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I, Faisal Alsanea, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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**How Saudi Students Adjust to the Gender Environment in the United States:
A study of the Strategies Couples Use**

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How Saudi Students Adjust to the Gender Environment in the United States: A Study of the Strategies Couples Use

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How Saudi Students Adjust to the Gender Environment in the United States: A Study of the Strategies Couples Use

ABSTRACT

This study examines how students from Saudi Arabia adjust to the gender environment of the United States. Saudi students come from a nation with a traditional and conservative gender climate that is guided by religious dictates. Other studies have identified some of the difficulties that Saudi students have when they encounter more liberal Western gender expressions. This study extends previous research by focusing on how couples adjust. In qualitative interviews with 20 Saudi students (10 couples), three broad categories of strategies emerged. First, Cultural Strategies capture the varied ways that the students tried to navigate every-day life in America (religion, education, food, dress, etc). Second, Gender Strategies address gender relations specifically, and includes both adjustments prompted by American life (e.g., women driving) and challenges associated with the co-education of men and women. Finally, Social Strategies involve the decisions Saudi students make regarding their social life, which includes strategies for both reaching out to Americans and avoiding Americans. Taken together, the findings generally support previous research. But the focus on couples also provides new insights. Most importantly, the study finds that not only women, but also men, are affected by life in the United States. This is so especially when it comes to child care and household labor. Moreover, while several of the interviewed students anticipated bringing some of their new insights and experiences back home to Saudi Arabia (women's greater independence; greater opportunities for women to do meaningful work), in other ways their commitment to Saudi culture was strengthened (the modesty of women; no drugs and alcohol).

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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 (Altbach 2004). Universities in the United States are especially attractive to students (Alazani, 2014; Hofer, 2009; Razek, 2012; Heyn, 2013), as reflected by the 586,000 international students that are currently studying in the United States. 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 their home country's education. Students from Saudi Arabia are reported to be among the most rapidly expanding population of international students, with an increase of about 50% since 2011 (Davis 2014; Alraddadi 2014).

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 (Alsaleh 2009). One of the various challenges encountered by Saudi couple students while studying abroad, is precisely 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 (Doğruel 2015). In contrast to Saudi Arabia, women in the United States are not only living their

lives side by side with men but also appear to be treated in a manner that is identical to men in every field of their living (Jakobsen & Bernstein 2009). In this thesis, I examine how Saudi couples studying in the U.S adjust to this new gender environment that poses challenges to their traditional culture at every turn.

The main reason Saudi students come to the United States is to acquire the kind of higher education that allows them to develop 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 sole nation that does not allow co-education of men and women (Almunajjed 1997). 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 each and every citizen (Levy 2011). Therefore, students who go to the United States to study have to adjust to a foreign culture where all the values stated above not only have few adherents, but also are contrary to both law and practice.

Against this background, it is important to ask what challenges Saudi couples studying in the United States face and how they adjust, not only as individual men and women, but also as a couple, to this foreign culture. This study specifically targets the influence of typical gender representations and gender segregation teachings of Islam on the adjustment to the 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.

A number of studies have covered many of the problems faced by male international students from Saudi Arabia, including language development, living and dining, gender environment, surviving capabilities, and misperception of success and extreme level of competition at the top. Many of these studies also cover the adjustment strategies adopted by these students (Heyn 2013). Fewer studies have been conducted on the problems faced by female Saudi students (Lefdhahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern 2015) and even fewer on Saudi couples studying abroad. The current study is novel in that it is an attempt 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.

Background

The flow of students to International Universities: The Charm of the West

There are many factors that “push” and “pull” students to international universities, including a shortage of space at local universities, a strive for excellence in research and academic independence, and the importance of acquiring a foreign degree, especially an American one (Altbach 2004). In the case of Saudi Arabia, students are also pushed to international universities because Saudi education is based on memorization, as needed to learn Qur’an, which is an educational approach that is not conducive to the pursuit of higher degrees (Hofer 2009; Danielewicz-Betz 2013). Mazawi (2005) 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 (Spalding & Flack, 1976; Caldwell 2013).

The government of Saudi Arabia is well aware of the limitations of its institutions of higher education and has begun to adopt a western-style form of education that emphasizes concepts, team-work, progress in critical thinking, and implication of information technology (Ramady and Al-Sahlawi 2005; Krieger 2007, as cited by Danielewicz-Betz 2013). Among these efforts is the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) that provides financing for Saudi students to pursue education abroad; this program specifically focuses on the academic disciplines that can assist the development of the nation as a whole, like IT, medicine and engineering (Al-Mubarak 2011). Studies have shown that, in addition to improving their career chances, exposure to the United States strengthens Saudi Arabian students' respect for their home country even as their cultural vision broadens (Hofer 2009; Al-Ghamdi 1994). This scholarship program has also clearly benefitted the participating educational institutions in the United States, both financially (Hofer 2009, Alanazi 2014) and in terms of student enrollment (Hofer 2009). Currently, Saudi Arabia is fourth, after China, India, and South Korea, when it comes to sending international students to the United States (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern 2015).

General problems encountered by International Students; Challenges and Adjustments

The issues experienced by international students studying in the United States was brought into light in 1950s (Heyn 2013). 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 (Abdel-Razek 2012; Caldwell 2013; Heyn 2013; Hofer 2009; Al-Abiky 2009; Al-Morshedi 2011; Mustafa 1985). Utter and De Angelo (2015) 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 (2016) have demonstrated that such adjustment issues can lead to depression in international students.

All international students face challenges, and they adopt a wide range of different adjustment strategies (Hassan and Singh 2016). Which particular strategies students adopt depend on a host of factors associated with both the students themselves and the context in which they find themselves. Wang (2003) found that the capability to efficiently communicate in English (Anson, 2011), the development of organizational skills and expertise in one's field of specialty, stress-overcoming strategies, perception towards the foreign culture, resilience, patience, degree of adaptability, courtesy, self-esteem and self-determination development are aspects contributing to adjustment while studying abroad. Among these factors, one of the most significant is the interaction and bonding with Americans (Heyn 2013; Al-Morshedi 2011). This interaction can take place either face-to-face or via social media sites and smartphones (Rui and Wang 2015).

While much of the research on international students focus on individual students, a few studies have examined processes of adjustment for couples who study abroad. A study conducted by Alshaya (2005) 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 (2013) 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. Taylor and Albasri (2014) 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.

Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013) found that most Saudi Arabian students studying abroad experience discrimination when it comes to their local customs and fashion. The values of the Saudi society follow the couples wherever they go, and can result in segregation from Americans and their way of life. However, most Saudi students in the United States adopt some flexibility in their values and traditions in order to adjust to the foreign environment (Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013).

Saudi Norms regarding Gender Inequality and The adjustment of Saudi Women to the U.S. culture

It is well-documented that Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, do not encourage equality between men and women, and this resistance to providing social, communal, educational and managerial rights to women as equally as men has been most difficult in terms of women empowerment. Women are not even eligible to vote.

(Metcalf, 2008; Alsaffaf 2014). The administration of Saudi Arabia is based on Wahhabi norms that are the strictest in Islam in terms of women suppression, in comparison with other forms of Islam, and so every type of restraints is enforced upon women (Doğruel 2015; Sakr 2008). Moreover, there is no concept of freedom for women in their self-support, in that, before marriage, they are considered the responsibility of their fathers and after marriage, their husbands. They also need to seek consent in most of their affairs from their guardians. This very aspect of the Gulf area becomes a challenge for women when they study abroad and have to interact with the opposite gender (Al Morshedi; Heyn). Al-Ghamdi, and Al-Shedokhi, as cited by Heyn 2013 have shed light on the fact that female students who pursue higher education at international universities sometimes change their subject specialties in order to avoid interaction with men.

The issue of women's rights and freedom has come into priority in the previous five decades across the globe. Even though it was in the nineteenth century when the issues regarding women rights began to be addressed internationally, it gained great focus in the post-war era (Berkovitch & Bradley 1999). As the modernization is spreading across the globe, women of the Gulf region have struggled a lot for the acquisition of basic rights, especially education. Under the statement of Holy Qur'an, knowledge-gaining is an obligation for every Muslim, either male or female, and in 1961 the

government established the General Presidency of Girl's Education (Al Saloom, 1995, as cited by Hofer 2009), whose mission was to provide education to Saudi girls. This step laid the foundation for the development of sixteen elementary schools (Hofer 2009, Doumato 1999).

Women in Saudi Arabia have influenced various communal and gender relationship as they have pushed for societal and employment reforms (Alshaya 2005). They had to step into the world of employment reform using “wasta”; an individual of dominant status whose position can be used to persuade others, owing to extreme resistance of their entrance in the work-force (Al-Hussain & Al-Marzooq 2016). They also used the power of news and electronic media to spread awareness and seek support from other women. These media included *Islamische Zeitung (IZ)*, a newspaper published by Muslims in Germany that provides a space for debate among Muslims of different countries and an opportunity to widely publicize issues and problems in economic, communal, cultural, social and political arenas (Kuppinger 2011), and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including the “Oct26Driving” campaign ran on Twitter by the women of Saudi Arabia regarding their efforts to secure the right to drive (Yuce et. al., 2014). The media focuses a lot on the issue of women driving in Saudi Arabia. The “Oct26Driving” campaign encouraged many Saudi women to go behind the wheels since there is no specific law that prohibits their driving, but culturally men and the police prohibit it.

These struggles have somewhat reformed the patriarchal system of Saudi Arabia, leading to provision of a number of facilities and opportunities to women in the last seven years (Al-Kayed 2015). These recent cultural and political changes have provided women with the opportunity of studying abroad, just like men. It is as a result of these

developments that currently 17,117 Saudi women are studying in the United States on KASP and constitute 22 percent of all the Saudi Arabian students studying in United States (SACM, personal communication, November 3, 2012).

These female students face various challenges, including having to take classes from male teachers, studying alongside male students, no driving skills and an absence of gender separation in almost all public fields. Scholars refer to these adjustment challenges as “culture shock” (Berry & Ward, 2006; Sam & Berry, 2006; Ward, 2004, as cited by Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern 2015, pg. 408). The authors further insist that regardless of these problems and adjustments, women receive better training in the United States than their home-country, as far as the development of their professional skills are concerned. This experience has also resulted in an opening up of their perception regarding their own culture as well as the foreign culture. They challenge social patterns that assert their dependence upon men, and insist that Islam is being misperceived in this regard (Al-Ghamdi 1994).

Overall, the literature has clearly demonstrated why Saudi students prefer studying in the United States than in local universities in their home country. These opportunities for Saudi students provide several benefits to both the countries, and contribute to globalization. Although these students, especially married women, experience adjustment problems regarding the culture and gender environment, they somehow adopt flexible attitudes towards the American culture in order to adjust and perform well academically. Upon exposure to a versatile and dynamic atmosphere in the U.S, flexibility may occur regarding beliefs of their local norms and traditions in order to adjust to the American culture.

METHOD

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the dynamic and permissive gender atmosphere of the United States on Saudi student couples coming from the cautious and patriarchal society of Saudi Arabia. More specifically, the aim is to explore the strategies that the students use to manage the foreign environment. In doing so, I also address the specific gender-related issues experienced by Saudi student couples and examine to what extent husbands and wives mutually support each other as they try to adapt to the gender environment of the U.S. The scheme of research adopted for this study consisted of a qualitative approach that included interviews with the respondents. The open-ended questions in the interview guide intended to reveal the adaptation strategies used by Saudi couple students that study in U.S.

Sample Size and Data Collection

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 because of traditions that do not allow strange men to be alone with women without their spouses, which means I interviewed ten couples. Although a fairly small sample, it is sufficient for the purposes of this study. As Patton (2002) has shown, there is no hard and fast rule when it comes to the required number of participants in qualitative research. In fact, a qualitative approach very frequently implies a smaller number of population since

the purpose is typically to get deep knowledge of the research phenomenon. For the accomplishment of this goal, a meaningful-criterion-sampling can be helpful to assure that the respondents would be an effective source of knowledge and be able to answer questions regarding all those issues that are pivotal to the study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The sample size to be selected is further based upon the reason for a particular study to be conducted, the nature of information requested by the researcher, suitability, reliability and the resources and time available to the researcher, as noted by Patton (2002). Moreover, comprehensive interviews can be accurately conducted using “3 to 10 respondents” for studies based on natural phenomenon i.e. behavioral attitudes (Creswell 2014).

The interview questions were divided into three sets. The first set of questions included information 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 information about the cultural shock for when the respondents arrived in the U.S, how they managed to adjust in this gender foreign atmosphere and what strategies and flexibilities did they adopted in order 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. 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 (Merriam 2009). 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.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I made sure to explain the purpose, significance and the anticipated questions of my research. 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 then translated back to English after the interview ended. There are 4 couples who chose to answer in English and 6 couples who chose to answer in Arabic.

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 (Merriam 2009). Tellis (1997) 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 (2016). Spencer (2016) also cited another author, (Galletta 2013), 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.

The biggest challenge that I faced was in obtaining enough subjects to participate in the study. Another challenge was participants changing their mind after I explained the consent form and the need for their signature. They felt more cautious about sharing their information, as they thought that the study will be more formal, even after I assured them that their information would be confidential and I would have an alias of the participant's name. I also faced a challenge with some conservative couples about the way that I would interview them together. As one of the traditions, some Saudi students are strict toward not letting their wives sit with another man by themselves. Even if they are interviewed together, they prefer communication to happen between the same gender, where a women communicate with women and men only communicate with men.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Based on responses gathered from these questions, 3 inter-related themes emerged:

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

Cultural Strategies

It is evident from the literature review that international students face several problems related to adjusting to American culture as they leave their home countries for the purpose of attaining degrees from prestigious institutes in the U.S. To get at these issues I asked the participants about their first impressions when they arrived to 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 first briefly describe their initial impressions of the United States and then move into a discussion of 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 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. Ahmad, a 28 year old participant who had been living in the U.S. for 5 years and had 1 child, responded:

I was a bit amazed by the professionalism of work. The discipline and respect of traffic. The organization of building constructions. I expected most cities to be like New York in terms of high buildings and towers. I was surprised by the way of building constructions that are made by only pieces of wood.

Nine respondents indicated that it was overall easy for them to adjust to the foreign culture and they mentioned several reasons for this adjustments. Four of the 9

respondents stated that they were already aware of the U.S. culture, so adjustment for them was not hard. Habib a 27-year-old man from Makkah who has been living in the U.S. for 5 years, expressed,

Adapting to the new culture was easier for me because I already knew what I would have to deal with, in the U.S.

Similar views were shared by Faiza, Basher and Sami.

They were also inspired by the quality education system, as this was the main concern of their arrival to the United States. Faiza, a 25-year-old woman, from Jubail and living in the U.S. for 2.5 years, responded:

I perceived the U.S. to be a highly-advanced country, from its best quality education system to the building infrastructures, and freedom of women.

Another respondent, Lamia a 22 year old women and living in the U.S. for 1 year, stated,

When I arrived here, I perceived U.S. to be a country that contains almost all the modern facilities invented so far. The technology here is outstanding!

These findings are analogous to the ones reported by Heyn (2013) and Pinkerton (2006).

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. The reasons for the culture shock were described by two of the respondents; Sary, a 29-year-old man from Riyadh and living in the U.S for 6 years and Saleh a 29-year-old man from Hail and living in the U.S. for 6 years, both did not have any idea of the culture in the U.S. Sary expressed his trouble as,

I was culture shocked since I’ve never been in America or Europe before.

Saleh, similarly, stated,

It was very shocking for me. I had no idea of the environment and culture here, so it was the first time I was exposed to this environment of the U.S.

According to the respondents, they experienced culture shock when they arrived to the U.S. because they were unfamiliar with the American culture. This created many struggles for them to adapt to the U.S. culture.

For 4 of the 10 respondents, U.S. was contrary to their country mainly because of religious practices, as Nouf a 28 year old woman from Dammam and living in the U.S for 5.5 years, had to say about the disrespect of women in America as,

I was surprised to see that women are not respected here, as they are respected in Saudi Arabia.

According to Nouf, this might be because of the fact that most of the Saudi women respect their religious norms in terms of covering themselves in modest clothing, whereas women in America have no such norms or restrictions so they dress up in a way totally opposite to that of Saudi women, and by opposite I mean showing parts of their body, thus, it is a form of disrespect for majority of the Saudi Arabian women. Lastly, four of the ten participants stated that they expected the U.S. to be very much like what is shown in movies, but it was less troubling and frightening, as expressed by Sary, a 29 year old man,

I expected the United States as it was presented in Hollywood movies, yet this was not the truth.

Saleh also stated that,

I expected that the U.S would be just like as shown in the movies, the atmosphere here would be very threatening and people would be cold. I was surprised that the U.S. was not as frightening as I expected it to be.

Samia a 26-year-old woman from Makkah and living in the U.S. for 4 years, added,

I expected that as a Muslim, I won't be safe here, but I was eager to attain an international degree, so my husband supported me and I took admission here. I was surprised to see that the environment here is pretty safe for international students. It's nothing scary, as shown in the news media all the times.

Thus these 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 (2015), 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” (pg. 417), 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 seem 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. Nouf was aware of the environment in U.S. through her brother, she says,

My brother has been to U.S. many times, so it was exactly as I was told by my brother and I expected it to be. Highly developed with helping citizens around.

Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern (2015) 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. way, like Faiza a 25 year old woman from Jubail and living in the U.S. for 2.5 years,

The environment here was exactly as expected because my family is quite liberal, and my parents raised me just like the “U.S.” way.

According to Faiza, what U.S. way means, her family raised her and her siblings to be familiar with Western culture and to be more open-minded in their daily lives.

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 (2009) 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. Undoubtedly, culture directs the way people think, act and feel, and becomes their vision, through which they also judge the world around them. Yet, it may hide other peoples' norms, resulting in people perceiving their own culture as the "right one" and the rest of the cultures become "unnecessary, odd ones" and are often declared wrong and not worth practicing. 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. Faiza commented,

I got married to Hashim a few months before I arrived to the United States. So, finding a common residence for both of us was the most difficult thing we had to deal with. The rest of the adjustments were comparatively easy.

Similar concerns about the difficulties in finding a satisfactory residence for them were expressed by the remaining 6 respondents. The finding of my study is consistent with the one indicated by Hofer (2009). 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, Hossein a 24 year old man from Riyadh who has been living in the U.S. for 2 years, said,

In my college in Saudi Arabia, I was a bright student and I thought I would be successful in United States too, but due to a different education system here, I had a tough time adjusting here, secondly, Americans are very punctual and strict in terms of the deadlines for any task to be completed, so this was another issue that was hard to cope with.

Heyn (2013) also indicated that 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. This often leads to somewhat uncomfortable situations for the Saudi students in the U.S.

Salwa a 25 year old woman from Riyadh and living in the U.S. for 3 years, indicated her trouble of facing the opposite gender in the classrooms:

I also faced tough time adjusting in my class, especially avoiding interaction with my male classmates.

Basheer who is a 40 year old man from Hail and living in the U.S. for 7 years, raised his concerns about the expensiveness of general commodities. Another respondent, Samia, faced difficulty in traveling alone to long and short distances when her husband was not available to take her out, as she belonged to a Saudi environment where women never go out alone. She expressed,

I also had to face difficulty in travelling alone when my husband remained busy.

Omar a 30-year-old man from Alkharj and living in the U.S. for 7 years, responded,

Driving on the roads, online orders and mail delivery, the care for the environment around us, and the companies' care about their customers' satisfaction are things that made my life easier in the U.S.

the current

The current study was not designed to examine the impact of length of stay in the United States, but a quick overview of the issue, indicates that Saudi couple students who have spent less time in the U.S. have to face more of the adjustment issues as compared to those that have been living in the U.S. for a comparatively longer period of time. Similar results were reported by Heyn (2013).

Hossein expresses his gratitude towards his wife as,

Yeah it was very difficult to adapt to this new culture, I tried to merge both of these cultures and that's why I was struggling in the very beginning but then, my wife helped me a lot in this regard and advised me not to lose my own identity by mixing up in this new culture.

For Sami and his wife Nouf, there were troubles in terms of dressing and dinning with their American friends. He shared his experience as,

Yes, it was difficult for me as well as my wife. We had to face many troubles related to our dressing and food. I mean we could never socialize ourselves in that we used to avoid dining in with our American friends because of the difference of choices for food to eat.

Moreover, 4 out of the 20 respondents also pointed out that finding “halal” food was one of the major difficulties they faced

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 some 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 some participants struggled with were perceived as easy to manage according to other participants. This included technology, education, travelling, shopping, healthcare facilities and insurances, 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. Two of the respondents, Samia and Lamia, expressed that language was an easy factor to adjust to because they had already taken English Language Courses before coming to the U.S. 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. As for Sary and his wife Arwa a 26 year old women from Riyadh and living in the U.S for 5 years, and another participant Nouf, healthcare facilities were relatively easy to navigate. 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 lifestyle for two respondents, Arwa and Omar. Basheer specifically liked the weather in the U.S. and Ahmad mentioned that the overall lifestyle organization in the U.S. to be simple and comfortable factor.

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. Khaled a 29-year-old man from Riyadh who has been living in the U.S. for 4 years was among the respondents who mentioned this, as were Sary, Ahmad and his wife Sara a 25 year old woman from Riyadh and living in the U.S. for 4.5 years. It is also important to mention that respondents from different cities in Saudi Arabia experience different adjustments to the American culture in terms of challenges that they faced during their stay in the U.S.

Similar views were shared by Reem a 27 year old woman from Riyadh and living in the U.S for less than 7 years, and Salwa. Habib expressed that he wanted to remain in the education system as attaining a degree was the reason of his coming to the U.S. so, he reflected,

Of course, it is very difficult to hold on to your own culture when most of the people belong to a very different culture, but I had to adjust because I did not want any depression to become a hurdle in my degree.

As Habib states, he had to adjust to the culture in order to not feel depressed. From his statement it is clear that allowing for some flexibility in one's own traditional or cultural norms can help prevent any confusion or discomfort when adjusting to a foreign culture such as the American culture. It can be indicated that brining some flexibility to traditions can help the process of adjusting to the American culture.

Ahmad and his wife Sara also did not face any difficulty in sticking to their own cultural norms, however they did not mention any specific reason for this case. For Salwa, it was somewhat difficult in Ramadan, as fasting and studying simultaneously was

difficult for her, but not during other months of the year. Among all the respondents, Basheer had a very different answer, which no other respondents point out; he stated,

It's been easy in some cases, and difficult in others. At our home, it easy to cook traditional food, sitting on the floor, and receiving a large number of friends in one time. On another hand, it's difficult to hold on our culture due to some restrictions in local society. For instance, eating outside, dealing with my noisy kids, and having conversations with family members.

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 my participants 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. Khaled expressed his views in this regard as,

Yes of course! U.S is a highly-developed country where a lot of opportunities are being provided to the citizens, whether it is the system of education, security, health care services, shopping or entertainment. Life is very convenient here.

His wife, Faiza, had similar things to say,

Yes, I love staying in the U.S. because it has an excellent education system and after that, excellent employment opportunities regarding the amount of wages too.

The technological implications have further made life appreciably easy.

Another reason the respondents presented for wanting to settle in the United States was freedom for woman. According to these respondents, 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. Rania commented,

Yes, I like staying in the U.S. because I like the life here, there are no restrictions for going out, driving and doing job here, which is very appreciable for me. After learning driving, I can go out even without my husband. He never restricts me.

Salwa also had similar views with Lamia.

Yes, I find myself more independent here. I can go out alone whenever I need to, which was never possible in my home town.

Hossein, Lamia's husband, also supported her statement by commenting,

Yes, I like staying here because my wife is very happy as she goes out with me as well as she sometimes goes on a walk alone.

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. Samia expressed her discomfort in this regard as,

Well, I do not like staying in the U.S. because I miss my country and my relatives. Although my husband and my child are here with me but still I would rush back home as soon as I and my husband complete our degrees.

Similarly, Norah commented,

No, I do not like staying at the U.S. because of the hustle bustle in the lifestyle here in the U.S. Time runs very fast here. I also feel isolated and kind of abandoned here. I miss my home and relatives in Saudi Arabia.

Some of these respondents also expressed difficulty in sticking to their own culture here, therefore they preferred going back to their home country. Nouf commented,

The education system is very good here, that is why I and my husband came to study in the U.S. but I do not like staying in the U.S. because this is not my culture. I am a Muslim and would love to return back to my own country as soon as my husband completes his Ph.D. degree.

Nouf is also a student but she must stay until her husband finishes his Ph.D. degree. She is the dependent of her husband's scholarship, so she has to be with him in the U.S even after she graduates. She also mentioned that she is staying in the U.S with her husband to support him.

Similarly, Reem had to say,

Well, overall, I would prefer my own country than U.S for stay because I find it difficult to stick to some of my cultural values here, which I believe, are my identity and I can't exist without them.

For three of the respondents, adjustment to the U.S. culture was very difficult because they were struggling with the English language. Hashim commented,

I am not very good in English language so I had to suffer some academic and communicational problems in this regard.

Sary and his wife Arwa made similar comments in regards to the English language.

These findings parallel the ones reported by Caldwell (2013), Al-morshedi (2011) and Alanazi, (2014). This social isolation is also partly attributed to communication difficulty, as some 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. In this regard, Rania expressed her concerns as,

During my first months in the U.S. and especially in the university, I had difficulty with language due to which I used to feel isolated because I was unable to take part in classroom discussions as well as informal chats.

Managing Religion and Islamic Values

Eight of the 20 participants I interviewed mentioned that they had faced a tough time in balancing their religious obligations with the cultural environment in the United States. Sary stated,

The only thing that I think is more difficult in the U.S. is fasting in Ramadan since the work schedule is the same with regular months, where in Saudi Arabia we have modified work schedule to the night shifts.

As Sary indicated regarding the modified schedule, in Saudi Arabia the work schedule is modified because due to fasting during the month of Ramadhan. For example, most work schedules are modified to start after breaking the fast (after sunset) or to be shorter than usual eight or nine hours a day; from 10:00 a.m. till 3:00 p.m.

Lamia, a 22 year old young woman from Riyadh, who has been living in the U.S for the past 2 years, commented,

Yes, I felt a lot of difficulty for sticking to my own culture, like offering prayers, wearing abaya and finding halal food, but me and my husband, both supported each other in this regard.

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. Norah, a 36 year old women who is married to Basheer, and has been living in the U.S for the past 7 years, has two sons and two daughters, and is very concerned about raising her children according to the Saudi tradition; however, she finds a great deal of difficulty in this respect. She reflects her worry as,

Yes, as our children are very amazed by the environment here, so it was hard to make them stick to their own culture. Raising our children according to Islamic values and traditions was very tough.

Another participant, Salwa expressed her views in that,

I had adjustment problems in Ramadan as I had to keep a balance between this religious obligation, studies and home.

Omar expressed his views in regard to his wife practicing Islam as,

The aspect of freedom of religion and wearing hijab for my wife was difficult, since everyone is watching us and that made my wife feel like unaccepted in many situations.

It is evident from these responses that Saudi couple students have to face hurdles when it comes to practicing their own cultural-religious values. 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 (2015) too.

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. Faiza reflected her perception in the following words,

No, it was not difficult for me because there are a lot of people studying here from a lot of different religions, cultures and nations. So, the Americans appreciate this cultural diversity and people practice their norms according to their wills, so, it is not a big deal here now.

Saleh, a 29 year old man who has spent 6 year of his life in the U.S. so far, had similar thing to say:

The U.S. is a place of cultural diversity, you can find many international students here, everyone with his/her unique cultural traditions and norms. Everyone practices his/her religious obligations here, so do I, So it wasn't that hard.

Among all, two of the respondents indicated that it was comparatively easier for them to hold onto their own culture as "no one cares in America." Rania a 24 year old woman from Hail and has been living in the U.S for 5 years, commented,

Well, it was not very difficult because no one ever bothered or pointed out anything related to my religion. I mean no one ever asked me about why I carry hijab, and why I avoid interaction with my male fellows. After all, they know about the Saudi government and their religious implications toward our country.

Omar reflected his thoughts as,

It was easy to hold onto my culture since nobody cares about anybody in the U.S. So, I don't need to care about practicing my culture, especially if I have friends from the same culture around me.

His answer also shows that he had the support of other Saudi friends, who practice their culture together.

For seven of the participants, practicing their tradition and cultural norms in the U.S. was easy because they were mostly surrounded by their Saudi friends, as expressed by Omar previously. Saleh also expressed similar views in that,

Moreover, I have a lot of Saudi friends here and we very often have get-togethers in order to retain our cultural identity.

Khaled maintained a balance between his own culture and the American culture which he was happy with. He added,

Surrounded by mostly Saudis in my social circle, I didn't find it that hard to stick to my own culture. In fact, living in the U.S made my beliefs stronger. But that does not mean I do not mix with Americans. I do interact, but only under the limitations of my religious beliefs. I have kept a balance and I am happy with this.

Sary had a similar point of view in this regard.

Concluding this section, I have shown that 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.

Gender Strategies

The idea behind this theme 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 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. and many had also modified their attitudes towards sharing family responsibilities.

Thirteen of the respondents 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. Yet, for Omar, staying in the U.S. had no impact on his perception towards gender related behaviors, neither positive, nor negative.

There were nine respondents 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. Among these participants, Khaled supported his wife's freedom to drive and attain an education; he presented his thoughts as,

For the point of gender inequality, I do believe that women in Saudi Arabia are under strict Islamic obligations where they are not allowed to even drive or vote. They are responsible for doing all the housework and take care of the children all alone. But after living here, I strongly admit this is wrong, women should be granted rights. Even I myself have brought flexibility in my attitude towards

sharing the house-related responsibilities and teach my wife to drive. This was the best I could do to support her and will carry this attitude for life.

Sary expressed his views as,

Yes, definitely I've been working for more than 5 years with a great team that has men and women members. It does not really matter if the worker is a man or women . . . However, if the coworker is woman and she delivered a baby, she should take additional days off for nursing the baby and I do not consider this as an inequality.

One of the participants, Habib, stated that he wanted a quality education in Saudi Arabia so that people can equally have the opportunity to acquire the best quality education, while living in their home country. He said,

I would like to bring back the teaching techniques in the U.S. to home. As there are not many universities in our region, so I would say that education system of our region must also be improved so that people shouldn't have to travel so many miles to get higher education.

Saudi women have recently started to raise their voices concerning the right to drive, as seen in the several campaigns conducted for this purpose, the 'Oct26Driving' Twitter Campaign being the most well-known of such attempts. In my study, four of the participants highlighted the demand for women's right to drive. Among these, Salwa expressed her thoughts as,

I have learnt that women can live a life of freedom even within the limits set by Islam. Driving is something banned in Saudi Arabia but it's not against the teachings of Islam. Women can enter the labor force and show their talent to the

world, even remaining within the limits and laws set by Islam. Although men are the caretakers of women, it is only the spouse's support that can lead his woman to success.

Three respondents mentioned that their experience of living in the U.S. made them appreciate and respect women more. In this regard, Saleh commented,

I have been in interaction with many of the female professors during my study here. I have really developed a lot of respect for women. There is no such scope of women independence in Saudi Arabia but I believe women should be allowed to work, in a respectable way that does not compromise their prestige or reputation. So that they will be able to work with respect and honor.

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 and nine women answered that they often discuss issues of freedom for women and better opportunities for them.

Lamia commented,

Yes, American women think of Saudi Arabian girls to be unhappy because we are not allowed to do things and enjoy life as they do, but I often have a friendly discussion with them, trying to clarify that this is not the case, although we cannot do things they do, but we are striving for acquirement of our general rights and the government is taking steps in this regard. This is the only reason I am studying here.

Similarly, a 27 year old man Habib, from Makkah, who likes to communicate, stated,

Yes, my favorite teacher is an American. He and I discuss this issue a lot whenever I go in his office. According to me, women are not given respect here, as in Saudi Arabia, I have my own arguments, and he has his own, but the debate is always a friendly one.

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 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 (2011) 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 I asked about what these Saudi couples think about the gender environment in the United States, six 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. Hashim a 28 year old man from Jubail who has been living in the U.S. for 3 years, reflected,

Women are independent here. They are allowed to get themselves educated, find a good job, and live their lives the way they want.

Similar comments were given by Hossein and Habib. However, these respondents also added that this gender environment lacks ethical boundaries when it comes to relations with the opposite gender. Khaled commented,

There are no ethical boundaries in relationships between men and women here which is the most annoying thing about the gender environment here.

Regarding Khaled's comment about gender environment, what ethical boundaries mean is the freedom of forming relationships with the opposite gender in the U.S.; however, in Saudi Arabia it is prohibited to form relationships with the opposite gender.

Faiza, a 25 year old woman who has spent just 2.5 years in the U.S. so far, shared her views as,

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 me as a Saudi Muslim woman.

Arwa and Lamia expressed related points of view here. Boundaries and limits here are based on the Islamic laws and role.

Another six 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 adjusted to it. Sami said,

The gender environment here is free of any restrains or boundaries. Women are independent here, but I don't think that women should be this much independent.

Salwa expressed she faced difficulty in adjusting to the gender environment due to interactions with the opposite gender. She stated,

I personally believe that the gender environment here is too open and dynamic which I do not like.

Similar views were given by Norah. Lamia, Rania and Sara supported the independence of women, still they were troubled by the boundary-less gender environment of the U.S.

Two of the twenty participants pointed to what they considered the "immoral" dressing of American women. Reem raised the point that she does not perceive that American women are respected, the way they dress up and show up. According to her,

I did not like the broad-mindedness in terms of gender here in the U.S. I also feel that women are not respected here, as in Saudi Arabia. They are mostly a part of amusement for boys. When I look at huge billboards in which women are "badly" advertised, I feel ashamed, and pity the gender environment here.

Nouf had similar views to that of Reem as,

As I already mentioned, I didn't like the way American women dress, and boldly walk along the streets, and maybe this is the reason why I feel they are not respected here.

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. Sary responded,

I think it is fine, yet I think it can be improved by assigning the difficult jobs e.g. truck driving and cars maintenance to men only and giving women the easy jobs as a kind of support to the women.

Similar concerns were raised by Saleh. According to Samia the wages are very low,

I had always heard of gender equality and women empowerment in West, over social media and websites, so I naturally expected the same. Undoubtedly, women hold very important positions in almost every field of life in the U.S. but I have mostly seen the majority of women working as laborers and doing all those cheaply paid tasks, which they do not deserve it at all.

Nouf supported gender inequality in terms of differences in employment opportunities, as stated by Samia. However, for Ahmad and Basheer, the gender environment of the U.S. has never been an issue for adjustment in the U.S. culture.

Strategies for Managing the Gender Environment of U.S.

Out of twenty, four respondents 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. Sami expressed his thoughts as,

I have two little daughters, so as a Saudi Muslim father I am very much concerned about the way they perceive the gender environment here, so I guess it is quite a good deal of trouble for both me and my wife to adapt to this environment.

His wife Nouf also had the same thing to say.

Out of the twenty, ten respondents 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. Hashim commented,

Yes, it was somehow difficult, but I and my wife ultimately realized that it was necessary to adjust to the U.S. culture if we want to become socialized both academically and environmentally. So, we did.

Khaled, a 29 year old man from Riyadh, expressed similar thoughts. Another respondent, Samia added same as Salwa,

Well, I always avoid all kind of interactions with males, wherever possible, but when I am bound to interact, like in class discussions, I do, because I want to perform well academically, and I don't want others to say that I am not confident at all.

Eight 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. One of the male respondent, Khaled also commented,

Direct physical contact with women, like shaking hands while greeting, is one of the aspect I found most hard to deal with. However, I never felt odd talking to them during class discussions.

For Salwa, Sara and Rania, interaction with the opposite gender during class discussions was “really” an issue. Salwa expressed her worry as,

Once in my class discussion I was grouped with the male classmates. I remained nervous throughout the class discussion and was unable to focus on what was actually being discussed. The university seems to be the most difficult place to adjust in terms of gender.

Al-Morshedi (2011) also explained that female students mostly face communication barriers in classroom discussions due to the presence of their male peers. Another respondent Norah, a mother, stated,

Once I saw my daughter sitting closely with some of her male classmates, as she studies in the middle school now, at that point gender openness really became an issue for me.

According to Norah, gender openness is an issue for her because she does not want her daughter to get involved with male classmates and get used to the openness of the American culture. Sami and his wife Nouf also conveyed their uneasiness with respect to their daughters' exposure to the open gender environment of U.S. Sami commented,

I do not want my daughters to get an education here because they are very little at this time and unaware of our own culture. Their minds are blank right now, so in this regard the gender environment has always been an issue for us.

The gender environment was never an issue in terms of adjustment for four of the respondents. They adjusted themselves to this type of environment by avoiding the gender environment problems or bringing some flexibility to their own lives. Habib commented,

Gender has never been an issue for us after we came here. As my wife is also a student, so enjoys her time at the university. We even go out for dinners at weekend nights sometimes, and fully enjoy our lives in the U.S.

For Saleh and Omar, adjustment was easy, but they reflected that it was problematic for their wives. Omar commented,

The gender environment in the U.S. is acceptable for me, however it is tough for my wife because everyone has the perception that she should not wear the hijab, and wherever we go everyone is looking at us because of the hijab. We try to ignore that to be able to finish our mission in the states and enjoy our life during the stay.

Faiza expressed her views as,

No, my husband realizes that If we want to adjust here both academically and socially, we would have to bring a little flexibility in our behaviors towards this foreign culture, so it's only because of his support, emotionally and mentally, that I did not have to face a lot of difficulties in adjustment in case of gender environment too.

Faiza indicated that the best way to adjust to the culture academically and socially is to bring some flexibility to their lives. In addition, her husband supported and encouraged her to adjust to the gender environment.

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 (2013).

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 (2016), 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. (2016) indicated that the mutual support between spouses has a significant effect on “marital satisfaction, marital communication and conflict resolution” (pg. 60). In light of this information, Khaled shared his views regarding his spousal support as,

She is very generous and understands the tough schedule of my Ph.D. so she is carrying the family responsibilities very perfectly. I feel gratified and happy.

His wife Salwa, also affirmed this statement and added,

He surely helps me in my studies as well.

Sary, a 29 year old man from Riyadh who has been living in the U.S. for 6 years, expressed his gratitude towards his wife as,

She supports me in almost everything. I'm very thankful to her.

Arwa, Sary's wife also commented,

He is a graduate student pursuing a PhD degree. He is a father who wants to grow our children with the best education. He is a spouse who supports his wife to continue her education and reaches her life goals.

Arwa's main goals are continuing her education and having better opportunities when she go back home.

When I asked the participants about whether they discuss various gender related issues with their spouses, eighteen out of the twenty participants said that they did. Among the issues discussed were support for adjustment, gender environment, freedom for women. Two of the twenty respondents also had a family discussion about the gender environment of the U.S. Norah expressed her views as,

Yes, I do discuss gender related issues with my husband, because only discussion is the way that we can protect our children here.

Similarly, Nouf commented,

We try our best to explain to our daughters that this is not our culture and we are at a study stay here, we ultimately have to go back to where we belong.

However, two of the twenty respondents Ahmad and his wife Sara avoid any discussion about the gender related issues, as stated by Sara,

He does not like to discuss this topic so we mostly avoid the discussion on it.

Most of the 20 respondents expressed that it was due to mutual support and discussions with their spouses that adjustment to the gender culture was made possible.

Salwa, Khaled's wife, stated,

My husband is very understanding and supportive, he observes my problems in terms of the gender environment so we often discuss this issue so that I can calm down and let go of this stress related to the environmental confliction. . . He says, 'we do not have to stay here forever; we ultimately have to return to our homeland. So, you do not need to panic'.

Rania, a 24 year old woman from Hai'l who has spent 5 years in the U.S. so far, shared similar thoughts as,

Yes! He understands that I do not feel easy interacting with my classmates, but he explained that 'do not let this issue be a hurdle in your education, if you participate in the group discussions while realizing your boundaries, there is no harm in that. After all you are here to seek education, learn and transform yourself so go ahead'.

Hashim and Saleh stated that discussion about gender related issues with their spouses helped them to reduce the stress of being in such a foreign country. Hashim commented,

Yes, we do talk, just in order to de-stress ourselves and feel relaxed and better in this foreign country.

Some of the respondents also stated that they mostly discussed the freedom of women in the U.S. and their huge role in employment and politics as well. Faiza commented,

Yes, we do talk about the freedom of women here. I go for a walk in the morning regularly, so my husband often makes fun and says if we were living in Saudi Arabia presently, you would have become fat.

Hossein shared his views as

Yes, we often talk about gender related issues especially how women can participate in family matters and can share their suggestions as well, and how they are helping their husbands economically, by doing jobs while taking care of family responsibilities too.

Lamia, Hossein's wife, shared similar thoughts.

According to Omar, a 30 year old man from Alkharj, women in Saudi Arabia do not need to work to earn their living as their spouses are responsible for their living, whereas no such system is present in the U.S. He shared his thoughts as,

Sometime we talk about it, like how women in the U.S. are looked for as less expensive labor and paid less in most instances. They are responsible for the lower-class jobs. We also talk about how they use women for marketing and advertisement in the U.S. and use their bodies to invite more customers like in restaurants. We also talk about the need for women to take care of themselves at all ages just like men, which is different than our culture where we take care of our women and they don't need to work to spend on the house.

What Omar means in his response is that since men are required to be responsible of their wives by Islam rules, the need to work is not necessary for females in this situation.

As the country is heading to modernization, woman are more likely to share responsibilities with men in the family. Being responsible means taking care of her, providing a safe environment and takes care of her financial needs. Attaining a degree in the U.S. for females will benefit her personal life and academic career as well.

Recently, there are many women continuing their education to not only make money but also to develop themselves. This indicates that the participants have different backgrounds and perceptions since they come from different places in Saudi Arabia.

Reem, a 27 year old woman from Alkharj who has been living in the U.S. for less than 7 years, stated,

My husband very often discusses the gender dynamism with me. We often talk about how women are not respected here, I feel sorry for the women in the U.S and at the same time, very happy for myself and the environment of my home country.

Samia also shared identical views in this regard. Women in the U.S. are seen as being active at clubs and parties, as it is part of their culture, and it is also common for women's bodies to be displayed on huge billboards at every nook and corner of the cities. This boldness is very hard to digest by individuals coming from such a religious and gender conservative country such as Saudi Arabia. Thus, these issues become essential for Saudi couples to discuss.

In conclusion, 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-

mindfulness 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. and in order for them to actively participate in social and academic settings. For the rest of the respondents, it was always difficult to survive in the gender environment of the U.S. only a few respondents expressed that gender was never an issue for them and they enjoy their stay at the U.S.

Social Strategies

This theme covers responses related to how international Saudi couples navigate their social environment, that said, 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 I 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 my 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. Sara expressed her surprise as,

It was very astonishing and amazing for me when on my first day at the University I was so warmly welcomed by my American peers. I mean. They were so opposite to what I thought! The faculty was amazing too!

Another respondent Reem was also surprised as,

I expected that Americans would be tough to deal with, in terms of social interaction, but I was surprised and happy to observe them as a very kind and courteous people.

Khaled stated,

The Americans are really easy to interact with, they are very caring and understanding. I was really impressed of this attitude of theirs, especially at the university.

Similar views were shared by Salwa, Habib, Saleh and Rania.

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. Saleh commented,

As I am a social person and like to communicate, it was not very difficult for me to adjust in the new culture. I often had discussions with my American peers in English, in this way I improved my language too.

Similarly, Omar replied,

It was not very difficult to adapt to the new culture. I like that the Americans are flexible in their language and try to help people for whom English is not their first language.

These findings support previous research, as reported by Alanazi (2014), 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 added that they had already learned English language skills in their home country. Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern (2015) and Heyn (2013) 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.

For only a very few of the respondents I interviewed, Americans were not friendly. Omar commented,

In terms of people, they always make you feel that you are different and you don't belong to this country or this world.

Omar also claim,

That my wife's hijab makes everyone watching us and that mad my wife feels like unaccepted in many situations.

Hossein expressed his concerns as,

I had heard that people here are good and kind, but I haven't seen any kindness or goodness in Americans.

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 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 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. Samia stated,

Yeah, I have changed my dressing and behavior towards gender mixing when very necessary, just in order to adjust to this environment because I do not want to be “the odd one out” here.

Similar views were shared by Hashim and his wife Faiza. Saleh and his wife Rania had similar thing to say. Rania commented,

We have also learnt to interact with the opposite gender in a respectable manner.

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

Brown (2007) 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, Davis and McGovern (2015) 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 (also Alraddadi 2014). These findings complement the current findings in that the majority of the participants said they had changed their previous ideas about gender inequality as observed in Saudi Arabia.

In terms of the positive influences that came from the U.S. society, changes in the perception of shared family responsibilities were the most prominent among the respondents. Nine out of the twenty interviewees expressed that they would definitely 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. As stated by Khaled, a 29 year old man, who got married 3 years ago, and has a one-year-old daughter:

Helping my wife and giving her a break of the tough routine of house responsibilities is something I really favor and will take this attitude along myself to Saudi Arabia because this is something very important for building an understanding relation with the spouse.

His wife Salwa and another respondent Sary also expressed similar views. Another respondent, Saleh who is a 29 year old man and has a 4 year old son, stated that,

One thing in the U.S. that has really inspired me is how a man takes care of his children while his wife is busy doing something. I have never seen such a friendly relation in terms of sharing responsibilities in Saudi Arabia. I have already adopted this attitude and will follow it for the rest of my life.

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. Faiza, a 25 year old women who has a son and has spent 2.5 years in the U.S., said,

I would really appreciate if Saudi Women realize the importance of getting themselves educated. Driving is another thing I would wish to take back home.

A 25 year old woman, Sara, who is the mother of a six month old, also expressed that she would like to take back to Saudi Arabia the linguistic and the driving skills which she learned in the U.S. as she said,

My English language and the driving skills are the two most important things I have learnt here, so I would be definitely taking these skills with me when I return home.

Reem, who is 27 year old and has spent 7 years in the U.S. so far, expressed,

Living in the U.S has made me more confident. I have learnt to be independent, I would really wish to be the same as I return back to Saudi Arabia.

Similar views were shared by other women, Samia and Rania.

A 24 year old young man, Hossein, who has been living in the U.S. for 2 years, expressed his concerns about granting the decision-making authority to women in Saudi Arabia after he observed the environment of the U.S., he said,

I like the freedom of woman in the U.S. and I know I can't change the culture completely but at least women should have the right to take part in decision making of the issues that are related to their whole life, like marriage.

After observing the injustice in terms of gender environment in the U.S., Lamia and Samia also expressed their interests for women of Saudi Arabia to always have respectable jobs that do not compromise their honor and dignity. Lamia, a 22 year old young women, responded,

Although women are a part of the labor force in the U.S., but for my own country I would wish that females to perform high level jobs, so that they work with honor, not the low-level ones.

To clarify what Lamia means, in terms of Islamic teachings, a woman is created as a 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. On the other hand, Islamic teachings suggest that a man is created to be strong physically and hence can perform all kinds of jobs that would demand a lot of physical hard work. These findings were in alignment with those of Alshaya (2005), 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 of the twenty respondents expressed their concerns about the openness of the gender environment in the U.S. Khaled stated,

The open and boundary-less gender environment of America fails to develop a long-term and trusting relation between boys and girls. They mostly spend time

together just to have fun, and when they break up with one, they move on to the next one, which is very inappropriate as far as the Islamic norms are concerned.

Sary, Basheer and his wife Norah expressed similar thoughts about the gender environment of the U.S. Norah commented,

According to me, there is no charm for a good relation in the opposite genders here, they change their partners when they are fed up of the one. This attitude must never be adopted by Saudi Muslims. However, a positive thing we would retain when we return back, is sharing family responsibilities as my husband has already happily adopted it and I am pretty glad of that, thanks to the U.S.

For four of the respondents, the way American women dress is one thing in particular that they did not want to see back in Saudi Arabia. Hossein commented,

Although there is no gender discrimination here but yeah this open environment and especially the dressing styles of women, I don't like them at all.

Faiza and Nouf also expressed similar thoughts in this regard. Arwa also mentioned,

Some men and women do not care about how they look like and I do not like that.

In terms of moral values followed by American women, Ahmad, a 28 year old man from Buraydah, who has been living in the U.S. for 5 years and has one child, expressed his thoughts as,

There are a lot of moral issues women in the U.S. understand differentially than women in Saudi Arabia that I would never consider women in Saudi Arabia would do.

These moral issues may include more-than-necessary interactions between men and women, especially physical interaction or extra-marital affairs, drinking, going to pubs, too much exposure of body parts and such related activities. Saudi women ignore and avoid such type of activities in their own country. These activities affect men as well. Sami, a 30 year old man who belongs to Dammam, has been living in the U.S. for past 6 years and has 2 children commented,

I would never want any woman in my country or my daughters to be open-minded, as the women of America.

Sara expressed a similar point of view. According to Omar, a 30 year old man from Alkharj, who has been staying in the U.S. for 7 years, there were so many negative aspects of the U.S. lifestyle that he could never imagine taking back to Saudi Arabia. He said,

I think we are living a better gender life than the people in the U.S. I don't think we need to bring anything home from the U.S. gender culture, since it is causing too much trouble for the U.S. population. The numbers of rape, sexual assault, and abuse cases are enough to stay away from the U.S. gender culture and environment. The only thing that I may bring home is the regulations and punishments for these cases.

To explain what Omar means, is that 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.

His wife Reem too, supported his argument. For these respondents, thus, living in the U.S. did not change their ideas regarding gender inequality; rather, it intensified them because husbands did not want that much freedom in terms of employment for Saudi women, as also demonstrated by Alraddadi (2014). They also did not want the open gender environment to take hold in Saudi Arabia.

In sum, it is evident from the responses of my 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 life style 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 as compared to those who faced communication problems with Americans due to English not being their first language. The respondents who were more social, usually freely discussed gender related issues with their peers, both Saudis as well as Americans, whereas there were a few who 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 gain a better understanding of the 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.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The basic reason for conducting this research study was to examine the general problems encountered by international Saudi couple students in the U.S. as they leave their home country for the purpose of attaining a higher education in a foreign country. Additionally, the aim was to evaluate the various elements of the U.S. gender environment that produce hurdles in the adjustment of Saudi couple students and prompt certain flexibilities or modifications to their behaviors. Thus, the research is unique in that it has addressed specific factors of the U.S. gender environment that directly relate to the adjustment of couples.

For the first theme, **Cultural Strategies**, I have addressed the initial impressions of the Saudi couple students as they arrive to the U.S., how the U.S. is different from in reality from what is shown in the media and movies and how these students cope with certain cultural challenges. The majority thought there was a huge difference in culture between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. For some, this cultural shock led to depression due to

many problems students faced during adjustments. It is evident from the literature review that as students travel to international universities, “cultural shock” is almost inevitable. This was the case for my participants as well. Among the “major difficulties” encountered by these Saudi couple students in adjustment were practicing their own religion, language and general communication with Americans, living and dining, and the expectations of the U.S. educational system, whereas the “relatively easier” aspects of the U.S. to adjust to were travelling and life made easy through technology. For most of the Saudi couple students, the overall adjustment in terms of education, culture and religion was relatively easy as some already had knowledge of the U.S. environment. For others, the initial adjustment was hard but as soon as they got married, the spousal support helped them adjust quite well. They also mentioned that, for the most part, they did not face any difficulty in practicing their religion as Americans appreciated and respected the cultural diversity brought to them by the international students. Only a minority expressed difficulties in terms of overall adjustment, as they found the new environment very different from their own. In short, it can be said that initially the students experienced a bit of culture shock but after getting used to the culture they found the society to be friendlier than they expected. This helped them adjust to the culture better than they would have.

For the second theme, **Gender Strategies**, I have addressed the thinking, in general, of the Saudi couple students, about the gender environment in America, and the strategies adopted by them in order to cope with it. A majority expressed that the open gender environment of the U.S. was too audacious for the Saudi women to adapt to or even get used to. However, a minority expressed that the U.S. gender environment provided independence to women, and a lot of bright opportunities for women in terms of

education, politics, and employment, which are lacking in Saudi Arabia. These students also found it challenging to initially adjust to the gender environment of the U.S. After some of them realized that their studies would benefit if they adjusted to the gender environment, they adopted some flexibility in their behavior in order to embrace their lives in America. They used to discuss certain gender related issues with each other, in order to release their spouses of the stress of adjustment. Yet, for some of the other participants, interactions with the opposite gender was against their cultural traditions and they could not adjust their behaviors. Most of these respondents also considered the adjustment in the U.S. gender environment to be facilitated by the support of their spouses, as they faced more adjustment problems being single than married. From all the couples that I interviewed, I found an overall positive response in terms of the strength of their relationship after their stay in the U.S. This observation can be explained in terms of the fact that exposure to a different culture reveals a lot of realities of social life worth considering. In this study, it can be indicated that it was easier for married people to adjust than for single people. The findings contribute to scholarship in that married student couples adopt somewhat different adjustment strategies than do single students. In short it can be said that the gender environment in the U.S is totally different from Saudi Arabia; however, some respondents make some changes to adjust to the new environment as couples.

The third theme, **Social Strategies**, addressed specifically the ease or difficulty of developing social bonds by Saudi couple students with Americans. Most did not have a lot of American friends because of the limited interaction, but many mentioned that communication with other peers, both Americans and Saudis, aided their adjustment to the social life environment of the U.S. A minority of the respondents avoided discussions

about gender-related issues with Americans which might be a reason for why their adjustment was comparatively harder. This might be due to their deficiency in linguistic skills as a few of the respondents mentioned that adjustment to the foreign culture was hard for them because of lack of English language speaking skills. The majority of the Saudi couple students indicated that staying in the U.S. greatly affected the way they used to think about the rights of Saudi women and gender inequality more generally. Now they think that Saudi women should be granted a right to drive, to seek quality education, and be granted respectable jobs in the work force. They also highlighted that men have learned to play a more active role when it comes to family responsibilities, and that they believe that Saudi women should be granted greater freedom over their own lives. But many also criticized the openness of gender relations in the United States, and especially the bold dressing and body exposure of American women. Taken together, this part identifies both the aspects of the U.S. culture that would like to bring back home and those that they would never like to see in Saudi Arabia.

The literature has shown that studying abroad not only provide better education opportunities but also develops students' vision as indicated by Brown (2007). A study by Davis and McGovern (2015) found that living in the U.S. can transform the perceptions and behaviors of students; they become more independent, confident and self-reliant. On the other hand, the new findings of this study add that the participants want to bring back the positive aspects of studying in the U.S. such as sharing family responsibilities. Another positive aspect is that many think that women in Saudi Arabia should be given general rights in terms of decision making, education and employment opportunities.

Nevertheless, there were a few respondents that did not change their perception of the freedom of women in Saudi Arabia, as they never want women empowerment in their country. This finding has also been reported by Zamil (2013) in one of his studies. He illustrated that despite the fact that globalization in the field of education has brought modifications to many of the aspects of interaction between international students, women are still viewed as submissive and it is still hard for Islamic societies to accept the idea of general rights for women. Nevertheless, women is a focus in the four-year developmental program of Saudi Arabia, and as reported by a study conducted by Oxford Strategic Consulting (2012) as cited by Alsaffaf (2014), if the participation of women in the work force increases to 40% in Saudi Arabia, the GDP can hit 17 billion dollars, ultimately adding about 58 billion dollars to the net revenue of the companies in Saudi Arabia, and thus, increasing the progress of the nation as a whole. Alfauzan (1992) found in his study that Saudi female students are more supportive of the participation of Saudi women in the workforce, as compared to Saudi men. I found tension related to gender in some of my participants as some were facing difficulties in adopting to the environment compared to others.

Hofer (2009) indicated that by 2020, the majority of Saudi students who are enrolled in international universities will have completed their degrees and returned back to their home country. The extent of difficulties to be faced upon returning back to the homeland entirely depends on the way that Saudi students have changed their perception about the rights of women in Saudi Arabia and the awareness of different cultures. Additionally, this also depends upon the extent to which the Saudi government eases its restrictions on the rights of Saudi women. The findings of the study suggest that after living in the U.S., most of the respondents changed their perception toward women rights

and their roles in the society. They are more likely to adopt positive aspects of the American society such as supporting women driving, providing better education and employment opportunities, and sharing the family responsibilities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

While interviews provide specific and meaningful and perceptive information, they may be biased in terms of feedback, missing memories, inadequately worded questions and respondents' forced responses, i.e. they spontaneously answer in accordance with what the researcher wants (Yin 2014) as cited by Spencer (2016). Patton (2002) stated that if essential issues are not mentioned by the respondents, this can lead to missing very sensitive topics and the feedback becomes limited. Respondents may feel uneasy about answering some questions because they may be embarrassed about some aspects of their lives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) as cited by Spencer (2016).

This study included only twenty participants (ten couples) which may not be enough to evaluate the full range of gender related issues or to examine variations across Saudi students, either in terms of their experiences in the United States or in terms of the experiences that they had in Saudi Arabia before coming to the U.S. For example, this study focused on Saudi couples studying at the University of Cincinnati, whereas future studies may focus on the Saudi couples studying at other universities in the U.S. with varying populations of Saudi and other international students. Moreover, the findings of this study indicates that there may be differences among Saudi students that come from different cities in Saudi Arabia, but the sample is too small to conclude anything with confidence. Furthermore, there were not enough participants to pursue questions regarding how length of the stay in the U.S. impacts how the students experiences their adjustment to the U.S. culture. More studies are needed to examine the different

environment and its impact on adjustment. Finally, there is a need to investigate the impact of gender related issues of certain different Western countries apart from the U.S., where Saudi students go for attaining higher education to see what kinds of difficulties they may face when they go somewhere other than the United States.

Interviewing couples as a male interviewer was hard because we were all Saudis and familiar with the traditions. In addition, interviewing the couples together can result in some similar responses by them. For future studies, interviewing couples separately and having a female assistant conduct interviews with the women may generate somewhat different results.

Demographic Information of the Participants

Name	Age	Gender	City of Origin in Saudi Arabia	Years spent since marriage	Number of children	Years spent since stay at U.S.
Hashim	28	Male	Jubail	3 years	1	3 years
Faiza	25	Female	Jubail	3 years	1	2.5 years
Khaled	29	Male	Riyadh	3 years	1	4 years
Salwa	25	Female	Riyadh	3 years	1	3 years
Sary	29	Male	Riyadh	5 years	1	6 years
Arwa	26	Female	Riyadh	5 years	1	5 years
Ahmad	28	Male	Buraydah	5 years	1	5 years
Sara	25	Female	Riyadh	5 years	1	4.5 years
Omar	30	Male	Alkharj	7 years	2	7 complete years
Reem	27	Female	Alkharj	7 years	2	Less than 7 years
Basheer	40	Male	Hai'l	15 years	4	7 years
Norah	36	Female	Hai'l	15 years	4	Almost 7 years
Hossein	24	Male	Riyadh	2 years	no	2 years
Lamia	22	Female	Riyadh	2 years	no	1 year
Habib	27	Male	Makkah	6 years	1	5 years
Samia	26	Female	Makkah	6 years	1	4 years
Saleh	29	Male	Hai'l	5 years	1	6 years
Rania	24	Female	Hai'l	5 years	1	5 years
Sami	30	Male	Dammam	5 years	2	6 years
Nouf	28	Female	Dammam	5 years	2	5.5 years

INTERVIEW GUIDE

First set of questions is about Demographic questions:

1. What is your Name_____?
2. How old are you_____?
3. What city are you from in Saudi Arabia_____?
4. How long have you been married_____?
5. Do you have children? (how many? How old?) _____?
6. How long have you been in the United States_____?

Second set of questions about their expectations before and after participants came to the U.S.:

1. What was your first impression of the United States when you first came? In what ways was it like expected? In what ways were you surprised?
2. Do you like staying in the U.S.? why? Why not?
3. Which aspects of living in the United States have been difficult to deal with? Which have been easier?
4. Has it been easy or difficult to adapt to the new culture? Explain.
5. Has it been easy or difficult to hold on to your own culture? Explain.

Third set of questions about living with a spouse:

1. What is the status of your spouse during your stay at the U.S.?
2. What do you think of the gender environment in the United States? Has it been difficult for you and your spouse to adapt? Tell me about specific instances when gender has been (or still is) an issue.
3. Do you and your spouse ever talk about gender-related issues?
4. Do you talk to someone else about gender issues (other Saudi people? Americans?).
What are some of the issues you talk about?
5. Have you and your spouse changed your gender behaviors since coming to the United States? (e.g., dress, gender mixing, driving, family responsibilities?)
6. What are the things about how men and women live their lives in the United States that you would like to bring back home? And what are the things that you would NOT wish to bring home? Why/why not?
7. Has living in the U.S. changed your concepts regarding gender differences and gender inequality in any way? If so, how? If not, why not?

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