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Gender Environment Adjustment of Saudi Arabian Students in the United States of America

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Abstract: Saudi students come from a country where gender norms are conventional, conservative, and governed by religious principles. Some of the challenges Saudi students face when they meet more permissive Western gender expressions have been outlined in other studies. By concentrating on how couples adjust, this study builds on prior studies. This study aimed to look at how Saudi Arabian students adapt to the diverse gender environments in the United States. Twenty Saudi students (10 couples) participated in qualitative interviews, and three major groups of tactics emerged. First, Cultural Strategies document the ways by which the students attempted to negotiate American daily life (religion, education, food, dress, etc). Second, Gender Strategies address gender relations, taking into account both changes brought on by American culture (such as women driving) and difficulties posed. By the co-education of men and women. Last but not least, social strategies deal with Saudi students' choices in their social lives, including tactics for interacting with and avoiding Americans. Together, the results typically lend support to earlier studies. However, the emphasis on couples also offers fresh perspectives. Most notably, the study reveals that being in the US impacts both men and women. This is particularly true when it comes to childcare and housework. Additionally, even while some of the students who were questioned hoped to bring some of their fresh perspectives and experiences back to Saudi Arabia (such as women's increased independence and chances for meaningful employment), in other areas their ties to Saudi society were strengthened (the modesty of women; no drugs and alcohol).

Keywords: Cultural Strategies, Saudi society, religious principles, American culture, social strategies.

1. Introduction

Currently, approximately two million students across the globe are pursuing higher education at universities located in foreign countries, a number estimated to reach eight million by the year 2025 [1]. Universities in the United States are especially attractive to students [2-5], as reflected by the 586,000 international students currently studying there. This attractiveness is due to the education system that the U.S. provides for international students. Many students are more likely to study in the U.S. to attain higher and better education than in their home country's education. Saudi Arabian students are reported to be among the most rapidly expanding population of international students, with an increase of about 50% since 2011 [6,7].

The issue of gender segregation has been discussed at international summits many times; one of the international summits held in the United States in June 2000 included representatives from 180 different nations from all over the globe who discussed the sensitive issue of gender inequality. Among these 180 nations, Saudi Arabia was ranked 129th in terms of gender segregation and inequality [8]. One of the challenges Saudi couple students face while studying abroad is the foreign gender environment. Both men and women experience a sort of "cultural shock," that is, a feeling of confusion that can be experienced by someone who moves to a new culture or environment (Merriam-Webster, Cultural shock), when arriving in the United States; however, the women are especially impacted by the new environment as they come from a country where women are not allowed to work, drive, or vote [9]. In contrast to Saudi Arabia, women in the United States live their lives side by side with men and appear to be treated in a manner that is identical to men in every field of their lives. [10]. This article investigates how Saudi couples studying in the United States react to this changing gender context, which constantly confronts their traditional culture.

Saudi students come to the United States mainly to acquire the kind of higher education that allows them to develop the professional skills they need to secure good employment. The education they can achieve in Saudi Arabia is too traditional and less advanced than what they need to succeed in the developed world. Also, many do not find the Arab educational system appropriate for higher education as it prohibits women from studying and gaining knowledge. Saudi Arabia is the

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only nation that does not allow the co-education of men and women [11]. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is a country where family responsibilities, religious faith, and cultural practices that reflect religion from every aspect, are the top priorities for every citizen. Therefore, students who go to the United States to study must adjust to a foreign culture where all the values stated above not only have few adherents, but are also, contrary to both law and practice [11].

Several studies have covered many problems male international students from Saudi Arabia face, including language development, living and dining, gender environment, survival capabilities, misperception of success, and extreme competition at the top. Many of these studies also cover the adjustment strategies adopted by these students [5]. Fewer studies have been conducted on the problems faced by female Saudi students [12] and even fewer on Saudi couples studying abroad. The current study is novel in that it attempts to investigate the changes in perception and attitudes that Saudi couples studying in the United States experience. The findings of this study will help us more precisely understand the hurdles and adjustments of Saudi couples in the United States.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, students are also pushed to international universities because Saudi education is based on memorization [3, 13]. Mazawi [14] notes that academic institutions in Saudi Arabia are under great pressure to transform themselves, as these institutes are located in central metropolitan areas that are more affected by Western influences. Moreover, many Saudi students prefer to attain their higher education degrees in the United States because they want to develop their English language skills, make friends with people from different national backgrounds, and prepare themselves for better employment after returning home [15].

The issues experienced by international students studying in the United States were brought into light in the 1950s [5]. Since then, the linguistic, cultural, academic and religious challenges have been highlighted in many studies, and have been shown to affect not only the academic practices of these students, but also their acclimatization to the foreign culture, language adoption, level of participation in their respective educational institutions, survival abilities, and their academic success [3,4,5,15]. Utter and De Angelo [16] highlight that most students also face problems when it comes to securing suitable housing and locating grocery stores that stock the foods they rely on. Suh and Rice [17] have demonstrated that such adjustment issues can lead to depression in international students.

While much of the research on international students focuses on individual students, a few studies have examined processes of adjustment for couples who study abroad. A study conducted by Alshaya [18] focused on the perception of Saudi students in the United States of women's role in Saudi Arabia. Among his sample population, 54% of the interviews were married, 1% were widowed, 3% were divorcees and the remaining 42% were single. He found that about 80% of his respondents were in favor of social, financial and educational empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia and that husbands should support their wives morally and socially because despite the fact that women are supported financially by their husbands in Saudi Arabia, they still are considered submissive when it comes to moral or social encouragement. Heyn [5] found that Saudi students, who are single, whether male or female, encounter more challenges regarding adjustments related to selection of scholarship-based admission in the U.S. universities, social interaction, and language than their married peers. Alsuwaida [19] also reported that it is beneficial for Saudi students to first get married and then go abroad for advanced studies, especially for women since the KASP program requires female applicants to have male companions in the foreign country. Their study further affirms that Saudi students living in the United States cannot escape the teachings of Islam despite the fact that the atmosphere in the United States is dynamic and lenient enough for both genders to be open to each other. This study focuses on Saudi couples attaining their degrees in the United States and this provides additional insights into the challenges and opportunities student couples face during their stay in the U.S.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, does not encourage gender equality [20, 21]. Women have little self-support independence because their fathers and husbands assist them before and after marriage. These social and cultural aspects of the Gulf area become a challenge for women when they study abroad and interact with men [5, 23]. Al-Ghamdi,[24], as cited by Heyn [5], have shed light on the fact that female students pursuing higher education at international universities sometimes change their subject specialties to avoid interacting with men.

Against this background, it is important to ask what challenges Saudi couples studying in the United States face and how they adjust to this foreign culture, not only as individual men and women but also as a couple. This study specifically targets the influence of typical gender representations and gender segregation teachings of Islam on the adjustment to a foreign culture. It also illustrates how couples support one another in adjusting, living, studying, and developing skills and abilities that facilitate their success as international students. Last but not least, this study also addresses how, if at all, these couples change their perceptions of American culture and how they think exposure to American culture will impact them as they return home when their studies are complete.

2. Research Sites and Sampling

In terms of sample size, I conducted interviews with 20 married Saudi students studying at the University of Cincinnati.

The students came to the United States at different times but have all been living in the U.S for a minimum of one year. The participants were also from different cities in Saudi Arabia in order to examine their different adjustment strategies. Both husbands and wives were interviewed together. This study's small sample is sufficient. According to Patton [25], qualitative research requires no set number of participants. Since the goal is to understand the studied phenomenon, a qualitative technique usually uses a smaller population. Meaningful criterion sampling can help achieve this goal by ensuring that respondents are knowledgeable and can answer questions about all the study's key issues [25, 26]. According to Patton [25], the sample size depends on the study's purpose, the researcher's information needs, applicability, reliability, resources, and time. For behavioral attitude studies, "3 to 10 respondents" can accurately conduct thorough interviews [27]. Also, the snowball technique of sampling was applied in which the respondents also referred other individuals to participate the research. This technique is indicated to be one of the approaches used for meaningful sampling techniques [26]. Interviews were first conducted with couples already known to me, and I asked them to recommend other individuals who could participate in this study. I also asked for participation via a Facebook group for Saudi student at the University of Cincinnati.

Study questionnaire:

The interview questions were divided into three sets:

The first set of questions:

Included demographic data about the participant's name, age, city of origin, length of marriage, number of children and time of stay in the United States.

The second set of questions:

Included data about the cultural shock of when the respondents arrived in the U.S, how they managed to adjust to this gender- foreign atmosphere and what strategies and flexibilities they adopted to adjust.

The third set of questions:

Included their experience of living with their spouses while studying abroad, and also addressed changes in perception in terms of the gender- equal environment in the U.S.

The questions were open-ended and aimed to reveal what adjustment measures were carried out by Saudi couples who study in the U.S.

Before conducting the interviews, I explained my research purpose, significance, and anticipated questions. I assured the participants about informed consent and protection regarding the sensitive information being given by them as the topic of my research is general and there is minimal risk associated with participation in the study. Furthermore, it was up to the subjects to choose for the interview to be conducted in the second language, that is English, or their native language, that is Arabic. In case of respondents who selected Arabic, I translated the entire questionnaire into Arabic, and then the answers were transcribed and translated into English after the interview ended. Four couples answered in English, and six chose to answer in Arabic.

3. Questionnaire administration

The interview questions were based on the information that emerged from analyzing the literature that specifically focused on the challenges related to the gender environment faced by Saudi students as couples, their adjustment in relation to these challenges, factors that aided adjustment and their views as they return back to their home country. The rationale for selecting interviews for my study is that for me it was the most suitable medium to be used, in accordance with my research topic as it clearly brought to me the values, beliefs and emotions of my respondents. It helped my respondents to reflect upon and consider all those aspects that helped them in the adjustment and modification of their attitudes and behaviors towards the dynamic gender atmosphere of the U.S. This form of qualitative research presents both structured as well as less-structured questions to obtain desirable data from all the subjects under study [26]. Tellis [28] supported the semi-structured interviews by expressing their significance regarding widening up the scope of data access with inclusion of additional sources that provide information, as cited by Spencer [29]. Spencer also cited another author, [30], who stated that as the questions in this type of approach are open-ended, they stretch from common questions to build trust, to specific questions in accordance with the main theme, thus remain precisely focal to the topic of research.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Emergent strategies

Based on responses gathered from this questionnaire, 3 inter-related themes emerged:

1. Cultural Strategies
2. Gender Strategies
3. Social Strategies

4.1.1. Cultural Strategies

The participants were asked about their first impressions when they arrived in the U.S. and what their expectations were about the U.S. Moreover, I asked in what ways it was different from their expectations, and what aspects of the U.S. they were surprised of. Below, I briefly describe their initial impressions of the United States and then discuss how they adjusted to their more long-term exposure to American cultures.

Initial Impression of the U.S. culture: Expectations Verses Reality

Almost all of the respondents expressed that the culture of the U.S. was almost opposite to that of Saudi Arabia. [Most of them felt] apprehensive about encountering problems they would require difficult adjustments as they arrived. Twelve out of the 20 respondents specifically mentioned that the U.S. is a developed nation in almost every field of life. According to these respondents, technology has a hold on many disciplines here. They were amazed to see all those enormous buildings with infrastructure.

[Nine respondents] indicated that it was overall easy for them to adjust to the foreign culture and they mentioned several reasons for these adjustments. Four of the nine couple's respondents stated that they were already aware of the U.S. culture, so adjustment for them was not hard. Ten out of the twenty respondents were specific in expressing that they faced "cultural shock" upon arrival to the U.S. and felt that the U.S. was very different from what they expected because they were not familiar with American culture. This created many struggles for them to adapt to American culture. For 4 of the 10 respondents, the US disagreed with their country mainly because of religious practices, Finally, 4 of the 10 respondents stated that they expected the US to be more like what is shown in movies, but less worrisome and fearful.

Thus these of Saudi students insisted that they faced initial "cultural shock" upon their arrival, as they thought of the U.S. to be just as it is portrayed in the movies, but they found it comparatively better, more hospitable and friendly. These findings align with those of Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern [12], who found that most of the Saudi women students expected the environment of the U.S. to be as shown over several news media. Their subjects had thought the United States would be "dangerous" and "frightening," a place where "it's easy to kill, there's a lot of very scary stuff, but after spending time in the U.S., they observed it to be "less unfriendly and dangerous than expected, less like the movies, and more friendly, accepting and tolerant of religion." For eight of the twenty interviewees, nothing in the U.S. was surprising or seems to be something that they already had not known, as they were familiar with the American culture and environment because of their friends and family members, who already had been to different cities of U.S. Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern [12] explain similar outcomes that their respondents gave related reasons for no surprise or amazement upon arrival to the U.S. Some also stated that they came from modern families and so, were raised the U.S.

Taken together, the findings concerning the participants' initial impressions of the United States align fairly well with existing research. The participants were impressed by many things (technology, education), critical of others (women's dress), and surprised by many aspects of the United States (friendlier, and easier to manage). Some participants were already familiar with the American culture because of their family members or friends' exposure to the American culture.

Impact of Exposure of Saudi Arabian students to the U.S. culture (Challenges and Adjustments)

Regarding the initial impact of the U.S. culture, some students found it shocking but as compared to the movies they found it to be a friendly culture. Al-Abiky [31] stated many mutli-dimensional elements that determine the cultural identity of an individual, which include religion, language, urge to practice one's own culture, life with family and several characters of physical appearance. These are the factors that bring complications to the adjustment of international students to new environments. Based on previous research, the author concluded that culture directs the way people think, act, and feel, and becomes their vision, through which they judge the world around them. However, it may mask other people's standards, resulting in people perceiving their own culture as the "correct culture" and the rest of the cultures becoming "unnecessary and alien" and often declared wrong and unworthy of practice. In what follows, I first discuss the challenges the students faced when it comes to managing everyday life – food, transportation, products, stores, the rhythm of everyday life, etc. – and then address religion as a particularly challenging aspect of living in the United States.

Managing Everyday Life

Saudi couple students that I interviewed faced difficulties in coping with various factors of the U.S. culture. These difficulties included residential issues, religious issues, travelling and the expensiveness of general commodities in the U.S.

Seven of the 20 respondents in the study specified “residence” to be one of the problems they had to face when they arrived at U.S. Similar concerns about the difficulties in finding a satisfactory residence for them were expressed by the remaining 13 respondents. The finding of the study is consistent with the one indicated by Hofer [3]. Finding satisfactory residence is a problem for Saudi students since they want to live where other Saudi live. Others talked about challenges linked to the expectations of educational system, whereas , many of the Saudi students are successful in academia in their home country, therefore they take the education system of the U.S. to be an easy thing to handle as well, but when they arrive to the U.S. with this perception of success, they mostly end up facing a lot of adjustment problems with the U.S. education system and its tough schedule[5]. This often leads to somewhat uncomfortable situations for the Saudi students in the U.S.

Among the aspects of the U.S. culture that were difficult to cope with were; practicing religion, residence, strict education system and travelling (in case of women), whereas for 6 of the respondents, travelling and management of the traffic system in the U.S. were among the top aspects that were easy to adjust to, then came the education system and the beneficial presence of technology in the U.S. lifestyle. The same aspects of American culture that 30% from participants struggled with were perceived as easy to manage according to other participants. This included technology, education, travelling, shopping, healthcare facilities and insurance, traffic, weather and simple organization of life in the United States. Four of the 20 respondents notably mentioned the education system of U.S. to be an easy aspect of adjustment. Four other respondents mentioned that their life was made very easy due to immense technological advancements. For 6 of the 20 respondents, travelling and driving were comparatively easier in the U.S. Four respondents also mentioned “shopping” as an easy element of the U.S. culture. The traffic system in the U.S. was another considerable factor of the U.S. Six of the respondents stated that they initially faced a hard time in adjustment at the beginning of their arrival to the U.S. specifically while being single, but as they got married, they felt adjustment became easier due to spousal support.

The majority of the respondents faced difficulty in adjusting to the U.S. culture and a minority of the respondents were used to the U.S. culture, which made their adjustments easier. In addition, some considered allowing some flexibility in their own traditions to adjust to the new culture, such as modifying their lifestyle. Respondents expressed that they really enjoyed travelling within the U.S. In light of these findings, it can be said that the lifestyle that these Saudi couple students had in their home country, had a great impact on their adjustment to the foreign culture.

Is U.S. “A better place to live”?

Most of the participants (60%) stated that they would love to stay in the U.S. and would settle there forever, if it were possible. The leading reason for this response was that life in the U.S. was made really easy due to technological advancements, the education system and the many employment opportunities. Another reason the respondents presented for wanting to settle in the United States was freedom for woman. According to these respondents (60%), women are free to drive, vote and can aim to have their dream job given the opportunities that are available to them in the U.S., whereas such opportunities are not available to women in Saudi Arabia. However, seven of the twenty respondents expressed their discomfort with the lifestyle in the U.S. They insisted that the U.S. was a totally different society; the place, the people, the lifestyle, nothing was similar to their home country. Thus, they felt socially isolated most of the time because of these reasons. Some of these respondents also expressed difficulty in sticking to their own culture here; therefore, they preferred going back to their home country. For three of the respondents, adjustment to the U.S. culture was very difficult because they were struggling with the English language. These findings parallel the ones reported by Caldwell [15], Al-morshedi [23] and Alanazi, [2]. This social isolation is also partly attributed to communication difficulty, as some (40%) of these respondents did not have enough linguistic skills to communicate with Americans in the neighborhood and classrooms. Hence, the lack of English language led to social isolation.

Managing Religion and Islamic Values

Eight of the 20 participants interviewed mentioned that they had faced a tough time balancing their religious obligations with the cultural environment in the United States. Couples that had children also faced difficulty in practicing their own religion because their children were no familiar with their own Saudi traditions and like the American culture. For some of the women, following their religious obligations in terms of head covering caused problems, owing to the curiosity and prejudice towards this type of dress code expressed by Americans, as stated by Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern [12]. For four of the respondents, it was easy to hold onto their own culture because they believe that America is a state of culture diversification and that Americans express their respect towards all international students who study at the university and live nearby the campus. The majority of the Saudi couple students faced many problems when it came to adjusting to the U.S. culture. According to them, the U.S. culture was almost opposite to their Saudi culture which caused them to experience “cultural shock” when they first arrived in the United States. The factors that

pleased these Saudi couple students included the building infrastructure and the technological advancement in the U.S and the environment in the American cities.

4.1.2. Gender Strategies

The idea behind these strategies is to examine the general perception of the Saudi couple students regarding the gender environment in the United States, and to determine what they do to adapt to this environment. The theme covers various mutual supportive strategies adopted by spouses to adjust to this environment and also the adoption of more flexible gender behaviors. Two sub-themes emerged from the data analysis, the first capturing the participants' general perceptions of the American gender environment and the second capturing the strategies they adopted to manage this new environment. The theme also examined how living in the U.S. has changed the perspectives of the Saudi couple students in terms of the U.S. gender environment as well as the role of women in society. Out of twenty participants, fourteen (70%) mentioned that women should be given the general right of driving. All the husbands among these fourteen respondents taught their wives to drive in the U.S.

Thirteen of the respondents (65%) indicated that after living in the U.S. they have learnt to share the burden of family responsibilities, which was previously totally dependent on women, and also come to view this as something that should also be changed in Saudi Arabia. Two of the respondents mentioned that they adopt some improvement in dealing with others after living in the U.S. There were nine respondents (45%) who expressed that living in the U.S. has modified their perception with respect to their education, employment, overall freedom and participation of husbands with family responsibilities. On the point of gender inequality, women in Saudi Arabia are subject to strict social laws where they are not even allowed to drive or vote. They are responsible for doing all the housework and taking care of the children on their own. But after living in the United States of America, they found that this was wrong, as women should be given all rights. With flexibility towards sharing household responsibilities and teaching the wife to drive

Discussion of Gender-related issues with Americans

When respondents were asked whether they discuss gender related issues with other Saudi or American friends, eight men (80% from men) and nine women (90% from women) answered that they often discuss issues of freedom for women and better opportunities for them. Additional gender-related issues they discussed include the burden of classroom participation for women, injustice in employment, and gender mixing in social life. Three of the participants (15%) mentioned that they never initiate any discussion by themselves but respond when asked, either by Americans or Saudis. Six of the respondents mostly discussed the issues of gender environment, freedom of women in the U.S. and moral values followed by American people with Saudis only. The remaining respondents said that they mostly discussed gender related issues with only their Saudi friends. This can be explained as they might feel shy or they might not be bold enough or may not have good communication with their American peers because of cultural differences. According to Al-Morshedi [23] adoption of this isolated behavior only leads to heightened feelings of being a foreigner and ought to be changed for adjustment in the foreign culture to be easy.

General perception of the gender environment in the U.S.

When respondents asked about what these Saudi couples think about the gender environment in the United States, six (30%) of the twenty participants (four women and two men) stated that the gender environment in the United States provides independence to women, as can be seen on their way to accomplish their life goals in the form of acquiring the best quality of education, and being a prominent part of employment. Women are free to make decisions about their own lives and other things they wish to do, so women believe no gender discrimination exists in the U.S.

The most positive aspect of the gender environment in the U.S. is that there are no restrictions upon women, they are free to educate themselves, get jobs, and earn a living; however, there are no limits in relationships between opposite genders, which is something very awkward for a Saudi Muslim woman. Another six (30%) of the twenty respondents reflected their concerns about the openness of the gender environment in the U.S., saying that it was too hard for Saudi women to adjust to it. Out of the twenty participants, four highlighted that in terms of employment, opportunities for women are more restricted when it comes to jobs that require greater physical effort, in comparison with opportunities provided to men.

Strategies for Managing the Gender Environment of U.S.

Out of twenty, four respondents (20%) expressed their deep struggles with adjusting to the gender environment in that they could not let go of their own teachings, so it was "always difficult" for them to adjust to the dynamic gender environment of the U.S. Out of the twenty, ten respondents (50%) claimed that adjustment to the gender environment was difficult initially, but they soon realized that they had to stay in the U.S. until they complete their degrees so it was necessary for them to adjust to the gender environment. Eight (40%) of the twenty respondents also mentioned specific instances when it was very hard to respond to the gender environment in the U.S. These answers were mostly indicated

by women who are enrolled in the university and mothers who care about their children. The gender environment was never an issue in terms of adjustment for four of the respondents (20%). They adjusted themselves to this type of environment by avoiding the gender environment problems or bringing some flexibility to their own lives.

Spousal mutual support with respect to adjustment in the gender environment of the U.S.

The majority of the participants emphasized the support they received from their spouse to adjust to the open and boundary-less gender environment of the U.S. Those who came to the United States as unmarried said that they found adjustment difficult as a single person in the beginning, but as soon as they got married, both men and women found the desired support through their spouses to adjust, making the adjustment easy. Couples expressed that discussing issues with their partners helped them to let go of any stress or depression caused by living in the foreign environment, and thus be motivated to become active socially. Similar findings were reported by Heyn [5]. Some of the parents in the study discussed the values of their own culture in contrast to the American culture, and talked about their efforts to bring up their children in accordance with their own religious teachings and values. In a study conducted by Suits [32], husbands found many ways to support their wives who were studying. These support strategies included being available at the hour of need, awareness and engagement of husbands in several family responsibilities when their wives did not have time for the family. Another study conducted by Yazdani et. al. [33] indicated that the mutual support between spouses has a significant effect on “marital satisfaction, marital communication and conflict resolution.

The majority of the Saudi couple students did not appreciate the open gender environment of the U.S., for them, it was too bold to be accepted by a Saudi Muslim. Some of the concerns that they raised about this openness included forming relations with the opposite gender, bold dressing (leading to body exposure) and open-mindedness of American women, and less-desirable employment opportunities for many women. Most of them found it hard to adjust to this dynamic gender environment but they soon adopted flexible behavior, like leniency in their attitude towards avoidance of the opposite gender, increased participation in mix-group discussions and sometimes the attendance of informal functions, as they felt it mandatory for their adjustment to life in the U.S. to participate in social and academic settings actively. For the rest of the respondents, it was always difficult to survive in the gender environment of the U.S. only a few respondents (20%) expressed that gender was never an issue for them and they enjoy their stay at the U.S.

4.1.3. Social Strategies

This theme covers responses related to how international Saudi couples navigate their social environment, how they perceive Americans to be, do they develop friendly relations with foreign people and how they like living in the U.S. or if they feel socially isolated (or homesick) and want to go back to their own country, and what aspects of the U.S. society (specially gender environment) that these Saudi couple students would like to adopt for the rest of their life, whether they stay in the U.S. or return back home to Saudi Arabia. After going through all the responses that been recorded for this theme, the following sub-themes arose:

- Overall Relation with Americans and American Society.
- Managing Social Life in Terms of Gender.
- Aspects of American Social Life that Saudi Students Want to Bring Back Home.

Overall Relation with Americans and American Society

Most of participants were actually surprised when they arrived to the U.S. The reason they give for their amazement is that they initially expected Americans to be unkind, but that was not the case at all. These respondents also attributed their adjustment to the U.S. environment to be easy because of social interaction and communication with Americans. According to them, Americans understand the trouble of international students so they adopt a very kind and helping attitude towards them, therefore international students can adjust well, both in their academic and social life. These findings support previous research, as reported by Alanazi [2], that adopting a friendly attitude towards Americans both inside and outside the academic boundaries, can help ease the adjustment challenges and difficulties. Some of the female participants (30%) added that they had already learned English language skills in their home country. Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern [12] and Heyn [5] highlighted that for Saudi female students, linguistic skills helped them to interact in a purposeful manner that made them more confident in their academic performances.

Managing Social Life in Terms of Gender

When respondents were asked about what changes they had implemented in regards to gender related behaviors like dressing, gender mixing, women driving and sharing family responsibilities, ten out (50%) of twenty participants mentioned that they had adopted flexibility in their way of dressing, so as not to appear “awkward” to the Americans, for example, by not wearing traditional clothes that they usually wear when they are in Saudi Arabia. However, two of the respondents (10%) stated that they retained their identity and did not bring any change to the way they dress. Five

of the respondents stated that they had to change their approach to gender mixing in order to adjust to American culture.

Aspects of American Social Life that Saudi Students Want to Bring Back Home

Brown [34] mentioned that studying at international universities not only provides better opportunities in terms of acquiring quality education, but also widens the vision of students in terms of the value of different cultures, even if the students may not change their own cultural practices. However, Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern [12] cite several studies that show that living in the U.S. transforms the perceptions and behaviors of international students; they become more independent, confident and self-reliant [7]. These findings complement the current findings in that the majority of the participants had changed their previous ideas about gender inequality as observed in Saudi Arabia.

Changes in the perception of shared family responsibilities were the most prominent among the respondents regarding the positive influences from U.S. society. Nine (45%) of the twenty interviewees expressed that they would want to take this adaptation to Saudi Arabia, as it might change the strict practice of imposing the entire burden of caring for the family upon women. Respondents also liked the idea that women in Saudi Arabia should be given general rights in terms of decision-making power, education, driving and respectable employment. Eight out of twenty respondents expressed their support for such changes.

Islamic teachings, a woman is created as delicate specie; her physique is not strong enough to do tough jobs, or jobs that may hurt her in some way while in the workplace. For example, working in a factory can be hard for women in Saudi Arabia, but recently they are more likely to work in other fields like in offices or shops. These findings were in alignment with those of Alshaya [18], who found that many Saudi students support general women's rights, both in society and in the family, such as the right to drive.

There were several aspects of the U.S. society observed by the respondents that were never likely to be carried to Saudi Arabia upon their return. These aspects particularly included gender dynamism and the way of in which most American women dress. Eight (40%) of the twenty respondents expressed their concerns about the openness of the gender environment in the U.S. The punishments and regulations for rape and sexual assault are not as strict in Saudi Arabia as it is in the United States. Adopting these kinds of punishments and regulations in Saudi Arabia will create a fair environment to live in since some crimes are not taken as seriously as the American society treats them.

In sum, it is evident from the responses of participants that Americans were overall warm and welcoming and helped these Saudi couple students to adjust in the foreign environment by building friendly social relations. The majority of my subjects also stated that they enjoyed the lifestyle in the U.S. specifically due to the way life was made easy by the advanced and easily accessible technology and freedom (for women). It can also be observed that those students who had good English language skills adjusted more easily and rapidly to the American society than those who faced communication problems with Americans due to English not being their first language. The more social respondents usually freely discussed gender related issues with their peers, both Saudis and Americans. In contrast, a few did not discuss gender-related problems with Americans, which can be attributed to their social isolation. Also, after living at the U.S. most of the respondents changed their perception towards the role of women in society and seemed eager to adopt various positive aspects of the American society, like the support of women driving, higher education and employment opportunities, and unburdening them by equally sharing the family responsibilities.

To conclude the social relations theme, the majority of the respondents have friends from Saudi Arabia, but some also socialized with Americans. They are most likely to form relations with their American classmates at the university to practice their English and better understand American culture. They meet with each other on campus or sometimes in a cafe to do homework and study. The social life of these Saudi couple students is mostly formed at the university, and they sometimes gather with other Saudi friends to socialize (drink coffee, eat food and have fun in their houses). Their children's social life is mostly formed in daycares, schools and through gatherings with other Saudi friends. The participants indicated that the social life with American peers and their friendliness at the university helped them a lot in adjusting to the American culture.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Most respondents thought the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were very different culturally. Due to several transition issues, culture shock caused depression in some students. The "main problems" that Saudi couple students faced were practicing their religion, language, general communication with Americans, living and dining, and the U.S. school system, but traveling and technology made life easier. Some Saudi couples struggled initially, but spousal support helped them adjust after marriage. After some cultural shock, the students found the society friendlier than expected. This improved their cultural adaptation.

Second, Gender Strategies. Saudi ladies found the U.S.'s free gender atmosphere too bold. A minority stated that the

U.S. gender environment gave women independence and promising prospects in school, politics, and jobs, which Saudi Arabia lacks. These students likewise struggled with the U.S. gender environment. After realizing that adapting to the gender environment would help their studies, some changed their conduct to accept life in America. Some participants could not interact with the opposing gender due to cultural norms. Since single people had more trouble adjusting to the U.S. gender environment, most of these respondents thought their spouses helped. Exposure to a new culture illuminates many societal realities. Married people adjusted better in this study. In conclusion, the gender milieu in the U.S. differs from Saudi Arabia, although some couples adopt it.

The third theme, Social Strategies; due to limited interaction, most had few American pals. However, some participants stated that talking to other Saudis and Americans helped them acclimate to U.S. social life. Some respondents had difficulties adjusting to the foreign culture because they needed to learn English. Most Saudi couple students stated that living in the U.S. changed their views on Saudi women's rights and gender injustice. However, many condemned America's open gender relations, notably American women's daring attire and body exposure.

6. Study Limitations

Recruiting enough people to participate in the study was the most difficult element. In addition, some participants renounced their participation once I detailed the importance of signing the consent form. Even though I promised them that their information would be kept private, they were still hesitant to participate because they associated the study with a higher formality than it had. The participant's real name would be changed to an alias. Some conservative couples posed a difficulty because they were concerned about how I would question them. Some Saudi male students adhere strictly to the tradition of not allowing their wives to sit alone with another male student. Even if both men and women are being interviewed, the women will only talk to other women, and the men will only talk to other men.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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