provide good care to them. I don't mind going the extra mile just to make them feel comfortable and feel safe and secure with me." (Student 42)

Anyone who follows a different path than the traditional role of women in society, e.g. being single, or working in an open environment, feels the struggle and estrangement. ("I feel estranged because of my social status: being single is not a norm here." It's difficult for them to accept me as a female working in an open environment.") They are cautious about what to wear, how to speak, and not to be seen alone with a man especially when the issue to be discussed is confidential and sensitive. Confirming my earlier finding (Szilagyi, 2015) these narratives also show that there is no way to bypass the rules of the game; if they want to play, they must obey ("I don't mind going to the extra mile just to make them feel comfortable, safe, and secured with me"). In her narrative, student 42 doesn't mention how she would like to dress or speak because in her society her voice or wishes are irrelevant. Her personal story reflects the initial stage of struggle of the oppressed, who internalizes the image of the oppressor and is fearful of freedom: "The behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour, following as it does, the guidelines of the oppressor" (Freire, 2017, p. 21) Whilst she respects the rules of an oppressing society, her choice of studying in online international programmes is unusual in her community, so as her lifestyle (being single or have aspirations as a leader at work). Just as she makes life choices that a few dare in her environment, she makes study choices less common in her community: "Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference." The poem entitled 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost chosen by one of the interviewed female, Saudi students reflects their inner aspiration to "change the way I was educated": they expect an identity transformation through a different way of education that "teaches them to use their brains". These thoughts are supported by the findings of Merrill (2014, p. 77): Muslim, female students, in particular, "may struggle with their learner identity" when confronted by "other roles and identities in their lives" because entering an online British university meant to choose the unknown "outside of their gendered and classed experience". As mentioned earlier, one of the British female students chose the same poem, 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost, to express the unknown and unusual nature of online education, even though the reasons behind this choice are different: for the British female participants, online learning offers the conformity to be able to have family, work but also extend their learning. This again supports the findings of Merrill (2014): online education provides a place for mature British women to be someone else other than mothers or wives/partners. For both, Muslim female students in KSA and British mature students, online education "remained the rare domain where they could make selfhood claims" (Quinn, 2003, p. 101). Despite similarities in their experience the struggle for a voice in a man-dominant society in which

religion imposes serious limitations on women's education, freedom of movement, and speech, the narratives demonstrate how different the British female and the Saudi female voices are. The powerful narrative from the Saudi Arabian female students demonstrates a vivid example of how Islam legitimizes beliefs, practices, and policies that disempower women through the instrumentalization of religion, in the era of post-secular feminism (Coles et al., 2015).

From the stories of Muslim male students, it is apparent that having a voice is not a real issue. Each time this topic came up during the interviews they started to talk about the struggle of women in this regard and expressed their sympathy towards their cause. Whilst they support the aspiration of women to have more voice in their society, they find it challenging to communicate with their female supervisors in the online international classroom: they respect them, but in their societies, they have very limited occasions to talk openly with women, and therefore it is an adjustment to change their cultural habits (e.g. avoiding women) in the online class, where the supervisor happens to be female and they must communicate with her:

"At the beginning I…I faced a problem. I got into the habit of avoiding women. [*laughter*] So now, I'm dealing with a supervisor who is a woman, and I have to deal with her. I found it difficult at the beginning." (Student 4)

Their online learner identities clash with their dominant roles in their society as the online learning community requires them to follow communication rules based on Western values, different from their local environment. In Bourdieuan terms, having a female teacher in the new online, British learning *field* is unfamiliar because it was not part of their earlier social experience in their local higher education practice, hence they feel like "fish out of water" when entering the new learning environment. These findings again are in line with the thoughts of Reay et al (2005, pp. 28-34) and Finnegan (2014, p. 15): "When habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjuncture can generate change and transformation, but also insecurity".

Online learning is the future of education

Despite the feeling of insecurity, the new learning environment offers something that makes Nigerian and Saudi students stay: their choice for the international online learning environment reflects their wish for the "freedom to say whatever you think is right or not" (Student 43). The online international learning environment based on Western constructivist learning theories provides them with "freedom to think, freedom to research, freedom to understand the signs or discuss" (Student 43). This is something that they have not

experienced in face-to-face classes at their local universities. As a result, the ways they are learning are also changing:

> "Instead of reading one text, I would read, maybe eight, nine, about the same thing. So I can get a different perspective". (Student 24)

> "Online learning is the future of education. This is where universities are heading and we cannot fall behind, whether it feels comfortable or not. After a while, I understood how it works, and my participation and contribution to the group discussions got better." (Student 33)

The online class design based on constructivist learning theories provides an inclusive institutional habitus that promotes diversity and acceptance, where according to Thomas (2002) students from diverse backgrounds will find greater respect for their practices, and therefore they will be more persistent with their studies. This example partly supports the findings of Finnegan (2014) which states that both the personal *habitus* and the institutional *habitus* are crucial in shaping the learning experience and learner identity. However, in online studies the specificities of the local context where students live whilst studying online have a huge impact on their learner identity especially for women: the nuances represented in the female narratives document a continuous struggle with a male-dominant society. These female voices are very different between the Global North and South and further nuances are present within the Global South (in my sample between Nigerian and Saudi Arabian female voices), which will be further clarified and explained as we move to the Nigerian context in the next sub-chapter. These nuanced female lifeworlds confirm postcolonial feminist views according to which female voices and women's conditions are not shaped in the same way everywhere (Coles & Gray, 2015).

4.3.2. Education is everything

In the next sub-chapters discontinuities are explored concerning what education means depending on the social norms of the physical society that surrounds the online. It will shed light on what the most significant differences are between the Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British educational cultures.

Transformation from the unknown

The stories of Nigerian students present a diverse multi-ethnic environment, where cultural identities are subject to change based on the ethnic group, religion, age group, or gender a student belongs. Similarly to Saudi Arabian male students, when it comes to the topic of having a voice, Nigerian male students tend to first explain gender inequalities in their country. Whilst men have a dominant role in their society, male Nigerian students feel that

education is the only weapon that can help an individual fight against poverty and social inequality:

> "Education is everything […] There is only one property, one that you give to achievement, and that is education. Education means in search of knowledge. Education is a ladder; it means transformation from the unknown." (Student 47). "We believe so much in education" (Student 50).

In Igbo and Yoruba lands there is more interest in Western education than in Hausa land because valuing education comes from their Christian roots and brought from family (Szilagyi, 2013). They choose online education because of its reliability and flexibility compared to face-to-face education in Nigeria which is often characterized by union strikes (Szilagyi, 2013). Furthermore, they value the freedom of expression in the British online learning culture: "The freedom of expression is not there in Nigerian schools. The difference is that [in the online environment] we can talk freely" (Student 46). From a sociological perspective, Nigerian male students believe in the transformative power of education: the Western online learning environment acts as a transitional space between their Nigerian ethnic reality, and the roles they assume in their ethnic/national society providing an opportunity for changing social inequalities and transforming their personal stories and identities (West, 2014). As Student 6 explained, the composition of J.S. Bach (Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring) represents his Christian upbringing, the fear of the unknown world of online international education, and the hope and salvation that education brings to his life:

"I grew up as a Christian chorister, I remember this song from the procession [on occasions] when I have surprises that I cannot explain. I entered the [online] class with a lot of doubt. How was it possible to complete a programme online? […] And eventually, I enjoyed every bit of it. Yeah… " (Student 6)	Johann Sebastian Bach: Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring Jesu, joy of man's desiring Holy wisdom, love most bright Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring Soar to uncreated light Word of God, our flesh that fashioned With the fire of life impassioned Striving still to truth unknown Soaring, dying round Thy throne.

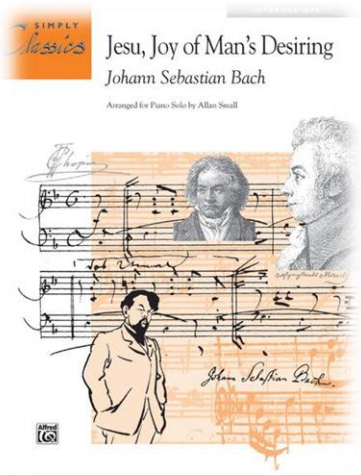


Figure 4.14.: The composition Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring by J. S. Back to express hope and salvation that online education brings, provided by student 6 (Male, Nigerian learner).

4.3.3. Barriers to accessing education

This sub-chapter continues exploring the discontinuities between the local educational culture and that of the British online educational culture by presenting diverse barriers to education depending on the physical location of the learner.

No peace, no rest in mind

Despite being valued, Western education is not always a possible path for Nigerian students. Inadequate infrastructure, unsafe environments, systematic gender bias, early and forced marriages, lack of schools, and limitations in teacher training impede especially girls in schooling in Nigeria (Ossai, 2021; Aja-Okorie, 2013). Education in a place that is shaken by war or civil unrest is a challenging place for online studies regardless of gender. Armed conflicts are the biggest threat to human development and education (Marshall, 2019). According to Rajab (2018) e-learning is generally considered a good way to remove barriers such as disasters, pandemics, and wars to accessing education (Rajab, 2018) because there is no need to travel to study. However, this article disregards the psychological effects of such traumatic and distressing conditions and ignores how student well-being affects learning. In my data sample, I had only one student who experienced education in wartime. Whilst it is not representative data and certainly more research would be needed to explore how effective learning can be in an international and transnational online class for those in a war zone, his testimony did not confirm Rajab's findings. Even though e-learning makes it possible to remove physical barriers to education, students are emotionally disturbed by the traumatizing

events happening around them. Student 50 was forced to take a break in his studies because of a lack of focus due to existential threats. He was a doctor in a hospital in the North of Nigeria and during the interview, he painted a detailed picture of how disturbed his mind was when there was no peace around him. He lost focus on his online studies and was concerned about his own security and safety:

> "I failed the module. I didn't study, I had too much on. There was a crisis in the North. As I talk to you the crisis is ongoing and I am planning to leave… You hear that 30 people are killed today, tomorrow you hear five more are chopped down…the day after tomorrow you hear people were killed in the church whilst they were praying. Churches are being bombed. The collective killings of the Boko Haram targeting Christians and non-Muslims make the place very difficult to live in. They bomb down schools in the north because schools represent Western education. The education level is very low, poverty is on the high side here. Leads who have no value in their lives, are easily brainwashed, give them 500 naira and they will do anything even killing themselves. I am Christian, so it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a normal life in this environment, let alone schooling online. When there is no peace, there is no rest of mind. You can't concentrate. You are not really stable psychologically and emotionally, you have to stop, you are affected. You tend to lose concentration. As a doctor, I resigned from my appointment, I want to move to another place because my security is more important than other things." (Student 50)

Whether online or face-to-face, education is a transitional space for non-traditional students to grow, but when due to existential threats security is not given in the physical environment where learning happens, learning is seriously jeopardized (Marshall, 2019; Winthrop and Kirk, 2008). Although there is extensive research on student well-being and online learning in the context of pandemics (Dhawan, 2020; Huang, 2022), little research has been conducted on how well-being or the lack of it affects online learning in war zones. Winthrop and Kirk's comparative study (2008, p. 659) provides insights into the face-to-face learning lives of children affected by conflict: social and academic learning is beneficial and possible in these very challenging circumstances only if child-centred approaches are used toward family and community development. In the case of student 50, the tight deadlines and assessments in the module made it impossible for the student to continue with his online studies. In the case of this student who could not "concentrate", none of the basic psychological needs – autonomy, seen as "a sense of ownership in one's action", competence described as a "feeling of mastery" and relatedness viewed as "a sense of belonging and connection" - in Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory could be met under such existential threats (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). Safety in online education is an existential, cultural *capital* that is not always obvious and given to every student who chooses online learning. He could retake the module later without academic or financial penalty as part of the mitigating circumstance policy in place at this particular British university. This policy offered a good solution for many students who had mitigating circumstances to study and provided equality, a "point of

sameness" (Öztok, 2020, p. 19) for these individuals. However, it failed to provide an alternative, personalized, and equitable learning path for this student while he was in a war zone. He had to relocate to a safer area to continue with his studies.

Internet and electricity shortages

Nigerian students reported overwhelmingly challenges with internet connectivity and electricity which is a major barrier in their online studies, especially in remote areas, but many times also in big cities:

> "There are challenges with internet access." (Student 39) "I have mixed feelings about online education: sometimes I felt frustrated when I was faced with internet connectivity. It was very stressful: I had to make a lot of sacrifices and effort." (Student 5) "The internet facility is not working up to 25 percent in Nigeria." (Student 46) "Right now, nothing is working, not even the phone. So, I can't send my work to my tutor. I can't do anything: I can't even communicate with my tutor to say this is why I'm not sending my work. I tried and tried. I was downloading when the whole thing went off." (Student 49) "The infrastructure is not working: the internet might be down and we need electricity to prepare the internet to work. Most of the time the electricity down. I have to buy a generator and have three internet providers." (Student 46) "If one is not working, I change and attach another one to my system." (Student 47) "When the internet is not [working] I carry my card, my laptop, I start going throughout the town, and I go to any side cafes. I look for a way to download the class materials online as you don't need the internet to compose what you want to submit." (Student 46) "I try to procure more than one internet provider for an expensive price, as a way to beat the deadline for submission of assignments and necessary reading. That's one method. The second alternative I use, which is what I used most, is that I am located at a five-star hotel in Abuja for more than 60% of my study hours, study time, I used to sleep in this hotel most nights to do my reading and do my assignments. I study far ahead of time. I could have been studying at my house, in my study room after my children went to bed. But simply because of the problem of poor internet service, I need to beat the deadline, I have to decide to go and continue my study in the hotel." (Student 47)

Relating this the Bourdieu's theory (2014), the lack of *economic capital*, in terms of adequate infrastructure, electricity, and internet makes it more difficult for Nigerian students to study in the *field* of online learning, than for students in more developed countries where this capital is readily available.

High tuition fees

Similarly, Nigerian students were the only ones reporting overwhelmingly about the difficulties with paying the tuition fees for online studies, which also shows a lack of *economic capital* (Bourdieu, 2014):

> "There is instability in Nigeria: increasing dollar, changing governments… that affected my studies." (Student 36) "There is a crisis now and the government removes subsidies. The money doesn't come. You have to ask your family to help because you have to pay the [tuition fee]." (Student 49) "Considering what one is earning over a year, it is a lot of trouble removing that much to pay for school fees, I need to take care of aging parents. At one point, I contemplated stopping the programme because the fees were too high." (Student 50)

Despite the high tuition fees that create inequitable learning conditions for them, they choose Western universities for their reputation and quality standards, which is again a pattern of Western cultural hegemony eradicated in Nigerian colonial history:

> "The general mentality is that Western education standard is higher than [the one in] Nigeria. It's pride and joy for your family to be able to send you somewhere else to study. They believe you have a higher standard than what you have in Nigeria. If you notice the population of Nigerian students doing this online course is very high. They believe the standard of British online education is higher compared to the Nigerian [standard]. It's true." (Student 5)

Gender bias

The new interviews with female, Nigerian students support my previous findings (Szilagyi, 2013) according to which career choices and aspirations of female Nigerian online students, just like marriage are bound by family obligations and family has a big role in their decisions:

> "As a woman who is learning, the onus is on the woman to look after her family and do a lot even though you are doing the online course. The online course helps because it means that when you've done all the other chores and you've looked after your children you can carry on studying." (Student 39)

Gender-based discrimination against women is still prevalent in the Nigerian society and a major barrier to accessing education (Aja-Okorie, 2013). In the Muslim Hausa context and some Muslim Yoruba communities, the practice of forced child marriage coupled with the practice of mutilation of the female genitalia means that women are more at risk of not being educated:

> "The men are seen as the law over the women […] You see teenagers that are being pushed against their will, not even knowing whom they will get married to. […] I meet a lot of them in the hospital. She became pregnant, and her pelvis is not wide enough to be able to have the baby. For Igbo and [Christian] Yoruba, gender equality [means] more" (Student 50). "What a man can do, a woman can do. In Hausa culture, it's almost forbidden" (Student 6).

Kagher et al. (2021) uses the terms African feminism and womanism to differentiate and decolonise African female voices from the Western feminist movements and highlights the existence of marginalization and discrimination against Nigerian women based on gendered embodiment: women's body is a socio-historical construct in the Nigerian context bound by religious, ethical, cultural beliefs and multitudes of violence experienced by Nigerian women's bodies every day. Due to their family obligations and rules imposed on them by their society, many women in Nigerian are not able to attend higher education: a survey published in 2013 by the National Planning Commission indicates that 50 percent of Nigerian female population had no formal education, whilst the total female enrolment compared to the male enrolment in higher education was significantly lower between 1986 and 2014 and in the past decade the gender gap further increased (Orisadare & Osinubi, 2018).

For those who can afford the high tuition fees of online studies (mainly Christian, Igbo, or Yoruba women) the flexibility of online learning allows studies by night. Education means empowerment for these women. From a sociological perspective, the online learning space is

a transitional space between motherhood and family obligations, in which they feel liberated from cultural expectations and can raise their voice, in ways they would not be allowed in their Nigerian educational context. Their identity transformation is similar to that of female students in KSA: though they have experience with mixed, male-female classes, they are still intimidated to speak up in their local environment. The Western online learning culture based on constructivist learning theories and principles creates a feeling of inclusiveness and gives them the challenge to finally raise their voice.

The barriers to accessing education, bad infrastructure, limited internet, and electricity supply, and a vulnerable economy exposed to economic crisis, civil unrest, and gender bias make it difficult for Nigerian students to access online education. How do the British institutions deal with these issues on the policy level? Each of the analysed institutions had an equality-based mitigating procedure for students who had difficulties submitting assignments in time. However, these policies based on the principle of equality are applied to all students without taking into consideration culture-specific barriers or offering individual and alternative learning approaches to facilitate learning and address or eliminate the specific barrier to learning.

4.3.4. Multicultural classroom

This chapter will present different communication styles brought from the physical society of the learner to the online classroom with an attempt to understand how students from the three analysed cultures communicate with each other and how they overcome their cultural differences in the online learning environment.

I have to respect you for your age

Nigerian, mainly Yoruba students expressed how much importance respect towards elders and authority plays in their culture and therefore also in the way they communicate in the online class:

> "Being Yoruba in the online class means that there is a balance of power relating to the facilitator of the course which in the Yoruba culture accords to respect. You may find it very difficult to call your Dissertation Advisor by their first name. In one module, a fellow Nigerian student responded to an American student saying 'I have to respect you'. When I read this, I recognized that that was the Nigerian in him." (Student 39)

> "We respect our elders. If you do not respect your elders, you are not going to gain any respect from anyone when you become an elder." (Student 47) "Often the issues in the online class have no bearing on my nationality or ethnicity and therefore my Nigerianness doesn't often come to play. But I am very conscious about it when I address people in the learning sets, even though we are all faceless. As a Yoruba person, I am trained to be very respectful to people in the learning set. I will not be aggressive. When I started the programme, I had questions to myself 'How critical should one be with other people? How should I engage with other people? Should I be very critical? Should I criticize? Should I

> be very aggressive in attacking people's views? And although as a lawyer my natural inclination is to aggressively criticize and analyse other people's position, I decided to step back, breathe, and say 'Ok. From my ethnic upbringing, I was brought up to be respectful to people. My assumption is that most of the people in the learning set would be older than I am, so I need to approach them in a more reverential manner rather than criticizing or attaching their contribution." (Student 48)

The Yoruba cultural identity and communication style are shaped by this profound respect towards elders and a deep awareness of how different others are in the classroom. They carefully consider every situation making sure that they are respectful toward their peers and professors in the classroom. Their stories are good examples of how advanced they are in terms of intercultural sensitivity, which, according to Chen and Starosta is "the ability to acknowledge and respect cultural differences as a result of positive emotional responses before, during, and after intercultural interaction" (Marshall, 2019, p. 186). Self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, involvement, and a non-judgmental attitude are the building blocks of intercultural sensitivity and Nigerian students display a high level of each of these elements in their online interaction with their peers. This is understandable, especially considering that they come from a multi-ethnic educational environment where they had to learn to interact with different ethnicities in the same country (Szilagyi, 2013).

The Yoruba communication style and the expression of respect in the online classroom support Öztok's findings (2020, p. 24) who states that students create a digital body, an online self in online learning "through which people embody material and symbolic conditions of daily life" and therefore online space is shaped by the social, political, economic, and historical realities of students. Through the process of interpretation, adjustment and enactment of self-representation students constantly make decisions about how they represent themselves in the online class based on the sociocultural values they bring from their physical environment (Öztok, 2020).

Freedom of perspectives

Every Nigerian student perceived that "the cultural experience sharing" in the online class was "mind-blowing […] injected life into my practice" (Student 50). They sense that the society outside the classroom is racist and full of prejudices, but the online classroom allows intercultural understanding through exchange of ideas:

> "People think we are dumbo. We think we are black. Because we are not clean, you people in the West think that we are also black in our hearts. We are not black. There are wrong perceptions from the West to other religions, and from the other religions also to the West. […] When we create an online programme when we share our differences, our understanding, and the way we do things differently, it becomes good for the world. It becomes good for us. It becomes good for me. (Student 47)"

This student explains how the online learning environment helps him find a voice, and a common understanding, which echoes the findings of studies examining student perceptions of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship (Edge & Khamsi, 2012; Quaynor, 2015; Hull, 2015; Goren & Yemini, 2017; Gucler, 2019). In terms of online learner identities, it raises questions about how individuals build their online selves. Within the process of identification, they assess the context in which others will perceive them and then they adjust their social presence or absence to be accepted and legitimized (Öztok, 2020), in this case, to avoid being stereotyped the same way they experience it in their physical environment.

In other examples, Nigerian students stated that interaction with other cultures in the online programmes was a "big learning curve", and there were situations when the use of proverbs created misunderstandings to the point of feeling offended: one of them recalled a particular incident when a student from a Middle Eastern country replied to his proverb with another proverb. According to Igbo ethnic norms, you are not allowed to ask for clarification about a proverb because "the culture requires you to understand the proverb, to apply it, and not to ask what you mean." (Student 49). Bounded by this cultural norm, he did not ask for clarification. Instead, he thanked and explained to the other students that he was offended:

> "Since I'm not too familiar with his culture, I was careful […] and my response was very cordial. I quoted in brackets what he said and I said [that] what he said didn't please me and that I was offended." (Student 49)

At the same time, learning the skills of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural understanding are crucial: "in the online classroom you have to be gender- and culture-sensitive; you have to mind your language […] you are now not 'living' with Nigerians, with Nigerian mentality, and hospitality… if we do that while in an international setting, we might run into trouble." (Student 6) This testifies that when reconstructing an online identity, some cultural and communication norms from the Nigerian society infiltrate in online communication, whilst others will be consciously absent. One's social presence or absence is part of the process of identification to convey to others who they are (Öztok, 2020).

Nigerian students appreciated to "learn […] and accept other people's views […] because it isn't how it is in Nigeria. (Student 5)" Similarly, British female students also found "valuable the wider learning that you can do […] from different perspectives" (Student 19) and felt connected to their online peers. They all account for this as a positive experience in their learning journey:

"The wider learning that you can do from what your colleagues are doing and their insights [that] are from different perspectives to your own, is really valuable. (Student 19) I found, through the online forums, you do build up a relationship with people online. Even though you may never have physically spoken to them, through written dialogue we've built up a relationship, I have a picture in my head of various students that I've come through with, and what they're like. I feel connected to them even though there are no social bonds as such." (Student 18)

Mature, British students living abroad in a multicultural society felt confident: one of them learned "how to put things in perspective and see the difficulties other people might have" (Student 1). The other mature British student also felt confident about his intercultural skills, especially with Asian cultures, but the Arab world was new to him. He felt that the discussions with his peers were not critical enough to a doctoral-level course, as students in the class were "frightened of conflicts and any kind of misunderstandings". He believed that a doctoral course was "about criticality, building and testing models" (Student 2). He grew up within the British education system and was academically very educated being an English university professor abroad. Yet, he seemed to be unable to empathize with those who come from cultures where open criticism is not among the cultural norms. His teacher eventually advised him to pretend that he was the module teacher and this is how he related himself to his peer for the rest of the programme.

Among the two younger British male students in their '30's, there is also some difference. One of them was not pleased either when "a particular classmate seemed to think that the Bible was an academic reference" (Student 26). He also felt that African students make lots of "white noise", and unnecessary 'thank you's in the online forums, where he thought that each post must include at least one academic reference. He too struggled to look beyond the surface and see the reasons why Nigerian students behave extremely politely or respectfully in the online class. The other younger, male British student experienced other perspectives as "eye-opening because it gives you fresh eyes and a better way to understand yourself" (Student 16). This suggests that intercultural and empathetic skills, seeing underlying reasons beyond the surface is not an age-dependent issue. His experience resonates with that of the mature student who learned to "see the difficulties other people may have" and the previously quoted Nigerian and British female students. The phrase *"So you found a girl who thinks really deep thoughts"* from Tori Amos refers to his peers in the online course who have deep thoughts about academia and research, which "I perceive myself lacking upon arrival to the online course" (Student 16). He looks up to and learns from his peers. He learned that online communication without body language can be abrupt. He remembers occasions when others were perceived using an "unpleasant tone", but he learned to read between the lines: "they've

[either] not thought through what they're doing or sometimes different cultures express themselves in different ways" (Student 16) He became aware of his British writing style, that is "polite and cautious", whereas "other cultures can be more direct that can sometimes be mistranslated" (Student 16).

In summary, two male British students, similarly to Nigerian and British female students remained open to and embraced differences, as a learning opportunity. Two male British students reported frustrating situations with students from other cultures, in which they could not understand the underlying reasons for behaviours unfit to the Western academic climate (e.g. 'white noise', lack of criticality, or using the Bible as reference) and therefore could not use these occasions for intercultural learning. They never asked their peers why they behaved this way. Their reaction was either remaining frustrated with the 'white noise' of African students, making a conscious effort to always post meaningful contributions with academic references and therefore reinforcing the Western academic culture, or creating an online self that pretends to be the teacher of the course with the approval of his module teacher, and therefore patronizing the rest of his peers for the next two years in the programme. With Bourdieuan terms, they both accumulated so much *capital* and excel so much in the *field* of British online education that no one could compete with them. The first solution is however interculturally more sensitive as he at least tries to be a role model to other students without pretending to be a teacher. In the other case, the patronizing behaviour is accepted and legitimized in the classroom by the module teacher, further reinforcing the privileges that he owns to his Britishness. These are both moments that demonstrate how the outside society infiltrates the online classroom and continues to reinforce inequity and cultural hegemony.

Freedom of expression and research

Saudi students felt that compared to their education in Saudi Arabia, they were encouraged to express themselves freely and conduct research by analysing different perspectives:

> "Online education is a very interesting experience; it is motivating, it gives you more self-confidence that you can do things alone, without being spoon-fed. In the [Saudi] university, the professors were treating us like children. There was respect but they were seeing us as youngsters. They were only about our grades, not about our personality, our freedom to think, freedom to research, freedom to understand the signs or discuss anything... [In the online course] there is a special respect for the culture. You have the freedom to research, the freedom to say whatever you think it's right or not." (Student 43) "I believe that my habits of learning have changed: I don't think I read as much outside the minimum requirement as I do now. Now, instead of reading one text, I would read, maybe eight-nine, about the same thing. So I can get a different perspective on the same thing. " (Student 24)

Nigerian students also felt the freedom of expression in the online class, something they have not experienced during their Nigerian education:

> "When I attended school in Nigeria, the interaction and the freedom of expression were not there." (Student 46) "If you try to bring your opinion to the class, interact and challenge the lecturers, God help, you may never graduate." (Student 50) "The difference is that here [in the online class] we know we can talk." (Student 46) "In the online classroom […] the instructor is also behaving like a student. The instructor is guiding the class, brings in a topic and everybody contributes. The instructor contributes. Some of them are humble enough to tell you openly: 'Oh Dayo, what you mentioned, it meant [a lot] for me.'" (Student 50)

Relating this to Alexander's comparative pedagogy (2001, p. 935), the descriptions of the Saudi Arabian and Nigerian classroom management in which the teacher does not allow free expression of ideas resembles *teaching as transmission* in which "education is seen primarily as a process of instructing children to absorb, replicate and apply basic information and skills". Based on these student voices, British institutions allow students to think, have an opinion, conduct research freely, and teachers do not consider themselves an authority in the classroom. In terms of the purpose of teaching, these descriptions resemble two versions of teaching: *teaching as negotiation* in which based on Deweyan principles, teachers and students jointly create knowledge in a democratic learning community and the students are not passive recipients of knowledge, or *teaching as facilitation* in which teachers are guided by Piagetian developmental, rather than cultural or epistemological principles and respect individual differences (Alexander, 2001b). These versions of teaching and learning hold different cultural values. Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students used to rote learning and memorization techniques need to adjust to a new way of learning in British institutions without receiving much guidance in understanding the differences and similarities between the different cultural versions of teaching.

You cannot keep quiet

Female Nigerian students are more critical about gender inequalities in Nigeria than their male peers, which they feel, is prevalent also in Yoruba and Igbo land:

> "Even if a woman is more educated than her husband, she's put under pressure not to show it." (Student 39)

She chooses the online learning environment because she feels she can 'raise her voice in the virtual classroom, as opposed to the face-to-face Nigerian class, where women tend to choose to be silent:

> "In the traditional class, your lecturers were your lords and masters. They gave you the instructions, you received and regurgitated whatever they wanted you to say so that you could get your marks. This is the culture of checking your environment before you say anything: are they older than me, the balance of power. It could be education, status, wealth, gender. I know things but I don't always say them in the physical classroom. [In the online class] I'm encouraged and I'm able to say more and interact more because I have no choice. So I think that is a major difference and positive for me because I could easily sit in a classroom, and if I'm not very certain, I would keep quiet. But with our mode of learning in the online module, you can't keep quiet, everybody has to interact. There are a lot

> of things that could intimidate you in a face-to-face class. You may know the answer, but you may choose not to say it. Many of us, who have studied face-to-face at a younger age are now doing an online course and we are able to voice, in fact not only able but expected to voice our views. (Student 39) We have this fear or respect towards professors. I can't ask a question, I have to keep quiet. Even when I don't understand something I'm scared to stand up. We see them as sadists (laughter), mean people, I never really had this, shall I call it freedom or liberty to stand up and say: Professor, I don't understand what you say, I need clarification." (Student 5)

Similarly to male, Nigerian students, the interviews with female Nigerian students also testify that in their previous learning culture, they used to have a strict authoritative relationship with the teachers, they feared them and used rote learning and memorization to repeat the thoughts of their teachers, who based on their cultural values, followed a version of *teaching as transmission* (Alexander, 2001b). However, learning to be silent as a woman, not arguing to be left alone, or calling the teachers Dr. X.Y. was an invisible pedagogical practice (Kelly, 2013) rooted in Nigerian cultural values. It takes personal effort for them to learn to adjust to British teaching as negotiation or facilitation (Alexander, 2001b) in which the student has an active and more democratic role. In a learning environment that does not take into consideration these cultural differences and assesses students based on how active they are in the class, Nigerian female students can be easily misunderstood as ignorant or lazy and assessed unfavourably when they are passive in an online discussion.

Fitting this situation to the Bourdieuan framework (Bourdieu, 2014), non-dominant individuals bring old learning technics from their previous educational culture that does not constitute a cultural *capital* in the new learning *field*. In the process of their online identity formation, they soon realize that this is not a valued behaviour and they change their learning behaviour to acquire more cultural *capitals* valued in the new learning *field*. Whilst most of them adjust and find their voice in the new environment which is very positive in terms of facilitating their personal development, it is important to notice that this is yet another example of cultural hegemony in which non-dominant students are forced into inequitable learning conditions as long as the institutions do not recognize and provide a more personalized learning path to help them adjust to the new learning culture.

Female Saudi students were very cautious about not to be misunderstood in their posts because they were aware of the negative stereotypes people have about the Arab world:

> "I was quite cautious: when I posted anything I used to read all my comments, before posting them, maybe three or four times, because I don't want to be misunderstood; the written can allow for mistakes and misunderstandings, so I was quite cautious not to be misunderstood, or to step over anyone's turn, or interrupt anyone in the middle of a discussion or a forum. There are not a lot of Arabs studying in this programme, and I wanted to set an example. We see online education also as the future, and we can do it as much as anybody else." (Student 33) "Before, I studied in a US-based online master's programme, but I couldn't complete it, I had to quit. There were so many political issues

> around the world, especially between the Middle East and the States after nine-one-one, so there was a lot of discrimination in the classes. I was the only student from the Middle East, and the professors were really against me. They were difficult with me. They were insisting on irrational things about my postings. They were very critical of me, so I had to quit. I couldn't continue that way. The UK-based online master's programme was different. I liked the communication with instructors and other students: there is respect for the students and between the students themselves. This is something I appreciate because no one would comment about anything that might hurt or make others uncomfortable with the class itself. There is a section in the instructions about being respectable. It makes me more comfortable, and more open. I told you at the beginning that in my culture, we don't usually discuss things openly and speak out what we think, but in these classes, we speak out, nobody would joke about whatever I post or say, even if it's illogical or not right." (Student 42)

This is another example of a situation in which social presence or absence in the online class is guided by stereotypes created in the outside society about the Arab world. Female students feel the pressure to play against these negative stereotypes in the online classroom, one felt discriminated in an earlier online learning environment at a US-based online institution. Having learned from these previous experiences, their social presence or absence is guided by precaution to show a role model to change the stereotypes built in the outside world. This supports Öztok's findings (2020, p. 24) who states that people in online spaces create their better selves based on impression management, and this better self "will have an impact on how students represent themselves as positive, reliable and hard-working individuals". For Saudi Arabian female students, there is pressure to show a 'better self' in the online space to counterbalance the negative stereotypes infiltrating from the physical society to the online learning space. To safeguard cultural differences and protect people from discrimination, all examined institutions applied policies to respect diversity in the classroom, which helped these students feel safe and appreciated.

Privileged

British students are aware of how privileged they are in the online class that operates based on British educational cultural norms:

> "I do feel like I'm more connected to the university than perhaps international students feel. It's probably because I understand, the language, where the tutors are living, and the social things […] I've always felt a little bit… more privileged and more in sync with the university. I mean it's only my opinion, but maybe the American and the Asian students from what they've said they felt a little bit more distant. Even though we were all distance learners." (Student 18) I suppose I take the English language for granted, I take the fact that it's in a British institution for granted, I wouldn't have ever thought about doing it anywhere else, which is doubly thought-provoking, because I'm a modern language teacher." (Student 19)

> "I think being British is advantageous in the online classroom because the university is based in England. A lot of the course materials or the books that we read refer to the UK education system and a lot of the books we read are written by Western authors so it's quite easy for me to tap into where the course is coming from. I'd say somebody who's been brought up in a completely different culture might struggle to make those connections as easily as someone who has lived experience of growing up through the education system, working in it, and understanding it from the inside out. Not that the course focuses specifically on the UK, but predominantly we deal with professors who have worked in

> the UK or have been born in the UK, and that's kind of where their experience is and that kind of similar to mine so that's an advantage." (Student 16)

With Boudieuan (Bourdieu, 2014) terms, British students have acquired many cultural *capitals* prior to their postgraduate studies that are valuable also in the online learning space. The *field* in which they are studying is not completely unfamiliar and the rules of the game are known. They are aware of the privileges that they earned through their previous educational experience where the curriculum and instructions, the routines and rules in the micro-culture of the classroom were similar.

4.4. Lived relations: sense of community

This chapter will present themes to explore how learning routines, roles, and relationships change in the online learning environment compared to the physical learning environment experiences in the different cultures under examination.

4.4.1. Online learners

Bonding

Only three students reported that they managed to develop "cordial" relationships with their classmates. Social media or occasional face-to-face elements in the class helped them build some level of bonding:

> "I created a WhatsApp group because I noticed that some of my peers needed to rant and let off some steam. This was very comfortable. This is how we tried to help each other. (Student (24) The face-to-face residency helped build some kind of intimacy with my classmates." (Student 6)

The challenge of building a learning community

Eleven students from all cultures reported that it was difficult to build community in the online class.

> "Formal emails, formal postings, just comments, and reply to the comments. There is no personal contact at all. And that's what I feel missing from the online classes." (Student 42) "It's difficult to kind of get a sense of continuity and a wider understanding of who is still participating and who isn't participating." (Student 16)

The interviewed, mature British male students found it difficult to bond with younger students. They either limited their communication or mentored them during the course:

> "I can respect the tutors who are experts and excellent in their field. But the students younger than me who know far less, and try to be nice and pleasant, and not to be too involved in the topic… I feel superior. I feel I am looking down on them." (Student 2) "They used to ask me for help. I tried to guide them with their dissertation." (Student 1)

The number of mature, male, British students was not representative enough in this research to draw solid conclusions, and further research would be needed to understand better how

mature British male students behave in multicultural online classrooms. My data demonstrated that they bring different strategies to deal with their visible privileges: privileged by the dominant British educational culture in the examined classrooms and by years of experience in learning, these students '*cultural and psychological capital* in the *field* of the online classroom was very visible and affected the way they socialized with their peers in the class. They either found it difficult to relate to them and acted as 'teachers' or they tried to provide peer guidance. Opposed to this, mature female British students and younger male British students used this opportunity as a learning experience and to be aware of cultural differences in the classroom.

West (2014) uses the sociology of Bourdieu to explain how universities tend to reproduce the existing social order and the ideas of Winnicott and Honnett are also helpful to understand why particular non-traditional students may prosper in a more diverse educational system. According to West (2014, p. 42) "successful transitions depend on the relational histories people bring with them, and on the responses of significant others in the new transitional space". The relationships with others in the transitional space help legitimate a new sense of self which is emotional rather than cognitive and this is what he calls *psychological capital*. In the examined examples students went through an identification process in which they constructed different meanings and strategies to deal with their visible privileges. Some – in my research, British, mature, white, male students - created an *imaginary capital* (West, 2014) and identified themselves with the role of teachers or guides in the class, others (mature, white, female British, or young British students) used it as a learning opportunity to develop intercultural sensitivity towards others. This is partly in line with Öztok's findings (2020, p. 21) stating that the trio of race, gender, and age or class "play a significant role in how different individuals make different meanings of their experiences" and therefore their identification process in the online class will be constructed differently. However, in my examples, different meanings and patterns seem to appear in the intersection of age, gender, and previous educational culture.

4.4.2. Online teachers

Academic support is missing

Seven students felt that their relationship with the online teacher was very formal and that academic support was missing in their relationship. Compared to their previous face-to-face

learning experience, they felt that they received more support from the academics in the physical classroom:

> "There is more academic support in a face-to-face classroom than in the online environment. More online webinars, more academic support should have been given by the academic, because the topic was new to everyone and that requires additional teaching" (Student 26). "In the online class, I struggle away by myself." (Student 19)

The role of the teacher

According to Alexander (2001), the British education culture regards teaching as facilitation where the teachers are facilitators who respect individual differences, give space to students and respond to developmental readiness and needs. For British students, the expectations about the role of the teacher and that of the student were clear: being critical and reflective in the classroom is a factor to success in online doctoral studies.

In the online learning environment, they felt that the relationship with the tutor was formal but supportive. Due to the limitations in the communication channels, challenging grades were a lot harder than in a face-to-face learning environment and more academic support in the form of online webinars would have been beneficial:

> "More online webinars, more support should've been given by the academic." (Student 19) The [relationship] online is formal. Sometimes they weren't keen to listen. […] They wanted to conclude emails rather than let things go on. If you want to challenge a grade, it's a lot harder online. You have to be quite succinct in your communication and have real-life statistical evidence on why you wanted to challenge it. (Student 26)

Students from non-Western cultures have different expectations about the role of the teacher in the online class. Saudi students expected that the teachers would give more guidance during the course because in their culture they are used to being told what to do. They find it challenging to critique freely others:

> "The Saudis need to be told 'This is what you need to do, this is why you need to do it'. They are waiting for the approval of the instructor, and there is a barrier between what they're thinking and what they should do. You have a [weekly] reflection assignment. And up to now, my colleagues are asking why we have the reflection." (Student 24)
>
> "The instructors don't usually interfere a lot with the group dynamics, they let you as colleagues discuss, and figure things out on your own first. And then, they tend to post, answer, or interfere. The listening part is more important in online classes than in face-to-face classes." (Student 33)

According to Alexander, when teaching is regarded as transmission, the role of the teacher is passing on information and skills, or when teaching is considered as disciplinary induction the teacher provides "access to a culture's established ways of inquiry and making sense" (Alexander, 2001b, p. 519) Whilst the focus of this study is not to fully compare the Saudi Arabian and British education systems, some elements of Alexander's comparative pedagogy

are applicable to adapt because in these narratives it is clear that the Saudi education culture has taught them different teaching and learning routines, which they need to abandon when they enter the online British classroom. From their accounts, it is clear, that they were used to a different version of teaching as transmission or disciplinary induction, whilst in the British learning environment, teaching is commonly regarded as facilitation (Alexander, 2001b). This is another example of discontinuity for Saudi students who need to assimilate into the new learning culture and learn how to be reflective and critical thinkers in the online classroom. This finding is in line with Öztok's study (2020): if it remains without acknowledgment or provision of equitable support from the institution, it is a form of cultural hegemony and domination of the British education culture, leading to inequitable learning practices, as these students are forced to adapt individually if they want to succeed. Those who can't, will drop out.

Gender bias brought from Nigerian society and the coping strategies that male students were equipped with when dealing with female bosses make them reflect on how to behave with female teachers in the class. It is another example when the stereotypes brought from their own culture dictate their thinking and communication in the online class. They were cautious when dealing with a female teacher. With the adaptation of Bourdieu's sociology (2014), they brought these stereotypes and routines from the *field* they live and work - the Nigerian education and working culture -, and in the new *field* of online learning, they realized that the learning and teaching routines, the rules of how the class was managed by the teacher and ways of communication were different. They gradually assimilated to this new learning culture after being initially very cautious: they eventually appreciated the maturity their female teachers brought to the class and the frequent feedback in the online learning environment which was very different from what they got used to in Nigeria:

> "Once, I had the impression of an online instructor being a lady. From our experiences in the traditional classroom… for me, ladies are more difficult to deal with. Even in my professional work, any time I had a female boss or a female client I used to be very careful." (Student 6) "But my last instructor was the best: she was not confrontational, she made you see the reason, why your solution is foolish. And you didn't get offended. She brought love, and maturity to the class, I appreciated it. When another student insulted me, she intervened and made sure that no person was offended."(Student 50)

4.5. Lived time: balancing act

This chapter further explores how learning routines change and barriers to access education diminish in online education from the perspective of time management.

4.5.1. The flexibility of online studies

As the students I interviewed are all busy professionals, regardless of the cultures they came from, they all appreciated the flexibility that online studies gave to them, without which they could not get access to education, removing an important barrier for working people toward lifelong learning. They found it important to develop a routine that helps them find a healthy balance between work, family, and study:

> "I prefer studying online because is practical for me. I can work and study with the flexibility I need. You can do it on your own, nobody sits in the classroom waiting for you. The key is to find a routine and balance my work and traveling time with my studies." (Student 1) "You move around the country or travel abroad, but you can still study, you are not limited by your physical location. I get up early in the morning and study before going to work. You need to find a balance, so your work and your mental health are balanced too. Online learning is more convenient, especially when you are working full-time." (Student 16)

This data adds to the findings of Veletsianos et al. (2021) who states that flexible online learning removes barriers of time, place and pace.

4.5.2. Mastering time management skills

In line with other studies conducted with adult students in online distance education (Veletsianos et al., 2021; Kara et al., 2019; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Forbus et al., 2011), my participants also felt that mastering time management skills and exhibiting time structuring behaviours are good ways to cope with the deadlines. They mention the importance of family support as often studies will take place in times normally dedicated to family, leisure, or sleeping. Managing time is a skill they gradually learn during their online studies:

> "Time is always a challenge. Managing time between my learning, my work, and my family. It's very difficult, luckily I've got a very understanding wife, who lets me study and work on Sunday[s]. Today it's Sunday. I'm using Sundays quite a lot to get work done. That was a major challenge, getting time, and oftentimes to work during my lunch break when I'm in my job." (Student 26)
>
> "The first modules for me were the most difficult and the fourth up to the eighth were the easiest because at that time I've already programmed myself and my weekends, my time, my schedule, my family, my work, and even my working area in the house. I just collect my area where I can sit and find everything handy with me." (Student 43)

Mature students seem to be even more under pressure as family obligations constrain them to be even more efficient with their time, some excel in reading efficacy, while others travel away from their families during the week to finish their assignments:

> "In terms of my time at the moment, I pick up whenever I can, so if my children are off doing something, and I've got an hour to sit and wait in class I'd pick up there. I do try and do it once I'm in bed in the evening, but this week I've just been too exhausted. I haven't done very much at all. I think I'm very good at managing myself, and not getting stressed about stuff. I don't force myself to read something that I don't think is relevant. I suppose other people will do. It will take them down the wrong road and won't help them. I will selectively read but make sure that I've read around enough as well." (Student 17)

> "I think the biggest challenge has been my time management; to make a concerted effort every day, and be engaged with my studies, in some sort of way. I live far from the University. I drive [home] on Thursday. During the week I am by myself. So, my time really is my time. But again, with the family, as a husband, as a father, time is more constrained. But during the week, I am a single man to use my time and feel free."(Student 2)

All in all, study time always takes place outside of working hours. In the Nigerian context, if internet access is also a problem, they develop routines to study in moments when they are close to good internet, and in some extreme cases, if they can afford it, they move to five-star hotels for the weekend to make sure they have internet and enough time to study. It is important to mention that travel as an escape from family to study was mentioned only by men. Women regardless of which culture they identify themselves, don't travel away from their families and tend to develop a learning routine in which they use every free hour between shores. This qualitative information complements the findings of Veletsianos et al.'s quantitative study ((2021, p. 32) in which they discovered that female student populations may "lack neat chunks of time due to other responsibilities" and that variations in participation routines "may be the result of structural and systematic influences or learner's time or lack thereof". They also suggest that temporal flexibility in the design of online courses may benefit women, considering their family obligations and other responsibilities.

4.6. Summary of and takeaways from the chapter

In this chapter, I attempted to present my data in its entire complexity in which I included and compared the different data sources to analyse phenomenologically the corporal (lived body), social (lived relations), spacial (lived space), and temporal (lived time) aspects of the online learning experiences from the perspective of British, Saudi Arabian, and Nigerian learners. The chapter also includes a preliminary discussion with the aim of progressively focusing and keeping the attention on the issues relevant to this research project. In Chapter 5 (Extended discussion), I will further elaborate on how the generated data connects to relevant theories and overarching theoretical frameworks with the ultimate aim of answering the research questions.

The data generated in my study reveals structural and systematic influences and how they universally and still differently affect female learners' online learning experiences from the Global South to the Global North. Structured inequalities including physical barriers to access education, high tuition, poor infrastructure, electricity shortages, existential threats, gender bias, gender-based discrimination, and academic impediments such as active

participation, speaking up, and expressing individuality in the classroom are new cultural capitals to acquire for female participants in the Nigerian and Saudi Arabian contexts.

Chapter 5: Extended discussion. Intersections and power dynamics

5.1. Overview of the chapter

In the previous chapter, a broad lifeworld analysis produced rich and thick descriptions that demonstrated "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" (Geertz, 1973, p. 312) and led the attention to wander in many different directions with the intention to understand and feel the phenomena under investigation and keep the analysis of these symbolic forms tied closely to concrete social events of common life keeping an unobscured connection between theoretical formulations and descriptive interpretations.

This chapter elaborates on the themes deriving from the phenomenological data analysis that are meaningful for the tenets of intersectionality and CDP. Not all phenomenological lifeworld themes are analysed: due to the robustness of the data a choice was made to progressively focus on the themes that concern intersectionality and CDP. Other phenomenological lifeworld themes will be explored in future publications. As a continuation of the methodology chapter, section 5.2 elaborates on how the intersectional and critical lens is applied in this study. The subsequent section will discuss the findings through this intersectional and critical lens, focusing on implications related to distinctive and unexpected learning experiences about power dynamics, marginalization, oppression, agency, and empowerment. Section 5.3. is dedicated to nuanced female voices as the phenomenological data analysis revealed that this is one of the strongest findings.

5.2. Intersecting dimensions shaping non-traditional learner identity in the online learning space

The findings of this study illustrate that online learner identities and experiences in the transnational and virtual learning space vary and are shaped by the intersection of characteristics inclusive but not limited to socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, age, ethnicity, and previous educational culture. Adapting the diversity dimensions of Cerna et al. (2021, p. 22) to my study, the extended discussion focuses on highlighting the continuities and discontinuities within and between these dimensions. Figure 5.1. visualizes how they interplay: socioeconomic status and geographic location are considered dimensions that intersect with each other and have a general impact on the other characteristics. All interviewed students were working professionals in middle/high socioeconomic status, with significant differences in income between the analysed geographic locations, which largely

shaped their experience: in the Nigerian context, high tuition fees, unstable internet, and electricity shortage were recurring themes, that created an obstacle to accessing education, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity or previous educational culture.

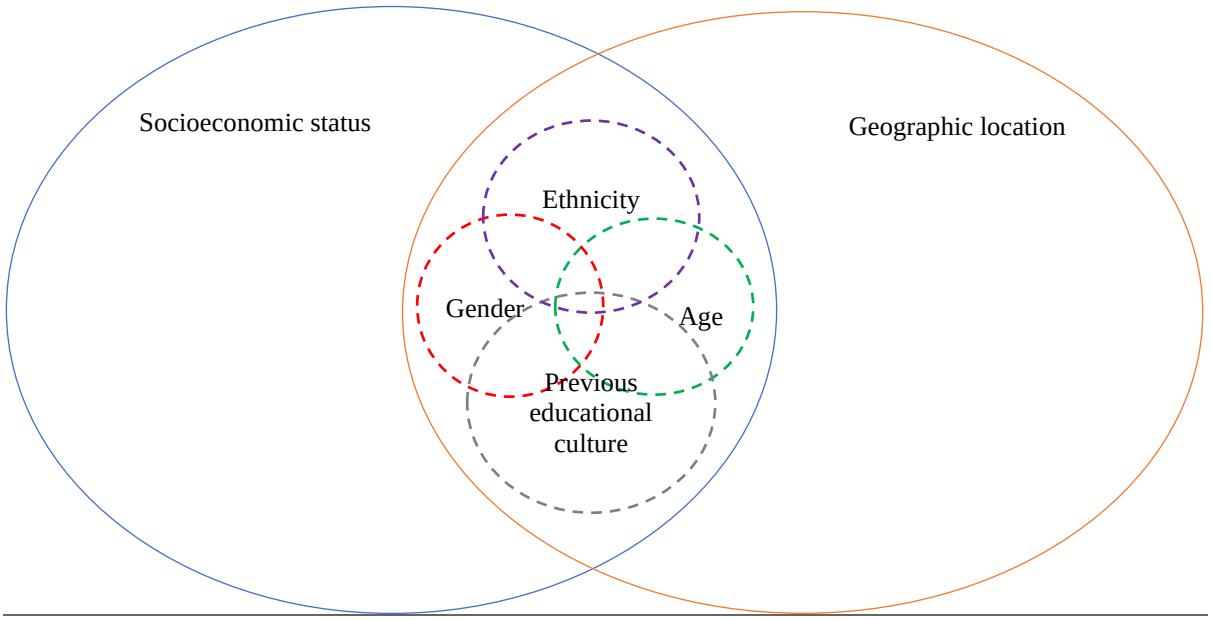


Figure 5.1.: Visualization of the intersection of socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, age, and ethnicity, adopted from Cerna et al.'s diversity dimensions (2021).

Based on the robustness of the themes in the findings and their relatedness to the tenet of intersectionality and critical digital pedagogy described in detail in the Methodology chapter, I chose to elaborate on the implications related to learning experiences about power dynamics, marginalization, oppression, agency, and empowerment, while others will be extended in future research publications. Based on the assumptions of critical (digital) pedagogy (Freire, 2013, 2017; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2020; Koseoglu et al., 2023), learning is situated, similar to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2018). It starts with an experience that is socially organized: the socioeconomic, cultural, and political issues that shape our reality, and personal struggles shape educational processes and outcomes. Meaning-making in education, in this sense, is also a "shared process grounded in the life experiences of students and teachers" (Koseoglu et al., 2023).

In the case of this research project, the focus stays on students' lifeworlds, learning experiences, and identity formation. Adapting the intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Bolitzer et al., 2023), and the perspectives of critical (digital) pedagogy (Freire, 2013, 2017; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2020; Koseoglu et al., 2023), which were already elaborated in chapter 3, the extended discussion in chapter 5 explores how the categories of socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, age, ethnicity, and previous educational culture interact within

non-traditional online learners and groups of learners to create distinctive learning experiences. It uncovers how the complex identities of online students and groups of online students from Great Britain, Nigeria, and the KSA are constructed in a particular social, historical, political, and economic context, locally and globally, with a focus on power dynamics. It aims to discover how the participants of this research as individuals or as a group experience simultaneously oppression, marginalization, agency, and empowerment throughout their online studies. It attempts to spotlight how the online learning environment provides space to recognize the intersectional nature of student identities and give a political and intellectual voice to multiple marginalized, non-traditional learners or groups of learners. Last but not least it explores the experiences of subordination and privilege in this online learning context to highlight what needs to be changed to create a more equitable learning environment.

5.3. Distinctive learning experiences at the intersection of gender, age, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

5.3.1. "The Road Not Taken". Female identity formation in the online learning space: struggle between tradition and modernity

The findings reveal that for non-traditional female students, the transnational online learning environment was a place to re-construct their identities and become aware of who they were, who they are, and who they might become by reflecting on their rights and freedoms, or lack of it concerning their gendered and situated reality. Their experience in online studies is partially in line with Finnegan's study (2014) who states that for younger female students, university is a transitional space between family, woman- and adulthood, whilst for mature female students, education is a space for being someone else than mother, wife, or partner.

However, this research demonstrated also that these female voices in the online learning environment vary in the Global North and Global South. The nuanced female lifeworlds presented in the previous chapter confirm postcolonial feminist views according to which female voices and women's conditions are not shaped in the same way everywhere (Coles & Gray, 2015). The intersection of age and being a woman gives a sense of marginalization for British female, mature, non-traditional learners in British society. They experience online study as a "miraculous last chance" to be themselves and fulfil their dreams at an age when work and family obligations are less stressful compared to their younger selves and allow them to create a new sense of self by adding a new form of psychological capital (Merrill,

2014; West, 2014). At the same time, throughout their online studies, they became aware of the taken-for-granted privileges by interacting in the transnational classroom with other female students from different countries in the world, who did not have the same privileges. The British educational culture, the routines in the classroom including communication with teachers and students, academic writing, the English language, and the freedom to critically think and express themselves were privileges that they became aware of when interacting with other students from other cultures. The online British learning environment provided them with growth and critical awareness of how the intersection of their multiple identities shapes their gendered and situated reality. They felt empowered to have an intellectual voice by participating actively in the class discussion and by being encouraged to publish their studies. Time management and procrastination due to family obligations and work were the main challenges they faced during their online studies.

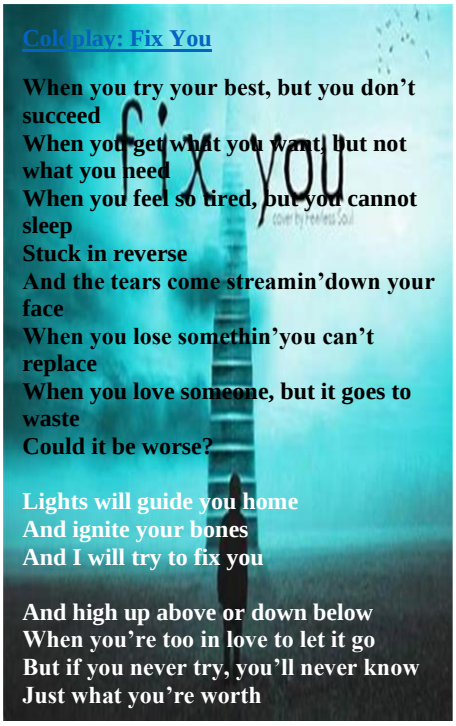
Saudi Arabian and Nigerian female online learners had a completely different spectrum of challenges. They both started to introduce their cultures assuming that I, a white, female researcher have little to no knowledge about their historical, socio-political, cultural, and economic reality. (This occasion made me reflect on my own positionality as a female online learner. Part of the reflection is inserted as a self-reflexive side note to demonstrate a continuous effort to bracket my assumptions and bias.)

In the Saudi Arabian segregated and man-dominated society, the gendered reality of the female, Saudi participants was "a struggle" in every aspect of their lives. Being single, working in an open environment, and studying online are unusual choices that do not fit the traditional image of a woman accepted by Saudi society. Using Freire's terminology (2013, 2017), in her

Self-reflexive notes from the researcher

"At the beginning, I thought I was aware of my Western feminist lens. I treated my participants as experts of their culture enjoying every bit of information they shared with me. As I was listening to them carefully, I became more aware of my privileges as a white, female, Central European, online learner. I understood that as an outsider I can only attempt to reproduce some of the meanings I captured and that it is impossible to present the entirety of their lifeworld. I also understood, that to create a more equitable research practice, I should involve them as much as possible in the research. I planned a participatory action research. However, the conditions at my workplace changed, and I had to abandon this idea. I still felt that with a phenomenological and critical, advocacy approach I could capture their stories without patronizing them.

I kept my head down humbly and used active listening, self-reflexivity, and a 'tabula rasa' attitude of phenomenology to interpret their experience and bracket out mine. During this process, I became more aware of how the intersection of my identities shapes my feminist worldviews and my online learning experience which are different from those of my participants. To test this, I chose a song to describe my online learning experience. For me, online learning is a way to fix me and fit into Western society. This theme does not appear in the experiences of my participants, which helped me bracket out my own."



local society, the Saudi, female online learner follows the rules of the oppressors and keeps being silenced, but her study choice reflects the aspiration to change, transformation, and freedom, by taking "The Road Not Taken". The vivid narratives in my findings chapter confirm the conclusions of Coles et al. (2015) who states that the instrumentalization of Islam legitimizes beliefs, practices, and policies that disempower women in their local society. However, my findings demonstrate further nuances in terms of finding new ways of resistance through online learning which becomes a symbol of empowerment, a new cultural capital, and a new way of recognition in the era of post-secular feminism.

The Nigerian context forces female online learners into yet another type of oppression. Kagher et al. (2021) use the terms African feminism and womanism to differentiate and decolonize African female voices from the Western feminist movements and highlight the existence of marginalization and discrimination against Nigerian women based on gendered embodiment. Gender-based discrimination against women is a major barrier to accessing education (Aja-Okorie, 2013). Due to their family obligations and rules imposed on them by their society, many women in Nigeria are not able to attend higher education (Orisadare & Osinubi, 2018). Muslim women in Nigeria are more at risk of not being educated due to the institutionalization of Islam that restricts their possibilities (e.g., early child marriage) (Orisadare & Osinubi, 2018; Coles et al., 2015). At the time of data collection, there were no Muslim, Nigerian, female participants enrolled in any of the three institutions under examination. Therefore, there was no possibility to include their direct life experiences in this research. Indirect data, through the mouths of male Nigerian participants, confirmed this when they reflected on these issues to characterize gender inequalities in their country. Online higher education attracts mainly Christian Nigerian students, as Western education is highly valued in Igbo and Yoruba lands or in other smaller Christian ethnic groups that are present in multiethnic Nigeria (Szilagyi, 2014). British online higher education is particularly attractive because of the prestige it represents from a postcolonial perspective and for its high quality, reliability, and flexibility compared to local Nigerian higher education (Szilagyi, 2013, 2014).

However, the lack of *economic capital* (high tuition fees, electricity shortages, and inadequate internet infrastructure, especially in rural areas) constitutes still major barrier to all Nigerian online learners accessing education. In my study, all Nigerian female learners were Christian and managed to afford the high tuition fees by assuming medium-high positions at work with relatively high income in their environment. Others took loans and had

financial support from their families. The unequal socioeconomic conditions, coupled with cultural and social norms imposed on women, shape their online learning in unequal ways. Without financial support, scholarships, and the recognition of these unequal conditions at the starting point of their studies, online education remains exclusive to those who can afford it and adjust to the tough conditions. Without creating equitable conditions for these learners, they remain treated as customers subjected to competitive, market-driven educational models, which represent yet another form of neoliberal exploitation of the West.

5.3.2. "Fear, hope and… change". Female learners' experiences of empowerment, agency, and marginalization

Nigerian female learners, like British or Saudi female online learners, often study by night when they are done with work, family obligations, and chores. The study confirms that the online learning environment is a transitional space where they feel liberated from cultural expectations and empowered to raise their voice in ways they would not be allowed to in the Nigerian educational context. Though they have educational experience in co-educated classrooms - something that female students in Saudi Arabia rarely have, unless they were educated in other countries -, they feel intimidated to speak up in their local environment, and at the beginning of their online studies, they are challenged to raise their voice. This is similar to the reported experiences of Saudi female students. Both groups go through a huge learning curve when they learn how to communicate in the online classroom from being traditionally silenced to suddenly taking the stage. Fear, hope, and trepidation from the risky and unknown described so vividly in their chosen songs or poetry illustrate the first timid steps they take through online learning from marginalization to recognition and empowerment.

Female learners in all the examined countries tended to appreciate the different perspectives and diversity in the classroom and embraced them as learning opportunities. Nigerian and Saudi Arabian women choose the online learning environment instead of local face-to-face education because they can raise their voices and cannot be silenced anymore. So modernity, in this case through online learning, offered a new way to break out from their situated and gendered reality, and provided a means to empower them. However, once there, they were forced to 'catch up'. The narratives can be explained by adopting Alexander's comparative pedagogy (2001): they were used to educational cultures brought from their local societies, where teaching was seen as *transmission* as opposed to *teaching as facilitation or negotiation,* which is the case in the British online programmes examined in this study. The student-teacher relationships were consequently also different in their local cultures. Their

experience adheres also to Bourdieu's Key Concepts (2014): learning how not to be silent, and shifting from memorization techniques to a new way of learning that involves critical thinking and high levels of academic writing in English are huge steps for them as they lack important *cultural capital* that are taken for granted for British learners. This represents a dichotomy of being empowered by being allowed to start these online programmes, and at the same time being marginalized as they struggle their way through their online studies, without consideration of their particular cultural needs, which has an impact on their motivation. This is a clear example of cultural hegemony in which non-dominant Nigerian and Saudi Arabian female students were forced into inequitable learning conditions since the institutions did not recognize or offer personalized learning paths to help them adjust to the new learning cultures. From the lenses of CP, without recognizing their learning curve and needs, the new way of learning becomes a new form of cultural invasion, in which "the invader penetrates the cultural context of another group and imposes their own view upon those they invade" (Freire, 2017, p. 125). The invaded, in this case female Nigerian and Saudi Arabian learners, perceive themselves through the eyes of the invader: "the more they mimic the invader, the more stable the position of the latter becomes" (Freire, 2017, p. 126). According to Caingcoy (2023), recognizing students' cultural backgrounds and needs and providing support mechanisms enhance academic achievement and engagement. This is what the examined institutions could do better to avoid cultural invasion and neoliberal exploitation.

5.4. Distinctive learning experiences at the intersection of geographic location, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and educational background. Empowerment and privilege vs. marginalization and stereotypes

5.4.1. Privileges

The findings demonstrate that British students with a British educational background, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity have a clear privilege when continuing their studies in British higher education compared to their Nigerian and Saudi Arabian peers: adapting to the Bordieuan key concepts (2014), they acquired the necessary cultural capital in their previous studies that remains valuable also in their postgraduate online studies, and they know the routines and rules of the classroom. These cultural capitals include the mastery of the English language, academic writing skills, curriculum, and familiar teacher-student relationships, in which the teacher is seen as a facilitator or negotiator (Alexander, 2001b). British students with British educational backgrounds can use this cultural capital and their student identities

directly and discuss their experiences comfortably in class. The digital online curriculum and pedagogy align with their learning needs.

In my data, most British students remained open and embraced cultural diversity in the classroom as a learning opportunity. Two male British students reported frustrating situations, as they were unable to adjust to the varying academic levels in the classroom and understand the underlying reasons for behaviours unfit to the Western academic climate (e.g. 'white noise', lack of criticality, or using the Bible as reference) and therefore could not use these occasions for intercultural learning. With Bourdieuan terms, they both accumulated so much *capital* and excelled so much in the *field* of British education that no one could compete with them. The first solution was to post meaningful, well-referenced posts and become a role model and a mentor in the class, which was an interculturally sensitive way to deal with academic privileges. The other solution was adopting a patronizing behaviour that was accepted and legitimized in the classroom by the module teacher, further reinforcing the privileges that he holds due to his familiarity with the British educational culture. These examples demonstrate how the outside society, with its cultural and social norms, infiltrates the online classroom and continues to reinforce inequity and cultural hegemony. In the examined examples, students went through an identification process in which they constructed different meanings and strategies to deal with their visible privileges. Some, in my research, British, mature, white, male students, created an *imaginary capital* (West, 2014) and identified themselves with the role of teachers or guides in the class, "the cultural invader," as Freire (2017) would call it, others, mature, white, female British, or young British students, used it as a learning opportunity to develop intercultural sensitivity towards others. Öztok's findings (2020, p. 21) state that the trio of race, gender, and age or class "play a significant role in how different individuals make different meanings of their experiences," and therefore, their identification process in the online class will be constructed differently. However, in my examples, a more nuanced picture emerges: different meanings and patterns appear in the intersection of age, gender, and previous educational culture.

5.4.2. Online education as a transitional place of empowerment

Male students across all three countries felt excitement, joy, and confidence when starting their online studies. For younger male students, identity transformation comes with the notion of becoming a professional, and it brings important learning when others challenge their ideas. For older students, the notion of self-development is more relevant: new learning

practices, such as fluid, open learning, and new ways of creating knowledge as well as the flexibility of the learning schedule are important elements that bring change in their lives.

Taking a closer look at the British male narratives, nuances appear depending on age or geographic location. For young and mature, white, male British students, doctoral studies were a way out of feeling marginalized: for the younger by developing new *capital*, critical thinking skills, and confidence in themselves, for the older by returning to their European educational roots to find humanity and hope. For both, the online educational environment provided a transitional space, a "place and time for self-reflection on one's identity" in which they both struggled with their learner identities confronted by other identities in their lives (Merrill, 2014, p. 77). Whilst Merrill discusses transitional spaces from a feminist biographical approach, giving voice to female students of different ages and backgrounds as well as highlighting the importance of the higher educational institution as a transitional space in their identity formation, the experience of non-traditional male students in different age groups and locations shows similar feelings of marginalization in a society in which the educational institution becomes the transitional space for identity transformation. It also confirms Öztok's statement (2020, p. 21) that "identification is intrinsic to context: it has individual and social aspects by which individuals perceive, categorize, and situate themselves, define symbolic boundaries among themselves, create links between one another." Identities in this sense are never fixed and static, but situated and constitute a dynamic set of practices in a particular context (Öztok, 2020; Holland et al., 1998). Öztok's (2020) findings suggest that students who identify as white understand their online self as their social presence, and those who identify as non-white are situated in the double-blind of their social presence and social absence. This is partly true when we examine strictly the online curriculum and the privileges they bring to the online learning environment without other identification factors in their lives. However, the findings of this research offer a more nuanced picture of the situatedness of learning, the motivations to choose online learning, and the lifeworlds of those who identify as white. The experiences and identities of white male students are extremely diverse: in this case, age and residence make their life experiences very distinct. They can even experience the fannonesque double consciousness (Fanon, 1967, Henry, 2022) that negatively affects their self-perception and identity formation outside of the online classroom due to their physical residence where they represent a minority. In other contexts, they might choose to be socially absent in the online class - e.g., when due to their younger age and lack of confidence, they prefer to read posts, and not participate actively for

a while in the online discussion forums. In this multifaceted reality, there is one in common to all non-traditional students (regardless of race, gender, age, or residence): the feeling of marginalization and online education acting as an escape room from being marginalized.

5.4.3. The dichotomy of empowerment and marginalization

Empowerment has been described in Chapter 3 as a process in which, according to Freire, "learners develop the knowledge and skill they need to undo oppressive structures and achieve liberation" (Freire, 2017 in Saunders & Wong, 2020). Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students, regardless of age or gender, felt empowered in the online classroom due to the freedom of expression, research, diverse perspectives, and critical thinking that was encouraged in the online learning environment and which they had not experienced in their previous educational cultures. Compared to the pedagogies they previously experienced, they were not passive recipients of knowledge but jointly created knowledge in a democratic learning community. Teachers were seen as facilitators of learning who respected individual differences, compared to authoritative figures in their previous educational experience who could not be questioned (Alexander, 2001b). They had to adjust and learn the rules and routines of the online classroom, abandon rote learning and memorization techniques, learn fluid learning, occasionally adjust to communicating with and being guided by female instructors, learn to ask questions, and improve their academic English and critical thinking skills from day one without receiving much guidance from the institutions on how to do all this. Critical thinking, academic English, questioning, and argumentation are cultural capitals that Saudi Arabian and Nigerian students have little to no exposure to in their previous educational experience, which confirms my previous findings (Szilagyi, 2014). In line with Reay et al. (2005) and Finnegan (2014), these student testimonies demonstrate that the *field* of British higher education was unfamiliar and created dislocation that generated change but also anxiety, disgust, ambivalence, and insecurity. Whilst Nigerian and Saudi students have to learn a new learning repertoire, British students already have it as they learned it as part of their previous, undergraduate British educational culture. This itself creates inequitable learning conditions.

The narratives of Nigerian students highlight an important feature in their online experience: from their perspective, education is a means of survival, and students must be determined to move up on the social ladder by studying in the online programme. The meaning of determination in their case has a different colour compared to British or Saudi Arabian

students. The experienced inequalities in their local culture determine how they see their cultural identity and presence in the online class. Determination is a *cultural capital* that they must have to succeed in online studies. There is so much more at stake in their case, so they are determined to create an online identity that will make them successful in online studies. The Western online learning environment acts as a transitional space between their Nigerian ethnic reality and the roles they assume in their ethnic/national society, providing an opportunity for changing social inequalities and transforming their personal stories and identities (West, 2014). This example demonstrates how concepts like determination have diverse meanings and colours for students coming from different cultures, and that the playing field from the beginning is not equal by any means. If the non-dominant perspectives are not recognized, they disappear or assimilate into the dominant discourse, and that itself creates inequitable, culturally insensitive learning conditions for the non-dominant groups (Öztok, 2020; Arditi, 2021b).

Despite being valued, Western education is not always a possible path for Nigerian students. The lack of *economic capital* (inadequate infrastructure, high tuition fees, electricity shortage, limited internet access), unsafe environments, lack of schools, and limitations in teacher training impede schooling in Nigeria (Ossai, 2021; Aja-Okorie, 2013). Education in a place that is shaken by war or civil unrest is a challenging environment for online studies. Armed conflicts are the biggest threat to human development and education (Marshall, 2019). Some studies (Rajab, 2018) provide a rather simplistic picture of the benefits of e-learning as it is generally considered a good way to remove barriers such as disasters, pandemics, and wars to accessing education (Rajab, 2018) because there is no need to travel for study. However, this view disregards the psychological effects of such traumatic conditions and ignores student well-being. Even though e-learning makes it possible to remove physical barriers to education, students are emotionally disturbed by the traumatic events happening around them. Safety in online education is an existential, *cultural capital* that is not always obvious and given to every student. The policies introduced by the examined institutions offered a good solution for many students who had mitigating circumstances to access education and provided equality, a “point of sameness” (Öztok, 2020, p. 19) for these individuals. However, they failed to provide an alternative, personalized, equitable, culture- and trauma-sensitive learning path to address or eliminate specific barriers to learning.

Intercultural sensitivity rooted in the respect for elders is a cultural capital that Nigerian students bring to the online multicultural classroom from their home environment, and excel

because they are socialized to have a deep awareness of differences in the classroom. They carefully consider every situation, making sure that they are respectful toward their peers and professors. The findings demonstrate that Nigerian students display self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, involvement, and a non-judgmental attitude in their interactions, which are the building blocks of intercultural sensitivity. This is understandable, especially considering that they come from a multi-ethnic educational environment where they had to learn to interact with different ethnicities in the same country and often in the same classrooms (Szilagyi, 2013). Their special way of communicating in the classroom reinforces Öztok's findings (2020) who argues that the online learning space is shaped by the social, political, economic, and historical realities of students, and therefore further confirms the situated reality of learning.

5.4.4. Awakening from racial double consciousness and developing critical consciousness to fight stereotypes

In Saudi Arabian and Nigerian narratives, fighting stereotypes in the online learning environment was a powerful theme regardless of gender or age. In Nigerian narratives, it is apparent the awakening from the Fanonesque state of racial double consciousness, the state of enforced and false negrification in which "colonized Africana people lost their earlier cultural identities and became identified by the colour of their skin" (Henry, 2022, pp. 259-260). The Negro state symbolizes "lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul" (Fanon, 1967, p. 190). According to Fanon, this form of racialization process creates a psycho-existential deviation in the psyche of Africana people: there are two sets of relations that regulate behaviour, one with their fellows and one with the white man. The negrified Africana self-consciousness and self-evaluation are profoundly influenced by the relationship with the white other (Henry, 2022). This thought resembles that of Freire, who states that in the initial stage of the struggle to find their true self, "the oppressed find in the oppressor their model of manhood" (Freire, 2017, p. 20).

In the narrative of student 47, it is visible the process of awakening an empowered self-image that, "explodes the caricature of 'the negro', and affirms an identity of his/her own choosing" (Henry, 2022, p. 261). This process of awakening was facilitated by the critical discussions that took place in the online classroom. Nigerian students experienced the dialogues in the multicultural online classroom as mind-blowing, where they could learn from different perspectives, develop the Freirean critical consciousness that is integrated with reality and "represents things and facts as they exist empirically in their causal and circumstantial

correlation" (Freire, 2013, p. 41). Yet, when they assess the online learning context, they adjust their social presence or absence to be legitimized and to avoid being stereotyped. Those who identify as non-whites regard themselves as cultural others in the online class (Öztok, 2020, p. 104).

Similarly, Saudi female students developed their critical consciousness by being exposed to negative stereotypes about the Arab world. Their social presence or absence in the classroom was guided by the precaution to be a role model to change these negative stereotypes brought from the outside world. These findings confirm Öztok's (2020) conclusions that people create their better selves in the online learning space: these Saudi female students felt pressured to show their better selves to counterbalance the negative stereotypes infiltrating from the physical society to the online learning space.

In Öztok's examples, students could use anonymity to avoid being stereotyped. In the case of the participants of this research, anonymity in the classroom was not an option. Exercising critical consciousness about themselves in the multicultural digital learning environment and awakening from the Fanonesque double consciousness led them to fight these stereotypes by using different strategies when they participated and formed relationships in the online learning space: striving to be a role model and being cautious of what they write and how they present themselves to others. Respectful communication and a high level of intercultural sensitivity helped them show who they are, and they earned respect from their online peers and teachers, which further empowered them in the online learning space.

In a culturally responsive learning environment where dialogue is guided by love, humility, hope, faith, and mutual trust, students can join in a critical search for knowledge as "only dialogue that truly communicates" (Freire, 2013, p. 43). All examined institutions applied policies, and their teachers followed these policies carefully to respect diversity in the classroom, which helped these students feel safe. However, my findings also demonstrate that this was a struggle that individual students faced alone. To create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, the institutions could develop further their policies to include culturally responsive pedagogy (Caingcoy, 2023) and create effective practices for teachers and students to develop a healthy self-image and critical consciousness to fight stereotypes, call out, and critically discuss inequitable or unjust learning situations within the classroom environment.

From the perspective of CP, lasting and trustful relationships with peers and teachers are important cornerstones to creating critical dialogue and developing critical consciousness. Most students in this research struggled to create a lasting learning community and long-term, trustful relationships with peers or teachers. According to West (2014, p. 42), "successful transitions depend on the relational histories people bring with them, and on the responses of significant others in the new transitional space". The relationships with others in the transitional learning space help legitimate a new sense of self, which is emotional rather than cognitive, and this is what he calls *psychological capital*. Without psychological capital, it is difficult to relate, trust, and create meaningful critical dialogue.

5.4.5. The dominant discourse of academic integrity: students depicted as cheaters and perpetrators of crime

CDP considers the Western academic discourse on academic integrity as problematic: in the name of safeguarding academic integrity, this discourse created antagonistic environments in which students are treated as cheaters and are subjected to pervasive surveillance (plagiarism detection software, learning analytics, proctoring platforms, etc…) in the digital learning environment (Koseoglu et al., 2023). The data in the findings of this research illustrated colourful and emotionally charged examples of the effect of such antagonistic environments on students unfamiliar with the pervasive academic integrity culture dominant in Western academia. This study confirmed some of Finnegan's (2014), and my earlier findings (Szilagyi, 2014), but at the same time provided a more detailed and nuanced picture of the context and meanings non-traditional learners created about this particular experience characterized by anxiety, insecurity, and de-motivation. In my sample, many wanted to quit the programme in its entirety due to being labelled as cheaters and dishonest persons for a cultural capital they lacked at the time. Gay (2018) argues that cultural neutrality, cultural blindness, homogeneity, and deficit syndrome are the reasons why minority students are not performing well in school on traditional measures. Similarly, in the case of this research, not knowing the rules of the game was treated as a deficit and created inequitable learning conditions for students from non-dominant cultures which yet again remained unnoticed. The tone of the academic discourse that criminalized the wrong behaviour further exacerbated the cultural shock, simply horrifying these students and discouraging them from continuing with their studies. There must be other alternatives to convey feedback to these students about their lack of knowledge without labelling them as perpetrators of crimes and still safeguarding academic rigour and high-quality standards in Western academia. Gay (2018)

argues that when students' cultural identities are respected, they are motivated to learn, which leads to higher levels of academic achievement because students are more likely to actively participate and connect their own experiences to the material they are about to learn.

This has analogies also with the concept of epistemic fluency, which can be defined as the flexibility of a learner to adapt to different ways of knowing about the world when knowing is conceptualized as context-dependent (Markauskaite & Goodyear, 2017). While the new academic rules could be introduced as new cultural capital, the negative experiences around criminalizing academic behaviour discourage students from developing an epistemic fluency between their local knowing and that of the new British educational culture. Based on the robust findings of this thesis, I argue together with other critical educators that the discourse on academic integrity needs reconceptualization where integrity means ‘doing the right thing’ and so digital learning environments should be designed in a way that they do not create cheaters, but encourage authentic creation and appreciate learning as a process instead of a graded product (Gay, 2018, Giroux, 2020, Koseoglu et al., 2023).

5.5. Summary of and takeaways from the chapter

The previous chapters of this study examined the perceptions of non-traditional students about their online learning experience, and this chapter focused on learning situations where signs of domination, marginalization, empowerment, agency, privileges, and stereotypes were revealed. By looking at these learning situations, the study found signs of empowerment, and agency in these online courses mostly due to the Western social constructivist instructional design, in which students are engaged in interactive assignments and form learning communities to share knowledge and professional experiences to endorse social awareness (Barak & Green, 2021). However, despite the social constructivist instructional strategies in the classes, significant inequitable learning conditions have been observed at the intersection of geographic location, gender, ethnicity, and previous educational culture. These inequalities were perceived by learners as remaining mostly unnoticed by the higher education institutions that operated these courses.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: At the crossroads between equity and equality

6.1. Purpose of this research

This interdisciplinary research that integrates cultural and social psychology, sociology of education, sociocultural analysis, and comparative education in the field of transnational online higher education, aimed to explore from an intersectional and critical lens the lifeworlds of non-traditional students studying in UK-based, transnational programmes residing in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom or being citizens of these countries. The scope of the project was to uncover the multidimensional nature of inequality varied by geographical/national context, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, previous educational cultures, and gender, and how these inequalities become visible and intersect through student voices. The research applied hermeneutic phenomenology, and lifeworld studies in the methodology as well as intersectionality and critical pedagogy as theoretical frameworks to address issues of empowerment and agency, marginalization and cultural domination, privileges, stereotypes, the development of critical consciousness, social presence or absence, and cultural inclusion or the lack of it in online transnational education.

6.1.1. Contribution to new knowledge

The “Road Not Taken” symbolizes the current state of a dichotomy of online education for online learners and institutions: both face the relatively unexplored field of online learning with cultural assumptions and biases. Students who socialize in different cultural environments bring study routines and values from their local educational culture. Western institutions providing online courses wear their Western cultural lenses when developing their courses. This creates a dislocation between the lived learning experience and the learning goals set by the institutions. Unequal socioeconomic and cultural conditions shape online learning experiences in unequal ways. Without recognizing the unequal conditions, non-traditional online students are forced to assimilate into the dominant Western educational culture, which represents a form of cultural hegemony imposed on them. Without creating equitable conditions for underrepresented online learners, they remain treated as customers subjected to competitive, market-driven educational models, which represent yet another form of neoliberal exploitation of the West. Following the tenets of intersectionality and critical pedagogy, the main findings of the exploratory research that have not been reported in previous literature are summarised as follows.

Empowerment and agency were revealed in all examined cases. The online learning environment acted as a transitional place for identity transformation. The intersection of gender, geographical location, and age revealed nuances and new colours in their identity transformation. Female students find themselves in the struggle between tradition and modernity. For female, mature British students, online learning gave a miraculous chance to acquire a new form of psychological capital and a new sense of self to become something else than a mother, wife, or partner. Saudi female students felt disempowered in their local society: they were constrained to follow the rules of the oppressors in their life choices, but found a new form of resistance in their study choices via online learning, which is a symbol of empowerment. For female Nigerian learners, online education represents fear, hope, and change. They feel empowered to raise their voice in ways they would not be allowed in the Nigerian educational context, where they felt marginalized due to gender-based discrimination, social and cultural norms, family obligations, and lack of economic capital. Farley and Burbules' study (2022) generalizes feelings of anxiety among minority students due to the novel learning experience. However, in this study, mostly female learners reported a sense of anxiety because of "The Road Not Taken", while most male students were confident when starting their online studies. British male students went through an identity transformation and felt empowered in the online learning space. Younger British students were engaged by a sense of becoming a professional, while older students felt that self-development and new learning practices such as fluid and open learning (Falconer et al., 2013; Blaschke & Hase, 2015; Blaschke, 2014) helped their long-term engagement in the online programmes.

The intersection of geographical location and previous educational culture revealed experiences of empowerment. Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students, regardless of age or gender, felt empowered in the online classroom due to the freedom of expression, research, diverse perspectives, the role of the teacher as a facilitator in their learning process, and the way critical thinking was encouraged in the online class designed based on social constructivist instructional design (Barak & Green, 2021).

Marginalization and cultural domination were reported at the intersection of gender, geographical location, ethnicity, and previous educational culture. The intersection of geographic location, ethnicity, and previous educational culture revealed unequal learning conditions for mainly Nigerian and Saudi Arabian online learners. The systematic literature review of Farley and Burbules (2022) and Sublett's study conducted with online students of

colour (2020) mentions many impediments that minority online learners face, mainly in the US context. The current study, however provided a more detailed and nuanced account of structured inequalities in a global multicultural classroom where underrepresented students of Nigerian and mainly Saudi Arabian educational backgrounds are present. In the Nigerian context, this includes physical barriers to accessing online education, such as high tuition fees, bad infrastructure, electricity shortages, and existential threats (e.g., terrorist activity and civil unrest in their vicinity). In both contexts, the acquisition of new cultural capitals including critical thinking, academic English, academic integrity, critical questioning, and argumentation, being led by female instructors and the relationship with the instructor seen as facilitator are new cultural capitals that Saudi Arabian and Nigerian students have little to no exposure to in their previous educational experience.

In the intersection of gender, geographic location, and previous educational culture, both Nigerian and Saudi female students who were socially silenced before, had to learn how to speak up, participate actively, and post meaningful contributions expressing their individuality, which was a new, unexplored cultural capital for them and remained largely unnoticed by the institutions. In these cases, the cultural shock and feelings of marginalization created change and disjunctions in terms of being overwhelmed, anxious, offended, and insecure about their learning process, discouraging them from continuing their online studies. These unequal learning conditions were largely unnoticed by the examined British institutions, and that itself created a sense of marginalization and offered the choice of either assimilating to the dominant academic discourse or disengaging and leaving. Farley and Burbules' study (2022) mentions some of these challenges for underrepresented students in the US context, but the current study offers an integrative and more nuanced picture, representing the whole cultural context in which these learning experiences are displayed.

Privileges were reported mainly in British narratives due to the familiarity with the British educational culture, including dominant pedagogies that instil critical thinking skills, the freedom of perspectives and research, the curriculum, the nature of the teacher-student relationship, academic integrity discourse, and academic English writing skills. Students from the dominant British educational culture were not always able to deal with these privileges in a culturally sensitive way. To avoid patronizing behaviours that reinforce cultural hegemony and inequitable learning conditions for others, these students should be guided more efficiently by the online instructor to find culturally inclusive ways of dealing with their privileges in the online international and multicultural learning environment.

Stereotypes and critical consciousness. Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students had to fight stereotypes and microaggressions in the multicultural online learning environment, which is partly in line with the findings of Sublett (2020) and Farley & Burbules (2022). However, the nuanced lifeworlds presented in this study also demonstrated that students developed and exercised critical consciousness about themselves and awakened from the fanonesque double consciousness. They fought against these stereotypes by using different strategies when they participated and formed relationships in the online learning space: they strived to be a role model and were cautious of what they wrote and how they presented themselves to others. Respectful communication and a high level of intercultural sensitivity helped them show who they are, and they earned respect from their online peers and teachers, which further empowered them in the online learning space. However, these were individual efforts and provided no learning to other students in the classroom, as critical discussion about their experience of fighting against stereotypes and inequitable learning conditions was not an explicit and integral part of the class activities.

The lack of lasting relationships with teachers and peers was an additional factor that all the interviewed students mentioned and longed for. The lack of cultural inclusion in the course content and materials, and the lack of social presence in the form of meaningful, lasting democratic relationships with peers and teachers, are major causes for disengagement for underrepresented online learners (Farley & Burbules, 2022). From the perspective of CP, meaningful relationships facilitate trust and critical dialogue, which are the basic principles of developing critical consciousness.

6.1.2. Addressing the research questions

The main research questions of this study is: how do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the influence of their cultural identities and learning routines on their online learning experience? And, how do Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, and British students perceive the impact of online learning on their cultural identities and learning routines? The sub-questions are as follows: What are the continuities and discontinuities between their local educational culture and the online educational culture? How do they communicate in the multicultural online classroom? How do their learning routines and roles change in the online learning environment? What are the barriers to online education considering their local cultural context and the Western educational context?

Applying an intersectional and critical lens, this study revealed that students' lifeworlds and online learning experiences are just as colourful as the colours of an impressionist painting and have just as many varieties of sounds and meanings as the music and poetry in different parts of the world. Female and male voices are not the same in all parts of the world: they have a variety of colours, rhythms, rimes, and refrains. The combination of geographic location, socioeconomic status, and gender or previous educational culture creates patterns in the narratives of non-traditional learners about their online learning experiences and determines power dynamics, experiences of privilege and subordination, marginalization and empowerment, oppression and agency. Age and ethnicity provide further nuances to the picture.

In their personal experiences, female students took "The Road Not Taken" with fear and hope, and male students started it mostly with confidence. For women, it represented a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, where online learning is seen as a new cultural capital and becomes a new way of resistance, recognition, and empowerment. However, online learning experiences and female voices are different across the world, and the learning conditions for female learners are not shaped in the same way (Coles & Gray, 2015). British female non-traditional students experience online study as a miraculous last chance to fulfill their dreams by developing a new psychological capital and creating a new sense of self (Merrill, 2014; West, 2014). The British educational culture – classroom routines, student-teacher relationships, academic writing, the English language, and the freedom to think and express themselves critically in the classroom – is a cultural capital and a privilege that they became aware of when interacting with other students from different cultures. Acquiring intercultural competencies, developing epistemic fluency, and learning to deal with these privileges in a culturally sensitive way was a big learning curve for female British learners, who acted as 'smooth operators' in the multicultural online learning environment.

In the Saudi context, online learning is a way of resistance against a disempowering local reality that keeps women silenced. The mere access to online education becomes a new symbol of empowerment, a new cultural capital, and a new way of communication to regain their voice. In the Nigerian context, structural impediments, including sociocultural norms, gender-based discrimination, a lack of economic capital, high tuition fees, electricity shortage, inadequate internet infrastructure, especially in rural areas, unsafe environments, a volatile economy, and occasional civil unrest, make it very difficult to access Western education. Female students of medium-high socioeconomic status, from mostly Christian

ethnic groups that value Western education, are attracted to enroll in these Western courses (Szilagyi, 2013, 2014). Without financial support, scholarships, and the recognition of their unequal conditions at the starting point of their studies, online education remains exclusive to those women and men who can afford it and adjust to the tough conditions. Despite the unequal conditions, those Saudi Arabian and Nigerian women who can access these courses feel empowered to raise their voices, and this also brings challenges for them. Speaking up in the online class is a huge learning curve as they learn how to communicate in the online classroom from being traditionally silenced to suddenly taking the stage. Modernity, through the channel of online learning, offers a new way to break out from their situated and gendered reality.

However, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity, British students with a British educational background have a clear privilege in British higher education, compared to Nigerian or Saudi Arabian peers. As mentioned in section 3.5.2., following the definitions used by McIntosh, Case, and Minarik, privilege in this study is defined as dynamic, socially constructed, automatic, and unearned circumstances, conditions, and "benefits bestowed upon perceived members of dominant groups based on social identity" (Minarik, 2016, p. 55). Being socialized into the British educational culture and being familiar with student-teacher relations - in which the teacher is seen as a facilitator or negotiator as opposed to a transmitter of knowledge -, the mastery of the English language, academic writing, the curriculum, and critical thinking skills, represents a new cultural capital that Saudi and Nigerian students had to acquire on their own. British students possess it as a clear advantage and entitlement. From a critical pedagogical lens, these inequitable conditions that the institutions seldom recognize are occasions of cultural invasion (Freire, 2017). According to Caingcoy (2023), recognizing students' cultural backgrounds and needs and providing support mechanisms enhance academic achievement and engagement. Appreciating different cultural backgrounds as part of institutional culture and embedded in institutional policies as well as in classroom practices would help avoid cultural invasion and neoliberal exploitation.

Dealing with privileges is not always problem-free in the online multicultural classroom. The study demonstrated that at the intersection of age, gender, and previous education culture, various solutions arise in terms of forming relationships and dealing with different communication styles. In my sample, mature, male students raised in the British educational culture constructed an imaginary capital, and identified themselves with the role of teacher or guide, a sort of "cultural invader" using Freire's (2017) words. Female and young male

students with British educational backgrounds used these occasions as learning opportunities to develop intercultural sensitivity towards others and offered peer support to others. These diverse experiences and solutions are important signs for the institutions to recognize because peer-to-peer relations can reinforce existing power dynamics of domination and subordination. The teacher in the class must be vigilant to recognize these events and turn them into a learning opportunity for the whole class.

This study offers a nuanced picture of the lived learning experiences of white male students with a British educational culture: residence and age are crucial in shaping their learner identities: they might even experience the fannonesque double consciousness if they live in a minority in a country that discriminates against them, and therefore chose online learning to feel empowered in an otherwise marginalizing reality. Others, due to their young age and lack of confidence, might choose social absence in the online learning environment, especially at the beginning of the course. In this multifaceted reality, there is one in common for all non-traditional students (regardless of race, gender, age, or residence): the feeling of marginalization in the outside world and online education acting as a transitional space, an escape room from being marginalized.

Saudi and Nigerian students were in a dichotomy of empowerment and marginalization in the online class: the social constructivist online classroom environment that provided space for them to exercise the freedom of expression, research, diverse perspectives, and critical thinking was a mind-blowing experience for most. However, adjusting to new learning routines and rules, abandoning rote learning and memorization techniques, being exposed to fluid learning, occasionally adjusting to communicate with and being guided by female instructors, learning to ask critical questions, and improving their academic English and critical thinking skills represented a new form of cultural capital that they had not experienced or learned before. The unfamiliarity with this new cultural capital created disjuncture, anxiety, ambivalence, and insecurity. Without recognizing these non-dominant perspectives, the institutions exacerbated inequitable and culturally insensitive learning conditions that disempowered their learning experience.

For Nigerian students, inequitable learning conditions are further aggravated by the lack of economic capital: inadequate infrastructure, high tuition fees, electricity shortage, limited internet access, unsafe environments, fragile economy exposed to financial crises that affect student loans and salaries, lack of schools, civil unrest, and wars make Nigeria a challenging

local context for online learning. Safety is an existential cultural capital that is not always obvious and given to every student. Online education keeps reinforcing inequitable learning conditions, if these local challenges remain unnoticed or if simplistic, equality-based policies are provided that treat student experiences the same across the world. Alternative, personalized, equitable, culture- and trauma-sensitive learning paths need to be developed to address these barriers to learning to reduce the achievement gap and keep these students in the online class (Alexander, 2001b).

The nuanced lifeworlds of Nigerian students also reveal a non-dominant cultural capital that they bring from their local culture and use in the online classroom, which is respectful communication. Nigerian students display a high level of self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, involvement, and a non-judgmental attitude in their interactions, which are the building blocks of intercultural sensitivity. It helps them to be flexible and adjust to the new ways of knowing, developing further epistemic fluency. This high level of intercultural sensitivity also helps them gain respect in the class. Exercising critical consciousness facilitates the process of awakening from the Fanonesque double consciousness to fight stereotypes in the online class. The study found that both Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students often faced stereotypes and microaggressions in the multicultural online learning environment. Individually, they developed communication strategies to counterbalance stereotypes: they created an online social presence, a better online self that acts as a role model by being cautious about what they write or post, and they avoid offending others. Nigerian students used their cultural capital of respectful communication to achieve this. Some of the British students reported that they perceived the respectful communication style of African students as "white noise" since they were not familiar with the cultural backgrounds and values of their peers. Connecting this to Bourdieu's concept of field and capital, as well as that of epistemic fluency and intercultural collaboration, these examples demonstrated that some of these British students are not so open to other ways of knowing or communicating but the one they are familiar with, in the British educational culture.

Nigerian and Saudi Arabian students made an effort to fight against stereotypes which was often misunderstood by other students. These individual efforts did not always provide collective learning opportunities in the classroom, because critical discussion about their learning experience of fighting microaggressions and stereotypes as well as studying in inequitable learning conditions were not an integral part of the reflection activities designed

in class. Such misunderstandings coupled with the lack of lasting relationships with teachers and peers aggravated the lack of cultural inclusion and social presence and hindered the creation of meaningful and trustful relationships in class, which are major causes of disengagement for underrepresented online learners (Farley & Burbules, 2022).

6.2. Implications of the research

6.2.1. Implications for theory and research

Higher educational institutions that operate transnational online classrooms are at a crossroads in creating an educational culture based on the principles of equity (fairness and inclusion) or equality (sameness) (Öztok, 2020; Farley & Burbules, 2022). Equitable practices in higher education imply that fairness is realized by ensuring that "personal and social circumstances do not hinder achieving educational potential and inclusion means that everyone has the right to "attain a basic standard education" (Amaral, 2022, p. 26). Under the tenets of equality, students are treated and evaluated on the principle of sameness, wearing the lenses of the majority of students and teachers with the premise that the same course is offered to everyone, disregarding how these courses are perceived by disadvantaged and minority learners (Öztok, 2020; Amaral, 2022).

According to the tenets of culturally responsive education (Ladson-Billing, 1995; Gay, 2018) the achievement gap decreases and student engagement increases dramatically when learning is contextualized and ethnically diverse students' abilities and talents, prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities are recognized and built into the instructional process. In the context of international online learning, Khoo and Hou's mixed method study confirmed that international students with low academic English proficiency had the highest volume of writing output and engagement metrics when culturally responsive pedagogy facilitated their learning by promoting learner agency, increasing student satisfaction, improving student perception of learning and creating an inclusive learning environment (Khoo & Huo, 2022). The vivid narratives presented in this study reinforce that learning is situated and identity formation in the online learning space, just as in any learning space, is "deeply entwined with students' ethnic identities and cultural socialization" (Gay, 2018, p. 30). Implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in digital learning spaces is crucial to creating inclusive and equitable digital learning environments (Caingcoy, 2023; Koseoglu et al., 2023).

The analyzed learning experiences demonstrate that online learning, when accessible, empowers non-traditional online learners, but it also marginalizes underrepresented student groups by not recognizing their inequitable learning conditions. This exploratory study was conducted from a bottom-up approach to represent multifaceted student realities and offers practical solutions to higher educational institutions to develop further their online transnational courses and policies by including differentiated, inclusive, and culturally responsive education principles next to the social constructivist learning principles that are already part of their course design. Implementing differentiated instructions and culturally responsive pedagogy in digital learning spaces is crucial to creating inclusive and equitable digital learning environments (Caingcoy, 2023; Letzel-Alt & Pozas, 2023).

As critical educators, we have the responsibility to humanize education and create learning environments that promote the plurality of experience, discovery, critical thinking, skepticism, resourcefulness, and creativity, and at the same time transcend geographic locations, cultural settings, or subject matter (Koseoglu et al., 2023). The strategies offered in this study help create a more democratic, inclusive, and equitable digital learning environment by recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds, creating inclusive classroom communities, adapting differentiated instructional strategies to meet diverse learning needs, and challenging stereotypes individually and collectively to promote critical consciousness (Koseoglu et al., 2023).

6.2.2. Implications for improved policy and practice

The strategies that are developed below are based on a thorough literature review on differentiated instruction, inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies, and the findings of this research to tackle some of the most practical issues that - unlike my study - current literature does only partially answer due to the lack of qualitative data on the perceived online learning experience. The concrete strategies will hopefully help educators recognize students' cultural backgrounds and explore differentiated instructional strategies and interventions that they can utilize effectively to meet diverse learning needs. The strategies offered in the next paragraphs help create a more democratic, inclusive, and equitable digital learning environment by recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds, creating inclusive classroom communities, adapting differentiated instructional strategies to meet diverse learning needs, and challenging stereotypes individually and collectively to promote critical consciousness (Koseoglu et al., 2023).

Strategy 1: Recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds.

Golden (2017) states, that to reach educational equity and equal opportunities for students, culturally responsive pedagogy is the right pedagogy because it advocates for going beyond assumptions and stereotypes about learners, avoiding deficit framing which is systematically applied in traditional educational systems, and focusing on local meaning-making and "a deeper understanding of learners' experiences and funds of knowledge". When students' multiple cultural identities and practices are respected and understood as cultural processes, thus resisting the static and reductive notions of culture, students are motivated to learn and this leads to higher levels of academic achievement as students are more likely to actively participate and connect their own experiences to the curriculum (Golden, 2017; Gay, 2018). By valuing students' cultural perspectives, teachers can help nurture students' self-worth and strengthen their sense of belonging in the classroom (Allen et al., 2017; Caingcoy, 2023). Teachers, policymakers, educational scientists, and instructional designers must recognize the profound "influence that culture has on learning and make learning processes compatible with the sociocultural contexts and frames of reference of ethnically diverse students" (Gay, 2018, pp. 51-52). Many of the structural access issues of underrepresented students reported in this and other studies (Öztok, 2020; Sublett, 2020; Farley & Burbules, 2022) are external factors of inequality (e.g. bad infrastructure, poor internet, lack of technology, high tuition fees, gender bias), that educational institutions alone cannot address. However, these structural impediments are reminders for teachers and policymakers to be sensitive to the burdens these students are dealing with, try to see the learning experience also from their perspective, and acknowledge that not every student has the same learning experience and learning opportunity (Farley & Burbules, 2022). Grounding research in culturally responsive pedagogies and minoritized students' meaning-making processes and identity formation, focusing on students' concrete, lived experiences are ways to avoid portraying them as 'at-risk or failing' students (Golden, 2017; Sublett, 2020; Haynes, 2023).

The findings of this research explore lifeworlds with the intent to document some of the cultural meaning-making processes and identity formation of online learners and create a greater understanding of non-dominant cultures to see differences as opportunities rather than obstacles to students' academic progress. For example, knowing the previous educational culture and the context in which female Nigerian and Saudi Arabian online learners live and study, sheds a different light on the fact that they might be silent and post few meaningful academic work at the beginning of the online class. Knowing where they come from, can

inform educators to reduce biased and deficit thinking about their lack of motivation. Similarly, if we learn more about the principle of respect towards elders in Yoruba communities, we can better understand why Nigerian Yoruba students tend to post a lot of "white noise" in the online learning environment. This can assist educators and peers to better understand the way Nigerian students communicate and relate to others and facilitate mutual and intercultural learning processes in the online learning environment.

There is no receipt to know your students since it is a lifelong learning journey with the guidance of an educational philosophy called critical pedagogy (Freire, 2017; Giroux, 2020). The general strategies to understand more about the cultural backgrounds of students are curiosity, inquisitiveness, and an attitude of seeing them as experts in their cultures. It requires self-reflection from us, educators, to admit that there is a lot we don't know about other cultures, and it is impossible to know everything. It requires an attitude of openness towards different ways of knowing and learning. Developing trustful relationships, and safe learning environments where we educators can also be vulnerable and allow ourselves to ask our students about their cultural backgrounds in a culturally responsive and non-judgmental way, and being guided by pure human curiosity are the only ways to start the journey.

Strategy 2: Building relationships and creating inclusive classroom communities.

By developing strong connections between students and teachers and establishing a supportive and inclusive classroom climate, teachers can create a safe space where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and identities (Caingcoy, 2023, p. 3206). Building positive teacher-student relationships has been linked to improved student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Gay, 2018).

Creating an inclusive classroom community helps foster a sense of belonging among students, reducing the likelihood of marginalization and promoting positive social interactions (Farley & Burbules, 2022). By prioritizing positive relationships and inclusivity in the classroom, teachers can create an environment that supports students' social-emotional well-being, engagement, and academic success. Developing strong teacher-student connections contributes to a sense of trust, respect, and belonging, enabling students to thrive and reach their full potential within the educational setting (Caingcoy, 2023). The lack of culturally responsive course design, materials, and instructions often leads to microaggressions in the online classroom, which, together with the lack of cultural inclusion

and social presence decreases the motivation and engagement of minority students in online classrooms (Farley & Burbules, 2022).

The findings of this research revealed that students from dominant cultures find it difficult to deal with their perceived privileges in the online international environment: some choose interculturally sensitive ways – for example being a role model or acting as a peer mentor, others do it by creating cultural hegemony and unequal learning conditions for others in the classroom – for example, by patronizing students from non-dominant cultures and acting as a teacher, or judging African students for their“ white noise” when they are expressing respect towards others in the classroom, or middle eastern students when they use religious books as an academic reference unaware of the Western academic writing norms. When these moments are left unguided and unnoticed by the online class instructor, it creates a culturally non-inclusive environment where learning is limited to the subject matter and where epistemic fluency and intercultural collaboration remain undeveloped.

According to Chen and Starosta, “intercultural sensitivity is the ability to acknowledge and respect cultural differences as a result of positive emotional responses before, during, and after intercultural interaction, and is comprised of six elements: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgment” (Marshall, 2019, p. 186). Open and honest communication guided by intercultural sensitivity leads to intercultural competence that, according to Olsen and Kroeger “involves sensitivity to the perspectives of others, a willingness to try and put oneself in the shoes of others and see how things might look from their perspective” (Marshall, 2019, p. 186). Creating an inclusive environment in an online, international, and multicultural classroom means that students must cultivate greater intercultural sensitivity, competence, and epistemic fluency to facilitate intercultural collaboration and learning. The lifeworlds of this research demonstrated numerous examples in which students from non-dominant cultures excelled in intercultural sensitivity. There were varying levels of intercultural sensitivity, competence, and epistemic fluency present in the student population from dominant cultures.

It was also noticeable that in many of the examined online international programmes, either due to confirmation bias or the limited communication channels – mostly emails or online posts in online discussion forums in the absence of verbal communication -, it was challenging for online teachers and students to recognize moments when they act close-minded and judgemental towards each other. Following Raymond Williams’ notion of culture

seen as fluid, the online learning culture is also changing as meanings change with every interaction between the participants of the learning community (Arditi, 2021a). Creating and maintaining an inclusive and equitable online learning environment is a continuous effort for every participant in the learning community. Therefore, personal and professional development in the form of training should be offered to online students, teachers, and policymakers on cultivating intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence towards each other. (Caingcoy, 2023). With a well-trained, culturally responsive facilitator in the online classroom, supported by culturally responsive instructional design and policies, students are guided to bridge cultural gaps and to express their voice confidently in a non-judgmental way (Guy, 2018; Caingcoy, 2023; Haynes, 2023).

Strategy 3: Implement a differentiated and culturally responsive online instructional design that meets students' learning needs and cultural backgrounds.

Providing plurality in class activities. Aligning instructional strategies and students' cultural backgrounds fosters a sense of relevance and authenticity, enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ellerbrock et al., 2016). Culturally responsive instructional strategies include culturally relevant materials and activities that resonate with students 'cultural identities and diverse perspectives that validate students' backgrounds. (Nieto, 2009; Farley & Burbules, 2022; Caingcoy, 2023). From the perspective of CDP, instructional strategies must express plurality in engaging creatively in the classroom. It proposes the abolition of standardized assignments and introduces a wide range of possibilities in classroom assignments and assessments, including multimedia, fiction writing, book reviews, position papers, and negotiated projects (Koseoglu et al., 2023). Differentiated instructional strategies promote tiered assignments, visual aids, close monitoring, and scaffolding of the learning process by granting autonomy to students to choose their preferred forms of learning (e.g., project-based learning, portfolios, etc…) (Letzel-Alt& Pozas, 2023).

Promoting collaboration. Besides diversity in assignments, promoting collaboration leads to greater academic achievement and a more positive attitude toward learning, especially for those students (e.g., students from Nigeria or remote locations) who often struggle to access the classroom. Collaborative assignments and the flexibility of co-creation provide agency and empower students who are culturally silenced. (Koseoglu et al., 2023) According to CDP, online institutions should avoid high-stakes assessments as learning is not a product but a creative process. Digital technologies can facilitate the creation of podcast-style audio

projects, documentary or narrative videos, interactive presentations, websites, blogs, and digital documents. (Koseoglu et al., 2023) Diversity and co-creation as well as offline possibilities to work on assignments would help any student whose learning is jeopardized by physical, cultural, or social boundaries (Villegas et al., 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2016).

Improving social presence in the online classroom is more difficult to achieve than in traditional classrooms: applying conscious strategies to promote peer-to-peer interaction as well as teacher-student interaction is key to engaging underrepresented groups (Farley & Burbules, 2022). Teacher presence can be increased by embedding mini-lectures, personal insights in the course material, and scaffolding on how the course structure helps learners achieve their learning goals (Villegas et al., 2017). Garrison's community of inquiry can help build long-term online learning communities in small groups or clustered discussions (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Peer mentoring and peer tutoring are other options to optimize classroom dynamics and utilize all students' strengths for a positive learning experience in the online learning community (Farley& Burbules, 2022; Tereshko, et al., 2024). An intentional composition of student working groups and tutoring systems within the learning group helps ensure differentiation and inclusion based on individual learning needs (Letzel-Alt & Pozas, 2023).

Introducing virtual office hours for consultation provides one-to-one opportunities for students to ask questions. (Farley& Burbules, 2022). This can provide a safe zone for previously silenced underrepresented students who are learning how to actively participate in class and might not ask questions in the classroom bound by their cultural norms. Providing regular feedback, expressing care, checking in from time to time, and setting up clear expectations are also common strategies to increase instructor presence in the online classroom. Automated processes cannot replace personal attention (Farley& Burbules, 2022). Blending synchronous and asynchronous activities and using different channels of communication are technology-enhanced ways to further increase active engagement in the classroom (Farley& Burbules, 2022).

Ungrading. Online learners who study English as a foreign language and multilingual online learners should be provided with special assistance with their online studies since they are already disadvantaged compared to native English learners and are constrained to use more cognitive strategies during their studies (Farley & Burbules, 2022). According to Khoo & Huo (Khoo & Huo, 2022), online students from non-dominant cultures who face a

Eurocentric education system are unaware of Western expectations, conventions, and norms, therefore, they are at higher risk of being accused of academic integrity violation. The dominant discourse of academic integrity should be challenged by creating learning environments that do not create cheaters and dishonesty. (Koseoglu et al., 2023) This can be done, for example, by privileging authentic creation and considering learning as a process rather than a product (Koseoglu et al., 2023).

Students should be given risk-free opportunities to recognize culturally different academic writing styles and learn to switch between their local and the normative Western academic writing style (Khoo, E. & Huo, X., 2022). Video chats and 'safe house' platforms can help students merge colloquial and academic discourse as they develop their learning style and can be used as an ungraded practice environment, enabling inclusive discussion for students and teachers (MacKinnon & MacFarlane, 2017; Farley & Burbules, 2022). Other ungrading approaches, such as formative feedback, 'receive and resubmit' protocols, and co-creating of assessment criteria are further examples that could be implemented as they help students receive input without punishment and lead to more meaningful and culturally responsive learning experiences (Koseoglu et al., 2023).

Strategy 4: Challenging stereotypes and promoting critical consciousness.

Culturally responsive teachers and critical educators aim to empower students by helping them develop a critical understanding of social injustices and inequities (Freire, 2013, 2017; Giroux, 2020; Koseoglu et al., 2023). By incorporating diverse perspectives and encouraging critical thinking, teachers can foster a sense of agency and empower students to become advocates of social justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teachers create opportunities for students to challenge stereotypes and critically examine their own biases (Gay, 2018). To help students fight and recognize stereotypes not just individually and randomly as it occurred in the analysed examples, but collectively and intentionally as part of an intentional and planned instructional design, higher education institutions should promote critical thinking, the development of critical consciousness, and embrace open-mindedness. This can be achieved by providing opportunities that prompt students to reflect on their own experiences, interrogate their own and the teacher's biases, provide critique, and see different viewpoints, for example by implementing reflexive writing assignments on potentially divisive and controversial topics (Koseoglu et al., 2023). Engaging in counter-storytelling in which one voice experiences not widely heard can challenge privilege, stereotypes, bias,

inequities, and inequalities (Cho, 2016). Personal experiences in navigating complex learning environments (Markey et al., 2021), reflection on power dynamics (Ellerbrock, et al., 2016), and silence as a means of resistance (San Pedro, 2015) are some of the resources that offer honest and situated accounts of people's lived experiences.

Strategy 5: Provide professional development and support for teachers, educational scientists, policymakers, and online curriculum designers in implementing culturally responsive pedagogy.

When instructors integrate a critical multicultural framework in their online classes, online learning has the potential to produce transformative learning experiences, but when instructors, policymakers, and higher education institutions fail to address factors that hinder certain groups of learners, the inequitable learning conditions remain unnoticed which affects negatively and disproportionately underrepresented and minority learners (Farley & Burbules, 2022). Creating a differentiated, inclusive, and culturally responsive classroom environment requires ongoing teacher reflection and self-awareness, and the development of knowledge and skills to effectively address the needs of culturally diverse students. Training given to teachers, educational scientists, policymakers, and online curriculum designers should focus on diversifying their pedagogical strategies, cultural competence, and critical reflection skills. As this is an ongoing lifetime journey that one can only start, further support should be provided via mentoring and building a supportive community of practice (Caingcoy, 2023)**.**

By embracing culturally responsive pedagogy, educators can create classrooms that empower students, promote academic success, and foster a sense of belonging and respect for all (Hammond, 2014; Caingcoy, 2023). Teachers are responsible for radiating inclusivity and cultural diversity as well as facilitating engagement and achievement in the classroom (Gay, 2018). They are mediators who facilitate critical dialogue about conflicts or inconsistencies between different cultures, guide students to understand who they are by facilitating positive cross-ethnic and cross-cultural relationships, and help avoid prejudices, stereotypes, and microaggressions from occurring in online classrooms (Gay, 2018). “Students' self-efficacy – the belief about one’s capabilities to learn or perform behaviour at designated levels – is a strong predictor of student achievement” (Bandura, 1997, cited in Farley & Burbules, 2022, p. 18). To elevate students' academic self-efficacy in a constructive way teachers can provide examples or additional reviews on difficult concepts, model problem-solving and guide

students using multimedia, share personal experiences to connect theory and professional practice, set challenging but achievable tasks, provide low-risk opportunities to practice and facilitate collaboration opportunities with peers (Farley & Burbules, 2022).

6.3. Limitations, lessons learned, and future research opportunities

“The Road Not Taken” serves as an overarching metaphor in this study that has implications in three layers. Firstly, it is the metaphor that female participants chose to describe their process of finding new and creative ways to liberate themselves from existing societal norms that limit their learning possibilities. Secondly, it directs to the future, prompting the educational research community, and institutions to look critically at their existing educational policies and practices and transform them into new, creative, and culturally responsive ways that meet the learning needs of a highly multicultural student population and the societal demands of the 21st-century. Thirdly, it describes my process of wayfinding as an online learner and researcher, daring to look at the research process creatively and making unusual choices in this discovery.

My positionality as an outsider researcher educated predominantly in the Western world helped me develop a ‘tabula rasa’ attitude of not knowing about the cultures that I was about to explore, but it had also the limitations and biases of Western academia through a particular European cultural lens. In future research, the insider's perspective should be also explored by involving researchers from the examined cultures and applying participatory research methodologies to include more of their perspectives in the knowledge-creation process and encourage more reciprocity in qualitative research.

The research philosophy is built on phenomenological and lifeworld studies, which is reflected in the choices that I made in this project from research design to data analysis and data presentation. Other qualitative methodologies, such as multiple case study approach could have been used yielding similar results. Eventually, the choice was made in favour of phenomenology firstly due to the inspirational work of Langeveld, which encouraged me to look at creative ways of qualitative researching, secondly, thanks to my profound belief in phenomenology as a way of life, and thirdly due to the conviction that holistic lifeworld representations serve better the purpose of this research.

Phenomenology as a methodology helped capture the nuances of the lifeworlds of the participants of this research. However, phenomenology as a philosophy has different cultural

dimensions: besides European phenomenology new traditions appear such as Africana phenomenology with representatives such as W. E. B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, and Lewis Gordon. Remarkable differences are discovered between European and Africana Phenomenology in the occasions of self-reflection, in the practice of self-reflection and knowledge construction (Black, 2007, Henry, 2022, Hoffman, 2022). The variety of themes and different phenomenological practices in Africana phenomenology may have implications for phenomenological research methods. I utilized diverse communication channels in my methodology: the use of artworks - music, images, songs, lyrics of songs, and poetry - in data collection to facilitate expressing universal human feelings, was an attempt to liberate the meaning construction and the particular lifeworld beyond culturally bounded descriptive narratives. My methodology, however, follows predominantly the European hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, and in future research, the decolonization of phenomenology could be further explored to reveal its implication for phenomenological research methods.

The data was collected between 2012 and 2018 and documented unequal learning conditions experienced by non-traditional online learners in that period. In an ideal world, the plan was to analyse and write up the data until 2020-21. When I planned this research, I was not expecting personal challenges, a global pandemic, and wars that eventually affected my lifeworld in profound ways and resulted in extensive intercalations in my studies. More recent data should be collected to see what changes have happened since 2018, considering also the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased use of online learning in higher education, and the polarization of societies. As cultural beliefs do not change from one day to another, I believe - and the literature confirms as well - that my research touches on highly relevant issues in higher education that are seldom discussed because of the difficulty of providing experimental data. More qualitative and experiential research should be conducted to reveal further nuances and colours in the learning experiences of human beings also with the advocacy to create awareness about diversity, inclusion, and equity issues persistent and deeply rooted, but mostly unnoticed in traditional and online educational systems.

As the sample in my research was relatively small and especially the British male student narratives had a great variation in their responses to privileges in the online classroom and marginalization experienced outside the class, further qualitative and quantitative research should be done focusing on white male students' experiences and strategies in the online classroom to understand further the nuances of their experience and the different colours of whiteness.

This study focused exclusively on non-traditional students' perceptions of their online learning experience and relationships with their peers and teachers in the micro-culture of the online classroom. Further analysis aimed at teacher perceptions, classroom management, and online curriculum and instruction would be necessary to provide a complete comparative analysis based on Alexander's three domains of teaching (2001a, 2001b).

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Appendix

1. Demographic details of interview participants

Table 1: Interview participants with British citizenship

Student	Referred to as	Citizenship	Gender	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Place of birth	Residence	Programme	Stage of studies	Previous studies
1	Student 1	British, English	male	58	not religious	white Caucasian	Nottingham	Baku, Azerbaijan	DBA	thesis	MBA online
2	Student 2	British, Scottish	male	48	atheist	white Caucasian	Irvine	Japan	EdD	thesis	London King's College (music history)
3	Student 16	British, English	male	31	Buddhist	white Caucasian	Manchester	UK, England	Education and Social Justice	modular studies, 2nd year	PGC and Master at the University of Manchester, French, and Spanish
4	Student 17	British, English	female	43	not religious	white Caucasian	England	UK, Scotland	Education and Social Justice	Modular studies, 2nd year	Masters in arts and Humanities (French and German, European Languages)
5	Student 18	British, English	female	48	Christian	white Caucasian	Leeds	Southeast UK	Education and Social Justice	End of thesis	Christ Church University Canterbury, Master at Open University
6	Student 19	British, Scottish	female	65	not religious	white Caucasian	Scotland	Dundee, Scotland	Education and Social Justice	Modular studies, 2nd year	Manchester University, Open University, Dundee University
7	Student 24	British	male	45	Muslim	Hausa	Niger	Saudi Arabia	EdD	Modular stage	Richmond College, Middlesex University, MBA
8	Student 26	British	male	36	atheist	Asian	Bangladesh	London	MSc in Marketing	Dissertation stage	BA at University Buckinghamshire
9	Student 37	British, Scottish	female	60	not religious	white Caucasian	Scotland	Edinburgh	MSc in Psychology	Dissertation	BA in Modern Languages London,

											Open University, BSC Natural Sciences

Table 2: Interview participants with Nigerian citizenship

Student	Referred to as	Citizenship	Gender	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Place of birth	Residence	Programme	Stage of studies	Previous studies
1	Student 5	Nigerian	female	36	Christian	Igbo	Ughelli, Delta State	Lagos, Nigeria	MSc in Human Resources	Graduated in 2011	No experience in online higher education
2	Student 6	Nigerian	male	50	Christian	Igbo	Owerri, Imo state	Lagos, Nigeria	MSc in Operations and Supply Chain Management	Graduated in 2017	MBA in Nigeria, Ph.D. at Walden University after Uni of Liverpool studies
3	Student 7	Nigerian	male	40	Christian	Igbo	Lagos	Lagos, Nigeria	MBA	Graduated	Masters in technology in Nigeria
4	Student 12	Nigerian	male	50	Christian	Igala	Oganenigu, Kogi state	Lagos/Abuja, Nigeria	MSc in Operations and Supply Chain Management	Graduated	Medical Sciences in Nigeria, currently Ph.D. at Walden University
5	Student 29	Nigerian	female	43	Christian	Igbo	Adamawa State	Lagos, Nigeria	MA in Educational Leadership	Modular studies	BA in Microbiology in Nigeria
6	Student 36	Nigerian	male	36	Christian	Afemia	Lagos	Lagos, Nigeria	MSc Information Security	Modular studies	BA in Technology in Nigeria
7	Student 39	Nigerian	female		Christian	Yoruba	Lagos	Lagos, Nigeria/ UK	MPh	graduated	
8	Student 46	Nigerian	male	49	Christian	Bini	Nigeria	Kabul, Afghanistan	DBA	Modular studies	Uni of Liverpool, MSc in Operations and Supply Chain Management
9	Student 47	Nigerian	male	41	Muslim	Yoruba	Bantu, Oyo state	Abuja, Nigeria	DBA	Modular studies	Yaba College of Technology, University of Calabar, master's in business administration in Business Administration,
10	Student 48	Nigerian	male	41	Christian	Yoruba	Nigeria	Lagos, Nigeria	DBA	Modular studies	Ogun State University, LLB, Manchester

											Business School, Univ. of Manchester, MBA in Finance
11	Student 51	Nigerian	female	47	Christian	Idoma	Lagos	Lagos, Nigeria	MPh	Modular studies	

Table 3: Interview participants with Saudi Arabian citizenship/residence

Student	Referred to as	Citizenship	Gender	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Place of birth	Residence	Programme	Stage of studies	Previous studies
1	Student 4	Emirati	male	39	Not religious (muslim by passport)	Arab	United Arab Emirates	Riyad, Saudi Arabia	DBA	thesis	MBA, Civil Engineering in Sudan
2	Student 33	Egyptian	female	32	Muslim	Arab	Egypt	Riyad, Saudi Arabia	Ph.D. Technology and Enhanced Learning	thesis	MA in Egypt
3	Student 34	Egyptian	male	41	Muslim	White Caucasian	Egypt	Riyad, Saudi Arabia	Information System Mgmt	Graduated in 2017	BA in Egypt in Computer Science, currently PhD at Walden University
4	Student 24	British	male	45	Muslim	Arab	Niger	Riyad, Saudi Arabia	EdD	Modular studies	Richmond Collage, Middlesex University, MBA
5	Student 42	Saudi	female	47	Muslim	Arab-African	Riyad	Riyad, Saudi Arabia	MSc in International Management	Modular studies	King Saud University, BSN in Nursing, Saudi Arabia
6	Student 43	Saudi	male	49	Muslim	Arab	Jeddah	Jeddah, Saudi Arabia	MBA	dissertation	Oxford Brookes University, King Abd Al Aziz University, Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Major,
7	Student 44	Saudi	female	47	Muslim	Arab	Makkah	Makkah, Saudi Arabia	MSc in International Management	Modular studies	College of Education in Makkah, Bachelor of Arts & Education, English Language and English Literature,

8	Student 45	Lebanese	male	26	Muslim	Arab	Sidon, Lebanon	Riyad, Saudi Arabia	MSc in Global Marketing	Modular studies	

2. Interview Protocol

Time & date of the Skype interview:	
Interviewee:	Age:
Residency:	Place of Birth:
Ethnicity:	Religion:
Programme:	Number of successfully completed modules:

The interviewer briefly describes the research project and the interview process, and explains the difference between online and traditional learning. The interview does not always follow the same questions; the interviewer asks about areas of interest from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective (lived space, lived time, lived body, lived relations) and lets students express themselves freely. The interviewer asks questions only to guide the interview without influencing the answers of the participant.

The interviewee is asked in advance to reflect on his/her online learning experience and show an image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song that best describes how he/she felt on the first day of the online class. He or she is asked to share the image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song with the interviewer before the interview. The interviewee comes to the interview with that image, poetry, or song in mind.

Icebreaker questions:

1. How did you feel on the first day of the online class? Can you show the image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song that best describe your experience? What would be the title of your image (in case the participant brings an image to the interview)? Why did you choose this image, poetry, or song?

Areas to be explored about 'lived space':

2. How do you feel about living in your country (name country of residency) and studying online at a UK institution?
3. Where did you study prior to your online studies (home country/abroad)? If abroad, why?
4. How can you describe the differences or similarities between learning in a traditional classroom and learning online?

5. What does it mean for you being (name the culture/ethnic group the student belongs to)? What does it mean for you in the online class?
6. What type of factors, situations affected your online learning experience?
7. How did other cultures in the classroom affect your online learning experience?

Areas to be explored about 'lived time':

8. When do you study online? When did you study in the traditional classroom?
9. How do you study online? How did you study in the traditional classroom?
10. What is your preference for your own learning?

Areas to be explored about 'lived body':

11. What are the basic values of your culture? If you share these values, how do they manifest in your communication style in your country and in the online classroom?
12. What meaning does online learning in your life? What are your goals with online learning?
13. What makes you successful in your online studies?

Areas to be explored about 'lived relations':

14. How is your relationship with your parents? What did you learn from them? How did they raise you as a child? Do you share their beliefs? Is there any difference between your and your parents' views?
15. How could you describe your learning experience and your relationship with the instructor/tutor in the online learning environment? And in your previous studies, in a traditional classroom?
16. How could you describe your learning experience and relationship with your classmates in the online class? And in your previous studies, in a traditional classroom?

Thank the individual for participating in the interview. Assure him/her of the confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews.

3. Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

My name is Dr. Anna Szilagyi. I am conducting doctoral research on the learning experience of students enrolled in online international postgraduate programmes. As you are studying in one of the online programmes of X University, I would like to invite you to participate in this project on cultural identity and learning challenges in international online classrooms.

What is the study about?

The purpose of the study is to understand the cultural and educational background of students and their online learning experience at the master's and doctoral levels. The research will focus on your current online studies and your face-to-face learning experience prior to your online studies. Online learning means that the learning is delivered 100% online, whilst face-to-face or traditional learning refers to a learning environment where students and teachers regularly meet in a physical classroom.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because I would like to understand where you come from, how your learning experience is, and what kind of expectations you have in your online studies.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you agree to take part of this qualitative study, this will involve the following: you will participate in an interview via Skype. Before the interview, you will be asked to (a) read this information sheet, (b) provide some of your personal data that will be kept confidential, (c) sign the consent form, (d) reflect on your online and traditional learning experiences and show an image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song that describe the best how you felt on the first day of the online class and another one to describe the best how you felt on the first day of a traditional classroom in graduate or postgraduate level. You will be asked to share the images, poetries, songs, or lyrics of songs with me before the interview. The first question in the interview will relate to the images, poetries, and songs that you have chosen. No interview can start before completing the above-mentioned points.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. You may have further outreach after the first interview for validation purposes or in case the research requires further follow-up on your responses.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The expected benefits related to the participation are the information gained from your learning experience and expectations, which will help us understand better your student experience and learning challenges related to your country of residence.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is completely up to you to decide whether you take part. Your participation is voluntary. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate without affecting your relationship with your instructors/supervisors, and administrative or academic staff at Lancaster University. The participants are selected according to their citizenship, residence, and academic history in the online programmes of Lancaster University.

What if I change my mind?

In case you consent this time, but during or after the interview you change your mind, you can withdraw your participation up until 7 days after the interview has been conducted. In this case, the data you provided will be removed permanently from our database and will not be used. Please note that often it is impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymized or pooled together with other participants' data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 7 days after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. Participating in the interview does not include costs or expenses for the participant. It will require 5-10 minutes of preparation and 60 minutes for taking part in the interview. If you experience any discomfort during or after the interview, you can contact me directly or my supervisors at Lancaster University. (Please see contact details on the next page.)

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me. Occasionally, the data may be shared with my supervisor as well. The only other person who will have access to what you contributed is a professional transcriber who will listen to the recordings and produce a written record of what you have said. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g., your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, and I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:

I will use it for research purposes only. This will include the publication of the doctoral thesis and the publication of books and journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences, practitioner conferences and inform policymakers about the results of the study.

When writing up the finding from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will use pseudonyms or numbers and anonymized quotes from my interview with you so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in any publications.

How my data will be stored?

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g., your views on a specific topic). In accordance with university guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

Who has reviewed the project?

What if I have questions or concerns?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me or my supervisor. My contact details are:

Dr. Anna Szilagyi

Email: a.szilagyi@lancaster.ac.uk

My supervisor's contact details are:

Dr. Nicola Ingram

Lecturer in Education and Social Justice

Department of Educational Research

Lancaster University

Email: n.ingram@lancaster.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1524 595124

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can contact:

Professor Paul Ashwin

Head of Department

Email: Paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1524 594443

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this research study.

4. Consent Form

Subject: Consent to participate in academic research project

Dear Participant,

My name is Anna Szilagyi. I am conducting a research project on cultural identity and learning challenges in international online classrooms, and I would like to invite you to participate in the research.

The purpose of this research is to understand the cultural and educational background of students and their online learning experience at masters and doctoral level. The research will focus on your current online and your face-to-face learning experience prior to your online studies. Online learning means that the learning is delivered 100% online, whilst face-to-face or traditional learning refers to a learning environment where students and teachers regularly meet in a physical classroom.

Qualitative data will be collected by the researcher, via Skype interviews. Prior to the interview, the participant will be asked to reflect on his/her online learning experience and show an image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song that describe the best how he/she felt on the first day of the online class. He or she will be asked to share the image, poetry, song, or lyrics of a song with the researcher before the interview. The participant will be asked to start to the interview with that image, poetry, or song in mind. The interview will be recorded, and the researcher will use the transcripts derived from the recordings. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The participant may have further outreach from the researcher after the first interview for validation purposes or in case the research requires further follow-up on the participant's responses.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. Participating in the interview does not include costs or expenses for the participant. The expected benefits related to the participation are the information gained about your learning experience and expectations, which will help us to improve our systems and better support our students.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before, during or after participation in the interview. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. Please be assured that your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and your identity as a participant will be known only by the researcher. All the information provided during the interview will be treated strictly confidential and will only be used for scholarly purposes.

This information is provided to you to help you decide whether you wish to participate in the present study or not. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with your instructor, your Student Support Manager. The participants are selected according to their citizenship, residency, and academic history in the online programmes.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the research participant advocate via the USA number 001-612-312-1210 or by emailing {email address of the office at the institutions, anonymized).

By replying to this email with the words, "I consent", the participant grants permission to the researcher to record the interview and analyse the responses in her research study.

If you wish to participate, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent" with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the research procedure. Please keep a copy of this email for yourself.

Thank you for your participation.

Kind Regards,

Anna Szilagyi, Ph.D.

5. Presupposition list

Illustrative examples from my presupposition list were composed alongside the research process to help my self-reflection process.

Date	Presupposition and assumption	Reflection and next steps
September 2017	"This was a bad interview. The Nigerian participant didn't know Skype and we spent 30 min trying to set up the online platform. The line was very bad. He had very strong accent, I barely understood anything. He barely answered the questions and kept complaining about bad connection. I think he didn't know what ethnicity is. I sounded too academic and he had no clue how to answer."	"Failure is also data. This actually confirms what other Nigerian students talked about. Internet, electricity, technology is a big issue in Nigeria. Review your interview protocol and make sure you can explain in common language what ethnicity is."
February 2018	"I am fighting with my own stereotypes about Nigerian students. I was expecting that Nigerian students would have difficulties with cultural sensitivity in the online classroom. Based on some of the literature I read, I expected there would be tensions in the online classroom between Nigerian ethnic groups. None of this happened. They are adult learners, sensitive and understanding, because they used to a multiethnic reality in Nigeria. I am so ashamed that I had this bias."	"Better later than never, well done. Read Fanon and Freire!"
May 2020	"During data analysis, I tend to focus on creating general meaning units based on the research questions. This is wrong. I might lose important data."	"Stay close to the text when you analyse. Forget about the research question for now. Keep focusing on the phenomenological data analysis steps."
January 2023	"Gender issues are very important to me. When I read the stories of female learners, my heart is broken, and feel for them. Am I too subjective now? Where is the border between my female identity and this research? You are not them!"	"It is important to keep in mind that I have this tendency to identify with them. But I am not them! Keep this in mind all the way during data analysis and writing up and just as the participants, chose also an art work and analyse your own online learning experience. The new channel will help you differentiate your experience from theirs."
March 2024	"Murray says I am good at writing and my weakness is structure. This is probably true but there is structure in my head. 😊"	"The readers of this thesis cannot read what is in your head, only what it is on paper. Be as explicit as you can."

6. Audit Trail

This audit trail is created by adapting the process described in Akkerman et al. (2008, p. 266)

Component	Description	What it is? Where to find it?	When?
1. Start document	Includes the conceptual framework or theoretical perspective, the (planned) methods along with a reflection on the researcher position in the study	Research proposal approved at the confirmation meeting	Jul 2017

2. Final document	Thesis, journal article, conference paper, report	Doctoral thesis	Dec 2024
3. Raw data	Raw data and field notes	Anonymized transcripts and field notes are available in NVivo and stored on my computer. Upon request, the researcher will make them available to the readers.	N/A
4. Processed data	Processed data and memos	The themes of the phenomenological data analysis are visualized in Chapter 4, p. 90. Relevant memos are incorporated in this thesis in the form of positionality statements, self-reflective notes, or explanatory text in chapter 4.	N/A
5. Process document	A systematic report on data gathering and data analysis, in terms of the actions undertaken and the associated results	See the steps below.	
	Ethics process	All three institutions approved the research before data gathering including the use of some interviews from previous research	Jun-Jul 2017
	Data gathering	Interviews were conducted via Skype or Teams based on the interview protocol (see Appendix 2). My field notes and self-reflective thoughts about the interviews were collected in my reflection notebook.	Sep 2017-Apr 2018
	Reflection and peer debriefing via regular meetings with 1st supervisor	These meetings helped my reflection process and determine the right direction	Jan 2017-Apr 2018
	Break due to approved intercalation		Apr 2018-Apr 2019
	Transcribing data and Performing member checks	Transcripts were audio or video-recorded and transcribed into a Word file. The transcripts were manually coded, checked, and filed together with the pre-interview materials that participants sent by email. All data have been uploaded to NVivo Member checks were conducted after each transcript was ready by emailing the relevant transcript to the participant who confirmed and approved it.	Apr 2019-Apr 2020
	Data analysis 1	The phenomenological data analysis process is based on the steps described in Ch. 3.:	May 2020-Sep 2021

		Step 1: Reading and listening carefully to the whole description Step 2: Creating meaning units Step 3: reflecting, digesting, and holding the meanings to transform them into more directly revelatory of the value of what the subject said. Re-wording to facilitate intersubjective understanding of the phenomena.	
	Break due to approved intercalation		Sep 2021-Mar 2022
	Reflection and peer debriefing via regular meetings with 2nd supervisor	These meetings helped my reflection process on the subject, as the supervisor was a subject matter expert in the research field	Apr 2019-Jan 2023
	Data Analysis 2	Re-visiting my earlier data analysis process and re-arranged codes into the definitive theme structure Created a visual overview of the data based on Gioia et al. Methodology. See p. 90) and a visualization of the diverse data sources (p. 88)	Jan-Feb 2023
	Data Analysis 3	Progressively focus the data on issues of empowerment and agency, marginalization and cultural domination, privileges, and stereotypes based on the themes of intersectionality and critical pedagogy. (see Ch.5.)	Mar-Apr 2023
	Writing-up	Writing up chapters, immersing again in critical literature, and revisiting the data analysis process, slightly changing research questions based on unexpected findings.	May 2023-Dec 2024
	Peer debriefing	Reflection session with academics at my workplace on this research project	Oct 2024
	Reflection and peer debriefing via regular meetings with 3rd supervisor	These meetings helped my reflection process to re-validate that I am doing the right thing and I am doing it right. I revisited every choice I made earlier, including theoretical frameworks, key concepts, and methodology.	Jan 2023-Dec 2024