

Understanding the relationship between critical literacy, cultural literacy, and
religious literacy for second generation immigrants

Dissertation Talk
SIG-KM Symposium

Malak Khader, Ph.D. Candidate
University of North Texas

Committee Members: Dr. Jeff Allen (Co-Chair), Dr. Sarah Evans (Co-Chair), Dr. Shawne
Miksa, Dr. Caroline Najour

Abstract

This study will explore how and where second-generation Muslim immigrants seek their information using their critical, cultural, and religious literacy skills. Second generation immigrants are known to be bicultural, meaning they learn to balance the culture of their parents along with the culture of their country (Garcia, 2019). By learning some of their culture from their parents, the information they receive is second-hand information, which may lead to filtered or biased information; it may also lead to confusion about information that's stems from culture versus information that stems from religion. This study incorporates three theoretical frameworks: Social Network Theory, Cognitive Authority Theory, and Figured Worlds Theory. The data collected for this study is done through a qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The participants of this study are second generation, adult Muslims of varying cultural backgrounds. This study is currently in the data collection phase, so results are limited.

Keywords: Information literacy, Critical Literacy, Cultural Literacy, Religious Literacy, Information Seeking, Knowledge Sharing, Cognitive Authority

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between critical literacy, cultural literacy, and religious literacy for second generation immigrants of the Islamic faith from varying cultural backgrounds. The study will explore how Muslims receive their information and how they evaluate that information. Further, to explore, how the subjects of the study seek out information pertaining to religion and culture, what sources they use as well as why they choose to use those sources. Being part of the United States, where Islam and its related cultures are not an integrated part of the general society, it can sometimes prove to be hard navigating through sources and people in order to find the answers needed for religious and cultural questions. In addition, many of the original religious texts are written and explained in Arabic, so non-native speakers must use translated texts for their information needs. So, how well do these translated texts meet the needs of the users and are the translations clear and understandable for someone who does not live in that religious and cultural environment?

As a delimitation of this study, only second-generation Muslim adults will be studied. This is due not only to their unique position of knowledge consumption, but also due to the breadth of knowledge they would have accumulated through their experiences as adults in the United States.

Research Questions

1. What is the evidence supporting the prioritization of religious or cultural literacies and/or critical literacy for second generation Muslims?
2. What is the relationship between involvement in religious organizations and religious literacy?
3. How do second generation Muslims weigh the information they receive from varying religious sources?

Theoretical Frameworks

The three theories used for this study are Social Network Theory, Cognitive Authority Theory, and Figured Works Theory. Social Network Theory examines a particular network and how the people or groups interact with each other within this particular network. A network can be something as small as three people, or something as large as thousands of people (Claywell, n.d.). The social networks that should be considered for this study are familial networks, community networks, and possible educational networks.

The second theory that contributes to this study is Cognitive Authority Theory. In his book titled *Second-hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority*, Wilson (1983) discusses how people handle information they receive from a secondary source. We often encounter information that has already been interpreted and analyzed from another source (a friend, coworker, news, etc.). Because of human nature, we usually tend to trust these people unless they have given us a reason not to trust them.

Figured Worlds Theory is the third theory that provides an explanation for the mentality of those who are in environments influenced by culture or religion. Vagan (2011) describes *Figured Worlds* as how people try to “make sense of their world through simplified cognitive cultural schemes or scripts representing their knowledge of typical characters, objects, situations, events sequences of events, actions, and sequences of action” (p. 48).

Literature Review

With this study, all of the literacies mentioned fall under the large umbrella of “information literacy”. The three major literacies covered are critical literacy, cultural literacy, and religious literacy.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is about understanding information while also realizing the context in which that information is presented (Janks, 2013). Janks (2013) also states that being critically literate requires to “read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources” (p. 227). Essentially what Janks is trying to communicate is that with critical literacy, information is not taken at just face value. Information is considered with a critical lens, understanding that the information could have been influenced by culture, media, perspectives, or other factors.

Cultural Literacy

Religious institutions themselves tend to create a culture of their own; within any particular group of people who follow a certain system, one can find norms, similar mentalities, habits, and a general status quo. These can be formed by the religious institutions themselves, especially if the members have been attending the institution for a long period of time and in many cases many people are born into the institution and stay there because it is what’s comfortable and familiar. So, what needs to be examined, in this situation, is the culture that is created among religious groups; with this, one is focusing only on the culture, not the religion.

According to Colonna (2014),

Cultural literacy is a concept that individuals with an awareness of and the capacity to comprehend the History, slang, symbols, and customs that construct

and organize a dominant culture will be better able to communicate with one another. This form of literacy asks that individuals have a body of shared knowledge, have an understanding of the historical context of a text or an image, know common symbols, can identify the meaning of common words or phrases, and can grasp common literary or cultural references. To be culturally literate and understand the History, biography, references, and symbols, one must interact with the culture. (para. 1)

Religious Literacy

There is little research in the field of religious literacy. Finding a thorough definition proved to be very difficult, because of the lack of research. There are some studies on religious literacy, but all have been conducted within a certain context; it is hard to find an explanation of religious literacy out of context. According to the Religious Literacy Project, conducted by Harvard Divinity School,

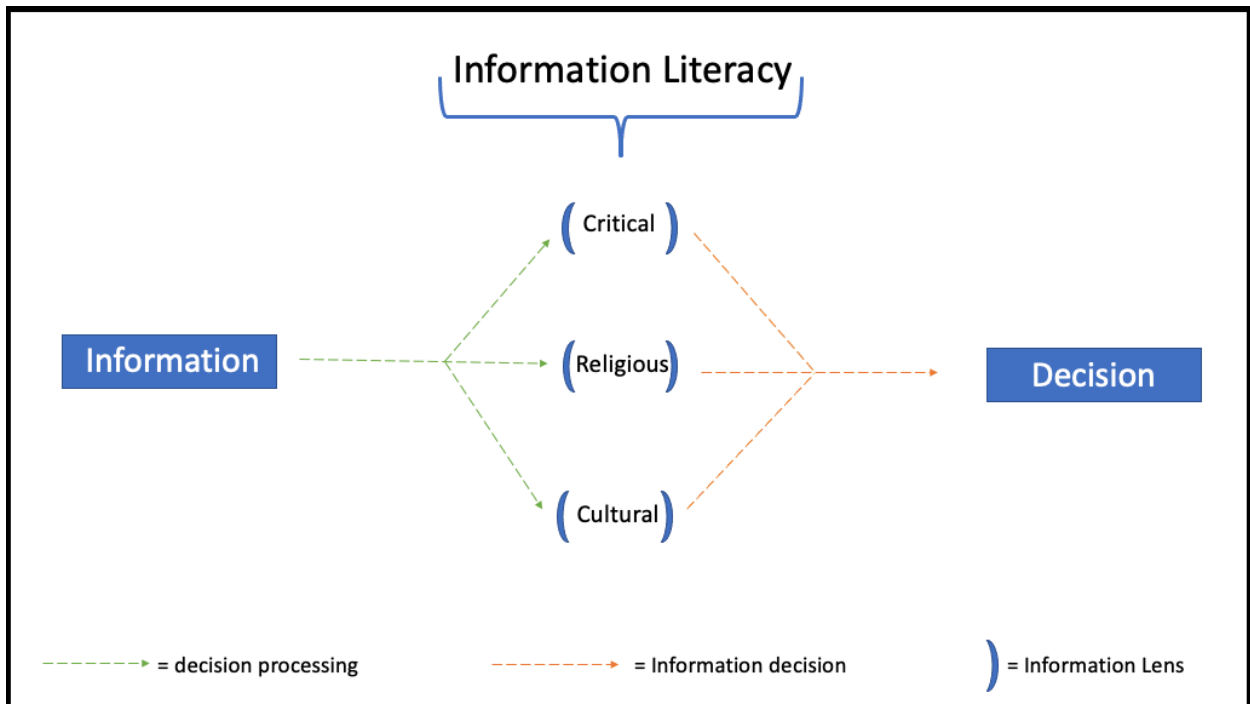
Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess: (1) A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts and (2) The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place. (n.d.a, para. 2)

The “Relationship of Literacies” Conceptual Framework

This study focuses on how a person uses the various important literacies that they have established throughout their life to make decisions. It is hard to assume the different thought processes that go through a person’s mind when making a decision. With the population being studied, one can theorize that when a participant receives some information that prompts an action or decision, they think about this information in three ways or “lenses”: critical, cultural, and/or religious. They will most likely make their decision based off of one “lens” or a combination of lenses and it all depends on the outcome they are trying to achieve.

Figure 1 illustrates this framework within the realm of information literacy. Because information literacy involves seeking, obtaining, evaluating and using information, all three lenses (critical, cultural, and religious) are considered an aspect of information literacy, but it is information literacy from a different perspective. The “information lenses” in this study can be regarded as a perspective used when handling information. The branched dotted lines are there to show that information does not have to follow a single path but can follow a combination of paths before a conclusion is met. It’s important to note that this conceptual framework is created by the author of this study based on the literature previously presented.

Figure 1 The Relationship of Literacies



Methodology

The identified population for this study are adults who are second generation immigrants, meaning they are born citizens of the United States, but their parents are of foreign origin. The population selected will focus on individuals who come from a Muslim background. This population was chosen for their unique position; they have parents who lived in an environment where their culture and religion complimented each other, so the parents were able to learn the religion through schools, communities, friends and family. However, their children, the identified population, grew up in the United States, where there is a stark difference between their religion and their culture; so, these individuals had to learn about major factors of their lives through their parents or other forms of second-hand knowledge (i.e. translated texts). This population was selected because they had to learn about culture and religion through non-traditional avenues, which may impact their interpretation of common ideas and practices.

Data is being collected through semi-structured interviews through zoom. The researcher is recording all the interviews for transcription purposes. Once all information is transcribed, the researcher will then analyze the information via a qualitative software by using content analysis procedures. There are open and closed codes that will be used during analysis to find trends with the study.

The interviews are being conducted individually in order to give the participants their privacy and encourage them to be as honest as possible, since the subject matter can be one of great sensitivity. The subject has been determined sensitive since most of the questions will revolve around information seeking and analysis within the realm of religion and culture. The interview is comprised of three major sections: participants' background, participants' information seeking habits, and participants' religious cultural literacy and cognitive authority.

Results

This study is currently in the data collection phase. Since the data is still being collected there are no conclusive results to report at this time.

References

- Claywell, C. R. (n.d.). What Is Social Network Theory? Retrieved from https://socialnetworking.lovetoknow.com/What_is_Social_Network_Theory.
- Colonna, S. E. (2014). Cultural literacy. In L. H. Cousins (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human Services & diversity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Garcia, M. (2019). Cross-Cultural Identity of Second-Generation Immigrant Youth.
- Harvard Divinity School. (n.d.b). *What is Religious Literacy?*. Retrieved from <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/our-approach/what-is-religious-literacy>
- Janks, H. (2013). Critical literacy in teaching and research1. *Education inquiry*, 4(2), 225-242.
- Vågan, A. (2011). Towards a sociocultural perspective on identity formation in education. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 18(1), 43-57.
- Wilson, P. (1983). *Second-hand knowledge: An inquiry into cognitive authority*. Greenwood Press.