

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SAUDI ARABIAN
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE FIRST
STRIKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله أولاً وآخراً على نعمته وفضله. أشكر الله سبحانه وتعالى وأحمده على توفيقه لي في تحقيق هذا الإنجاز. إن هذا النجاح لم يكن ليتحقق إلا بتوفيق الله وتيسيره، وأسأل الله أن يجعل هذا النجاح بداية لطريق جديد من العلم والعمل النافع.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, husband, daughters, and siblings.

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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SAUDI ARABIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE FIRST STRIKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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This research aimed to explore the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States during the first strike of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Three research questions guided my study: What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government? How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

This research applied segmented assimilation theory to the students' integration theory and drew on higher education research literature to suggest some indicators that could be employed to study international students' perceptions of their higher education experiences. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences from underrepresented groups better.

I employed a qualitative research design to develop an understanding and identify common challenges Saudi Arabian international students experienced during the first

strike of the coronavirus pandemic. I collected data from 10 participants by conducting in-depth phenomenological interviews. I developed the interview protocol with a list of semi-structured interview questions prepared in advance and used to guide the interviews. The findings revealed six major themes: (a) Financial impact, (b) Impact on academic life, (c) Institutional communication and support, (d) Impact on social life and social support, (e) Emotional and psychological impact and support, and (f) Strategies for adaptation and persistence. The themes from the participants' experiences revealed intersections with and ties to the scholarly literature.

My research developed an understanding of the perspectives expressed by Saudi Arabian international students in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the lived experiences of underrepresented groups is crucial for policymakers and regulators, as well as for those developing support initiatives, to effectively serve these populations. The recommendations for future research and professionals provide a clear direction in developing support programs for international students and enhancing the services provided to them, with the aim of promoting their well-being and facilitating their progress.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the past few years, the United States education system has seen an influx of international students in post-secondary institutions. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2020), approximately 6 percent (over 1 million) of all students attending post-secondary institutions in the country in the academic year 2019/2020 were international students. The educational quality of American universities and the quest for increasing diversity on campuses have played a role in this influx (Albashir, 2019).

Moving to a new country to study comes with many challenges, including culture shock, financial problems, homesickness, language barrier, social isolation, and adjusting to living and studying in a new environment (Kim et al., 2017). Such challenges usually vary by race, country of origin, ethnicity, and English language proficiency, among other factors (Mitchell et al., 2017). While some of the difficulties affect international students only during the transition period, some persist throughout students' stay in the country.

The personal and academic challenges that international students experience during their stay in the United States have been examined by several researchers (Heyn, 2013). However, most of the research found in the literature was either on international students in general or with a specific focus on Asian students because they form the largest group of international students in the United States (Alajlan, 2016; Heyn, 2013). The increasing representation from different countries on campus requires a focus on

more than one culture to capture the unique experiences of international students from different backgrounds (Abi-Daher, 2020).

The literature on international students shows that little is known about the experience of Middle Eastern international students in the United States, and even less about Saudi Arabian students in particular. International students coming from Saudi Arabia to the United States are faced with several social, psychological, and personal problems due to the vast cultural, social, and geographical differences between the two countries (Alajlan, 2016). For example, Alajlan (2016) stated that “throughout their educational journey into studying abroad Saudi students face personal situations as a result of the cultural and social trauma of being away from their families” (p. 4).

In addition to the challenges mentioned above facing international students, the year 2020 presented international students with a new set of challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and subsequent closure of borders, travel restrictions, and restriction of public gatherings have had a significant impact on education systems worldwide. These restrictions affected much of the core of educational institutions' operations, such as learning/teaching, research, and scholarship activities. Consequently, educational institutions around the world were forced to transform how they operate on such short notice (Crawford et al., 2020).

Within a month after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, 193 countries and communities closed all learning institutions, including universities, colleges, and other post-secondary institutions. Moreover, more than 220 million post-secondary students had their studies ended or significantly

disrupted due to the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). The onset of the pandemic forced learning institutions from all around the world to change the mode of learning from standard physical classrooms to online learning using online platforms, such as Zoom, Moodle, Blackboard, and WebEx, among other platforms (Crawford et al., 2020). This quick transition undoubtedly had significant impacts on governments and societies, including stakeholders in the education sector, such as school administrators, teachers, and students.

The onset of the COVID-19 crisis hit international students hard as they faced unprecedented challenges, ones that their domestic peers did not face (Koo et al., 2021). Some of the challenges experienced by international students during the coronavirus pandemic included loneliness, travel bans, visa restrictions, homelessness, racism, in addition to academic and financial concerns (Behisi et al., 2021; Bilecen, 2020; Koo et al., 2021). Moreover, many international students were constantly anxious about their health and safety in addition to being worried about their loved ones (Bilecen, 2020). International students also face a higher risk of mental health problems than their domestic peers (Behisi et al., 2021). An understanding of the various challenges that international students face because of the coronavirus pandemic is important in developing effective interventions and support systems for international students in the future.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic presented even greater challenges for Saudi students living in the U.S. during the time. As Behisi et al. (2021) reported, among other challenges of living in a foreign country during a global pandemic, “living away from family and friends was significantly associated with increased loneliness and

psychological distress” (p. 14) for Saudi students. This research aimed to investigate and develop an understanding of the lived experiences of international students in the United States during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study focused on international students from Saudi Arabia, one of the leading groups of international students in the United States.

Definitions

The following are definitions of key terms that will be used in this study.

COVID-19. It is an abbreviation of coronavirus disease 2019. It is a contagious disease and is caused by a virus of the SARS strain SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, n.d. b).

WHO. The World Health Organization is an agency of the United Nations. Its purpose is to promote health and direct responses to health emergencies around the world (WHO, n.d. a).

International students. They are students who have traveled outside their country of origin for the purpose of obtaining an education in another country (UNESCO, n.d.).

Saudi students. They are those who hold Saudi citizenship, and they come from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), a country located in the Middle East. Their stay in the U.S. is for the purpose of studying.

SACM. The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission is an organization that is responsible for monitoring the academic progress of Saudi students studying at higher education institutions in the United States and providing financial and social support for the students (SACM, n.d.).

KASP. King Abdullah Scholarship Program is a scholarship program sponsored by the Saudi government. Its purpose is to invest in human capital by providing Saudi citizens

with opportunities to study in the best higher education institutions around the world (MOE, 2020).

Phenomenological study. It is a research approach in which the researcher describes how people experience a phenomenon by describing their lived experience through the events of that phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Background

The higher education stage may be a sensitive one for students because they could be vulnerable to many issues due to the challenges this stage entails. In fact, for some students, their mental health issues begin to occur at college age (Shea et al., 2019). In addition to the concerns of mental health problems that all higher education students face, international students are exposed to additional stressors due to the challenges of cultural and academic adaptation (Mori, 2000). Upon arrival to a foreign host country, international students are faced with a set of difficulties that they have to overcome (Lee, 2015). According to Mori (2000), “difficulties with the following linguistic, academic, interpersonal, financial, and intrapersonal problems constitute unique sources of stress for international students” (p. 137). Also, Lee (2015) identified social isolation and discrimination to be among the greatest challenges for international students. These challenges emerge as a result of the new environment that they have to adapt to, which also imposes new roles for them as foreign students. According to Alajlan (2016), individuals who do not successfully master new roles may experience role conflict, which can negatively impact their emotional well-being and hinder their ability to fulfill their educational goals. Therefore, it is anticipated that international students may encounter

complexities encompassing issues in adapting, cultural disorientation, feelings of exclusion, and possibly academic difficulties due to social and linguistic limitations.

During times of hardships and calamities, international students are usually affected excessively while at the same time being neglected by their institutions. For instance, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian international students in the United States faced undue discrimination after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2003). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, all international students studying in the United States faced a high-level uncertainty regarding their legal status (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2003). Such tensions created difficult challenges as new government policies about visas and paperwork regulations made it extremely hard for international students to study in the country. However, instead of being safe havens at such difficult times of xenophobic, Islamophobic, and discriminatory policies and speeches, many higher education organizations usually imitate ethnocentric and racist policies and practices, ranging from rejection by peers to discriminatory academic restrictions (Alsabatin, 2005).

Apart from neglecting international students during times of crisis, the country's higher education institutions usually take on international students' plight to raise revenue. For instance, international student enrollment and recruitment, especially from affluent countries, went up immediately after the 2008 global financial crisis as institutions sought to mitigate their financial losses (Fischer, 2019). Before this, Cold War U.S. policy promoted enrollment of international students in American institutions. The country aimed to improve its economic and scientific advancement while simultaneously promoting the American way of life worldwide (Bu, 1999). Many of the

international students enrolled at the time, however, did not graduate as they never got sufficient social and academic support (Bu, 1999).

Years after the Cold War U.S. policy, a different global crisis is showing how the sorry plight of international students is yet to be addressed. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is showing that, in some ways, neglecting international students has only gotten worse. While the international student population has continued to grow, recent practices, such as the travel bans on some (Muslim-majority) countries issued by President Trump's administration in 2017, COVID-19 travel bans, and the recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) decision regarding online enrollment, have increased international students' anxiety about their future and status in the country (ICE, 2020; Johnson, 2018; Koo et al., 2021; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Despite these challenges, many educational institutions have not taken any action to support international students. Instead, some institutions have discarded the little resources available to international students and neglected them when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Koo et al., 2021).

Xenophobic policies and attitudes certainly posed additional hurdles for international students studying in the U.S. at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak (Bilecen, 2020; Koo et al., 2021). However, the particular ways that the pandemic has affected international students and what can be done to support these students are still unclear. This research aimed to understand and explain the experiences of international students studying in the U.S. at the onset of the pandemic with a particular interest in Saudi Arabian students' experience. It also sought to shed light on their viewpoints on how institutions can support them.

Theoretical Background

There is a gap in the completion rates of higher education degrees between ethnic minority students and ethnic majority students (Allen, 1992; DesJardins et al., 2002; Hatch & Mommsen, 1984; Mehan et al., 1994; Myers, 2003; Pathways to College Network, 2003). Students from underrepresented ethnic groups are more likely than other students to drop out of post-secondary education (Carter, 2006). This is a critical issue since the number of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds is increasing in the student population in both general and higher education, but they do not graduate from college at a significant rate (Keller, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). The disparities in the rates of persistence, as well as in the rates of graduation, consistently place underrepresented student populations at a disadvantage (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

In addition, long-term social mobility is negatively impacted by the wide achievement gap between students from underrepresented minority groups and other students. A higher education degree is essential for those who wish to improve their socioeconomic standing. College degrees have been shown to yield a great benefit to minority communities' socioeconomic status (Carter, 2006; Ma et al., 2016; Malveaux, 2003). Most students benefit greatly from pursuing a higher education degree. “More education means increased opportunities” (Ma et al., 2016, p.8). The benefits of pursuing higher education are substantial, encompassing both financial gains and personal and intellectual growth for the majority of students and for minority groups in particular. According to Stewart (1988), “the most urgent need in higher education was the successful participation or retention of minority students” (as cited in Carter, 2006, p. 34), and this fact is still relevant today. Therefore, it is vital to understand retention

issues, particularly retention issues for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Understanding college students' retention by campus leaders and scholars is a necessity not only for its benefit for higher education institutions but also for its impact on society in the long term (Carter, 2006).

There are several theories that have been developed to explain the factors affecting the perseverance of college students. The factors contributing to students' persistence in completing a degree are complex and cannot be explained through a limited set of factors (Braxton et al., 2004). However, it is evident that individuals who actively engage in educationally purposeful activities within and beyond the classroom have a greater possibility of persisting until graduation (Kuh et al., 2010; Quaye & Harper, 2015). The aforementioned claim has been substantiated through empirical evidence and frequently recorded by a number of researchers in the field of higher education (e.g., Astin, 1993; Bean, 1990, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 2000; Bridges et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peltier et al., 1999; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Tinto, 1993, 2000, 2005).

Among the most widely examined theories in studies on college students' persistence and retention (e.g. Cabrera et al., 1990; Cabrera et al., 1992; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Munro, 1981) are Tinto's model of student integration and Bean's model of student departure (Bean, 1982; Hossler, 1984; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987). According to Vincent Tinto (2000), there exists a positive correlation between persistence and engagement, which encompasses both academic and social integration. Engagement, in fact, is the strongest predictor of perseverance, as indicated in his findings. He also pointed out that many students cease to pursue their higher

education and leave college because they don't feel connected to their peers, instructors, or administrators. Tinto contends that increased levels of integration into campuses' social and academic communities lead to stronger degrees of institutional commitment, which encourages students to continue their educational pursuits.

There are more current theories that also address the specific needs of disadvantaged groups, but Tinto's model remains the one most commonly referenced as a general model. This review examines the general literature on theories related to minority students' persistence and success with a particular interest in the student integration model by Vincent Tinto. Research utilizing Tinto's concept has greatly advanced our knowledge of the factors influencing students' persistence and departure. The Tinto model has been found to be useful in determining college student attrition by several researchers (Getzlaf et al., 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). According to Tinto (1993), college students' departure phenomenon offers a perspective on the type of academic and social communities that students encounter at higher education institutions.

In this section, I started by reviewing the literature on the student integration theory. Then, I addressed the criticisms and perspectives of other scholars on the model of student integration. Finally, I pointed out the similarities in the discussions surrounding integration theory and the sociology of immigration. According to the literature, the way in which newcomers are perceived in the hosting country and the university they attend can have a significant impact on their level of engagement and ability to assimilate into new cultures (Nunez, 2004).

I aimed to focus on the student integration model proposed by Tinto and the segmented assimilation theory from the immigration literature as it applies to Tinto's

model. I explained how the factors that have affected minority students' retention are similar to the social, contextual, and structural factors that impact the acculturation of new immigrants in the United States which is discussed in the segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1999). After that, I briefly talked about how the concerns brought up by segmented assimilation theory are similar to those in emergent student development theories that concentrate on the unique challenges faced by students from underrepresented groups. Additionally, I discussed a few of the segmented assimilation theory's limitations and how they relate to the investigation of minority students' retention. Finally, I explain how segmented assimilation theory could be a useful analogy for analyzing the factors that contribute to the persistence of minority students.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

The model of student integration created by Tinto (1975, 1993) is a well-defined and widely used conceptual framework for evaluating college students' persistence factors. The student integration model looks at how factors like students' characteristics, participation behaviors, and enrollment are related to retention. Student characteristics include the student's educational, familial, and demographical backgrounds. Engagement behaviors include the ways in which the student participates in the institution's social events, academic activities, or any other type of activity that occurs inside the institution. The term "persistence," which is synonymous with "retention," in the higher education context refers to students who continue their enrollment in an educational program with the intention of finishing it or until the degree is attained (Nunez, 2004).

Using the model developed by Spady (1970, 1971) for dropout in higher education and Durkheim's (1879/1951) theory of suicide as a foundation, Tinto (1975, 1982, 1987) developed the student integration model to explain the factors that influence the decision of individuals to leave college or university before completing their degree (Cabrera et al., 1992). In further analyses of student departure, Tinto (1993) included Van Gennep's (1909/1960) views about individuals' rites of passage into adulthood into his model. Tinto highlighted parallels between concepts from the suicide theory, the transition to adulthood, and students' dropout and persistence in higher education (Carter, 2006).

During a student's time in higher education, attrition occurs as a result of interactions between the student and the institution's educational environment, as proposed by Tinto's model (Cabrera et al., 1992; Tinto, 1975). Tinto's theory is based on the hypothesis that:

Persistence is a function of the match between an individual's motivation and academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics. The theory asserts that, other factors being equal, the match between an individual's characteristics and those of the institution shape two underlying individual commitments: a commitment to completing college (goal commitment) and a commitment to his or her respective institution (institutional commitment).

Accordingly, the stronger the goal of college completion and/or the level of institutional commitment is, the greater the probability of persistence. (Cabrera et al., 1992, p. 144)

Numerous researchers have utilized the student integration model as their studies' conceptual framework. However, when the model was put into empirical testing to find the underlying structural patterns between institutional and goal commitments and academic and social integration, the results were mixed (Nora, 1987; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Stage, 1989; Voorhees, 1987).

The conflicting results in the literature on the influence of student commitment, integration factors, and pre-college experience on persistence were attributed to factors like gender, race, institution type, and lack of control for external influences (Cabrera et al., 1992). The contribution of external factors in influencing preferences, commitments, and perceptions is a significant gap in Tinto's theory and related research (Bean, 1985; Cabrera et al., 1992; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987). This issue is important to address given the various social and institutional initiatives that are being designed to increase enrolment and reduce dropouts in higher education by looking at other factors beside the institutional ones such as family support and ability to pay (Cabrera et al., 1992). However, even with this limitation, the student integration model has been used by some researchers to find out how external factors like the influence of close relationships, finances, and college preparation affect persistence (Braxton et al., 1988; Cabrera et al., 1990; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Nora et al., 1990).

In Tinto's framework, students' sense of belonging and involvement in campus life are considered to be influenced by factors like student behaviors, attendance, enrollment, and type of institution. Therefore, a student's decisions of whether to maintain their enrollment in the institution and complete their degree, transfer to a

different institution, or drop out of higher education are all affected by the student's level of engagement on campus. Academic and social integration are considered the two main forms of involvement and participation in higher education. Indicators of academic integration include student-faculty interactions, student participation in research projects, and the amount of time spent on assignments. As for the indicators of social integration it includes participation in student organizations, interactions with other peer groups, developing friendships, and residence halls experiences (Nunez, 2004).

Perspectives on the Student Integration Model

Researchers have expanded on Tinto's approach and provided other angles from which to view the students' departure issue. Some scholars have suggested looking at student attrition from an organizational standpoint. Bean (1980) argued Tinto's theory and suggested that instead of associating students' departure with the concepts of suicide, scholars interested in examining student departure should look into organizational studies that have investigated the factors behind people quitting their jobs or leaving professional settings. Bean and Eaton (2000) created a psychological model of student retention, suggesting that the factors influencing college student retention are tied to the individual's psychological processes related to achieving social and academic integration (Carter, 2006). Some examples of effective retention programs include learning communities, mentorship programs, tutoring, first-year groups and initiatives, and student orientation (Myers, 2003).

Tinto's approach has been criticized by scholars throughout the years for its limited possibility of applying to minority groups (Braxton et al., 1997; Tierney, 1992). Some scholars advised that people interested in investigating student departure to

carefully analyze Tinto's model relevance and applicability to the wide range of diverse student groups in higher education today (Carter, 2006). Braxton et al. (1997) examined fifteen testable concepts generated from Tinto's theory in terms of support by institutional type, student group, and aggregated support. Braxton and his colleagues recommended that future researchers could evaluate these factors with different ethnic or racial student groups. According to the scholars, the empirical internal validity of Tinto's model for both African Americans and Native Americans is uncertain. Therefore, they proposed revising Tinto's theory or utilizing different theoretical approaches to investigate the retention of students from racial or ethnic minority groups (Braxton et al., 1997; Carter, 2006).

Tierney (1992) opposes the inclusion of anthropological elements that are adapted from the rituals of transition concepts into Tinto's framework. He claims that rituals of transition are not conceived of as movements between different cultures and are not to be used to transition from one culture to another. He pointed out that Tinto's model includes assumptions about individuals who undergo rites of passage in a culture that could be different than their own (e.g., racial minority students in predominantly White institutions). In addition, Tierney argued that integration models have the effect of simply bringing minorities into the cultural frame of reference of the dominant group that is conveyed inside the dominant cultural forms, thus maintaining the status quo of the unseen cultural hierarchies and inequalities that exist within societies (Carter, 2006).

In addition, some critics of Tinto's approach argue that it places too much emphasis on individual factors rather than social factors, and fails to account for the unique cultural experiences of minority students. They also argued that Tinto's theory

implicitly places the responsibility of leaving college on the students, while other environmental, social, and cultural factors could have played a role in causing the disengagement (Braxton, 2000; Laden et al., 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1992). Over the past several years, scholars have attempted to provide alternative conceptualizations of how minority students could effectively navigate predominantly White college contexts as a response to the presumption of integration. According to Rendón et al. (2000), the process in which students live simultaneously in two realities and two cultures could be referred to as biculturation. This phenomenon was also described by some scholars as dual competency, in which students must be competent in both their own culture and the culture of the institution (Swail et al., 2003).

Similar discussions have occurred in the sociology of immigration field on whether immigrants assimilate and the ways in which they integrate into the American culture. Nunez (2004) examined how the segmented assimilation theory proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993) can be applied to conceptually revise the prevailing paradigm of student retention by Tinto. For my research, I want to follow Nunez's approach in utilizing concepts from Tinto's theory of student integration with concepts from the segmented assimilation theory from the immigration literature to explain the persistence of minority students in higher education. This approach is premised on the idea that factors that impact the acculturation of new immigrants are similar to the factors that impact minority students' participation and retention in college. According to the segmented assimilation theory, which is grounded in recent research on immigrants' integration into American society, not all immigrants take the same steps to integrate into the American culture; they follow different paths and participate in the society in various

ways (Nunez, 2004). In this research, I propose that the concepts from the segmented assimilation theory could be used to explain the ways in which students from diverse backgrounds adjust to life at a higher education institution.

Segmented Assimilation Theory and College Students' Integration and Persistence

Some immigration researchers (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) argue that the majority of earlier research on immigrants' assimilation assumes that the journey of assimilation for all immigrants to engage with the host society or become people with similar economic and social characteristics to those of the majority groups in the hosting society (i.e., White middle class) happens in linear way (straight line). This point indicates that all immigrants will have the same experience taking the same steps in adjusting to the new society (Nunez, 2004). According to Zhou (1999), this type of assimilation is known as "classical assimilation," and it is analogous to the belief that all college students take the same path toward integrating into college and will experience a similar social integration process in higher education.

Recent advances in assimilation theories may be pertinent to the research on students' persistence in higher education for numerous reasons. First, the argument concerning the assimilation process in immigration being the same for all immigrants from different ethnic groups is related to the social integration perspective critiques and their arguments in the literature of higher education (Nunez, 2004). These arguments imply that the road toward being fully engaged in college life could be different for individuals from different groups depending on factors such as their gender, race, religion, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. Second, immigration literature examines how individuals transition from one culture to another and the way in which

newcomers engage and fit in that new culture. The theoretical findings from the immigration literature, therefore, could be applicable to the experiences of minority students whose cultural and familial backgrounds might be less experienced with higher education and are consequently less likely to undergo linear rites of passage (Nunez, 2004). College students, in this sense, particularly those from minority communities and traditionally underrepresented groups, such as students with disabilities, first-generation, low-income, and non-traditional students, might be viewed as immigrants adjusting to new circumstances. Third, the existing demographic data and trends suggest that immigrants and their children will make up a growing proportion of the student body in secondary and post-secondary education in the near future (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Colleges and universities today serve an increasingly diverse student body that is racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically more diverse than ever before. With this diversity, it is important for higher education institutions to realize that many of these students are like immigrants to the campus: they are unfamiliar with the norms and expectations of college life. Scholars who study higher education from a social-ecological viewpoint believe that students not only undergo a personal transformation after entering college, but they also contribute to shaping the campus environment (Dey & Hurtado, 1994, 2000). Since the number of people from underprivileged backgrounds enrolling in colleges and universities is increasing, it is imperative that these spaces be adapted to meet the needs of marginalized groups.

Portes and Zhou (1993) argued that individuals from different immigrant groups might take different paths and engage in different parts of society instead of following the same form of involvement. According to their model, there are three main types of

variables that impact these assimilation processes and explain the differences in immigrants' engagement in the American society. These include individual factors, family factors, and factors related to the broad social context that immigrants experience in the new host country. In this research, I emphasize the importance of social context variables in understanding the impact of institutional and social factors on the participation of minority students in higher education. Although individual and family factors are certainly important determinants on student persistence, I narrow my attention to social context factors because they are more central to the discussion on minority students' participation in higher education. In addition, my concentration on the social context variables is because they also entail factors that could be considered by higher education policymakers and administrators when addressing issues related to minority students (Nunez, 2004).

Social Context Variables (Context of Reception Variables)

"The context of reception" is a term used by Portes and Zhou (1993) to describe the social environment that immigrants find when they move to a new country. The context of reception includes three main areas: the policies set by the host country's government for immigrants, the attitudes and stereotypes of the hosting society towards immigrants, and the co-ethnic communities characteristics in the host country. According to this perspective, immigrants' participation in the social, cultural, and economic activities of the host society is shaped by the context of reception and how it influences and interacts with the individual and familial backgrounds to form the way in which immigrants engage. In the 1970s, policies that allowed for the resettlement of the refugees who came from Vietnam and offered them financial aid, and the strong social

networks that were present in certain geographical areas which may have assisted those lacking sufficient economic and social resources in achieving social mobility are all examples of the positive reception that the Vietnamese refugees have received (Nunez, 2004; Zhou & Bankston, 1996). Mexican American immigrants, on the other hand, may have had lower levels of social and economic mobility throughout the last century because of the relatively negative reception they received in the United States, which included deportation policies, settlement constraints, and the frequent bouts of hostility towards immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Similar to how the reception of immigrants and how they are perceived in a new country is impacted by the policies set by governments regarding immigrant groups, students' sense of belonging and involvement in the campus community could be impacted by institutional policies in higher education. Historically, racial and ethnic criteria have been used to restrict access to higher education for particular ethnic groups in the same way that similar policies have been used to restrict immigration to the United States for certain groups (Nunez, 2004). These restrictions could be implemented at three different levels: the institutional, the state, and the national level. Many universities and colleges have a history of systematic discrimination and exclusion of women and people of color, and their participation has been limited on campus for a long time in these higher education institutions (Nunez, 2004). In the early 20th century, restrictions on Jews admission were implemented at some higher education institutions, and they lasted until the 1960s at some of the prestigious institutions. Also, at a recent time, there have been concerns that some higher education institutions, mostly elite colleges, were trying to cap the admissions of Asian students because the number of qualified applicants for

admission was high. However, the growing presence of members from underrepresented groups in higher education administration and the legislative actions pressured by some states led to the lifting of exclusionary measures (Perlman & Waldinger, 1997).

Affirmative action laws were first enacted on a national level in the early 1960s with the goal of reducing racial and gender discrimination in the workplace and in schools. As a response to a court case contesting the use of affirmative action, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case that race and ethnicity could be utilized to increase the diversity in the student body enrolled in higher education institutions alongside other considerations in the admission process [438 U.S. 265 (1978)]. Consequently, the national regulations and policies that have been made to serve minorities formed a more welcoming environment (i.e., a positive context of reception) for underrepresented groups to pursue higher education.

Later, Affirmative action was challenged and even banned in some states. In Texas, California, Florida, Washington, Georgia, and Michigan, Affirmative Action was banned due to the belief that its policies were inequitable because they benefit underqualified minority students and favors them over other more qualified individuals (Nunez, 2004). For instance, the Proposition 209 referendum, which was passed in California in 1996, prohibited considering racial and ethnic backgrounds in the admissions process for public universities. It also resulted in the creation of outreach and support initiatives aimed at serving minority students. This was an example of how state-level regulations could impact minority students' opportunities to access and persist in higher education. All these regulations and policies at all levels (institutional, state, and national) have had an impact on the inclusion and exclusion of minority groups in higher

education. Similar to how immigration regulations restrict or expand access for particular populations, the policies in higher education may have an explicit or implicit effect on restricting students' chances of enrolling in college and adapting to campus life, and its impact could vary for each student (Nunez, 2004).

The second part of the context of reception is how individuals of minority groups are perceived by society. These social perceptions include biases or stereotypes that people in the host society hold about immigrants. Some scholars have pointed out that racial stereotypes may impact the integration processes of some immigrant groups more than others (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). For instance, assimilation might be more difficult for immigrants with dark skin color than for those with lighter skin tones due to the negative racial assumptions and stereotypes about people with dark skin in American society. When these ideas are applied to the context of higher education, it becomes clear that minority groups members may face barriers that could limit their ability to engage in college life due to the negative stereotypes and misconceptions about them (Nunez, 2004). For example, Jews who attended prestigious colleges in the early twentieth century faced racial insults as well as discrimination and social exclusion by being prohibited from some clubs and activities because of their religion and ethnicity (Steinberg, 1989). Their ability to fully integrate into college life, therefore, was constrained.

Despite the fact that minority students now experience a more welcoming campus environment, racist events continue to happen on campuses in both explicit and implicit means (Altbach, 1991; Chang, 1999). According to studies on racial microaggressions (subtle acts of racism), racist attitudes impact minority students' daily lives (Solórzano,

1998; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Racist experiences like these can have a detrimental impact on students' sense of belonging to the institution and on their motivation to engage in academic and social activities on campus. For instance, in some institutions, racial minority students may be stigmatized by the notion that they were admitted merely on the basis of racial considerations because of affirmative action policies instead of their academic qualifications (Nunez, 2004). Such perceptions can still occur even when there is evidence showing that minority students were not being accepted under such considerations (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). In addition, such views can make the campus an unwelcoming environment for students from underrepresented groups, leading them to drop out of college.

Moreover, the perpetuation of such stereotypes about minorities might reinforce the notion that they do not fit in higher education and that they would not succeed in that environment, discouraging them from enrolling and participating in college. In a study on the "stereotype threat" phenomena, Steele (1997) indicated that minorities might score poorly on high-stakes assessments due to the negative preconceptions associated with their group's performance on tests in the past. Also, when minority students are surrounded by negative views about their academic potential and their admission opportunities, it may serve to reinforce such stereotypical threats and negatively impact their outcomes (Nunez, 2004). On the other hand, other forms of stereotyping like the "model minority" stereotype that portrays Asian students as high achievers and being academically gifted might add more social pressure on them to excel and cause institutions to overlook their unique needs because they do not seem to be regressing in their academic achievement (Escueta & O'Brien, 1995; Sue & Abe, 1995). Furthermore,

the discourse used by higher education administrators to explain the reasons for minority students dropping out of college may have a detrimental impact on the participation and enrollment levels of these individuals in the institution. Administrators' assumptions about the needs of minority students may affect the extent to which initiatives and policies to support these groups are developed and the number of resources that could be dedicated to assist them in their education journey. The prevalent belief that students must abandon their culture for them to succeed in college implies that these individuals must adhere to the institution's standards and norms instead of placing the responsibility on the institution to create a welcoming environment that serves students from diverse backgrounds (Nunez, 2004).

The third part of the context of reception is the reception of the co-ethnic communities for people of the same ethnic backgrounds. In the immigration context, this refers to the kind of support that the existing ethnic communities in the host country can provide for new immigrants upon their arrival. If new immigrants can live around other immigrant communities and be among others of their own ethnicity, they can learn how to deal with biases and stereotypes in the society and find economic and social resources that could help them settle (Nunez, 2004). The same concept can also be applied in higher education context where the presence of peers with similar experiences and backgrounds can have an impact on students' persistence in college. The proportion of students who identify as belonging to racial or ethnic minorities in higher education reveals the extent to which these groups are present in the student body (Nunez, 2004). When the composition of the student body is clearly diverse, it is an indication that the educational institution's climate is more inclusive of students from various backgrounds

(Gurin, 1999). This “structural diversity” as some scholars referred to it, has been linked to positive learning experiences and outcomes for students of minority groups (Gurin, 1999).

In order to get a better understanding of the subject matter, we can take a look at organizations that are primarily consisting of members of racial or ethnic minorities, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). In a study that examined the outcomes of African American students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) compared to those attending historically Black colleges, it was reported that the ones who attended the HBCUs have shown better educational outcomes overall. According to the researcher, this could be attributed to the higher levels of institutional and social support that the students experienced at these institutions (Allen, 1992). In addition, some scholars have indicated that students from underrepresented backgrounds have greater chances of completing their degrees at institutions that primarily serve certain ethnic groups like HSIs, HBCUs, and TCUs, and this could be because they are surrounded by a more supportive environment (Laden et al., 2000).

Minority students' participation in colleges and universities may also be affected by the presence of ethnic communities and groups on campus. For example, ethnic and racial clubs and associations at higher education institutions, especially at the PWIs, can provide minority students with the social, emotional, and academic support they need and introduce them to resources available for them that can help them navigate the college life (Nunez, 2004). Some researchers have also indicated that students' participation in activities with these ethnic associations on campus can positively affect minority

students' academic performance and persistence (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). On the other hand, researchers who adopt the social integration perspective believe that these ethnic organizations could be a barrier that hinders students' persistence. According to this social integrationist argument, such organizations could cause more division on campus by categorizing students into ethnic groups, and minority students are the ones more likely to leave college because they are not fully engaged with the campus's dominant culture (D'Souza, 1991). However, scholars who adopt the multicultural approach assert that students' chances of engaging and succeeding in higher education increase when they are surrounded by peers from similar backgrounds (Tierney, 1992).

Linkage with Research in Higher Education Literature

Student Engagement

The effort that the students make and the amount of time that they put into participating in academic and extracurricular activities are what is referred to as student engagement (Kuh, 2003). Students typically derive a greater amount of value from their time spent in college when they devote a more significant amount of their time and energy to activities that have an educational purpose. Some examples of such activities include frequently interacting with people from various backgrounds and using what they learn to find solutions to problems that occur in the real world (Kuh, 2003). The topic of college students' engagement in higher education institutions in the United States will be covered in the following paragraphs.

The level to which students from different backgrounds are engaged in their studies differs substantially (Wang & BrckaLorenz, 2018). Several previous studies have looked into the level of engagement shown by students in the United States (e.g., Kuh,

2003; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Quaye & Harper, 2015). Numerous studies have been conducted on students who come from nontraditional or diverse backgrounds and experiences (e.g., Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Denson, & Chang, 2009; Junco, 2012; Kuh et al., 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). These studies have focused on demographic factors such as gender, race, age, fields of study, enrollment status, first-generation status, and grade point average (Wang & BrckaLorenz, 2018).

In their study, Pike and Kuh (2005) distributed a survey to 3,000 undergraduate students in U.S. colleges. The purpose of the survey was to compare the levels of engagement and intellectual growth of first-generation and second-generation students in American higher education. From the survey results, the researchers inferred that first-generation students were less likely to engage in college activities compared to students who had a parent who attended college. Additionally, they found that first-generation students were less likely to perceive their college environment as supportive.

In the body of literature that has been done on international students' educational experiences in the United States, relatively few studies have mainly investigated the levels of engagement in college activities experienced by international students. When compared to students from the United States, the degrees of engagement shown by international students varied depending on both their class standing and the type of activity they participated in (Wang & BrckaLorenz, 2018). Zhao et al. (2005) analyzed the differences in participation in academic activities between international students and American students in the U.S. They discovered that international students, compared to American students, were more involved in academic challenges, student-faculty communication, and the use of technology in course activities. In addition, international

students deemed themselves as having greater opportunities to gain personal and social development and better education outcomes in general than their American peers (Zhao et al., 2005). Despite this, international students were found to have a lower level of engagement in activities such as community service and socializing than their American peers.

Sense of Belonging

The need to belong for a college student is a learner's subjective feeling of connectedness and integration into the campus community and the institution (Pedler et al., 2022). The need for belonging is, therefore, the feeling of being a part of a community that makes one feel a connection with other people. The human need for belonging and love represents the need for meaningful relationships in their lives. Relationships help an individual grow and develop and feel that they are being supported and valued (Pedler et al., 2022). Students in higher education have a greater tendency to drop out of school if they feel that they do not fit with the social and intellectual atmosphere of the institutional life in their organization or if they are unable to build personal relationships which are the basis for establishing membership in the institution's communities (Mwangi, 2016). This puts students at a greater risk of attrition. On the other hand, higher levels of fitting or a sense of belonging improve the likelihood that students would be satisfied with their experience at the school and continue their education (Mwangi, 2016).

Terrell Strayhorn (2012) adopted Tinto's (1993) conceptual theory framework by moving away from the deficit theory and focusing on the learner and where they originate. Strayhorn's model of a college student's sense of belonging portrays that a

sense of belonging based on cognitive aspects impacts the affective outcomes of the learner. The theory focuses on the institutional sense of belonging, a social sense of belonging, and an academic sense of belonging. Strayhorn's (2012) model indicates that international students who enter institutions of higher education in an environment where there is a merging and meeting of physiological needs and social motives facilitate the manifestation of a sense of belonging.

In his theory, Strayhorn considers what the student brings to college. He also explores the campus environment concerning Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In higher education institutions, a sense of belonging among international students implies perceived social support on campus during the learning process and the experience of the feeling of being cared for and mattering. A sense of belonging for international students also includes a sense of being connected to the campus community, and respect for the campus social groups, which impacts the students' behavior.

A sense of belonging and good relationships with teachers and friends are the most critical factors for students' involvement in school. Strayhorn's model of a college student's sense of belonging portrays that such a feeling based on cognitive aspects impacts the learner's effective outcomes. A sense of belonging is also connected to the identity development process, student involvement, and engagement in the learning process (Strayhorn, 2012).

Several researchers have concluded that students' sense of belonging is strongly influenced by the connection they establish with both their peers and their teachers. It has been suggested that a sense of belonging depends on various factors, including meaningful interpersonal interactions, networks of support and resources, and the

perception that one is accepted and respected (Mwangi, 2016). There is empirical evidence that supports the assumption that an increased sense of belonging in college is connected with positive psychological, academic, and persistence results, according to the studies that have been done up until now (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012).

Studies that analyzed the impact of the college environment on the persistence of minority students indicate a relationship between minority students' perceptions of the campus climate and integration, retention, and their sense of belonging (Baird, 2000; Hurtado, 2002; Hurtado et al., 1999). Hurtado and Carter (1997) proposed the "sense of belonging" concept as a more relevant indicator of minority student persistence than the integration measures that are commonly utilized. Their "sense of belonging" framework accounts for the potentially negative or unwelcoming environment minority students may experience. Furthermore, their findings imply that a student's sense of belonging in an institution may be influenced by various affiliations with social, familial, religious, and other communities within and outside the institution.

The factors of the context of reception identify various external and internal institutional characteristics that may impact students' views of the campus climate in higher education. In a similar way, Hurtado et al. (1999) proposed a campus climate framework that emphasizes the idea that there are various dimensions of the institutional climate that could impact minority students' engagement in higher education. These dimensions include the "historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion" of minority groups in governmental and institutional policies; "structural diversity" which shows minority groups' representation in the student body, faculty, and staff; "psychological climate"

that is reflected in the perceptions and attitudes of the students toward discrimination, prejudices, and racial/ethnic tensions; and “behavioral dimensions” which appears in the social interactions across different racial groups, and campus and classroom diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999, p. 4).

When applied to the study of college students' persistence, the segmented assimilation theory highlights potential disparities in students' trajectories by recognizing different pathways of engagement in community life. Combining this approach with an interactionist perspective, which places an emphasis on students' perceptions of their environment, provides a lens for scholars conducting studies that aim to comprehend students' voices, subject positions, power dynamics, and worldviews (Nunez, 2004). However, since students' perspectives are different, it must be taken into consideration that not all factors are of equal significance to all students (Tanaka, 2002). For instance, in a study on Latino students' sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) indicated that similar characteristics may have distinct meanings for different students, meaning that their impact on a student's feelings of belonging could be different depending on the ethnic background of the student.

Based on the premise that students from different ethnic backgrounds participate in college life in distinct ways, the application of the segmented assimilation theory to the theory of integration creates a framework for considering different variables pertinent to various groups of students (Nunez, 2004).

Segmented assimilation theory as applied to integration theory provides an avenue toward envisioning a link between the tradition of integration research, with its more modernist view of a unitary subject and limited influences on subjects'

experiences, and a more postmodern conception of a variety of influences, trajectories, and standpoints that students may experience as they participate in college life. (Nunez, 2004, p. 15)

In addition, it also provides a more nuanced understanding of the social and structural aspects that influence students' efforts to navigate the complexities of the higher education setting through the context of reception concepts.

Despite the fact that integration theory has been criticized, particularly when considering the perspectives of students from underrepresented groups, many researchers built their studies on its foundation (Braxton, 2000). One approach to bridging new theoretical and empirical insights regarding minority student persistence with the paradigm of integration is to take into account how segmented assimilation theory pertains to integration theory. This approach provides a framework through which to consider how to incorporate findings from studies of minority students' lived experiences into an improved conception of integration theory (Nunez, 2004).

This research incorporated literature from a different field that demonstrates how integration theory could embrace the perspectives of underrepresented student groups as a way to provide another approach for understanding students' persistence. In particular, it sheds light on how minority students experience and navigate the college environment, which integration theory as it has been constituted does not directly address, by applying the principles of the context of reception from segmented assimilation theory. According to the analogy between the context of reception in segmented assimilation theory and the college environment factors, aspects like racial stereotypes, incidents of discrimination, admission policies, student body composition, forms of institutional support for minority

groups, and access to supportive ethnic associations all need to be addressed by integration theory (Nunez, 2004). The studies referenced in this review imply that these macro-, meso, and micro level aspects associated with the context of reception have a significant impact on minority students' engagement level in higher education. Moreover, studies in both areas suggest that when individuals identify with their ethnic culture as they adjust to their new life in a new country or in a new institution, it may improve their chances of becoming actively involved with the community they became part of and lead them into achieving positive educational outcomes (Nunez, 2004).

To sum up, this research applied segmented assimilation theory to the students' integration theory and drew on higher education research literature to suggest a number of indicators and potential variables that could be employed to study students' perceptions of higher education climate in the interest of establishing a better context of reception for diverse groups of students. Students' experiences with different campus climates and the aspects that impact persistence may be better understood and interpreted if these factors were taken into account.

Research Questions

This research explored the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States during the first strike of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?
3. How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

Significance of the Study

According to the International Association of Universities (2014), international students benefit their domestic peers and institutions significantly. Specifically, they make significant research contributions, are critical in establishing international ties, provide unique perspectives on pertinent issues, and contribute to the creation of multicultural environments that advantage local students (Wu et al., 2015). Contemporary research also indicates that international students bring additional revenue and provide their institutions with a reliable source of income as they pay substantially higher tuition fees than their local counterparts (Cantwell, 2015). However, despite these numerous benefits, international students are underserved in the best of times and are usually left defenseless during times of crisis (Wu et al., 2015). Understanding the lived experiences of international students during a crisis is essential in developing interventions to help them adapt to the new conditions and fostering disaster preparedness for the future.

In the academic year of 2018/19, there were about 37,080 Saudi students studying in higher education institutions in the United States, which makes Saudi Arabia the fourth largest source of international students in the United States (IIE, 2019). The importance of conducting a study on the experience of Saudi Arabian students in U.S. universities during the coronavirus pandemic lies in the need to understand the difficulties faced by this population and to provide them with appropriate services in times of crisis to help

them succeed academically and achieve their goals. Also, this study will provide information to help higher education institutions in the United States understand this group and design the appropriate services for the needs of this growing population.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few years, the United States education system has seen an influx of international students in post-secondary institutions. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2020), approximately 6 percent (over 1 million) of all students attending post-secondary institutions in the country in the academic year of 2019/2020 were international students. The educational quality of American universities and the quest for increasing diversity on campuses have played a role in this influx (Albashir, 2019).

Moving to a new country to study comes with many challenges, including culture shock, financial problems, homesickness, language barrier, social isolation, and adjusting to living and studying in a new environment (Kim et al., 2017). Such challenges usually vary by race, country of origin, ethnicity, and English language proficiency, among other factors (Mitchell et al., 2017). While some of the difficulties affect international students only during the transition period, some persist throughout the students' stay in the country. In addition to the challenges mentioned above facing international students, the year of 2020 presented international students with a new set of challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The personal and academic challenges that international students have experienced during their stay in the United States have been examined by several researchers (Heyn, 2013; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Olivas & Lee, 2006; Pedersen, 1995; Ward et al., 2008). However, most of the research found in the literature was either on

international students in general or with a specific focus on Asian students because they form the largest group of international students in the United States (Alajlan, 2016; Heyn, 2013). The increasing representation from different countries on campus requires a focus on more than one culture to capture the unique experiences of international students from different backgrounds (Abi-Daher, 2020).

The literature on international students shows that little is known about the experience of Middle Eastern international students in the United States and even less about Saudi Arabian students specifically. International students coming from Saudi Arabia to the United States are faced with several social, psychological, and personal problems due to the vast cultural, social, and geographical differences between the two countries (Alajlan, 2016). For example, Alajlan (2016) stated that “throughout their educational journey into studying abroad Saudi students face personal situations as a result of the cultural and social trauma of being away from their families” (p. 4). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic presented even greater challenges for Saudi students living in the U.S. during the time as Behisi et al. (2021) reported that among other challenges of living in a foreign country during a global pandemic, “living away from family and friends was significantly associated with increased loneliness and psychological distress” (p. 14) for Saudi students.

Overview of International Students in American Higher Education

The phenomenon of students emigrating to seek knowledge is not new. Education institutions have been a destination for students from all over the world since the Middle Ages when students migrated to Paris and Bologna to attend their universities and seek knowledge. With the spread of universities in Europe, student emigration increased.

Large numbers of students immigrating to Germany to study were recorded in the mid-nineteenth century (García & Villarreal, 2014). There are several studies have been devoted to the topic of foreign students' mobility (Bessey, 2012; González et al., 2011; Oleksiyenko et al., 2013). According to Bessey (2012), international students exhibit a preference for countries that are geographically closer to their home country when making decisions regarding their choice of study destination. However, a study conducted by González et al. (2011) showed that besides distance various factors influencing the selection of destination by international students were examined. These factors included the size of the country, educational background, quality of educational institutions, the language spoken in the host country, cost of living, and climate. Governments have implemented preferential policies to promote the mobility of international students due to the economic benefits and potential talent they bring to a region or country (Oleksiyenko et al., 2013; Yao, 2018). For a long time, Europe was the primary higher education destination for students because of its long-standing universities that have enviable reputations and prestige. That preference for European universities was until American universities began to flourish and gain a high reputation in scientific research, which attracted students from all over the world. Now, the United States has become the first destination for higher education for many foreign students around the world (García & Villarreal, 2014).

Challenges for International Students Studying in the U.S.

Although most American universities have become acquainted with international students due to the increase in their number in U.S. higher education over the years, which reached one million and nine in the academic year 2017-2018, there are still some

difficulties that this group of students face over others (Albeshir, 2019; IIE, 2019).

Acculturation and adjustment to a new culture are key topics in the body of literature on international students (Leong, 2015; Terrazas-Carrillo et al., 2014; Yao, 2018).

According to Terrazas-Carrillo and colleagues (2014), international students are more likely to successfully integrate into a new culture when they have possibilities for social engagement and self-expression. The experiences and satisfaction levels of international students are impacted by individual-level factors that include language proficiency and coping ability. The experiences of international students are also shaped by environmental factors, including culture and reception by their host society (Leong, 2015; Yao, 2018). In addition, many foreign students studying in the United States report facing academic, cultural, social, and financial challenges throughout their educational journey (Albeshir, 2019; Bai, 2016; Gautam et al., 2016; Heyn, 2013; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Liu, 2016; Perry 2016). The challenges of international students will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Academics and Language

Scholars have extensively examined the academic challenges faced by international students, which can be broadly categorized into; the need to navigate English language proficiency, achieving satisfactory performance in academic settings, struggling to meet the expectations of academic advisors, limited access to support services, and comprehending the complex structure of the education system in the United States (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Gong & Fan, 2006; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Shaw, 2010). However, most of these challenges were mostly linked to the lack of English language proficiency.

The language barrier forms a significant challenge for the majority of international students in an academic setting (Albeshir, 2019; Bai, 2016; Banjong, 2015; Gautam et al., 2016; Liu, 2016; Rabia & Hazza, 2017). According to a study by Liu (2016) examining the challenges of international students in American higher education, a significant number of international students demonstrated limited competency in the English language. Most of the students had difficulties with the intensive reading requirements, which are different from what they are used to in their home countries, and finding the time to finish them before the next lecture. In addition, some individuals involved in the study reported facing challenges in comprehending the spoken language of their instructors. These students faced difficulties in understanding some concepts and idiomatic expressions used by both their professors and peers.

Challenges with the use of the English language in the classroom environment have a detrimental impact on the academic performance of international students. In order to fulfill their academic obligations, international students were required to comprehend the material presented in their lessons and actively engage by posing inquiries, according to Liu (2016) in his study on Asian foreign students. Moreover, there were instances where students expressed that their professors were dissatisfied with their proficiency in writing, resulting in an increase in the writing standards for college-level students (Liu, 2016).

In addition, Rabia and Hazza (2017) found that the language barrier posed a prominent challenge for Arab international students enrolled in American higher education institutions. English language barriers were also cited by Rabia and Hazza as a contributing factor to the struggles their Arab participants had with writing and

communicating. English proficiency is the primary concern for international learners, according to Banjong (2015), because it is crucial for comprehending lectures and performing well on examinations in higher education settings.

International students' success at American universities has been linked to their level of English ability, according to a number of studies (Daller & Phelan, 2013; Koys, 2010; Morris & Maxey, 2014; Wait & Gressel, 2009; Ward et al., 2015). The achieved results of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) were utilized by each of these scholars in order to evaluate the participants' level of English ability. Grade Point Average (GPA) was the first indicator of academic success. Ward et al. (2015) found that international students had a lower GPA in their first year of college compared to domestic students at the same level. The authors attribute this disparity to having challenges with the English language. According to Morris and Maxey (2014), the results of the TOEFL can be used as a reliable indication of future academic performance. In a study on international students majoring in engineering, Wait and Gressel (2009) found that students' TOEFL scores correlate positively with their overall academic performance in the classroom and on examinations.

However, it has been argued by various studies that there is no correlation between the TOEFL test scores of international students and their academic achievements (Krausz et al., 2005; Martirosyan et al., 2015; Wongtrirat, 2010). Wongtrirat (2010) provides a concise overview of the findings derived from a meta-analysis encompassing 22 studies that examine the correlation between international students' English language proficiency and their academic performance. These studies employed a combination of GPA and course completion metrics, along with TOEFL test scores as a measure of

English proficiency, to assess academic performance. Wongtrirat's study yielded the finding that the utilization of TOEFL test scores as a means of predicting international students' educational outcomes lacks effectiveness. Also, the study conducted by Krausz et al. (2005) on international students enrolled in a business college revealed that there is no significant correlation between TOEFL test scores and the academic performance of the students.

Social and Cultural

It is frequently observed that international students face various social and cultural challenges when adapting to the American culture (Albeshir, 2019; Bai, 2016; Gautam et al., 2016; Matusitz, 2015). Many foreign students in the United States struggle with feelings of loneliness and homesickness, which could have a detrimental impact on their academic proficiency and progress (Banjong, 2015). The primary factor contributing to the social challenges experienced by international students in the United States is the lack of proficiency in English language skills, as explained in several studies (Banjong, 2015; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). Some researchers pointed out that international students experience social isolation because of the language barrier, as they feel discomfort in conversing in English in the presence of their American peers (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Liu, 2016). Therefore, international students sometimes avoid expressing their perspectives and opinions during classroom discussions (Albeshir, 2019). It was also noted by Lin and Scherz (2014) that some international students are inactive in their classes and experience feelings of alienation as a result of their passive role.

International students' limited ability to communicate in English contributes to their isolation from the local and the school communities, including their professors and

peers (Trice, 2007). According to Banjong (2015), many groups of international students expressed a sense of loneliness during their time in the United States due to their inability to establish friendships with American students in their schools. The issue of insufficient English language proficiency has been identified as a contributing factor to the challenges faced by international students in establishing social connections with individuals from the local community (Banjong, 2015). Wu et al. (2015) explained that sometimes the distinctive features of the spoken language, including pronunciation, accent, and rate of speech, contribute to the social isolation experienced by some groups of international students.

Early studies on international students showed that there was a notable association between the adaptation of foreign students in the United States and their subjective evaluation of their language proficiency, which was evidenced by Ying and Liese's (1994) study on Taiwanese students. Having inadequate proficiency in the English language is expected to have an impact on the academic and social achievements of international students. Consequently, this influence may subsequently affect their psychological adaptation to the new cultural context (Mori, 2000).

In addition to encountering challenges in socializing with domestic students, certain groups of foreign students have reported experiencing overt hostility on campus and within the surrounding community. It is unfortunate that some foreign students studying in the United States may encounter instances of social abuse, which includes prejudice, harassment, and discrimination. International students may find it particularly difficult to adjust to their new surroundings if they are subjected to social abuse because

it creates an unwelcoming and unsafe environment. Among the typical types of social abuse that overseas students might experience are:

- **Discrimination:** Foreign students may experience it because of their nationality, race, ethnicity, or religion. This may have a detrimental effect on their social and academic life and cause them to feel excluded and alienated.
- **Prejudice:** International students may face instances of prejudice or the perpetuation of stereotypes, which can stem from a lack of knowledge, misconceptions, or ignorance. Misunderstandings may arise as a result of this situation, potentially fostering a hostile environment for some groups of international students.
- **Harassment:** It is another issue that international students might encounter, and it can take the form of physical or verbal assault. The experience has the potential to induce trauma and exert adverse effects on the student's mental and physical well-being (Great Learning, 2023).

Another significant challenge faced by international students, particularly during their initial transitional phases to the U.S., is culture shock (Geary, 2016; Liu, 2016; Matusitz, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). Culture shock, according to Young (2014), can be explained as the emotional and behavioral responses that arise from being exposed to a new or unfamiliar cultural environment, different from one's accustomed surroundings. Moreover, Macionis and Gerber (2010) identified culture shock as that state of disorientation that individuals may experience when they encounter unfamiliar circumstances resulting from a new life situation, such as immigration, visiting a foreign country, transitioning between different social environments, or even when embarking on

a journey to a distinct lifestyle. In other words, cultural shock is a phenomenon that elucidates the effects of transitioning from one cultural surrounding to another. It entails adjusting to a completely new setting, interacting with a large number of new people, and learning the customs and habits of a distinct community (Albeshir, 2019).

In most cases, people experience culture shock in stages, beginning with the honeymoon phase and progressing through discouragement, adjustment, and finally acceptance. Additionally, this phenomenon encompasses the emotional distress experienced when individuals are distanced from significant people in their lives. These individuals serve as valuable sources of comfort and support during periods of uncertainty and challenging times (UW, 2019). Also, the issue of language differences poses a prevalent challenge for international students as they navigate and acclimate to the cultural context of the United States (Banjong, 2015; Liu, 2016). Disparities in the way of life, language, values, and even food all contribute to the cultural shock felt by international students (Hofstede et al., 2010; Young, 2014).

Furthermore, establishing friendships with local individuals in the United States might be difficult for a foreign student due to cultural differences as well (Perry, 2016; Trice, 2007). According to Wu et al. (2015), a cultural barrier for some foreign students might be the significant differences in traditions and practices between their home countries and their host countries. Because they are unfamiliar with the social and cultural norms, some foreign students avoid going to public places or visiting popular sites in their study cities fearing of behaving in an inappropriate way in certain settings (Gautam et al., 2016; Kusek, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). There have also been reports from several groups of international students that their time studying in the US has resulted in

fewer levels of social interaction and community involvement compared to when they were in their countries (Kusek, 2015). In a study aimed to examine the associations between international students enrolled in public universities in various small cities in Ohio and the local populations, Kusek (2015) reported that the state of these relationships was very poor. Kusek also added that the presence of a substantial population of international students in Ohio did not translate into positive relations with the local community, and the level of engagement exhibited by the students was observed to be relatively low. However, Kusek further stated that some students reported feeling safe on their school campus and around their school community but had little social opportunities and activities that would encourage them to interact with individuals from the community.

Culture shock and homesickness can cause a wide range of issues, some of which may prevent students from making the most of their academic opportunities. Furthermore, several groups of foreign students originate from cultures that value social interactions and belonging to a collective society, but upon arriving in the United States, they often experience feelings of loneliness and encounter difficulties in assimilating and establishing connections with society that emphasizes individualism (Alremai, 2016). International students often perceive these challenges and stressors as being unique to the American context, leading them to refrain from seeking support. They hold the belief that their difficulties will naturally dissipate upon their return to their home countries. Consequently, foreign students find themselves grappling in isolation, thereby exacerbating their personal stress levels, potentially resulting in mental health challenges that can detrimentally impact their educational achievements. According to Sarkodie-

Mensah (1998), in some foreign cultures, seeking assistance is associated with incompetent or unmotivated students. Often, international students come to the United States carrying a high weight of expectations from their family and friends for their accomplishments, according to Carroll and Ryan (2005). This burden may cause them to experience an excessive amount of stress which leads to increased pressures and adds greater challenges to the ones they are already dealing with.

In addition, foreign students must overcome those difficulties in the absence of the support system that they are accustomed to having in their home country, which may affect their academic progress (Alremaih, 2016). It was also noted by Bai (2016) that foreign students often have difficulty performing at the same level as they did in their schools back in their home countries. According to the findings of previous studies (Alremaih, 2016; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002), social and academic support plays an important role in the adjustment process for international students. Being far from home and loved ones, foreign students often do not have access to the social support they require in the host country to thrive in their educational journey (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). College students' sense of security and academic success have been found to benefit from receiving and giving social support, which has helped students deal more effectively with intellectual problems (Alghamdi, 2020).

The significance of social support for academic achievement has been highlighted by several researchers, who have found that it could have a big impact on students' overall performance (De la Iglesia et al., 2014; Li et al., 2018; Sarason et al., 1990). According to the findings of Li et al. (2018), there is a considerable positive relationship between the perceived social support and academic progress. In their study on 262

Chinese students, Li et al. (2018) reported that their findings indicated that there was a significant correlation between social support and students' academic performance ($r = .13$, $p < .05$), as well as between social support and self-esteem ($r = .47$, $p < .01$). This suggests that an increase in the number of social support sources can contribute to improved academic performance among students. The results also indicated that social support significantly impacted university students' physical and emotional well-being (Li et al., 2018).

Accordingly, quality of life, as well as academic success and sense of self-worth are significantly impacted when college students have strong social support systems (Alghamdi, 2020). DeBerard et al. (2004) conducted a research on a sample of 204 male and female first-year college students to identify some predictive risk factors associated with academic success and retention by utilizing the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MPSSS) to evaluate social support, which was one of the predicted risk variables that the researchers focused on, and by utilizing the SAT scores, cumulative high school GPAs, and cumulative college GPAs of the students evaluate the academic achievement. The findings of the study conducted by DeBerard et al. (2004) demonstrated that social support exerted a beneficial impact on academic performance. Academic performance may thus be predicted by the social support students receive from family, friends, and intimate partners.

In their study, Bordes-Edgar et al. (2011) examined the impact of academic and nonacademic variables on the educational persistence of a group of 76 Latino students enrolled in a higher education institution in the United States. This research employed a longitudinal design, in which the investigators conducted a subsequent examination after

a period of four and a half years. The Perceived Social Support Inventory–Friend (PSS-Fr) and Family (PSS-Fa) Scales were utilized to measure the factor of social support and its association with academic persistence, and the Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decision Scale was used to assess academic persistence. The research results indicated that the perception of social support played a crucial role in predicting academic persistence. These findings also showed that social support provided students with the necessary motivation and determination to achieve their academic objectives and make more informed decisions regarding their education.

Health and Safety

Concerns over health and safety are another obstacle that faces international students while studying in the United States. Students in higher education, in general, are susceptible to mental health concerns, but students from minority groups, not citizens of the United States, and those from low-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009) because of structural barriers such as a lack of resources and support, inequality, and socioeconomic disparity (Koo et al., 2021). In addition to the stressors faced by college students, for international students, the presence of academic pressures to achieve success contributes to an increased level of stress, which in turn renders individuals more susceptible to experiencing mental health challenges (Alremaih, 2016). Also, dealing with an increased amount of difficulties in the absence of adequate support for international students can lead to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Chen, 1999).

In addition, access to healthcare for international students is a complicated matter for them due to their lack of a clear understanding in this regard. In a research project

conducted by Perry et al. (2016), a significant proportion of international students expressed unfamiliarity with the appropriate avenues for accessing healthcare services in the United States. This lack of knowledge can be attributed to the differences between the healthcare system in the United States and the systems prevalent in their respective home countries (Zhang et al., 2022). Other scholarly investigations indicate that international students exhibit lower levels of familiarity with the utilization of university counseling centers despite the presence of mental distress among certain individuals within this population (Carr et al., 2003; Choi, 2015).

Moreover, according to Perry et al. (2016), international students expressed concerns regarding safety as a challenging aspect of their educational journey in the United States. According to Nyland et al. (2010), safety is a systematic problem that affects foreign students and has to be given considerable attention in the United States, despite the fact that rates of assault and victimization vary across American colleges (Le & Stockdale, 2008; Le & Wallen, 2009).

Financial Problems

Many foreign students struggle financially since their opportunities for financial aid, acquiring jobs, or extra income in the United States are limited because of their immigration and visa status (Albeshir, 2019). According to the Institute of International Education (2019), international students at U.S. public universities are required to pay tuition and fees at a significantly higher rate compared to their American counterparts, nearly amounting to double or triple the cost. Some international students are financially supported by their families or governments, but most of them struggle with financial hardship because of the increased cost of living in the United States (Albeshir, 2019).

According to Wu et al. (2015), students who lack financial support have increased levels of stress as a result of the increased load of their financial responsibilities. This stress is a contributing factor to poor academic performance.

Overview of Saudi Arabian Students in the United States

There are deep and historical relationships between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that started when the U.S. government recognized Saudi Arabia as an independent country under the leadership of the founding father, King Abdulaziz, in 1931. Then, this relationship was strengthened when the Saudi government gave a concession to discover oil for Standard Oil of California (whose current name is Chevron) in 1933 (Albeshir, 2019). Also, the discovery of oil in commercial quantities by an American petroleum geologist in 1938 helped in tying those relationships, and it also contributed to developing the relationship between the two countries very rapidly (Albeshir, 2019).

The discovery of oil had an impact on pushing Saudi Arabia to the center of the global economy, and the lack of business or educational infrastructure at that time did not prevent the country from being a leader in the oil industry. However, King Abdulaziz realized at the time that the large revenues generated from the country's oil resources had to be managed and utilized wisely, and as a result, plans were immediately put in place for the development and expansion of education (Hall, 2013). The investments in education in Saudi Arabia were initially all focused on domestic improvements. It was not until 1950 that Saudi Arabia started sending students to study in the United States. According to Heyn (2013), "In the 1950/51 academic school year, Saudi Arabia, for the first time, sent some of its young citizens to the United States to study and obtain

advanced degrees to improve their professional opportunities” (p. 38). That year the United States hosted 13 students from Saudi Arabia (Heyn, 2013).

In 1951, the Saudi government established a cultural office in New York, which was later called the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM), to administer scholarships for Saudis studying in U.S. higher education institutions and meet the cultural, social, and educational needs of the students (SACM, n.d.). SACM also provides financial support for the Saudi students who meet the scholarship qualifications. In addition, SACM is keen to reflect the culture of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and reinforce the cultural identity of students by supporting, organizing, and participating in cultural and social events with the students (SACM, n.d.).

SACM follows the students’ academic progress and keeps records of the students’ statistics. It reports to the Ministry of Education (MOE). In addition to representing the Saudi Ministry of Education, which sponsors the Saudi students’ scholarships, its responsibilities include implementing the scholarship policies and rules and ensuring that the students are following them in order to maintain their status active to continue receiving the support they need (SACM, n.d.). According to their website:

Since 1988 the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission has undergone constant modifications in its organizational structure and continues to integrate modern information technology into its office procedures. It provides fast, efficient and reliable support and services to the Saudi students and their dependents in the U.S.A. and enhances and strengthens the educational and cultural relations between the Kingdom and this country. SACM regularly reports on students’ academic progress, facilitates communications and exchanges scientific and

technological expertise between American educational and research institutions and their Saudi counterparts. (SACM, n.d., para. 4-5)

The aim of the provision of financial support to academically competent Saudi citizens is to enable them to pursue higher education at prominent worldwide institutions and accomplish academic success. After successfully completing their academic pursuits, it is anticipated that graduates will be required to return to the Kingdom and actively participate in the advancement of the nation. The development, qualification, and preparation of Saudi Students would be vital in providing essential support to both the public and private sectors of the Kingdom and ensuring their readiness to effectively participate in the global labor market and excel in the realm of scientific research.

Over the years, the number of Saudi students in the United States kept increasing, and the United States became one of the first destinations for Saudi students to pursue their education (Hall, 2013). The largest number of Saudi students in the United States in the last century was in the academic year 1979/80 when the number of Saudi students reached more than 11,000 students. While the number of Saudi students in the United States in the 2015/16 school year remains the largest in history, as their number in American higher education institutions was 75,205 students.

However, in 2004, the number of Saudi students studying in the United States decreased to 1,024 students after reaching over 10,000 in 2000 (Heyn, 2013). This decrease was due to the restrictions imposed by the immigration department after the September 11 attack in 2001. According to Hall (2013), “given that the Saudi international student population had been significant and reliable in the years leading up to September 11th, 2001, the cost of this decline is estimated to have cost 40 million

dollars in revenue” (p. 8). As a result, that year, an agreement was reached between the late King Abdullah and the former U.S. President George W. Bush to repair the economic and diplomatic damage from the 9/11 attack, and the King Abdullah Program for External Scholarships (KASP) was launched in 2005 (Albeshir, 2019).

Afterward, the influx of Saudi students returned, and their number in the United States increased in a short time. KASP is considered the largest government-funded external scholarship program. This scholarship program represented an opportunity for Saudi students to build cultural understanding in the United States and overcome negative perceptions. Now with more than 37,000 Saudi students studying in higher education institutions in the United States, many campuses have become familiar with Saudi students.

Challenges for Saudi Arabian Students Studying in the U.S.

Despite being provided with the chance to participate in an orientation session organized by the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Washington, D.C., and being assigned a dedicated adviser to offer assistance and support throughout their stay in the United States, Saudi Arabian students encounter several challenges in adapting to their new environment (Heyn, 2013). Existing literature indicates that Saudi Arabian students studying in the United States encounter challenges related to their adjustment process. These challenges primarily stem from the need to acclimate to a new host culture, navigate a different educational system, experience a lack of representation, and cope with various aspects of culture shock (Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Khedaire, 1978; Jammaz, 1972; Midgley, 2009a, 2009b; Mustafa, 1985; Shabeeb, 1996).

Academics and Language

The Arabic language holds the status of being the official language of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to Heyn (2013), there is a significant disparity between the language used in Saudi Arabia and English, necessitating Saudi Arabian international college students to acquire a completely distinct linguistic framework in order to enroll in educational institutions in the United States. English and Arabic exhibit notable distinctions, particularly in their writing and reading orientations. English follows a left-to-right directionality, whereas Arabic adheres to a right-to-left directionality. Moreover, English learners coming from Saudi Arabia are required to engage in the study of new and completely distinct phonological and grammatical structures. It is crucial for these learners to be cognizant of the potential interference that may arise from their native Arabic linguistic structures when attempting to comprehend the English structure (Abi-Daher, 2020). Studies indicate that because Arabic and English have such distinctly different systems, Saudi Arabian students are possibly more concerned about learning English (Auty et al., 1993; Mousa, 1994). Also, according to Hofer (2009) and Mustafa (1985), the accent of a Saudi Arabian student could lead to either overt or covert forms of discrimination against the student. Mustafa (1985) reported that Saudi Arabian international students encountered instances of discrimination while attempting to learn English as a second language, thereby presenting a formidable obstacle.

In addition, international students from Saudi Arabia encountered academic difficulties with notetaking, essay writing, delivering oral presentations, understanding lectures, and interacting with their instructors (Abi-Daher, 2020; Al-Shehry, 1989; Heyn, 2013; Mustafa, 1985). International college students are required to possess proficiency

in academic English, enabling them to effectively comprehend and produce written materials for academic purposes. Achieving proficiency in English poses a more significant difficulty for Saudi Arabian students compared to other international students due to the substantial disparities between Arabic and English. Consequently, this creates a series of additional challenges (Heyn, 2013).

Several researchers have shown a keen interest in various aspects of Saudi Arabian international students' lives that may pose challenges to their academic achievements over the past decades. These areas include perceptions of success (Al-nusair, 2000; Shaw, 2010), adjustment difficulties (Abi-daher, 2020; Fallon & Bycroft, 2009; Heyn, 2013; Hofer, 2009), social support (Alghamdi, 2020; Alremaih, 2016), conflicts in values (Alshaya, 2005), and common concerns (Albeshir, 2019).

Saudi Arabian students encounter various academic difficulties while pursuing their studies in the United States, primarily due to disparities between the educational systems of their home country and the United States. Al-Sallom (1994) highlighted three distinguishing features of the Saudi Arabian educational system. First, the Saudi education system places a significant emphasis on Islam, as evidenced by the number of weekly classes allocated to the study of the holy book (Quran) and Islamic teachings. This emphasis is observed consistently from the earliest stages of education in kindergarten to the highest levels of higher education. Second, the education system in Saudi Arabia follows a policy of segregating female and male students in schools. Third, it is noteworthy that public education in Saudi Arabia is fully funded by the government and provided at no cost to both Saudi citizens and residents at all levels. Therefore, the emotional and learning experiences of Saudi Arabian foreign students in the United

States are affected by variations in the educational systems between Saudi Arabia and the United States (Al-Sallom, 1994; Heyn, 2013).

Most Saudi Arabian students who chose to pursue their education overseas were among the top-performing students in their home country. According to Leong and Chou (1996), Saudi Arabian international students tend to exhibit exceptional academic performance in their home country prior to their arrival in the United States. Therefore, these students typically hold elevated expectations regarding their academic achievements in the United States. In addition to their own high expectations, they also carry greater hopes and expectations from the government and their families, which raises the possibility of frustration and failure (Al-Nusair, 2000; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Rasheed (1972) examined how Saudi Arabian foreign students perceived the purposes and objectives of American universities. In light of a survey conducted by Rasheed, aimed at Saudi Arabian international students in the United States, the objective was to ascertain the level of importance attributed to various university goals. These goals encompassed the desired outcomes of students' educational experiences, encompassing both academic and social development. The findings revealed that students' perceptions of these university goals varied depending on their chosen field of study. Additionally, it was observed that participants placed progressively less emphasis on these goals as their duration of stay in the United States increased.

Saudi students enrolled in American higher education programs were less engaged in campus activities than their American peers. In a study focusing on foreign learners from Saudi Arabia attending American institutions, Al-Nusair (2000) investigated the factors that contributed to students' positive and negative impressions of

their college environments, as well as their overall satisfaction with their educational experience in such environments. Saudi Arabian students' utilization of school facilities and learning and development opportunities was measured using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). The assessment of Saudi Arabian students studying in the United States revealed that these students exhibited lower levels of engagement in various activities compared to their American counterparts. Specifically, the activities in which Saudi Arabian students demonstrate less involvement include activities related to art, music, theater, students' Greek organizations, and campus social experiences outside the classroom.

In contrast, the findings of the research demonstrated that Saudi Arabian students studying in the United States exhibited a higher level of engagement in activities encompassed aspects such as involvement in library-related experiences, interactions with faculty members, acquisition of knowledge through coursework, and engagement in scientific experiences. Al-Nusair suggested that foreign student offices support social events to foster additional opportunities for interactions between American and Saudi students. These opportunities could benefit Saudi students who may be experiencing feelings of exclusion, homesickness, and hostility.

To develop resilience, Saudi students utilized several approaches to successfully navigate and adapt to the American college environment as international students. Shaw (2010) conducted a study that explored the perspectives of college international students from Saudi Arabia and their educational experiences in American higher education. The primary focus of the study was to identify the success strategies employed by a sample of 25 Saudi Arabian participants. Shaw's study revealed that the participants' success

techniques encompassed several elements, including goal planning, effective time management, use of study skills, engagement in study groups, utilization of campus resources, and devoted effort. Additionally, the sense of belonging to the campus community was identified as another factor that contributed to their achievements. Shaw also identified personal adaption resilience and intercultural competence as the primary attributes essential for Saudi Arabian students to effectively navigate and thrive in other countries' contexts. Shaw proposed that the promotion of resilience and intercultural competence among Saudi Arabian students may be achieved through the facilitation of coping skill development and the provision of support that enhances intercultural competence.

Social and Cultural

Upon their arrival, these students exhibit varying perspectives and promptly identify disparities between their respective cultures and the culture of the host country. The variances might pose a significant difficulty for the majority of foreign students. The educational aspirations and overall achievement of a student may be contingent upon their awareness and adaptation to cultural disparities within the United States. Conversely, the inability to adapt to the cultural norms and implicit guidelines of the host country can have a detrimental impact on the overall well-being of international students, thereby impeding their academic accomplishments (Alghamdi, 2020).

Saudi Arabian culture, as described by AlLily (2011), is a complex combination of traditional values and Islamic principles. Saudi Arabians have a tendency to guarantee that every sort of transformation or variation occurring within their nation adheres to predetermined accepted limits. The Saudi Arabian culture has a notable inclination

towards upholding historical traditions within their community, despite the inevitable evolution of societies throughout the years. People in Saudi Arabia are brought up in a very religious setting. The Saudi Arabian culture has a profound and significant association with the Quran. The religious foundation of Saudi Arabia is intertwined with all aspects of its identity. The impact of the Islamic faith on the broader cultural fabric of Saudi Arabia is of significant magnitude, as evidenced by (Long, 2005). Ahmed (2002) asserts that Saudi Arabians exhibit an unshakable commitment to their historical culture, as observed from a religious standpoint. This commitment might pose significant difficulties for Saudi international students who are studying abroad. International students from Saudi Arabia are raised within a religious milieu whereby the individual's consciousness about religious culture and familial ties play a significant role. Growing up in an environment characterized by a robust religious upbringing, individuals might encounter discomfort when exposed to a broader global and diverse community (Abi-Daher, 2020).

In addition, like most international students, Saudi students experience significant challenges when pursuing their education in a foreign country and adjusting to new cultural surroundings. According to Gielen et al. (1992), Saudi students encounter cultural and social distress, as well as educational challenges, throughout their time in foreign colleges and universities, partly due to their distance from their family and home country. Saudi students studying in the United States originate from a significantly distinct cultural background, encompassing traditions, religious beliefs, and value systems that may potentially collide with American cultural values and practices. In their pursuit of academic success, these disparities may pose a significant challenge. Alajlan

(2016) asserts that there are many aspects where differences exist between the United States and Saudi Arabia in regard to social culture and language. Considering these significant disparities, it is anticipated that Saudi students may encounter complexities encompassing issues in adapting, cultural disorientation, feelings of exclusion, and possibly academic difficulties due to social and linguistic limitations.

Moreover, for many international students, being away from their home countries caused different levels of social and adjustment challenges while they were studying. These difficulties include experiences of culture shock and perceived discrimination. Russell et al. (2010) reported that a substantial percentage of foreign students encountered varying degrees of social pressure and difficulties while studying abroad due to being distanced from their home countries and origin cultures. Such challenges have the potential to impact several elements of the lives of foreign students, encompassing their social relationships and learning experiences. The distinctive academic setting and the obstacles encountered by foreign students can serve as a driving force for them to actively seek out social networks, including various forms of social support and social ties. Therefore, the support of family and friends may be crucial in helping international students overcome the challenges they face.

In the cultural context of Saudi Arabia, it is customary for individuals to engage in discussions pertaining to personal matters within the confines of their closest family members. Saudi Arabians engage in social interactions within many settings, including their private residences, coffee shops, professional environments, and places of religious practice. The importance of social support for foreign students' successful acculturation to the U.S. environment was highlighted in several studies (Dao et al., 2007; Sümer et al.,

2008). Furthermore, there was a significant positive association seen between increased perceptions of social support and reduced levels of academic stress, lower signs of anxiety and depression. In addition, increased perception of social support was also linked to positive sociocultural adaptation. According to Bektaş et al. (2009), maintaining a connection to one's home community is essential to the psychological adjustment that occurs when moving to a new country.

For Saudi Arabians, the significance of familial bonds extends beyond the confines of the immediate family members (nuclear family unit). To clarify, the extended family holds significant importance within the familial framework of Saudi Arabian society. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the extended family is regarded as a fundamental element within the broader framework of the family system. The Saudi Arabian culture places significant emphasis on the institution of the family, considering it a key component. El-Banyan (1974) highlighted the significance of the family within Arab society, asserting that it serves as the fundamental social unit in Saudi Arabia. It also serves as a tool to set commitment, responsibilities, and determination of social standing among its constituents. Abu-Hilal (1986) described the strong commitment to the family in such communities as to have the willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good of the family. In the realm of decision-making and the operation of a family unit, it is the family as a collective entity that plays the role of the primary influencing factor rather than the individual. The culture of Saudi Arabia is distinguished by collectivism, wherein significant emphasis is put on the needs, attitudes, and ambitions of the family as opposed to individualistic societies, thereby highlighting a contrasting cultural orientation.

Saudi Arabian international students encounter a multitude of cultural disparities. The family values, customs, language, religion, and social interactions of this particular culture exhibit notable distinctions when compared to Western civilization. Many scholars encourage individuals to engage in deeper learning and comprehension of the perspectives held by Saudi Arabian foreign students toward their own culture. Furthermore, a multitude of these distinctions contribute to the phenomenon of categorizing persons based on preconceived beliefs. This combination of factors might render it difficult for these students to succeed in an educational system centered on Western values and norms.

Financial and Health

Several issues international students from Saudi Arabia may encounter have been highlighted by researchers in various studies. Some of the issues are related to language proficiency, learning styles, unfamiliarity with the environment, shifting cultural norms, stress, anxiety, and loneliness (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Msengi, 2007; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). Some studies on international students have indicated that Saudi students studying in the United States have encountered different levels of psychological distress, including strain, headaches, depression, and anxiety (Alhajjuj, 2016; Almotery, 2014; Alqarni, 2018; Brutt-Griffler et al., 2020; Caldwell, 2013; Melius, 2017; Young & Snead, 2017).

International students often face challenges in managing stress as they navigate the process of adapting to a new cultural environment. To alleviate their stress levels, every student requires time and a supportive social environment. Jenny et al. (2003) examined the utilization of university counseling services by international students and

explored the motivations behind their decision to seek such services. Study results indicate that when faced with challenges, international students turn to their social support network, which includes friends and family. Despite the availability of counseling services at college campuses, these students have shown a preference for avoiding utilizing such services unless they experience disruption or disconnection in their relationships with friends or family members. International students often view counseling services as an alternative means of support only in the absence of their family and friends (Alghamdi, 2020).

Financial difficulties were not considered to be of main concern in most of the literature on Saudi students, as a significant number of Saudi students get monthly financial support from the Saudi government through the scholarship program (Aldossari, 2016; Alhajjuj, 2016; Alremaih, 2016). However, some researchers have discovered that married students with kids are more likely to have financial difficulties; this is particularly true for students with small children who require daycare, as these expenses account for a significant portion of Saudi students' income (Alhajjuj, 2016; Alremaih, 2016).

Saudi students may typically count on family support when dealing with personal difficulties including those relating to social life, finances, or health. Seeking assistance from family members is a prevalent practice among individuals in Saudi Arabia (Abi-Daher, 2020). Counseling and therapy are not widely embraced or acknowledged within the Saudi societal context. It is commonly anticipated that individuals will seek guidance and support from their family members, relatives, and friends. Offense may be perceived when individuals initially seek support from sources external to their immediate family

(Abi-Daher, 2020). Therefore, when Saudi students encounter financial difficulties or psychological distress, they often avoid seeking professional help.

Unique Challenges

Most Saudi Students are affiliated with Islam as their religion and identify as Muslims. Muslim students confront a particular set of hurdles when it comes to pursuing a degree in higher education. When asked whether they feel criticized because of their religion, a majority of Muslim students in colleges across the United States said they do (Al-Romi, 2000). Some even admit to being made uncomfortable when practicing Islamic rituals that can be observed by their peers. These activities include praying and fasting within the school premises.

There are some widely known needs that Muslim students reported as being unfulfilled within their institutions (Haddad et al., 2009). The majority of documented experiences reported that they do not have a place to perform their prayers. While walking through campuses in search of empty rooms where to undertake ritualized prayers, which Muslims are required to do five times a day, one respondent described feeling “sneaky” (Haddad et al., 2009). Also, the need to request permission to use a place for prayer sometimes causes embarrassment for some students. Some scholars suggested that student affairs professionals could address such needs and work with administrators to identify a specific, private space for students who are affiliated with Islam to use exclusively for this intent. In addition, Muslim students have additional requirements that are connected to their educational calendars, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, which they must meet. Given that students are fasting during this period, it is much more challenging for them to sit through lengthy classes and

examinations or engage in vigorous exercise, such as participating in a physical sport or activity (Haddad et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Muslims on college campuses face a variety of issues, not the least of which is a sense of alienation (Rockenbach et al., 2018). A group of students has expressed a sense of alienation because Muslim students very seldom constitute a majority at colleges in the United States, and the only time they tend to congregate is during worship with their communities outside campus (Rockenbach et al., 2017). Muslim students are more likely to face discrimination or harassment as a result of their faith. Despite the reputation of U.S. universities as strong advocates of raising awareness about social justice, Muslim students are frustrated by the lack of clear efforts by colleges and universities to accommodate policies that include them (Khan, 2021). According to the University of Michigan's Islamophobia Working Group (UMIWG), a group that tracks anti-Muslim occurrences on college campuses, the number of anti-Muslim incidents grew dramatically in 2016 (Taylor, 2017). The UMIWG group reported that 40 percent of Americans across several campuses viewed Islam unfavorably.

Consequently, the negative assumptions on the faith of Islam led to the formation of the islamophobia phenomenon. Islamophobia refers to the irrational fear, prejudice, or discrimination against Islam and its followers. The presence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice on U.S. higher education campuses has hindered the active engagement of Muslim students in both academic and non-academic activities. A recent study that was conducted by The Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) in the 2019-20 school year aimed to understand the prevalence of Islamophobia on U.S. college campuses, reported that "nearly 40 percent of the Muslim students experienced

harassment or discrimination, based on their religious identity, from peers, campus administrators and other personnel” (Khan, 2021, para. 5). Being in an environment where the student does not feel a sense of belonging and support may affect their academic progress. According to Shafiqa Ahmadi (n.d.), co-director of the Center for Education Identity and Social Justice at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, “Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias on campus has had a negative effect on Muslim students’ quality of engagement with faculty and their peers inside and outside the classroom” (as cited in Khan, 2021, para. 14).

Muslim students are vulnerable to discriminatory practices on college and university campuses, no matter how delicate the efforts towards marginalization by the institution. This is true even though higher education institutions are often perceived as locations that promote a safe climate and adopt diversity. Moreover, due to the fact that Islam is a collectivist religious doctrine (that is, it promotes traditions and culture that everybody in the collective must adhere to), Muslim students frequently feel as if they are participants of one's entire faith (Rockenbach et al., 2017). Feelings of anxiety and tension can result from having a collectivist mindset while living in a very individualist culture such as the United States.

Additionally, for Muslim students, it is particularly difficult to succeed in classes that have a strong political or religious inclination on the subject matter. Students who identify as Muslim have experienced discrimination and oppression and a complete absence of awareness on the part of their teachers, which could have a negative impact on their academic performance. Some students have expressed feeling reluctant to speak up or rectify faculty who express negative thoughts on Islam even though professors are

considered to be trusted figures that students could speak with about their concerns (Rockenbach et al., 2017).

On the other hand, another group of students reported experiencing positive interactions with their professors after September 11 because they gave them an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings. According to Rockenbach et al. (2017), when students from Muslim backgrounds were afforded the chance by their professors to enlighten their colleagues about their religion from their first-person points of view, they reported having a positive experience in their institution. Other students reported that they felt acknowledged within their universities. They also felt that their instructors and other students were generally respectful of their differences. Also, some students reported feeling less threatened on campus when they started to notice that their classmates started asking questions, conducting research, and gaining more knowledge about Islam because of the tragedy (Rockenbach et al., 2017). These examples reflect the importance of dialogue and creating safe spaces for students, especially those of marginalized groups, to express their thoughts and feelings.

World Events and International Students in the U.S.

The status that American universities have gained among foreign students can be attributed to the policies and laws passed by policymakers after World War II that supported the development and funding of scientific research (García & Villarreal, 2014). After World War II, in 1946, the late Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas presented legislation that would establish the Fulbright Program, which was ultimately enacted by Congress and signed into law by President Harry S. Truman. Since its beginnings, the Fulbright Program has enabled over 400 thousand participants and graduates from the

United States and 165 other nations to study, teach, and conduct research in participating countries while fostering global understanding and cooperation. The Fulbright Program was established and continues to receive support because of its goal of promoting peaceful and trusting relationships among nations (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d.). According to Thelin (2019), after World War II, U.S. higher education enjoyed a quarter-century of support, which made universities gain a lot of prestige, prosperity and popularity, and that period was called the golden age of American universities (p. 260).

In addition to the education support policies introduced by the federal government following World War II, the *Science the Endless Frontier* Report written by Vannevar Bush in 1945 was instrumental in advocating for continued support and funding for scientific research in universities (García & Villarreal, 2014). “During this period the so-called research university emerged as a powerful new entity that earned international respect for American scholarship” (Thelin, 2019, p. 260). The ongoing financial support for scientific research at universities was also impacted by the congressional reaction to the 1957 Soviet Union Sputnik satellite launch (Thelin, 2019).

American higher education institutions gained international recognition due to their significant funding and their capacity to recruit leading scholars.

According to García & Villarreal (2014)

Having substantial federal funding and attracting preeminent scholars from around the world, American universities became the envy of the world. This produced a shift in the number of students that no longer yearned to go to Europe but remained in the United States for their post-secondary education. (p. 128)

Thus, American higher education institutions became a hub for those seeking degrees from all over the world. Providing such opportunities has opened great horizons and produced a shift in higher education in the United States, and added a greater value to these institutions.

The benefit also reaches to more than just the institutions. Numerous scholars have documented the noteworthy impact exerted by international students on universities in the United States, thereby influencing various aspects such as classrooms, campuses, and communities (Alghamdi, 2020). International students originate from diverse cultural contexts, encompassing a range of viewpoints and concepts that they exchange with their host community. The presence of international students in American universities can yield positive effects across multiple dimensions of their lives, encompassing academic, cultural, and financial domains. Furthermore, it has the potential to augment individuals' understanding of diversity and foster a greater appreciation for various civilizations and cultures (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002; Wu et al., 2015).

The act of pursuing further education in a foreign country is considered a significant and transforming life event for the majority of international students (Bradley, 2000; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Msengi, 2007). In many colleges and universities around the world, international students make up a significant and growing population, but the United States hosts the largest number of international students (Lee, 2015). Chinese students constitute the largest population of foreign students in the U.S. They have maintained their leading position in being the largest group since the first wave of students arrived from China in 1872 until now. After China comes India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia (IIE, 2019). However, the increased number

of international students in American universities does not mean that their journey was easy, as there are several events happened and laws enforced that greatly affected the influx of international students to the U.S.

Over the years, higher education in the United States has gone through many events that have had significant impacts on its institutions, including political, economic, social, and health crises. Each crisis had a different impact on universities and colleges. Some of them necessitate a change in laws or the prohibition of certain practices, and others require the regulation of expenses, for example. Therefore, the services provided in such institutions are affected. Also, the environment and general atmosphere on campus may be impacted as well, making it uncomfortable for some groups of students. Some student groups witnessed forms of racism, hostility, and hatred because of their belonging to a certain race or religion. Some world crises may increase the occurrence of such situations that these student groups encounter.

International students often are highly impacted and subjected to a number of difficulties during times of crisis, while at the same time, their educational institutions overlook their needs. For instance, following the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, international students of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian backgrounds encountered instances of discrimination, while all international students experienced a sense of ambiguity regarding their legal standing in the country (Cluett, 2002; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2003; Lee & Rice, 2007; Owens, 2002). These doubts turned out to be foreseen when, following 9/11, new laws and documentation pertaining to visa requirements made it more challenging for international students to enroll in American universities (Rosser et al., 2007). Nevertheless, rather than

functioning as secure shelters amidst periods of intensified hostility toward foreigners, institutions of higher education frequently reinforce racist and ethnocentric policies and practices. These encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from academic restrictions that discriminate against certain individuals to the social exclusion of students by their peers (Yakaboski et al., 2017).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that U.S. educational institutions have not only demonstrated a lack of efficacy in safeguarding international learners during times of crisis but have also frequently leveraged their presence to enhance economic growth and promote their multicultural reputation. For instance, during the global financial crisis of 2008, universities used the benefit of foreign student tuition to offset their losses, which led to a surge in enrolment and recruitment of international students, especially from wealthy countries (Fischer, 2019; Macrander, 2017). The United States prioritized fostering international education during the Cold War in order to attract the brightest brains to further scientific and economic advancements in the country and to promote American lifestyles abroad (Bu, 1999). However, according to Bu (1999), a significant number of overseas students who were enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States during the Cold War were unable to graduate owing to a lack of academic and social support.

In addition, the Chinese students' experience throughout the history of American higher education provides an example of how international students are to be greatly impacted by world crisis events. Chinese students are considered one of the first and oldest groups of international students to come to the United States, and since the beginning of their entry into American higher education in the nineteenth century, they

have constituted the largest group of international students in America. Despite their familiarity on university campuses, Chinese students are considered one of the groups that have faced the most racist and hate incidents in the history of American higher education. The racist crises faced by this group began from the beginning of their appearance in American universities until the latest health crisis that the world experienced, COVID-19. The first wave of Chinese students that arrived in America in 1872 did not last long due to the political and economic events that occurred in the mid-1870s and the growth of hatred and racism against the Chinese in that period. The situation was worrying for the Chinese students because it had reached a life-threatening level leading the Chinese government to cancel the CEM (Chinese Educational Mission) scholarship project and recall the students in 1881, a year prior to the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (Fish, 2020; Shirley, 2018). A long time passed until China returned to sending its students to America due to the political situation and wars during that period including the First and Second World Wars (Chu, 2004).

As the number of Asian students increases in American universities, hostility towards them also increases under some circumstances provoked by political and economic crises. According to Perry et al. (2016), Asian foreign students expressed concerns regarding safety as a challenging component of their educational journey in the United States. In addition to encountering challenges in socializing with the domestic student population, several students have reported experiencing instances of violent hostility inside the school environment and in the local community. This phenomenon is further exemplified by the occurrence of anti-Asian assaults during the COVID-19 global pandemic. While the prevalence of violence and victimization among Asian populations

attending universities in the United States may differ (Le & Stockdale, 2008; Le & Wallen, 2009), Nyland et al. (2010) contend that ensuring safety is a systemic matter that warrants significant attention for international students in the U.S. Amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, the United States was confronted with a pressing concern over safety, particularly due to an alarming surge in unprecedented anti-Asian hate crimes (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022).

Another group that also faced frequent instances of hostility in the history of American higher education is those affiliated with Islam religion. International scholars and students living in the United States, particularly those who identify as Muslim, encountered psychological distress, apprehension, and uncertainty. The Islamophobic and anti-Muslim sentiment shapes Muslim experiences in the United States. Over the past few decades, Islamophobia has become more visible and grown in magnitude exceeding its association with the September 11, 2001, terror attacks (Bonet, 2011). In the aftermath of this historic terror event, the U.S. government approached anti-terrorism within its borders with renewed vigor. Consequently, this led to an increase in racial and religious profiling in all spheres of life within the nation. Thus, it is impossible to correctly analyze Islamophobia in education without connecting the matter to national and global politics (Bonet, 2011).

Regarding the Islamic faith, the complicated reality of Muslim students in American higher education institutions appears to reflect the aggregate national atmosphere in which they live. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2017, about 14 percent of American Muslims believe that the American people hold that the larger American population projects hostility toward Muslims. However,

Islamophobic ideology has increased in the United States over the past decade. During the previous presidential regime, for instance, the president quite literally advocated Islamophobia. During the 2016 presidential elections, Americans were treated to a rare barrage of anti-Muslim slander and Islamophobic fearmongering under the guise of ridding the country of religious extremists (Stegmeir, 2017). This gave rise to a wave of Islamophobic attacks and set a precedent for what would be the new normal for Muslims across American society and organizations, including schools.

Higher education institutions were part of the trend, which saw a drastic rise in the formalization of Islamophobia underneath the pretense of national security in 2017. When Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016, Muslim college students saw a substantial rise in hate crimes on their campuses, which was influenced by the nationwide political and legal atmosphere (Cohen, 2017). The executive order signed by President Trump imposed a ban on the entry of individuals from seven countries with Muslim-majority populations, including Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, into the United States. President Trump made an endeavor to implement a travel ban on immigrants originating from nations with a primarily Muslim population, a measure that was widely perceived as discriminatory towards individuals adhering to the Islamic faith (Rose-Redwood C. & Rose-Redwood R., 2017).

Numerous higher education institutions inside the United States expressed strong disapproval of President Trump's travel restriction. The commitment of higher education institutions in the United States to international partnership and cross-cultural interaction in the quest of knowledge has been longstanding. However, the implementation of the travel ban has the detrimental consequence of compromising this fundamental goal of

higher education (Rose-Redwood C. & Rose-Redwood R., 2017). As a result, American higher education witnessed a decrease in the number of new international students enrolling in colleges and universities.

The United States now holds the largest population of international students globally. However, there has been a decrease in the number of these students due to the hostile climate they face. Mzezewa (2019) discussed the potential decline in the number of foreign visitors to the U.S. In accordance with the National Travel and Tourism Office of the Commerce Department, the United States had a notable influx of around 80 million international visitors in 2018, marking an unprecedented milestone. Nevertheless, based on the U.S. Travel Association records, the percentage of the foreign travel market in America has declined from 13.7 percent in 2015 to 11.7 percent in 2018, reaching its lowest point since 2006. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this decline will persist in the forthcoming years. Mzezewa (2019) also projected that by the year 2022, the percentage is anticipated to decrease to 10.9 percent. In addition, it is argued that the United States has seen a decline in its openness toward international students pursuing educational opportunities and turned into an unreceptive place (Rose-Redwood C. & Rose-Redwood R., 2017). Therefore, even though the United States possesses the highest count of international pupils globally, its status began to decline among these groups of students due to the unsupportive environment.

In the following section, I highlighted the world events that had a significant impact on the influx of international students in the United States and contributed to shaping their experiences while pursuing higher education degrees. I focused on the major events that either permitted or prohibited the entry of large numbers of

international students and had a significant impact on their lives as foreign students, with a particular interest in Saudi Arabian students.

Throughout the years, there have been several events, such as political tensions and economic and health crises, that have impacted the presence and experiences of foreign students who came to the United States to pursue their educational dreams. For international students, specifically Saudi Arabian students, the crises of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 (commonly referred to as 9/11) and the global health pandemic resulting from the widespread coronavirus (COVID-19) were among the most critical events that impacted their presence and their experiences in the United States.

9/11

On September 11 of the year of 2001, a group of 19 individuals affiliated with the extremist organization known as "Al-Qaeda" executed a series of coordinated hijackings involving four commercial planes. Two of these aircrafts crashed intentionally into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center situated in New York City, while another was deliberately directed towards the Pentagon building situated in Washington, D.C (Long & Maisel, 2010). The occurrence marked the first major assault on American territory subsequent to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (Albeshir, 2019).

The terrorist attacks that targeted the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had a profound effect on all Americans. Also, a great number of people and nations were affected by the catastrophic event as well. Following the incident, President George W. Bush officially initiated the war against terrorism and all individuals affiliated with any terrorist organizations, particularly those associated with Al-Qaeda (Albeshir, 2019; Cainkar, 2009). With the start of the war on terrorism, national security became a concern

for many Americans for the first time in their lives. As a result, further security measures have been added to the United States visa system, making it exceedingly difficult for international scholars, scientists, and students to enter the country (Urias & Yeakey, 2009).

In addition, the U.S. government has been passing an immense number of legislations and signing laws into effect at a rapid pace. The goal of these laws is to regulate how universities and colleges comply with the law when it comes to enrolling and hiring international individuals. The restrictions, which were meant to address vulnerabilities highlighted by the 9/11 attacks, have created substantial hurdles for genuine ambitious international learners and scholars (Urias & Yeakey, 2009). Moreover, The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) established a program in 2003 to collect and manage information about all international students and exchange visitors across the United States in response to the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, upon the discovery that one of the hijackers had entered the country under a student visa but has never attended any classes.

The occurrence of the September 11th attacks served as a major factor in shaping the perspectives and experiences of Saudi students residing in the United States (Albeshir, 2019; Heyn, 2013; Shaw, 2010). The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia experienced a decline in confidence due to the fact that fifteen out of the nineteen hijackers involved in the terrorist attacks were Arab Muslims of Saudi nationality (Albeshir, 2019; Long & Maisel, 2010; Shaw, 2010). Muslims and Arabs residing within the United States were also greatly affected and subjected to harassment as a result of the attack perpetrated by Al-Qaeda. The frequency of attacks and hate crimes targeting

individuals of the Muslim faith experienced a significant surge following the events of 9/11.

There was a widespread belief among many Americans that Arabs and Muslims were unfaithful and showed a lack of loyalty toward the nation that hosted them (Albeshir, 2019; Cainkar, 2009). Therefore, many immigrants from Arabic countries who were residing in the United States without legal authorization were deported by U.S. authorities. International students, particularly those of Muslim and Arab backgrounds, also experienced victimization after the event because a portion of the nineteen people who perpetrated the terrorist attacks possessed a student visa in order to gain entry into the U.S (Urias & Yeaky, 2005). The legal forces consequently interrogated over a thousand Arab and Muslim students about their possible involvement in the terrorist attack. After that, the authorities implemented additional regulations and procedures that are necessary for obtaining a student visa with more restrictions on those coming from Muslim and Arab countries (Albeshir, 2019; Urias & Yeaky, 2005).

In general, the incident had an adverse impact on Saudi students residing in the United States. During the period after the attack, Saudi individuals encountered challenges in acquiring visas of any sort for the United States, including those intended for tourism, educational pursuits, and even business opportunities. This situation posed considerable challenges for the Saudis, who had long regarded the United States as a preferred destination for tourism and academic pursuits (Albeshir, 2019). However, the political leaders in Saudi Arabia and the United States successfully mitigated the consequences of the September 11 events in a timely manner. The United States recognized Saudi Arabia as a nation committed to counterterrorism efforts and actively

promoting peace and global stability. Since its inception in 2005, the influx of Saudi students in the United States has experienced a notable surge. This can be attributed to the introduction of a government initiative known as the King Abdullah External Scholarship Program, which aims to provide external scholarships to Saudi students (Albeshir, 2019).

COVID-19

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and subsequent closure of borders, travel restrictions, and restriction of public gatherings have had a significant impact on education systems worldwide. These restrictions affected much of the core of educational institutions' operations, such as learning/teaching, research, and scholarship activities. Consequently, educational institutions around the world were forced to transform how they operate on such short notice (Crawford et al., 2020).

Within a month after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, 193 countries and communities closed all learning institutions, including universities, colleges, and other post-secondary institutions. Moreover, more than 220 million post-secondary students had their studies ended or significantly disrupted due to the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). The nature of the pandemic forced learning institutions from all around the world to change the mode of learning from standard physical classrooms to online learning using online platforms, such as Zoom, Moodle, Blackboard, and WebEx, among other platforms (Crawford et al., 2020). This quick transition undoubtedly had significant impacts on governments and societies, including stakeholders in the education sector, such as school administrators, teachers, and students.

The onset of the COVID-19 crisis was particularly difficult for international students as they faced unprecedented challenges, ones that their domestic peers did not encounter (Koo et al., 2021). Some of the challenges experienced by international students during the coronavirus pandemic included loneliness, travel bans, visa restrictions, homelessness, and racism, in addition to academic and financial concerns (Behisi et al., 2021; Bilecen, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020; Koo et al., 2021; Litam, 2020). Nyland et al. (2010) claimed that safety is a systemic issue that worries foreign students and has to be properly addressed in the United States, despite the fact that rates of harm differ among the foreign groups studying at U.S. universities (Le & Stockdale, 2008; Le & Wallen, 2009). When the United States experienced a dramatic and unprecedented rise in racially motivated crimes during the COVID-19 epidemic, the problem of safety became even more pressing.

International students often face challenges in managing stress as they navigate the process of adapting to a new cultural environment and the global health pandemic presented even more stressors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many international students were constantly anxious about their health and safety in addition to being worried about their loved ones (Bilecen, 2020). Fearing they would not be able to see their families on a regular basis, many international students pondered leaving the United States and dropping out of their colleges and universities (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2017).

Furthermore, the implementation of travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the subsequent ruling made by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to impose limits on online enrollment, has resulted in heightened

anxiety among foreign students over their legal status and prospects for remaining in the country (Bhojwani et al., 2020). However, it appears that higher education institutions in the United States have not made significant efforts to assist their foreign students. In the current context, where international students are facing specific forms of discrimination, educational institutions have once again reduced the scarce resources allocated to support these students and neglected their needs in addressing the crisis (Bhojwani et al., 2020). This worldwide crisis is shedding light on the persistence of previously highlighted difficulties as they remain unresolved, and in certain cases, the disregard for the welfare of foreign students has been exacerbated.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic presented even greater challenges for Saudi students living in the U.S. during that time. As Behisi et al. (2021) reported, among other challenges of living in a foreign country during a global pandemic, “living away from family and friends was significantly associated with increased loneliness and psychological distress” (p. 14) for Saudi students. The pandemic also presented fear of travel for most international students, including Saudi Arabians. Their worries were not only about their health concerns but also about their academic progress and educational future. Their fear stemmed from the possibility that they would not be permitted to enter the nation again after leaving it to attend conferences or see family (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2017). However, little is known about the experiences and perceptions of Saudi Arabian students during the pandemic. Therefore, this research aims to explore the lived experiences of Saudi students during the pandemic and identify the challenges they faced.

Summary

The aim of this chapter was to examine and review the literature on international students in the United States. The literature addressed the history of international students pursuing higher education degrees in the U.S. with an emphasis on Saudi Arabian students. The topics covered in the literature included a general overview of the history and challenges faced by international students, with a specific interest in Saudi Arabian students. Finally, I presented a discussion on the world events that impacted foreign students obtaining degrees in American higher education, with a focus on the experiences of Saudi students and the events that had a major impact on them during their studies.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Overview and Research Design

Research Questions

The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States during the first strike of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?
3. How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

Research Design

In this research, I employed a qualitative research design to develop an understanding and identify common challenges Saudi Arabian international students experienced during the first strike of the coronavirus pandemic. According to Creswell and Creswell:

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to

general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.51).

Therefore, a qualitative research design is suitable for this research because the COVID-19 topic is still relatively new, and little is known about the experience of people during the onset of the pandemic. Therefore, in order to gain a deep understanding of the personal experiences and perspectives of Saudi students studying in the United States, a qualitative phenomenological research approach was selected for this study. The exploratory nature of phenomenological research offers the researcher a lot of flexibility and adaptability in their study and is essential in laying the foundation for future research. A phenomenological approach investigates the experiences of a group of people who have experienced a particular phenomenon, making it suitable for this research. A phenomenological study is essential in understanding people's meanings of a phenomenon and how they adjust to new circumstances and ideas as they emerge. It also helps in contributing to the development of new theories and gathering data seen as natural rather than artificial (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Phenomenology, as a type of philosophy, offers scholars a theoretical framework to follow in order to gain a better understanding of phenomena on the level of subjective reality. Understanding the subject in relation to a certain event or phenomenon in his or her life is likely made possible in large part by this philosophical framework, often known as the theory of subjective reality (Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology encompasses

both methodological and philosophical perspectives, as it permits the researcher to employ discussions, observations, and interviews as data collection strategies. In addition, phenomenology serves as an instrument for developing one's own perceptual acuity, establishing one's standpoint, broadening one's perspective, and delving into the examination of lived experience at a more profound level (Qutoshi, 2018). Therefore, it possesses the qualities of philosophy and serves as a research method of inquiry. The adaptable nature of a phenomenological study as a qualitative approach makes it suitable and beneficial for this research. It allows researchers to ask open-ended questions, which prompt participants to provide a range of responses and describe varied experiences. Such responses help a researcher formulate and ask additional in-depth questions to understand better the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The primary objective of engaging in phenomenology is to conduct a meticulous examination of the phenomena being investigated, with the aim of delving into the intricate realm of lived experiences from the perspective of the individuals directly involved in them. Engaging in this process not only facilitates a heightened comprehension of a phenomenon or occurrence but simultaneously enables an exploration of our inherent characteristics, leading to a transformative experience at an individual level. By adopting this approach, a researcher may engage in critical reflection, so enhancing their capacity for deepened contemplation and heightened attentiveness in comprehending social activities.

According to Spiegelberg (1969), when conducting phenomenology of any form, researchers should follow three steps. The first step is intuiting. This procedure refers to the cognitive process of perceiving or recalling a particular occurrence, maintaining a

state of conscious consciousness, actively engaging with the subject matter, immersing oneself in it, and contemplating or reflecting on it.

The second step is analyzing. In this step, the researcher should conduct an examination of the phenomena by thoroughly scrutinizing it. The aforementioned elements encompass various aspects of the phenomenon under consideration. These include the spatial aspects, such as the constituent parts and their arrangement. Additionally, the temporal aspects encompass the episodes and sequences that occur over time. Furthermore, the attributes and dimensions associated with the phenomenon are also of significance in this step. The environments, settings, and surroundings in which the phenomenon occurs must also be considered.

Moreover, it is necessary to consider the prerequisites and consequences of the time of the phenomenon and the different perspectives or approaches that could be adopted when examining the phenomenon. Additionally, there are central aspects or focal points, as well as peripheral aspects or horizons, that warrant attention. The appearance and disappearance of the phenomena are noteworthy as well. Finally, the clarity of the phenomenon is a crucial factor to consider. The examination of these elements should encompass both the external manifestations, such as things and activities, as well as the internal manifestations, such as ideas, pictures, and feelings.

The third step is describing. In this step, the researcher should provide a written description of the phenomenon. The text should be written in a manner assuming that the readers have no prior expertise or knowledge of the subject matter, and the researchers should lead them through their analytical and intuitive processes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Spiegelberg, 1969).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an academic pursuit that seeks to understand the ways in which people's lived experiences, cultural norms, and tradition influence their daily practices (Oerther, 2020). While initially influenced by Husserl's ideas, Heidegger ultimately diverged from his perspective and subsequently formulated hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger's theoretical framework relied on the premise that consciousness should not be viewed as a separate entity from the world but rather as an integral component of human experience (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). He stated that an individual's background has a significant impact on their perception of the world, therefore emphasizing the necessity of considering this contextual influence.

In the study of hermeneutic phenomenology, the primary objective is to highlight commonly overlooked experiences, which subsequently allows researchers to generate meaning and cultivate comprehension (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Heidegger's key concept was the hermeneutic circle, which describes a repetitive process in which the researcher's interpretations shift from trying to comprehend a specific aspect of the experience to creating a sense of the whole and then returning again to looking at a different aspect. This particular procedure helps the researcher in attaining a progressively profound comprehension of the phenomena under investigation.

According to Van Manen (1990), who derived inspiration from Heidegger's work, the primary objective of phenomenology entails the interpretation of a textual or historical study with the aim of gaining understanding. Additionally, he has created a useful manual on hermeneutic phenomenology that offers a framework for doing phenomenological research centered on six research activities: 1. Shifting our attention to

a phenomenon that captivates our interest and engages us with the world; 2. Examining firsthand experience as it is lived rather than as it is abstractly conceptualized; 3. Contemplating the fundamental themes that define the phenomenon; 4. illustrating the phenomenon through written form and revising; 5. Sustaining a robust and purposeful pedagogical connection to the phenomenon; and 6. Ensuring a balanced research context by looking at both the individual components and the whole (Van Manen, 2016).

Researcher Role

Phenomenology, approached from both philosophical and methodological positions, entails the examination of a phenomenon as it is perceived by individuals, delving into a more profound comprehension within a particular context. This involves providing a meticulous account and interpretation of lived experiences through the process of bracketing, which involves the suspension of researchers' preconceived assumptions (Gearing, 2004). The utilization of the bracketing strategy, as stated by Husserl, is imperative for researchers in order to obtain a profound understanding of lived experiences within the context of the study. According to Speziale and Carpenter (2007), the utilization of bracketing serves as a valuable method for ensuring the validity of the process of data collection and analysis within the context of phenomenological research.

When conducting phenomenological research, the researcher's personal reflections are considered to be an integral component of the research process. My role in this research was based on my interest in investigating the personal experiences of Saudi Arabian international students living in the United States. As a Saudi Arabian international student with a deep connection to the population being studied, it was imperative for me to take all necessary measures to prevent any personal bias from

affecting the gathering and interpretation of data. I thus paid close attention to and thought back on my experiences and my role as a researcher prior to, during, and following the participants' interviews. Also, in order to adhere to the phenomenological principle of bracketing out the researcher's personal experiences and preconceived notions, in the next paragraph, I outlined my background and the characteristics I share with the study subjects.

I first came to the United States as an international student in 2013 to complete my graduate studies. I completed all my primary and secondary education in a private school in Saudi Arabia. The school's educational system was structured on Arabic as the principal language and English as the secondary language. English proficiency was further developed through extracurricular opportunities such as intensive English classes offered in school. After that, in 2012, I graduated from a public university in Saudi Arabia with a bachelor's degree. Following my graduation, I spent one academic year working as a teaching assistant at a public institution in Saudi Arabia. Then, I received a scholarship to pursue my education in the United States.

Upon arriving in the United States in 2013, I started my classes in an intensive English language program affiliated with the linguistics studies department at a public university. The program is intended for international students who need to enhance their skills in English before entering a degree program or who want to increase their English competence. I completed two semesters in the language program at the advanced and pre-academic levels. After completing the levels and acquiring the language proficiency requirements, I was admitted to the educational administration master's program. I earned my master's degree in educational administration in 2016.

After earning my degree, I went back to Saudi Arabia and worked as a lecturer teaching college-level courses, as well as as an academic advisor for two years. In addition, I was assigned two administrative positions at the university where I worked. I held positions in the College of Education as director of quality and academic accreditation and at the College of Medical Sciences as vice dean of student affairs. Afterward, I was admitted to the PhD program in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Oakland University and returned to the United States to start my doctoral studies in 2019.

My experience in higher education sparked my interest in concentrating on and researching higher education topics. My interest in student challenges and experiences, in particular, stems from my professional and educational journey, during which I have had direct interaction with higher education students from different backgrounds and cultures. My role in this research was prompted by my own experiences as an international Saudi student studying in the United States.

Moving to a new country, immersing myself in a new culture, learning to navigate a whole new environment, and adapting to all the challenges that stem from such experiences are all things I have personally encountered. Potential similarities may exist between my experiences and those of the interviewees, which introduces the possibility of bias in the study. Thus, when I started my research, I was aware of my background as an international Saudi Arabian student studying in the United States, my potential for bias, and the necessity to set aside my personal viewpoints when conducting interviews and analyzing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Sampling, and Participants

Sampling and Recruiting

For the purpose of the research topic, I used criterion and snowball sampling techniques. I reached out to Saudi Arabian international students studying in selected U.S. colleges and universities through social media sites and Saudi social groups at the institutions. An advertisement was posted on Saudi students' social media accounts and groups. Moreover, invitations to participate in the research were also sent to the admins of the Saudi groups on WhatsApp, and they were asked to share them with the groups to ensure reaching as many prospective participants as possible.

The participants were selected using non-random purposeful sampling, which combines many criteria. This approach was chosen because it allows for the intentional selection of individuals who could provide valuable insights into the research topic and the main phenomena being investigated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research's target population consisted of international students from Saudi Arabia who were registered full-time in U.S. colleges and universities for a degree program during the academic years specified in the selection criteria. The selection criteria for the students were as follows: (a) An international student from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States. (b) Enrolled full-time in a college/university in the United States during the academic years of 2019/2020, 2020/2021, and 2021/2022; or were enrolled in a course when the Coronavirus was declared a global pandemic in March 2020. (c) a graduate or undergraduate student. (d) aged 20 and above. All tribes or persons born in Saudi Arabia were eligible for inclusion. This research study was focused on only international

students from Saudi Arabia; therefore, anyone who contacted me and was not from Saudi Arabia was excluded from the study.

After receiving authorization for the study project from the Oakland University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I started the process of recruiting participants. The recruitment was done through online postings, with the recruitment flyer posted on Saudi students' group pages on social media like Facebook and WhatsApp. Since the prospective participants were most likely to speak Arabic as their first language, the recruitment flyer was written in both languages Arabic and English. All the contact information was on the flyer, and all those who wanted to participate were encouraged to contact the researcher directly. After I received volunteering requests from the participants in my email, I replied to them with an email that included the study's information sheet and a question about their preferred way of contact to discuss everything pertaining to the study before proceeding to schedule the interview. Most participants choose to be contacted by phone number through WhatsApp.

I reached out to prospective participants who expressed their interest by responding to the recruiting advertisement. Then, I provided them with the information sheet to review it. I provided a full explanation of every important detail of the research and offered them the chance to ask any questions. Once the questions were addressed, if a prospective participant expressed interest in doing the interview, we proceeded to schedule the date and time for the interview. All those who fit the study criteria and agreed to talk about their experiences in relation to the research questions were included in the research.

Participants

I recruited ten individuals who were willing to take part in the interviews. The selection was based on the first ten people who volunteered their time to participate in the study and met all the inclusion criteria. The characteristics of the final participants are displayed below in Table 1. The final sample of selected participants consisted of eight females and two males. The participants were all in a marriage relationship and aged between 30 and 39. All who were included in the sample were registered in a degree program. An interviewee number was assigned to each participant in order to ensure their anonymity throughout the analysis.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

Interviewee Number	Gender	Age Range	Marital Status	Academic Degree Program	Enrollment Year
1	M	30-39	M	Master	2020
2	F	30-39	M	Doctoral	2019
3	M	30-39	M	Doctoral	2020
4	F	30-39	M	Doctoral	2020
5	F	30-39	M	Doctoral	2018
6	F	30-39	M	Master	2021
7	F	30-39	M	Master	2022
8	F	30-39	M	Doctoral	2020
9	F	30-39	M	Doctoral	2016
10	F	30-39	M	Doctoral	2019

The data shown in Table 1 reveals that 80% of the participants were female, and the remaining 20% were male. They were all married and around the same age. All participants were enrolled in a graduate degree program, with three pursuing a master's degree and seven pursuing a PhD degree. Four students started their degree program prior

to the pandemic between 2016 and 2019, while six began their studies during the pandemic between 2020 and 2022.

Data Sources and Instruments

The purpose of this research study was to provide an opportunity for Saudi international students to speak about their experiences and unique challenges while studying in the United States during COVID-19 and to gain a meaningful understanding of their perspectives and personal experiences. In order to fulfill the objective of the research, I opted for phenomenological interviews to collect data. According to Seidman (2019), the phenomenological interview offers researchers a means of understanding the meaning of people's behavior by giving them access to the context of their behaviors. This methodology has been particularly effective in shedding light on the perspectives of marginalized or underrepresented groups, as well as in comprehending more complex phenomena (Tomko et al., 2022).

Phenomenologically Based Interviewing is an approach that has significant use in the examination of complex matters within the realm of education, particularly pertaining to the process of learning. It is a methodical approach to conducting interviews, characterized by the use of open-ended questions. The primary objective of this technique is to encourage participants to recall and analyze their own experiences related to a certain topic, therefore facilitating a deeper understanding of the meaning and complexity of such experiences. The utilization of this interviewing method is especially advantageous in eliciting comprehensive and detailed narratives pertaining to the lived experiences of underrepresented and underprivileged groups (Seidman, 2019).

The study's data were collected through individual interviews with each participant. Because of their personal commitments during the data collection period, I was unable to conduct more than one interview with the participants. Thus, I acquired data from a single in-depth interview. I performed semi-structured, open-ended, and in-depth interviews using a predetermined set of questions. A fundamental tenet of research using in-depth interviewing is that individuals' interpretation and understanding of their experiences significantly influence their subsequent actions and behaviors related to those experiences.

Conducting open-ended and in-depth interviews is most effective when there is a clear framework that provides both the participant and the interviewer with a sense of the specific topic of the interview (Seidman, 2019). I developed the interview protocol with a list of semi-structured interview questions that were prepared in advance and used to guide the interviews. The questions were designed based on the research questions and Patton's (2015) guide, which suggested six different categories of questions that can be used to encourage and obtain responses from participants. The six categories include questions about background and demographics, feelings, sensory, knowledge, opinions and values, and experience and behavior.

The protocol for the interview consisted of a total of twenty-four questions. Five of the questions focused on background and demographic information, including gender, age, marital status, enrollment year, and degree program. Nineteen of the questions were interview questions that fell into different categories from Patton's (2015) guide to interview question categories. Some of the questions served more than one category (see Table 2). There was also a list of general probes that were designed to elicit further

details throughout the interview. Table 2 shows the list of the nineteen interview questions, which categories they represent, and which research questions they inform.

Each participant was asked the same basic questions, and if necessary, I followed up with more focused or clarifying questions. The questions never deviated from the original purpose of the research at any point. Participants in the interview had the option to opt out of responding to any given question.

Table 2

Interview Questions Categories

Research Question	Interview Question	Thematic Category
Research Question 1. What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?	1. Please describe your initial experiences as an international student in the United States when the COVID-19 pandemic began?	Experience & Behavior
	2. How did the presence of COVID-19 impact your overall experience as an international student in terms of academics, social interactions, and daily life?	Feelings Experience & Behavior
	3. What specific challenges did you face in adapting to the sudden changes in academic and social life due to the pandemic?	Experience & Behavior
	4. Please describe any challenges or adjustments you had to make in your studies due to the pandemic and how did these affected your sense of belonging in the academic community.	Experience & Behavior
	5. Please share any specific moments or experiences that stand out to you as defining aspects of your journey as an international student during the first wave of COVID-19 in the United States.	Experience & Behavior
Research Question 2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?	6. What support systems, if any, did you find helpful in navigating the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic?	Knowledge
	7. Were there any government-level initiatives or support measures that you, as a Saudi student in the U.S., were aware of or benefited from during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic? If so, please describe it.	Knowledge Experience & Behavior Sensory
	8. How effective were the communication channels between the university and international students regarding updates, changes, and available support during the early stages of the pandemic?	Opinion & Values Sensory Knowledge

Table 2 – Continued

Research Question	Interview Question	Thematic Category
Research Question 2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?	9. Did your institution offer any specific resources or assistance for international students dealing with challenges related to the pandemic?	Knowledge Experience & Behavior
	10. Were there any specific measures in place to address the unique needs of international students, considering the cultural and linguistic differences they may face during the pandemic? If so, please elaborate.	Knowledge Experience & Behavior Sensory
	11. What were your thoughts and emotions regarding the measures taken by the university or authorities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and how did these measures influence your experience?	Feelings Experience & Behavior
	12. How did your institutions address concerns related to academic adjustments, visa regulations, and potential travel restrictions for international Saudi students?	Knowledge Sensory
	13. How did the support or services provided by the institutions or government contribute to your overall experience as a Saudi student in the U.S. during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic?	Feelings Experience & Behavior
	14. Looking back, do you have any recommendations or suggestions for improvements in the support systems for international Saudi students during similar crises in the future?	Opinion & Values
Research Question 3. How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?	15. Please share your personal experiences and strategies that helped you overcome and cope with the challenges posed by the prolonged duration of the COVID-19 pandemic as a Saudi international student in the U.S.	Opinion & Values Experience & Behavior
	16. How did your daily routines and study habits evolve over time to adapt to the ongoing uncertainties and changes brought about by the pandemic?	Experience & Behavior Sensory
	17. Were there any specific support networks, either within the Saudi student community or beyond, that played a significant role in helping you cope with the extended effects of the pandemic? Can you please elaborate on that?	Experience & Behavior Feelings
	18. What particular tools, strategies, or resources did you find helpful in maintaining academic engagement and connection with peers during the prolonged pandemic period?	Experience & Behavior Opinion & Values
	19. Looking back, what lessons or insights did you gain from your experiences in coping and adjusting to the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as a Saudi international student in the U.S.?	Knowledge Opinion & Values

Table 2 shows the list of interview questions used in the interview protocol. A set of interview questions was developed for each research question to elicit a response that served the research objectives. The planning and development of the interview questions were informed by both the research questions and Patton's (2015) guide. Patton's guide proposed six types of questions that could be employed to elicit and stimulate participants' responses. The six categories include questions about background and demographics, feelings, senses, knowledge, opinions and values, and experience and behavior. As shown in the table, some of the interview questions fit into two or more thematic categories.

Data Collection Procedures

To examine the lived experiences of international Saudi Arabian students throughout their time spent in U.S. higher education during the first phase of COVID-19, semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted with the participants. The process of conducting interviews enables researchers to contextualize behavior and gain insight into individuals' actions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The data for this research were collected through culturally sensitive interviews. Each participant had one in-depth interview using a semi-structured list of questions to guide the interview process.

Initially, I obtained authorization from Oakland University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to start collecting data for this research project (see Appendix A). After the IRB consent was obtained, the recruitment flyers in both English and Arabic were sent to Saudi Arabian students' social groups on social media websites (see Appendix B). When someone contacted me from one of the recruitment postings, I replied with an invitation message to determine the date and time of the interview according to the participant's

convenience. The message also included the research information sheet, and I explained that we would have the opportunity to discuss any questions when we met for the interview.

I informed the participants that they would be participating in an interview that would be conducted online through platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, or WhatsApp, depending on their preference. Using the number on the recruiting flier, each participant contacted me individually over WhatsApp to arrange the interview, and they all opted to do the interview via WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a cost-free messaging and calling service that provides simple and secure communication. It is accessible on mobile devices worldwide. Its features and functionality have been enhanced to include sending and receiving many forms of media, such as texts, videos, pictures, documents, GPS location data, and voice and video calls. WhatsApp incorporates end-to-end encryption to ensure the privacy and security of its users' data shared on the platform (WhatsApp, n.d.)

The interview times and dates were set in advance to accommodate the schedules of the research participants and myself. I conducted the interviews from my home office. The participants were free to pick their preferred location for the interviews, although I advised that they be in a quiet, private area to ensure confidentiality and no interruptions. At the beginning of the interview and before I started recording, I shared a link to a form containing the information sheet and an informed consent agreement using Google Forms (see Appendix C). I reviewed the information sheet and verified with the participants their consent to be recorded. After we discussed everything pertaining to the study, I

asked the person if they wanted to participate they could click on "continue" in the Google Forms consent agreement.

For the convenience of the participants, all interviews were conducted online between March 13, 2024, and April 20, 2024. The interviews were conducted at the researcher's personal home office. Participants were given the freedom to choose their location depending on their comfort and availability. They were informed that the interview was expected to last around 90 minutes. The average duration of interviews was roughly 70 minutes.

The language used in the interviews was either Arabic or English, with the interviewee's preference determining which language was used. All respondents had the option to be interviewed in either English or Arabic. A version of the questions in both languages was prepared in advance in case someone had a preference for a specific language to be used during the interview. The purpose of having the questions available in Arabic or English was to create a setting to allow participants to understand and address the questions more clearly and at their comfort level. Since I speak both languages fluently, I was able to do the interview in either language. Only one participant opted to have the interview conducted in English, while the others all preferred Arabic.

I used a semi-structured list of interview questions related to the research topic to be explored. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview process, participants were able to control the conversation, but I was still able to delve deeper for more information if necessary. The interview questions were designed to correspond with my research questions (see Appendix D). Participants were also asked to provide demographic information. Each participant interview took approximately one hour. The participants'

responses were audio-recorded on my password protected mobile phone. After the interview, I informed the participants that they would be sent the transcript of the interview within a week so they could review it for accuracy and send it back to me.

Following each interview, I started the process of transcribing. I translated the transcriptions of the interviews conducted in Arabic. A translation tool was used to complete the translations, and the translation texts were reviewed and edited to ensure that they were accurate and conveyed the intended meaning. The transcription and translation of each interview required around four to five hours to complete. After the transcriptions were completed, a copy of the transcripts with translations was sent to each participant. The participants were instructed to review the transcripts for accuracy and were given the opportunity to make corrections or add more details if needed.

Data pertaining to the research, including audio recordings and notes, were properly encrypted. Physical copies of all papers related to this research project, such as anecdotal notes, were held securely in a secured cabinet in my private home office, accessible only to me. The confidentiality of the participant's identity was maintained at all times. All replies were kept anonymous. Any identifiable information given by the participants remained confidential, and the participants were only referenced by an interviewee number. Every file and piece of information related to this research project was secured, kept private, and saved on a password-protected laptop that can only be accessed by me.

When reporting results, no identifiable personal information will be used. The participants' identities will remain anonymous in any presentations or publications resulting from this research. I will take every measure to ensure the confidentiality of the

identification of the participants. All recordings and collected materials from interviews will be destroyed after the transcript is made. The anonymous transcripts will be destroyed five years after the research is published.

Data Analysis Strategies

The next section details data analysis procedures, which include pre-coding and data preparation, coding, analysis strategies, and validity.

Pre-coding and Data Preparation

Engaging in data preparation prior to coding enhances one's understanding of the data and facilitates the first step of fundamental analytical procedures (Saldaña, 2016). The data preparation process started with transcribing the interviews from the audio recordings. According to Seidman (2019), “researchers who transcribe their own recordings come to know their interview material better” (p.124). I went through the recorded interviews many times and documented any reflections or insights that emerged throughout the process. I personally transcribed the data from interview conversations and then conducted the initial review of each interview transcript, selecting significant statements that were particularly relevant.

After that, I prepared analytical notes regarding the initial review. The analytic notes consisted of my personal thoughts on each interview. These were only notes that I had written down to assist in organizing my thoughts before, during, and following the data analysis. The purpose of these analytic notes was to consciously set aside and exclude my own experiences and biases in order to maintain objectivity when reviewing the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). After all the interviews were transcribed and

checked for accuracy with all the participants, it was then organized for preliminary analysis and pre-coding.

In qualitative research, a preliminary exploratory analysis involves examining the data to gain a broad understanding of its content, documenting thoughts on a note, organizing the data, and determining if any additional information is needed (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This stage of data analysis also involves exploring the data. To explore and immerse myself in the data, I printed the interview transcript documents on paper in preparation for a pre-coding reading and manual analysis. In the process of preparing texts for manual coding and analysis, I laid out printed transcripts of interviews and all other materials I created during all the earlier stages of data collection, such as the notes I jotted down during interviews (Saldaña, 2016).

The text was then read line by line in order to establish a connection with the transcript and understand the meaning as expressed by the participant. Sentences and words that had the potential to be codes were highlighted with a highlighter, and I wrote notes on the margins of the page. There is an element of control and ownership that comes with working with qualitative data on paper and inputting codes in pencil (Saldaña, 2016). I read through the transcripts several times, focusing on the details and trying to understand the conversation as a whole before breaking it down into smaller sections (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I Identified and marked important participant statements and phrases that stood out as being significant or noteworthy. Finally, I reviewed the transcripts again to look for general themes that seemed to be connected to all interview responses.

Afterward, a document was opened in Microsoft Word, and the notes and codes written on the printed paper transcripts were transferred to the document. To organize the parts suitable for coding, I highlighted and underlined them (Saldaña, 2016). Finding and highlighting relevant information in interview transcripts helps researchers condense and organize their findings in a format that is suitable for sharing and presentation. (Seidman, 2019). The last step I did in this part was thoroughly reviewing the notes and transcripts and then organizing the materials for the coding stage.

Analysis Strategies

I conducted an analysis of the responses to the study questions, creating links with the findings that were found in the literature (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Findings from the literature review, research questions, and interviewees' perspectives formed the themes. Every one of them was given a code that reflected the many attributes that were considered significant. Through the use of categories, I was able to organize comparable coded material into relevant but smaller groups for the purpose of data analysis. Data from complete transcripts were organized into meaningful statements and phrases that gave the concept or the phenomena a voice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Two strategies were employed in the analysis. The first strategy was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach used to find and analyze recurring themes or patterns within a dataset. The distinctive characteristic of this approach is that analysis occurs on an intuitive level, where an “aha” moment occurs when one immerses oneself in data and carefully examines the relationships and correlations between concepts, codes, and themes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 440).

To identify codes and themes in my interview transcripts, I applied thematic analysis. I followed the recommended steps for doing a thematic analysis by Savin-Baden and Major (2013). I started by familiarizing myself with the data by printing the transcripts and reading through the conversations several times. After that, I started creating initial codes by highlighting and underlining words and phrases that showed a pattern. Then, I started looking for emerging themes within those patterns. To reduce the number of themes, I reviewed the preliminary themes for similarities and compared them together. I combined the themes that had similar patterns and characteristics to avoid redundancy. The end of the analysis process produced six major themes. The themes are described in more detail in Chapter Four.

The second strategy was hermeneutical analysis. The Greek word "hermeneuein," meaning to interpret, is the root of hermeneutical analysis. This approach focuses on analyzing and interpreting social events and how they were perceived by participants. Context and behavior are the focal points of this analysis, with the goal of understanding the general meaning in the context in which they occurred. It examines the connections between the parts and the whole (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

After I identified the final general themes, I used a hermeneutical analysis strategy to interpret the meaning behind the participants' statements. In an effort to unravel every aspect of the narrative, I searched for the significance behind the words they used to describe their experiences in certain circumstances. Then, I explained the meaning of the individual experience while recounting the participants' stories. During the process, I was aware of my own biases, and I bracketed out myself and eliminated my

experiences from the analysis so that the story told was not influenced by my preconceptions but rather reflected their pure experience. (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Validity

Researchers are encouraged to validate their results utilizing at least one of the findings' validity procedures (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of my findings, I used a member-checking strategy. The procedure known as "member checking" involves the researcher asking one or more study participants to verify the accuracy of data. This verification process includes presenting the findings to the participants and requesting their feedback on the analysis report to confirm accuracy (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

For the purpose of validating my analysis, I reached out to the participants two times during the study. The first time was after I finished the transcripts and sent them to the participants. I asked the participants to reflect on the transcriptions of their responses, revise them, and confirm or modify any inaccuracies in order to clarify their meaning. The second time was during the analysis procedure. I sought feedback from participants regarding several aspects, such as the comprehensiveness and realistic portrayal of the description, the accuracy of the themes, and the fairness and representativeness of the interpretations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Codes and Themes

In qualitative research, data analysis can occur in tandem with other steps of building the qualitative study, including data collection and report findings. For instance, Researchers may analyze a finished interview, create notes that may be incorporated into the final report, and plan the structure of the final report while interviews are taking place

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, instead of waiting until the end of the data collection process to start coding, I began as I was collecting and organizing my data. I started writing down any first ideas for codes I had after the first two interviews.

I coded on the printed documents first, then transferred the code to a Word document on my computer. These codes were meant to be constantly reviewed as the study advanced; they were not considered definitive at this point (Saldaña, 2016). The existing literature and the research questions helped to identify general themes, and while the interviews were being conducted, more themes emerged.

The researcher should approach the transcripts with an open mindset, intently looking for significant and intriguing elements within the text (Seidman, 2019). Therefore, an open coding strategy was adopted, where each word or sentence was seen as a code in itself. This stage produced a significant number of codes and themes. I used an inductive process of condensing data into a small number of broad categories (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Table 3 displays an excerpt of the preliminary codes, their meanings, and an example statement from the interview transcripts that match each code.

Table 3

Excerpt From the Preliminary Codes

Codes	Meaning	Example from Transcripts
Academic	This code included every statement that included the word “academic” in it or described an impact on academic life.	“I did not know what my academic situation would be like in the future.”
Classroom	This code included every statement related to the classroom environment and relationships in the classroom.	“Lack of class discussions and getting used to the regular classroom style.”

Table 3 - Continued

Codes	Meaning	Example from Transcripts
Emotions and Feelings	This code included any sentence that describes feelings and emotions.	“I felt afraid because I did not know.” “A lot of isolation and loneliness.”
Finances	This code included responses about financial struggles or changes in financial situation.	“Part of my salary was deducted.” “Would affect my financial situation.”
Support	This code included responses about seeking or using some sort of support from individuals or organizations.	“There was a group of Saudi students who provided me with the required support.”
Social relationships	This code included statements about social interactions.	“Social life with Corona was nonexistent.”
Communication	This code included statements about effective communication channels that helped.	“The presence of Blackboard facilitated communication.”
Strategies and self-care	This code included responses discussing strategies for resilience and adaptation to the circumstances.	“Self reliance in all aspects of life.” “Organizing time more effectively.”
Institutional Support	This code included statements about the availability and effectiveness of institutional support.	“University support was helpful in the first year of study.”

In addition, coding entails separating and categorizing material in order to describe and identify overarching themes within the data. During the coding process, the goal was to derive the meaning of textual data by breaking it down into text segments and assigning codes to each segment (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Keywords and color-coding strategies were employed to represent and organize connections and themes that were identified. I then checked for code duplication and overlapping themes.

Finally, I combined the codes into larger themes. When themes were identified, each theme was given a number and a color. Finally, the example phrases and quotes for each theme were coded with the theme color and number. The coding process produced six major themes. The final themes that emerged were financial impact, impact on academic life, institutional communication and support, impact on social life and social support, emotional and psychological impact and support, and strategies for adaptation and persistence. Table 4 provides a list of the final identified themes, their definitions, and the list of the codes used to create each theme.

Table 4

Description of Final Themes

Theme	Definition	Codes Comprised the Theme
Financial Impact	Financial struggles or changes in financial situation that occurred due to the constraints and conditions posed by the pandemic. It also includes the need to seek or use financial support or aid services that have not been used before these circumstances.	Economic conditions, financial situation, affected me financially, lost my job, find other sources, support from government, support from the university, tuition costs, financial aid, free of charge, financial support, paying, fees, refund, salary, budget.
Impact on Academic Life	The impact of pandemic-related constraints and the transition to online learning on the participant's academic lives and relationships in the academic community.	Academic situation, studies, school, academic work, scholarship, admission, registration, attendance, lectures, study plan, academic life, classroom, academic relationships, distance learning, remotely, assignments, library, academic community, academic tasks, classmates, professors, university atmosphere, participation, lack of integration.

Table 4 – Continued

Theme	Definition	Codes Comprised the Theme
Institutional Communication and Support	Institution, departments, or individuals within the institution who communicated with the Saudi students, and the ways in which students were communicated. Also, the types of support that were provided and suggestions for improvements to the support that can be provided in such circumstances.	Communication with students, role of lecturers and professors, systems that helped, communication channels, learning resources, university support, international students' office, effective in supporting, support channels, support programs, providing assistance to foreign students, cooperation, with the student, services provided by the university, coordination between channels.
Impact on Social Life and Social Support	How the social life and ways of communicating with friends and family have been affected. The ways or tools that helped in communicating, maintaining social relationships, or creating new ones. In what way the support from social circles helped in such circumstances.	Social distancing, social life, social interactions, friends, family, social communication, stay in touch, social support, relationships, gathering places, connecting through social media platforms.
Emotional and Psychological Impact and Support	Participant's feelings and emotions during the early stages of the pandemic, how their mental health was impacted, and the type of support they sought or needed during this period.	Isolation, loneliness, difficult experience, confusion, psychologically tiring, psychological factor, ambiguity, fear, frightening, scary, worry, psychological support, psychological influence, feelings, tension, psychiatrist, comforting, safe, mental health, anxiety.
Strategies for Adaptation and Persistence	The skills and strategies that the participants adopted which helped them in adapting and motivated them to continue their studies in those circumstances, despite the obstacles they faced.	Adapting, developing new skills, new habits, not following the news, strategies were followed, develop new experiences and strategies, determination, insistence on achieving goals, exercising, accustomed, doing activities, organizing time, self-reliance, persistence, goal set.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

My research aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States during the first early stages of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The objective of this research was to address the following questions:

1. What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?
3. How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

During the data analysis process, six main themes were identified: (1) Financial impact, (2) Impact on academic life, (3) Institutional communication and support, (4) Impact on social life and social support, (5) Emotional and psychological impact and support, and (6) Strategies for adaptation and persistence. In this chapter, I discuss the results of the research. The findings are presented and organized by themes. I have included a description of each theme and an interpretation of the participants' experiences under each theme. In addition, I have incorporated selected excerpts from the participants' narratives that provide insight into their personal experiences and how they described them.

Theme One: Financial Impact

Financial challenges were one of the primary obstacles Saudi Arabian international students described having encountered during the early stages of the pandemic. The financial impact included financial challenges or changes in the financial situation that occurred due to the constraints and conditions posed by the pandemic. It also included the need to seek or use financial support or aid services that have not been used before these circumstances. This theme emerged through different parts of the interviews. Some participants talked about financial difficulties when asked about the specific challenges they encountered, and others talked about it when asked if there were any particular resources provided by their institutions or the government that helped them during the difficult times of the pandemic as international students.

Although financial security poses a challenge for most students in higher education, it can be more challenging for international students. Several participants said they had some financial difficulties during the period under study. Their experiences included losing employment, financial insufficiency, changing residences, and seeking financial assistance programs and initiatives. Although they talked about their experiences regarding some financial difficulties, most of them had reservations about delving into the subject. Most responses to this matter were short and concise sentences.

One participant talked about his experience of losing his employment on campus. As an international student, he only had employment opportunities on campus. Upon the announcement of the spread of coronavirus and declaring it a global pandemic, most campuses around the United States started closing and adapting to remote learning. However, due to the ambiguity surrounding the circumstances, it was not known how

long the campuses would remain closed. As a result, certain students were informed that their employment would be terminated, as their occupations could not be modified to be performed remotely. He said that his major concern since the start of the pandemic and even before the closure was his financial situation, as he had predicted that it would be an issue when he was following the news about COVID-19 around the world. He stated, “*At the beginning of the crisis ... I was also afraid of the economic conditions and whether they would affect my financial situation.*” Then he continued discussing how the ban that was enforced by authorities impacted his employment, saying, “*That ban also affected me financially because I was working at the university, and after the Covid disaster occurred, I lost that job and had to find other sources.*” In the United States, international students have generally restricted employment choices to working on campus because of their student visa restrictions. Consequently, they depend on campus-based employment to earn additional income. So, the financial conditions of these international students during COVID-19 were highly dependent on their campus jobs and visa status.

During the academic year, international students are authorized to work a maximum of twenty hours per week on campus. International students are also permitted to participate in off-campus employment, but only after obtaining prior authorization and fulfilling specific criteria (ISSO, n.d.). However, off-campus employment opportunities are very limited for international students because most jobs off-campus require the possession of a Social Security Number. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed several higher education institutions to shift their instruction online, which resulted in the elimination or reduction of numerous on-campus employment and the layoff of several employees.

Several international students have complained that COVID-19 has impacted their part-time jobs and internships since the outbreak started (Olatunji et al., 2023).

Another participant shared her financial struggles during that time, indicating that she had been through difficult times because her income and financial situation had changed. She said:

When the pandemic happened, I think there were some cutoffs, so part of my salary was deducted. They had to cut off, I think, about like 10% of my salary. I know that sounds like a little, but it was a lot for me because I was renting a big house because I had kids, the bills were high, everything was high, and my salary was not enough to cover the rent and the bills, so I had to go look for another house that is within my budget.

This participant explained how the reduction in her salary impacted her ability to pay the rent on her rented house and the bills, forcing her to look for another accommodation within her financial means.

Then she continued talking about the struggle of finding a new residence that fit her new financial situation and accepting international students at the same time. According to her, some homeowners and housing compounds were not accepting international students because of their credit scores and because some renter insurance companies raised their quotas and changed their policies during the pandemic. She explained:

But then the struggle start [sic] because it was not easy to find a house during that time because I think there were some situations with the insurance companies. And so, a lot of compounds were not accepting international students

because I didn't have a social security number or credit score, so it wasn't easy to find a house at that time or a compound that would accept International students. Also, most of them, because we don't have credit scores, will give it to us with the highest rate.

Her statement indicated that the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted some organizations, such as the insurance companies and rental agencies she mentioned, to adjust their policies. As an international student, she was adversely affected by the policy revisions that were implemented by these organizations, as they did not adequately address the needs of noncitizens. Most international students who are married and have families live in rentals off campus and rely on paid employment or their scholarships to pay their rent. However, since the pandemic started, most students have had changes in their financial conditions. As a result, some international students residing in independently rented houses have faced difficulties in meeting their rental payments.

Additionally, the participants discussed the financial support programs and initiatives that they needed or used during that time as one of the financial challenges they encountered. The economic crisis posed by the pandemic had a substantial impact on people who had limited access to social security systems, such as international students. For example, economic stimulus packages were provided by the U.S. government to help with some of the financial difficulties that have resulted from the pandemic. However, international students were not eligible for such financial support programs. The Saudi participants in this study shared their experiences with other financial support initiatives that were useful to them as international students with limited resources in such situations.

Several participants reported that they had benefited from some of the support offered by their institutions in this regard. When asked about the support services that helped them with their finances, one said, *“I received some support from the university, and it was in the form of free internet offers for students and free Covid tests.”* Another participant added, *“Facilities were provided to access the internet, and study needs and tools were distributed free of charge.”* Moreover, a participant stated, *“Providing devices to students was a great initiative, and they are thankful for it.”* Providing devices was a great help to some students because they did not own personal devices and could not afford to buy them at that time. They were relying on the devices available to them on campus to complete their tasks, so this was particularly challenging for them with the campus's closure.

Almost all agreed that offering free-of-charge services was very helpful. The free services included COVID tests, access to the internet, and some learning tools. Since they had to take the COVID tests at the time to travel, visit certain buildings, or attend events, it was helpful for them to have that covered by their institutions. Also, they greatly appreciated the free internet services and electronic devices, which were essential for completing all their classes and assignments due to the change to remote education.

In addition, a small number of participants reported receiving financial assistance in the form of tuition refunds or partial payment of tuition. One of the interviewees said, *“There was support from the university in baring part of the tuition costs for a semester of the year.”* And another said, *“Only a portion of the tuition fees was offered to be refunded.”* Under these circumstances, the offering of such assistance has been extremely beneficial to these students. This is because they were unable to take advantage of the

financial aid services offered by the state or other organizations, as most of the aid or grants were limited to domestic students.

Furthermore, some respondents indicated that they did not receive any assistance to alleviate their financial struggles. A group of participants expressed the need to offer financial support to international students in the midst of such challenging times. They suggested that higher education institutions should offer financial assistance programs for international students. For instance, one respondent said, *“I suggest raising financial support for international students given that crises such as COVID pandemic make students face many financial difficulties.”* Another added, *“The most important support that Saudis need is to provide financial support for their children under four years old.”* This last statement was shared by a female participant who talked about her struggle of not being able to put her kid in a daycare or have someone help her with the kids while she had her classes because she could not afford it. So, her suggestion was that international students should have some sort of financial support services to help them cover the costs of childcare programs.

Finally, financial security is a concern for many higher education students, but it is much more pressing for international students, particularly during difficult times with limited resources. The financial status of more than half of the participants was impacted by COVID-19. Some participants have reported that COVID-19 has had or is expected to affect their current and prospective employment opportunities. They spoke about how the COVID-19 outbreak affected their finances, including losing their jobs or having their salaries reduced. This issue has led some of them to seek financial support initiatives that they did not require prior to the pandemic. In this regard, although some participants

stated that they did not require or receive such services, they did provide recommendations for the type of financial support they wished was available to international students.

Theme Two: Impact on Academic Life

The academic life of Saudi international students was one of the most impacted aspects during the early stages of the pandemic. This theme included responses that explained the impact of pandemic-related constraints and the transition to online learning on the participant's academic lives and relationships in the academic community. The participants' experiences varied in this regard, and each individual experience was unique. While a few individuals perceived it as a positive experience, the majority reported encountering several challenges. Saudi students have reported encountering difficulties such as a lack of integration with the academic community, inadequate interaction with instructors and peers, time management, distraction and frequent interruptions during online classes, difficulty adapting to learning and completing tasks remotely, and a decrease in productivity caused by distance from the campus atmosphere. In addition, some participants expressed concern over their academic status and progress.

When describing their concern over their academic progress, one stated: *“I felt afraid because I did not know what my academic situation would be like in the future. Whether my studies would continue or stop and what will happen to my scholarship.”*

And another explained:

From an academic standpoint, the in-person academic lectures were stopped at the beginning, causing some confusion for me in terms of whether I would be able to complete the study plan in a timely manner or if I would have to postpone it.

These remarks demonstrated how some Saudi student's main concerns were about their academic standing and advancement. The fear and concern were due to the restrictions imposed by social distancing measures and the overall sense of uncertainty surrounding the pandemic.

Furthermore, the shutdown of embassies and delays in processing student visa applications significantly impacted several international students. One participant expressed concern about her opportunities to advance to her graduate studies due to the uncertainty around future constraints or regulations that could impact her admission. She stated:

My scholarship and my admission were postponed because of closure of the embassy. I couldn't get my visa, and I didn't know when I will start and graduate, and I was scared to lose my admission to the program.

Because of the pandemic-induced closure, she was unable to acquire a student visa, resulting in the postponement of her scholarship. She explained that gaining admission to a PhD program was challenging for her, and for personal reasons, she intended to begin her studies in 2020 and hoped to avoid any delay. This situation has prompted her to be frustrated and concerned about the possibility of losing her admission to the doctoral program.

Another struggle the participants faced during the first months of the pandemic and moving to online learning was the difficulty of adapting to learning and completing tasks remotely. As one said, the hardest thing during that time for her as a new international student was “*Adapting to the distance learning style.*” This participant described how hard it was for her to adapt to a remote learning style because it was her

first semester. She said that she arrived in the United States during the closure of the university campus and started her first semester online. It was difficult for her, as an international student, to adapt and integrate into the academic community without being on campus and meeting her classmates and instructors in person.

Another participant had a similar experience and said that she was “*Unable to accept the new teaching method.*” She explained that it was not only difficult for her but for her children as well. She stated, “*I had difficulty adapting to children studying remotely. Confusion was a common feeling among parents and teachers.*” Due to her lack of prior experience with online education, she found it challenging to adapt to a new learning style. Consequently, she faced difficulties introducing her children to this unfamiliar learning environment. Her description of her experience as an international student participating in online learning during the early stages of the pandemic revealed that she frequently felt confused during the process.

Several Saudi international students encountered challenges while transitioning from a traditional classroom environment to an all-online format during COVID, mostly due to the substantial amount of independent work they were required to do. One participant said that the challenges for her were “*A lot of individual work and not being able to be in the regular classroom, but only on Zoom.*” Due to the transition to online classes, she had to rely heavily on independent work since she lacked direct access to her instructors or classmates for assistance. She clarified that she preferred asking the professor questions in person rather than over email since she was insecure about her language abilities. This reason was why she found it difficult to adjust to being away from a traditional classroom setting, and it presented a barrier for her.

In addition, some participants experienced difficulties in completing the assignments and projects that were assigned to them for their online courses during the early stages of the pandemic. Some Saudi students found it difficult to participate in group assignments and form groups with other students. A few participants reported that they found it challenging to do “*Group assignments*” and “*Choose groups with no social contact with others.*” The participants expressed difficulty completing group tasks and selecting groups without any prior knowledge or social interaction with their classmates. They also struggled with exchanging knowledge and engaging in online conversation. Some stated that they found difficulty in “*Knowledge exchange and dialogue*” and “*getting used to the new communication style and knowledge exchange.*” Engaging in online activities was challenging due to the obstacles of effective communication and the need to find a mutually convenient time to meet since many individuals wanted a break from prolonged screen exposure.

Moreover, a group of participants reported that the online form of communication resulted in poor engagement with their professors and classmates. One participant noted that since the classes were shifted to online form, there has been a “*Lack of class discussions,*” and it “*affected my communication with my colleagues at the university.*” Another commented on the impact of moving the instruction online, saying, “*The only effect was our distance from classmates, as the bond between classmates weakened.*” In addition, a participant who started her studies during COVID said, “*I did not form adequate social or academic relationships with students and doctors.*” According to their statements, some students felt that they were not actively involved with their lecturers and peers in the online classes. They were unable to establish sufficient social or

academic interactions with other students and instructors because of the limited chances for communication and class discussions in the online format. The impact of online classes resulted in students being physically distanced from the classroom environment, leading to a weakening of their interpersonal connections.

The participants further highlighted an additional consequence of transitioning to distance learning in response to the pandemic. A group of participants mentioned a decrease in productivity caused by their distance from the campus environment. Several participants described the "university atmosphere" and "library environment" as factors that encouraged them to work hard toward their educational objectives. Being distanced from the campus atmosphere was challenging for some Saudi international students. As one student stated, *"Being in the library environment was a great motivator."* Another participant said, *"The biggest challenge was not being in the library"* and that *"Conditions improved after the partial return to direct attendance in schools."* The responses indicated that the academic atmosphere inside the institution and its libraries motivated individuals to be more productive and accomplish their educational goals. When the institutions were partially reopening and returning to in-person classes, the difference in productivity was evident to some of them.

Interruptions and distractions during online classes proved a challenge for most higher education students. Saudi international students, however, have the added challenge of having to do their dual role as parents and students with no nearby familial support. Most of the participants were parents, but they were unable to receive assistance with their children or have someone look after them while they were attending their online sessions because they were living in another country far away from friends and

family. Furthermore, some individuals were unable to have outside help due to the financial limitations imposed by the pandemic. In this regard, one participant stated, *“The challenge I faced was being a mother while I was a student in these difficult circumstances with no help.”* Another added, *“I was trying to find time and space for myself to complete my academic tasks and trying to find activities for my children inside the house.”* Also, one said, *“It was difficult to find a suitable quiet place at home with no distractions.”* The circumstances proved challenging for these individuals mainly because they were unable to effectively manage their time as full-time students and parents. The school's closure posed an additional difficulty, as parents had to juggle their own coursework while assisting their children with their academic assignments. Due to the closures caused by COVID-19, they were unable to obtain the necessary help.

With the gradual return to in-person attendance, participants encountered additional challenges. Several individuals expressed challenges in integrating and effectively interacting with others while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing in the classroom. One participant said, *“The strangest thing is that when I met the students studying with me for the first time in person, I felt uncomfortable and couldn’t fit in and integrate.”* This participant began her studies during the pandemic through online classes and encountered difficulties in establishing interpersonal bonds with others in her class. However, she expressed that the transition to in-person classes posed additional challenges due to her discomfort with all the measures of returning to the campus during the pandemic, such as wearing masks and maintaining social distancing in the classroom. These factors hindered her ability to comfortably integrate into the academic community when she started attending in person.

A further issue that arose once classes resumed on campus was that several participants found it challenging to communicate and comprehend lectures while wearing masks. One individual stated, *“It was difficult to understand the language and hear the correct letter sounds with the mask on,”* and another added, *“It was difficult with masks and less interaction than normal days.”* The use of masks and limited interaction increased the challenges for international students in comparison to the pre-pandemic era. Some Saudi international students found it difficult to understand the language and appropriately perceive the words spoken by their professors when masks were used during lectures.

The early phase of the pandemic had a significant influence on the educational experiences of Saudi international students. The topics covered encompassed the participants' explanations of how pandemic-related restrictions and the shift to online learning have affected their academic lives and connections within the academic community. Most of the respondents reported experiencing several challenges with their academic experience during the early stages of the pandemic. Saudi students have faced various obstacles, including limited integration within the academic community, insufficient engagement with professors and classmates, challenges in managing time effectively, distractions and frequent interruptions during online classes, difficulties in adapting to remote learning and completing tasks, and a decline in productivity due to being physically distant from the campus environment. Furthermore, several individuals addressed concerns regarding their academic standing and advancement.

Theme Three: Institutional Communication and Support

This theme emerged when the participants were asked about the support or services provided to them by their institutions during the challenging phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it contributed to their overall experience as Saudi international students in the U.S. The responses under this theme included statements describing departments or individuals within the institution who communicated with the Saudi students, as well as the ways in which students were communicated. In addition, it included the responses that detailed the types of support or any specialized resources that were provided for international students facing difficulties linked to the pandemic. There were also responses that provided suggestions for improvements to the communication channels and support services that could be helpful in such circumstances.

Several participants described the first few weeks following the announcement that college campuses would be closed due to the pandemic as chaotic. Saudi international students expressed great concern over the status of their visas and the possibility of continuing their studies. The institution and the international students' office did not provide any clarity or communication other than the email announcing the suspension of in-person sessions and the transition to online instruction. Some participants stated, *“At first, the channels were unclear”* and *“Communicating with the university required more time to complete my special requests as an international student.”* The responses indicated that during the first few weeks of the pandemic-imposed campus closure, no clear plans were put into place, and no channels of communication were established with the students. Due to the ambiguous nature of the situation, most institutions were waiting for updates from the World Health Organization

(WHO) before initiating communication with the students. Consequently, international students were concerned and uncertain about their legal and academic standing at that time. Another participant expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment of the staff in the international students' office at her institution during the early stages of the pandemic. She said that her experience with the office was *“Not good, and the staff in the office are not good at dealing with students.”* She explained that the staff at the international students' office failed to properly address the students' concerns at that time.

Furthermore, several Saudi students expressed their confusion and uncertainty about their academic situation after receiving conflicting instructions from both the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) and the institution's international student office. One participant said, *“There was no communication between the offices. SACM was telling us something different from the international office and immigration.”* According to her explanation, during the first week of the campus closure, SACM was awaiting a response from the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia regarding the potential modification of scholarship policies in light of the exceptional circumstances. Some academic advisors at SACM advised the Saudi students to continue attending their classes on campus until they receive approval from the Ministry of Education. This is because their scholarships do not cover online courses, and it is also against their student visa policies to be registered in all online courses. On the other hand, the international student office advised the students to follow the university's guidelines for taking the courses online and wait for immigration officials' instructions on the new regulations for international students. Due to the lack of communication and coordination between the parties involved in the

affairs of Saudi international students, the students were left confused about whose directions to follow.

However, some participants indicated that their perceptions of their experience with the institutions shifted when the institutions reached out to them after developing strategies to address the situation. Once the communication channels were established, several participants said, “*Communication was good,*” “*Excellent,*” and “*Very effective.*” The participants expressed that the communication after that was very efficient and prompt in conveying expectations as necessary. One of the respondents said, “*After that, communication was made with the student, and everything related to the form of study was clarified.*” Another participant added, “*After a while, strong and effective communication channels were activated and they clarified all aspects that matter to me as international student.*” Also, one participant stated, “*SACM also provided communication to complete my requests easily and quickly and without need to travel,*” and “*The international students office provided support channels for communicating and answering questions or providing assistance to foreign students.*” Students were able to conveniently have their requirements and concerns addressed after SACM and their educational institutions introduced effective communication channels and support tools. As a result, their overall experiences as international students improved, and they felt reassured.

Moreover, a participant noted that after the institution implemented the strategies for managing the pandemic, the international students' office demonstrated increased collaboration and understanding in addressing the needs of international students. He stated, “*During that period, I found all cooperation and flexibility in cooperation with the*

student in terms of registering for study hours, staying in the United States, or returning to Saudi Arabia. The procedures were easy and smooth.” Another participant said, *“The institution dealt well with the issue and was flexible.”* The participants explained that once effective communication was established, they were informed that they could continue their courses online and had the option to either remain in the United States or travel to Saudi Arabia without any impact on their visas or scholarships. Also, they will have full access to all the necessary resources for their educational journey.

In addition, institutional support played a significant role in shaping the experience of some Saudi international students throughout the onset of the pandemic. One participant said, *“Frankly, the services provided by the university were my motivation to continue excellence and creativity.”* The support provided by the institution served as a catalyst for his persistent effort to achieve academic success. Another respondent stated, *“University support was helpful in the first year of study.”* Also, some participants said that institutional support *“Was effective from an academic and cognitive perspective due to the presence of learning resources and tools”* and *“It contributed positively to my experience.”* Resources such as the establishment of effective communication with students and the availability of academic support services and online learning resources were major sources of motivation and persistence for Saudi international students during such a challenging time.

Moreover, the respondents indicated that their professors and instructors were the most significant sources of support for them during the pandemic. In this regard, one participant mentioned that *“Everyone understood that this was an unusual situation, and the professors cooperated.”* Another participant said, *“All faculty members have been*

making updates, changes, and support available to us on the Moodle website,” and one emphasized *“the role of lecturers in relieving student stress by reducing assignments or canceling some.”* The participants indicated that since the beginning of the outbreak and throughout its duration, their professors have made efforts to reassure the students and alleviate their concerns. Faculty members promptly offered full support to their students of their capabilities soon after the campus closure was announced, even before obtaining information on the institution's planning for that period. The participants believed that the instructors' support was the most significant factor in reducing their anxiousness during that time as international students.

Finally, some participants offered a few suggestions for improved institutional support that they wished existed for international students experiencing challenging circumstances. A few participants indicated that during challenging times, higher education institutions should be *“Dealing with determination and managing to alleviate those fears”* and that there should be *“More flexibility, support, and awareness.”* It is imperative for higher education institutions to be certain and transparent in addressing unprecedented circumstances. They should have no hesitation in providing reassurance to students and effectively managing their concerns, thus demonstrating the institution's efficiency. In addition, one participant suggested *“Expanding the providing of advisory services related to the psychological and social aspects and financial planning.”* Another participant also emphasized that *“Increasing awareness of how to adapt to the new situation and sharing the challenges facing most people can make the situation lighter and less severe.”* Most of the recommendations emphasized the need to offer counseling services that educate international students on how to navigate and cope with challenging

circumstances, as well as additional tailored support services particularly developed for international students.

Theme Four: Impact on Social Life and Social Support

This theme covered responses that discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social lives of Saudi foreign students and its effects on their connections with friends and family. It also included the techniques or tools that enabled communication during that period, maintaining social relationships, forming new ones, and the support offered by one's social circle in such circumstances. Another description of social support is the degree to which an individual feels safe, valued, and supported by their social circle. Social support is provided mostly by family members, but it also includes friends, colleagues at work or school, and people in one's community.

Living distanced from families has always been a challenge for international students studying abroad. However, the friendships and relationships they establish in the new country usually serve as a source of comfort, alleviating their feelings of alienation. One participant said, *“During the first wave of COVID, the most important of those experiences were those related to sitting at home during the ban period and how it initially affected my communication with my Saudi colleagues.”*

He found it challenging to not be able to physically meet with the Saudi groups since he was used to gathering with them at a designated location to engage in conversations, give life updates, and participate in activities together. Such interactions could not be accomplished by text messaging or phone calls.

Another participant described how hard it was for her to adjust to the new situation after the social-distancing and stay-at-home orders. She said,

On the social level, meeting weekly with my friends was my outlet while abroad. Meeting them charged my energies for the following week. My family and I also used to go out every once in a while to visit a new place; with Corona and staying at home, it was a big challenge to try to adapt to a new routine in a situation that was not known how dangerous it was at the time.

She explained that since her arrival in the United States, she found that routinely getting together with her friends was a source of comfort and that engaging with them provided her with the energy she needed to face the days ahead. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stay-at-home order, she had a considerable challenge in adapting to the new standard of living of being physically distant from her social circle. The social support that international students receive is critical to their ability to successfully navigate the transition to a new culture or adjust to new circumstances.

In addition, some participants described the social life during COVID-19 as non-existent. A participant said, *“Social life with Corona was non-existent, and it was very difficult for us to communicate with others in case a problem occurred.”* Another participant also had a similar opinion, stating, *“Socially, it has become almost non-existent and is limited to electronic communication channels.”* Most participants indicated that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical separation and social isolation from their social circle had a significant impact on them. Some participants described their social life during the COVID-19 pandemic as *“difficult”* and *“isolated.”* One participant stated, *“Socially, the isolation was difficult, as we could not visit friends or family in Saudi Arabia.”* She explained that they strictly adhered to social distancing and quarantine guidelines, which led to a feeling of isolation. Because of the uncertainty

and lack of clear information about the effects of the pandemic, they were unable to engage in social interactions with others in their social circles or travel to their families.

Furthermore, most participants said that they relied on social media platforms such as “FaceTime,” “WhatsApp,” and “Snapchat” to communicate with friends and family. These means of communication have helped alleviate social isolation for some individuals. Although technological alternatives for communication, such as social media, were widely used, some participants found that they were insufficient substitutes for direct conversation. Relying on social media as a means of communication has posed challenges for some individuals. As one said, there was a “*lack of integration*” into the community because there was no direct interaction. This was particularly important for some Saudi international students, as they found that direct interactions with others aided them in assimilating into society and adapting to the distance from their families. Also, another participant stated, “*In the past, social interactions were easy. I could communicate easily, but after the COVID crisis, it became difficult and complicated.*” She added, “*The biggest challenge I faced was how I could become as social as before and talk to people normally.*” She indicated that social distancing and her dependence on social media and online modes of communication have resulted in the development of social anxiety, which made it challenging for her to engage in social interactions even after the social distancing measures were gradually being lifted.

Finally, the social life of Saudi international students was highly impacted during the onset of the pandemic. The most prominent impact was the difficulty in communicating. For most participants, family members were the primary source of social support, but their social support groups also included friends and Saudi groups. Saudi

international students have long faced the issue of being apart from their families. However, the friendships and connections they made in the U.S. offered them comfort, alleviating their feelings of alienation, which made it hard for some to be physically distant from these support groups. Moreover, most participants said that they depended on social media platforms like "FaceTime," "WhatsApp," and "Snapchat" for communication with their friends and family, and these modes of communication have aided in mitigating social isolation for some individuals. Despite the widespread usage of technology alternatives like social media for communication, several participants discovered that these options were inadequate replacements for face-to-face interactions. Some participants indicated that the high reliance on online interactions caused them to have social anxiety and a lack of integration in the community.

Theme Five: Emotional and Psychological Impact and Support

This theme presented the subjective experiences of participants during the initial phases of the pandemic by including their emotional and psychological responses, the effects on their mental well-being, and the specific forms of support they sought or required at that time. When asked to explain how they felt as international students at the beginning of the pandemic, the most common responses were fear, loneliness, anxiety, and isolation. One participant described her experience, saying it was “*A lonely experience that involved a lot of isolation and loneliness*” and “*There was ambiguity and fear that conditions would not improve.*” Also, one respondent stated, “*It was a big challenge to try to adapt to a new routine in a situation that was not known how dangerous it was at the time.*” The majority indicated that their emotional and psychological distress stemmed from the ambiguity surrounding the pandemic and its

duration. Also, the measures taken to control the widespread transmission of the coronavirus had an impact on the mental health of some participants.

For most respondents, the first few weeks were filled with fear and anxiety due to the strict restrictions and measures imposed to mitigate the situation during that period. One respondent said, *“At the beginning of the epidemic, there was fear of contracting the disease and confusion due to health precautions such as isolation and closing gathering places.”* Another respondent said, *“It was a critical stage and a difficult experience for me as an expatriate. Difficulties in terms of the systems in place due to the corona pandemic.”* One also added, *“Daily life, in general, has become psychologically tiring for me due to the restrictions imposed by the ban”* and *“The psychological factor had the most impact on academic life, interaction, and social communication due to fear of the pandemic.”* Their responses indicated that in addition to the health concern of contracting the disease, Saudi international students first found the shelter-in-place orders, border closures, and social distancing to be unsettling. Their regular daily activities have been significantly affected, and as foreigners, they have not received any form of support or guidance, which was concerning for several individuals.

The closing of borders and the offering of evacuation flights increased their anxiety. One participant said, *“When the students were evacuated to their countries, it was a frightening experience.”* Another explained that it was very stressful that she had to make a decision of leaving or staying immediately. She said, *“The evacuation order was a bit scary, but due to the circumstances of my doctoral studies, it did not take long to decide to stay in America because I only had this solution.”* The participants explained that the Saudi government offered the students tickets to be on evacuation flights to Saudi

Arabia if they wanted to go back before the complete closure of the airports. They were faced with the immediate decision of either remaining in the U.S. or departing for Saudi Arabia. It was a difficult decision since nobody knew when they would return or when everything would return to normal.

As for psychological support, most participants reported that communicating with friends and family was a crucial coping strategy for dealing with anxiety and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some examples of their statements were: “*The greatest support was from my close family,*” “*The family has an important role in supporting people during crises,*” “*Having friends was a great support to us during that period,*” and “*There was an American friend who was like a psychiatrist. She was very comforting to me.*” They explained that their frequent interaction through the use of video calling platforms, such as Facetime and WhatsApp, for communication with friends and family proved to be really comforting and beneficial in providing them with the emotional support they needed.

In addition, some individuals noted that engaging with other Saudi students in the United States was comforting as they empathized with their challenges. Some participants acknowledged getting the help they needed from other Saudi students. One participant said, “*The Saudi students in my department helped me when I had difficulty.*” Also, one stated, “*Try to stay in touch with Arab and Saudi friends in the foreign country you are in, especially in the same city as you. You need to have friends and chat about your concerns.*” Another participant shared, “*There was a group of Saudi students who provided me with the required support, celebrating occasions and providing gifts related to Islamic occasions.*” The participants emphasized the importance of receiving support

from those who have the same background and the significance of little acts such as celebrating shared occasions and exchanging presents. They found this support to be incredibly helpful for their emotional and psychological well-being throughout the difficult times of the pandemic.

A few participants mentioned receiving psychological support from their institution and the Saudi government. One participant said that her institution offered *“Emails for psychological support, but there were no services.”* She said that the psychological support from her institution was only through general emails sent to all students, but no specific psychological support services were provided for international students. Another student said that he received support from the Saudi embassy. He said, *“There was moral and psychological support from our wise government and facilitation of ways that could alleviate the Saudi students’ foreignness.”* According to him, when he contacted the Saudi embassy about the issues he had, they promptly provided him and his family with all the necessary help.

Finally, the most common emotions expressed by Saudi international students during the onset of the pandemic were fear, loneliness, anxiety, and isolation. The majority expressed that their emotional and psychological suffering originated from the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and its long duration. Moreover, the implemented steps to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus had an apparent impact on the mental well-being of some individuals. Regarding psychological support, most participants indicated that engaging in communication with friends, family, and fellow Saudi students in the United States was an essential way to overcome feelings of anxiety and tension during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Theme Six: Strategies for Adaptation and Persistence

This theme emerged from the participants' responses, discussing how they were able to adapt to the prolonged period of the pandemic with all the obstacles that came along with it. It includes the adaptive abilities and coping mechanisms that the participants developed, which enabled them to persist in their academic pursuits in spite of the challenges they encountered. It took some participants more than a year to adjust to the new life conditions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the support they were accustomed to, they had to discover new approaches for adapting and persisting in their educational path as international students.

Most of the participants indicated that the initial step towards adaptation was to accept "*the new normal life*" of living with the COVID-imposed regulations. One participant stated, "*After a long time had passed, I became accustomed to staying at home. Everything changes quickly, and you must always adapt to new situations.*" Another participant said, "*By adapting and finding ways to make it easier, its toughness will weaken, and it will become simple.*" Based on their explanation, accepting the reality of the pandemic and the continuous changes it could bring proved to be a highly effective strategy for adapting.

In addition, some participants said they stopped following negative news and rumors about the pandemic on social media and instead relied on authoritative sources for important information. A respondent said, "*Not following the news and not allowing anyone to share any news about Corona in the lack of clarity about the matter was the greatest decision. That didn't make me worry too much.*" She explained that not following the negative news was the best decision she made since it just increased her

anxiety. Another participant stated, *“I was not hearing the news and anticipating new events much. We followed the rules and my family and I were safe and secure, and I had school assignments more important than what was happening outside.”* Several participants also shared the same thoughts and stated that they exclusively relied on official sources for essential information and complied with the authorities' regulations regarding the pandemic. According to their explanations, refraining from reading negative news about the pandemic and its impact was the optimal choice because it helped them alleviate their concerns, concentrate on their studies, and complete their tasks and assignments with no distractions.

In addition, several participants said that developing new habits and learning new skills helped them overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic's effects on their lives and maintain their commitment to their education. Most said that they developed healthy habits such as *“walking daily,” “exercising,”* and *“eating healthy”* food. One participant talked about the strategies he employed that helped him, saying, *“The strategies I did: sleeping well, eating healthy, and walking. I personally realized that they are a factor that helps a person start working better and overcome the challenges facing a person.”* Another participant stated, *“I took great control of my time, my health, and my diet,”* and she added, *“I tried exercising, and it played a major role in improving my mental and physical health and in spending my free time.”* Adopting new healthy practices significantly enhanced their daily life activities. They saw an increase in activity levels and energy, enabling them to handle challenges more effectively and motivating them to work harder.

Furthermore, several participants expressed that concentrating on their objectives and developing skills relevant to assisting them in accomplishing their aim of finishing their studies served as a significant motivator for their persistence. The skills and strategies that the participants adopted, which helped them adapt and motivated them to continue their studies in those circumstances, included developing their academic reading and writing skills. For example, one participant talked about working on his research writing skills. He said, *“I followed different strategies, the most notable with regard to writing research. I allocated a room and called it the library. It contains all the tools I need to facilitate the research and writing process.”* Another participant also talked about focusing on improving her academic writing. She stated, *“I relied on writing three times a week, writing more intensively on certain days, and allocating more time to editing and rewriting.”* Their remarks demonstrated their ability to leverage the circumstances to their advantage. With the additional time available due to the shutdown and less commute to campus, Saudi international students were able to dedicate more time to enhancing their skills in academic reading and writing.

In this regard, other participants emphasized the importance of determination, time management, self-reliance, and goal setting in their persistence for academic success. For example, one said, *“Patience, determination, persistence, and the goal set in my mind are the reason for the success of adaptation.”* Another also had a similar opinion, saying, *“Determination, purpose, and insistence on achieving the desired goals of my studies as a scholarship student.”* Others discussed these skills as essential factors for persistence. They stated, *“One of the most important lessons I learned during this pandemic is self-reliance in all aspects of life,”* *“Writing about the goals and things you*

want to change or achieve,” and “*Organizing time more effectively to complete my academic tasks and family life.*” The participants' statements emphasized the significance of competencies such as these in terms of supporting them in adapting to new circumstances and encouraging them to continue their academic endeavors by providing additional motivation.

Finally, some participants pointed out the value of dedicating time to “*having fun*” and practicing self-care activities. For instance, a participant said, “*Just as children need to play outside, we, as doctoral students, need to go out and play from time to time. This may be achieved in the simplest ways.*” Another respondent said, “*Doing different activities for family members, shopping, self-care, having gardens around, and going out for walks made it easier to adjust to not having any contact with anyone and have more energy to study.*” Throughout the prolonged duration of the pandemic, Saudi international students asserted that they managed to maintain their concentration on their academic pursuits, even in the absence of assistance from their family and friends in nearby locations, by implementing such strategies. Their responses emphasized the significance of allocating time for leisure and well-being, as it promotes calmness and rejuvenation to adjust to new circumstances.

Summary

In summary, the findings of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews indicate that six significant themes are evident in the interviews with Saudi Arabian international students who were studying in the United States at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The six main themes were: (1) Financial impact, (2) Impact on academic life, (3) Institutional communication and support, (4) Impact on social life and social support, (5)

Emotional and psychological impact and support, and (6) Strategies for adaptation and persistence. The themes that emerged from the participants' experiences include intersections with and ties to the scholarly literature. The next chapter will concentrate on establishing connections between the results generated by this study and the existing body of research literature. I will also discuss the implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological approach was determined to be the most suitable for this study. I used a qualitative method by conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gather data. I then used an inductive approach to analyze the data, which involved a multi-step coding process. I identified six primary themes that emerged during the discussion of the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian students who were studying in the United States during the early stages of COVID-19: (a) Financial impact, (b) Impact on academic life, (c) Institutional communication and support, (d) Impact on social life and social support, (e) Emotional and psychological impact and support, and (f) Strategies for adaptation and persistence.

This research addressed three questions. First, I examined the challenges that Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experienced at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, this study also sought to identify the specific support services the students received or required from their institutions or the government, which contributed to improving their experiences. Finally, I sought to know how the students coped and adjusted as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted. The participants expressed how the difficulties caused by COVID-19 overlapped with the issues they were already experiencing as international students and posed additional challenges. In this chapter, I provide an overview and discussion of the significant

findings that have emerged from my research. I also discuss the implications of these findings, identify the limitations of the study, and suggest possible directions and recommendations for future research.

Summary and Implications of Findings

This section is organized by the main research questions. It begins by summarizing the key findings that emerged from the analysis and then discusses their implications.

Three primary questions guided this study:

1. What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?
3. How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

To address these questions, I collected data through phenomenological interviews with Saudi Arabian international students who were enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial phase of the pandemic refers to the period within the first year after COVID-19, which was officially recognized as a global pandemic in 2020. I conducted interviews with individuals who met specific criteria, which included being enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States between 2020 and 2022, to gain insights into their experiences as the pandemic persisted. The data analysis uncovered significant insights into the experiences of Saudi Arabian international students during the beginning of the pandemic.

Research Question One

What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The participants in my study openly discussed their experiences as international students in the United States during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, most of them generally characterized their experience as international students during the pandemic as challenging. Some characterized their experience as difficult, stressful, and lonely. Overall, the participants expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed. Their feelings were related to their perception of being unprepared and lacking support, as well as their institutions' failure to adequately guide them. The difficulties that Saudi international students encountered affected their academic, social, emotional, and psychological lives and their financial situations. In this section, I present the findings in relation to the research question. I will discuss each major challenge by summarizing the findings and then discussing their implications and how they relate to the literature.

Academic

Notably, the majority of participants in this study reported experiencing academic difficulties during the pandemic. As covered in Chapter Four, the most common academic issues raised by Saudi international students were related to their inability to integrate into the academic community, interact with peers and instructors, manage their time effectively, concentrate, and finish assignments online at home. In addition, the findings of this study showed that the participants had decreased productivity due to their absence from the campus environment and concerns about their academic progress. A possible reason for this outcome may be related to the characteristics of the participants.

All the individuals involved were Saudi international students who had completed their undergraduate studies and were currently pursuing graduate degrees. They were recipients of a scholarship provided by the Saudi government under the KASP program and supervised by SACM. Assuming they were already well-established as independent learners, the fact that their scholarship and visa status only permitted a maximum of one online course per semester and only under certain conditions means that they could not have had any prior experience with online coursework before the pandemic.

Consequently, the sudden shift to remote learning presented academic difficulties for them. Also, distance learning created a barrier for students to assimilate into the academic community and establish relationships with their instructors and classmates due to the absence of possibilities for meaningful interactions, such as those that occur in face-to-face settings. Several researchers have concluded that students' sense of belonging is strongly influenced by the connection they establish with both their peers and their instructors. It has been suggested that a sense of belonging depends on various factors, including meaningful interpersonal interactions (Mwangi, 2016).

Some of the aforementioned challenges are not considered new to the experiences of Saudi international students because of the disparities in the educational systems of their home countries and the United States. Research in the literature has shown that Saudi Arabian international students often face challenges when it comes to engaging with their professors and peers (Heyn, 2013). Adapting to the American educational system is a significant challenge for several Saudi Arabian international students (Abi-Daher, 2020; Heyn, 2013). However, those challenges grew and became more apparent

due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, such as the transition to fully online education and the physical distance from the campus environment.

The findings revealed a resemblance to the existing literature about the presence of academic challenges. However, the academic challenges identified in this study are distinct from those found in previous studies. Some of the academic challenges Saudi students experienced during COVID-19 were consistent with those mentioned in the literature on international students. However, the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic exhibited unique attributes. For example, the academic challenges in the literature were primarily associated with the language barrier, whereas the academic challenges identified in this study were primarily associated with the remote learning format and the physical distance from the academic community. My findings were also compatible with Al-Nusair's (2000) research findings, which demonstrated that Saudi Arabian students studying in the United States exhibited a higher level of engagement in campus activities that included involvement in library-related experiences, physical interactions with peers and faculty members, and engagement in academic experiences in the classroom.

In addition, these findings are supported by Tinto's ideas in the theoretical framework for the student integration model. During a student's time in higher education, attrition occurs as a result of interactions between the student and the institution's educational environment, as proposed by Tinto's model (Cabrera et al., 1992; Tinto, 1975). In Tinto's framework, students' sense of belonging and involvement in campus life are considered to be influenced by factors like student attendance, enrollment, and type of institution. Therefore, a student's decisions of whether to maintain their

enrollment in the institution and complete their degree or drop out of higher education are all affected by the student's level of engagement on campus. Indicators of academic integration include student-faculty interactions, participation in academic projects, and the amount of time spent on campus.

Moreover, the results of the study showed how government and institutional pandemic-imposed regulations could impact international students' opportunities to access and persist in higher education. These results were consistent with the literature on immigrants and international students discussed under the theoretical framework. The literature included studies that confirmed that regulations and policies at all levels (institutional, state, and national) have had an impact on the inclusion and exclusion of minority groups in higher education. Similar to how immigration regulations restrict or expand access for particular populations, the policies in higher education may restrict students' chances of enrolling in college and adapting to campus life (Nunez, 2004).

Social Life

The social life of Saudi international students was significantly affected during the beginning of the epidemic. The primary consequence was the difficulty in communicating and establishing new relationships. In this study, the findings have shown that it was challenging for some individuals to maintain physical distance from the social support networks they established in the United States. Although technological alternatives such as social media were widely used for communication, many participants found that these options were insufficient substitutes for face-to-face contact. A number of participants said that the extensive dependence on online contacts resulted in isolation, social anxiety, and a lack of integration in the community. One possible explanation for

this outcome is that Saudi international students usually meet and form relationships with most of their peers and other Saudi individuals on campus. Therefore, the social distancing created a barrier for them. This was demonstrated by the experiences of the individuals in my research who arrived in the United States during the pandemic and were unable to meet and establish connections with students from similar backgrounds, which resulted in their feelings of isolation. For them, engaging in face-to-face communication yielded distinct and deeper experiences and relationships than communicating virtually.

The findings were generally consistent with studies in the literature on Saudi international students' social challenges. For many international students, being away from their home countries caused different levels of social and adjustment challenges while they were studying (Russell et al., 2010). Saudi students encounter cultural and social distress throughout their time in foreign colleges and universities, partly due to their distance from their family and home country (Gielen et al., 1992). In the literature, several studies showed that Saudi international students have always encountered the challenge of being apart from their families, and the friendships and relationships they establish in the United States commonly serve as a source of comfort, alleviating their feelings of alienation (Alghamdi, 2020). The participants in this study demonstrated that the physical distance from their social support groups during the pandemic created social isolation and adjustment challenges. Alajlan's (2016) study revealed that it is anticipated that Saudi students may encounter complexities encompassing issues in adapting, cultural disorientation, feelings of exclusion, and possibly academic difficulties due to social limitations. Although previous research in the literature has often linked social challenges

to cultural differences, my research yielded different findings. The social difficulties seen in this study were mostly attributed to factors such as physical distance and the means of communication used.

In addition, increased perception of social support was also linked to positive adaptation. Several Saudi international students in my research reported that direct interactions with people of the same background were crucial in helping them integrate into society and adjust to being far away from their families. The distance from those social support groups created challenges for most Saudi international students. The importance of social support for foreign students' successful acculturation to the U.S. environment was highlighted in several studies in the literature (Dao et al., 2007; Sümer et al., 2008). The findings also confirmed the assumption of the segmented assimilation theory presented in the literature. The significance of the support of ethnic communities for individuals of similar ethnic backgrounds in a foreign country was underscored by Portes and Zhou's (1993) context of reception. In the immigration context, this refers to the kind of support that the existing ethnic communities in the host country can provide for new immigrants upon their arrival. If new immigrants can live around other immigrant communities and be among others of their own ethnicity, they can learn how to adjust and integrate into society and find support resources that could help them settle (Nunez, 2004). The same concept can also be applied in higher education contexts where the presence of peers with similar experiences and backgrounds can have an impact on students' persistence and adjustment to new circumstances. Al-Nusair's (2000) recommendation that international student offices organize social activities is therefore necessary in order to create more opportunities for interactions between international

students and their peers with similar backgrounds or experiences. Such opportunities might be advantageous for Saudi students who may be encountering feelings of exclusion and isolation during difficult times.

Emotional and Psychological

The findings showed that feelings of fear, loneliness, anxiety, and isolation were the most prevalent consequences on the mental well-being of Saudi international students. Most individuals said that their emotional and psychological struggles were caused by the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and its longevity. Additionally, the implemented actions to mitigate the pandemic had an apparent impact on the mental well-being of several participants. Saudi international students expressed a major concern about maintaining their legal status as international students through the completion of the mandated in-person classes and not being able to have fully online courses. This unexpected suspension of educational activities on campus has put this student population under stress and fear of losing their legal immigrant status, which could significantly impact their academic achievement. Saudi international students have felt additional pressure due to the disruption caused by the shutdown of embassies and airports.

These findings confirmed some of the existing literature on the experiences of international students during the pandemic. The recent studies concerning the experience of international students during the pandemic proved that the onset of the COVID-19 crisis was particularly difficult for international students as they faced unprecedented challenges, ones that their domestic peers did not encounter (Koo et al., 2021). The research on the experiences of international students during the coronavirus pandemic has

identified several psychological challenges, such as feelings of isolation, anxiety, fear, and emotional distress. The predominant causes of these emotions were mostly attributed to the implementation of travel bans, visa limitations, distance from social groups, and instances of racism, alongside academic, financial, and health-related concerns (Behisi et al., 2021; Bilecen, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020; Koo et al., 2021; Litam, 2020). Although Saudi students in my study encountered similar challenges as described in the literature, my research findings indicated that the participants did not express any concerns regarding general health issues. Also, no instances of racism or issues pertaining to cultural or ethnic differences were mentioned by the participants in my study.

In addition, most participants in my research expressed that interacting with friends, family, and fellow Saudi students in the United States was crucial for alleviating feelings of fear and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are consistent with existing research on the impact of social support in reducing psychological distress among international students during challenging times. As indicated by Jenny et al. (2003), when faced with challenges, international students turn to their social support network, which includes friends and family. The study conducted by Bektaş et al. (2009) indicated that establishing and maintaining a link with one's home community is essential to psychological adjustment in a new setting or circumstances. As previously noted in the literature, there was a significant positive association found between social support, lower levels of stress, and lowered signs of anxiety and depression (Bektaş et al., 2009). The results of my research on psychological support align with the existing literature, indicating that Saudi students often rely on familial support when faced with difficulties in their lives. Seeking assistance from family

members is a prevalent practice among individuals from Saudi Arabia (Abi-Daher, 2020). In Saudi Arabian culture, the preference for relying on family members for support during challenging times is deeply ingrained, often taking precedence over seeking professional assistance (Abi-Daher, 2020). The study participants confirmed the findings of previous research that Saudi students tend to rely on social networks for support rather than seeking counseling or professional help. None of the participants mentioned seeking professional support for their psychological and emotional distress. As indicated in the literature, international students exhibit lower levels of familiarity with the utilization of university counseling centers (Carr et al., 2003; Choi, 2015). This may be the result of the institutions' inadequate awareness or provision of specialized services to meet the requirements of these groups and attend to their unique needs.

Financial

While many students in higher education faced difficulties with financial security during the pandemic, it was a more pressing issue for international students. Several participants in my study reported experiencing financial challenges during the pandemic. Their experiences included job losses, financial hardship, moving homes, and the need for financial support. This outcome could be attributed to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic and their status as foreigners. Also, the lack of effective financial aid programs for international students during the pandemic may have contributed to their financial difficulties.

In the literature on Saudi students, financial difficulties were not considered to be of main concern in most of the studies as a significant number of Saudi students get a monthly salary from the Saudi government through the scholarship program (Aldossari,

2016; Alhajjuj, 2016; Alremai, 2016). In my research, even though most Saudi students were hesitant to discuss the topic in detail, they did acknowledge facing some financial difficulties that have not been addressed in prior studies on the experiences of Saudi international students studying in the United States. Discussing financial difficulties in Saudi culture may be considered unacceptable due to several cultural and social considerations. Admitting to have financial difficulties can be stigmatized by society as an indication of incompetence or personal failure. There is also a significant emphasis in Saudi culture on maintaining family honor and reputation, which could prevent individuals from openly addressing their financial concerns. In addition, individuals' personal pride and commitment to upholding their dignity may prevent them from seeking help or discussing their financial difficulties.

The cultural emphasis on self-reliance and providing for one's family may hinder Saudi individuals from acknowledging financial hardships. Privacy and discretion are highly valued in Saudi culture, especially when it comes to personal and family matters. Engaging in conversations about financial difficulties may be seen as a breach of this privacy, which is often discouraged. Furthermore, certain outcomes from my study aligned with the research conducted by Alhajjuj (2016) and Alremai (2016), indicating that married Saudi students with young children who need childcare are vulnerable to experiencing financial challenges. A number of individuals who were parents expressed the challenges they faced in finding reasonably priced childcare, which became even more difficult during the pandemic.

The body of literature on international students indicated that a significant number of them have financial challenges due to the limitations imposed by their immigration

and visa status in the United States. These limitations restricted their access to financial aid, employment opportunities, and other sources of income (Albeshir, 2019). These assumptions are compatible with the results of my study. Most participants in my study were struggling financially because their student visa restrictions prevented them from working outside campus, causing them to lose their jobs after the pandemic-imposed closure. Their status as international students also prevented them from accessing some financial aid programs. The participants expressed how the difficulties caused by COVID-19 overlapped with the issues they were already experiencing as international students. Due to past, recently enacted, and expected immigration regulations and travel limitations, Saudi international students experienced uncertainty over their financial situation, employment opportunities, and expectations for their future in the United States.

Research Question Two

What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?

The results indicated that professors and instructors were the most significant sources of support for Saudi international students during the pandemic. The Saudi students first had difficulties due to the lack of efficient communication and coordination among the agencies responsible for supervising international students. The findings also showed that in the absence of well-established institutional support services for international students, effective communication was key to the experiences of Saudi international students during challenging times. The institutional support discussed in the findings focused on meeting academic requirements by providing the necessary

technologies for online courses. However, generally, there was a scarcity of institutional support services offered to international students, particularly in addressing their non-academic needs, such as financial and psychological needs, as well as the unique challenges they faced due to the pandemic. The participants reported that most of the support they received from their institutions was provided through email communication.

These results may be explained by the institutions' efforts to manage the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic and their limited understanding of the difficulties encountered by certain groups of international students. The limited understanding stems from the substantial presence of international students from different backgrounds pursuing education in the United States and the unpredictability of the extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, most institutions considered it more suitable to give priority to the overall academic requirements of all students instead of addressing the unique challenges of certain groups.

The findings indicated a similarity to the existing body of research, which suggests that many studies on international students have shown a deficiency in higher education institutions' provision of adequate support services for international students during times of crisis. For example, previous research has examined the experiences of Saudi international students during difficult periods, such as 9/11. These students faced similar concerns regarding their visa status, academic progress, and financial obstacles. However, their institutions failed to address their needs adequately and did not offer appropriate support to address their concerns (Cluett, 2002; HCRP, 2003; Lee & Rice, 2007; Owens, 2002). Furthermore, recent studies on the perceptions of other groups of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic yielded similar results with regard

to the lack of institutional support. In their study, Bhojwani et al. (2020) indicated that while international students were facing difficulties during the pandemic, their educational institutions reduced the scarce resources allocated to support these students and neglected their needs when addressing the crisis.

In addition, the results of my research confirmed the significant role of professors and instructors in providing guidance and support to their students during times of crisis. In the study by Rockenbach et al. (2017), it was shown that Saudi students experienced positive interactions with their instructors following the events of 9/11. Since their educational institutions failed to address their needs, the professors created a safe and supportive environment in the classroom and offered the necessary support during that time.

Moreover, U.S. governmental support for international students during crises is an issue that has not been addressed previously in the literature. During the COVID-19 pandemic, among the several steps taken by the federal government to aid the American people were stimulus packages that provided financial aid to students and residents of the United States. The financial aid was only available to American taxpaying citizens who met specific criteria. Participants in my study reported that, except for free COVID testing and immunizations, they were not eligible for any other sort of support from the U.S. government during the pandemic. Most international students are categorized as nonresident aliens for tax purposes, which prohibits them from benefiting from such financial aid programs (Olatunji et al., 2023).

Research Question Three

How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

Determining the coping strategies of Saudi international students is essential for informing the development and design of support systems. The study findings revealed several coping and persistence strategies employed by the Saudi students. Their coping and persistence strategies included acceptance, developing new habits, learning new skills, time management, goal setting, developing their academic skills, and focusing on their well-being. Most of the strategies adopted by Saudi students were in the interest of improving their academic life. The results are likely explained by the participants' characteristics and the circumstances they were in. Given that their primary purpose for being in the United States was to pursue their education and the fact that most of them had finished at least one semester prior to the pandemic, they had to find means and strategies to achieve their educational objectives. The adaptive abilities and coping mechanisms that the participants developed enabled them to persist in their academic pursuits in spite of the challenges they encountered.

Certain aspects of the results regarding the persistence strategies adopted by Saudi students were consistent with the literature. The literature on the persistence of college students has shown that the primary coping approach employed by most international students to ensure their continued academic progress was engaging fully in academic activities. Compared to American students, international students were more involved in academic challenges (Zhao et al., 2005). It was evident in previous studies that individuals who actively engage in educationally purposeful activities within and beyond the classroom have a greater possibility of persisting in higher education until graduation (Kuh et al., 2010; Quaye & Harper, 2015). The findings also confirmed the principles of Tinto's integration theory, which served as the theoretical foundation for this study. The

student integration model looks at how factors like students' characteristics, participation behaviors, and enrollment are related to retention. Tinto contends that increased levels of integration in academic activities lead to stronger degrees of institutional commitment, which encourage students to continue their educational pursuits. Vincent Tinto (2000) demonstrated that there is a direct relationship between persistence and engagement. Engagement behaviors, according to Tinto, include the various ways in which students are actively engaged in academic activity. Several participants in my study expressed that concentrating on their educational objectives and developing skills relevant to assisting them in accomplishing their aim of finishing their studies served as a significant motivator for their persistence.

The skills and strategies that the participants adopted, which helped them adapt and motivated them to continue their studies in those circumstances, included developing their academic skills. According to Kuh (2003), students benefit more from their college experience when they prioritize educational activities and invest a substantial amount of time and effort into them. As a result of the closure and the reduced commute to campus, Saudi international students were able to allocate more time to improving their academic skills. The participants highlighted the significance of dedication, time management, self-reliance, and setting objectives in their commitment to achieving academic success. The participants emphasized the importance of these qualities in helping them adjust to the new situation and motivating them to pursue their academic goals.

In addition, my study identified unique coping strategies employed by Saudi students, which have not been addressed in other research. Several individuals noted that acquiring healthy habits, such as dieting, exercising, and dedicating time to their well-

being, served as a coping approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the participants, the adoption of new habits and healthy behaviors had an important role in helping them overcome the challenges caused by the pandemic's impact on their lives and significantly improved their daily life experiences. They saw a rise in activity levels and energy, which encouraged them to efficiently manage challenges and served as a motivation for increasing their efforts toward their education and academic tasks. Throughout the prolonged duration of the pandemic, Saudi international students asserted that by implementing such strategies, they managed to maintain their concentration on their academic pursuits even in the absence of support from their institutions and their social support people nearby.

Limitations

The aim of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students who were studying in the United States during the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed a qualitative research design, which was suitable for the purpose of my study but facilitated the inclusion of a limited sample size. This study was restricted to data obtained from a sample of ten Saudi Arabian students who were pursuing their education in the United States during the first stages of the pandemic. Therefore, the results of this study are restricted to the experiences of these particular individuals. One possibility is that the outcomes might be different if the data were collected from a bigger sample size.

The study only included Saudi students who willingly volunteered to be interviewed. There is a chance that there were some differences between these volunteers and the non-volunteers. The individuals who did not volunteer may have been reluctant to

share their experiences due to ongoing difficulties, trauma, or concerns about potential harm. This could be attributed to their continued affiliation with their institutions or being recipients of a sponsored scholarship, as they feared that their involvement could have negative consequences for their present conditions. The findings of the research could have been impacted by the opinions of those who did not volunteer to participate.

In addition, my intention was to recruit Saudi college students from all age groups, degree programs, and marital statuses to capture experiences from different perspectives. However, all those who agreed to participate were graduate students who were enrolled in American higher education institutions between 2020 and 2022, married, and aged 30 or older. Possibly, Saudi students who are out of these specifications may have valuable insights to provide on their experiences as foreign students during the pandemic. One further limitation is that the sample representation included 80% females and 20% males. Therefore, the voices of women were greater in my study. An equal gender representation could have yielded different results.

Finally, this study was not designed to generalize its findings to the entire population of Saudi students enrolled in abroad programs. The experiences of Saudi students studying in the United States might be different from those of Saudi students studying in other countries. It is also not possible to generalize the findings to all international students. The generalization of my findings may be limited due to potential disparities between the research sample and the distinct challenges encountered by Saudi students in comparison to other ethnic groups of international students in American colleges and universities. Moreover, given the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the current pandemic and its effects, my findings might not be relevant in the long term.

However, further examination by other scholars might uncover new insights from the data. The purpose is to assist researchers who are examining comparable inquiries with similar theoretical approaches. The knowledge and insight gained from my research could be utilized to inform future research on comparable occurrences or crises.

Direction for Future Research

The limitations of this study highlighted several opportunities for further research, including different research designs and samples. The voices of undergraduate Saudi international students were not captured in my research. Future studies should look into this population's experiences since their viewpoints and difficulties might provide valuable information that institutions could use to better support them. For example, it would be beneficial to look into the experiences of those who just started college during the pandemic. Those individuals might have had to navigate college life as a freshman foreign student during a global pandemic. Also, those who stayed in the United States after finishing their ESL program and could not enroll in a college or university during the pandemic. Incorporating the perspectives of those who were unable to be enrolled and found themselves stranded in a foreign country might shed light on the profound effects of the pandemic on their lives and experiences.

There is a need to utilize different study designs to capture the experiences of Saudi international students from different angles. Future researchers could adopt a mixed-methods study design to thoroughly examine the experience of Saudi international students. Also, more comparative studies would be helpful in further examining the disparities in the experiences of different groups during the pandemic. These studies could be between Saudi international students and domestic students or between Saudi

international students studying in different countries, for example, between those who study in the UK and those in the US. More focused studies could also be conducted on a specific demographic, focusing on gender differences, for instance. The resulting analysis of such studies would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the disparities in studying experiences and outcomes among different groups in higher education, which could lead higher education institutions to generate innovative solutions for the challenges encountered by each group. An in-depth analysis of these distinct difficulties would enable the implementation of specialized procedures and support service plans for each group.

Conclusion and Implication for Practice

Over the years, higher education in the United States has gone through many events that have had significant impacts on its institutions, including political, economic, social, and health crises. Each crisis had a different impact on universities and colleges. Some crises necessitate a change in laws or the prohibition of certain practices, and others require the regulation of expenses. Therefore, the services provided in such institutions are affected. Also, the environment and general atmosphere on campus may be impacted as well, making it uncomfortable for some groups of students, such as international students.

International students often face challenges as they navigate the process of adapting to a new environment, and the global health pandemic has presented even more complications. The participants in my study expressed how the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with the issues they were already experiencing as international students. Due to past, recently enacted, and forthcoming regulations and

limitations, Saudi international students experienced uncertainty over their legal status, financial situation, employment opportunities, social life, academic progress, and expectations for their future in the United States. These challenges had created a load on their mental health, leading to feelings of anxiety, fear, confusion, and stress. The worldwide crisis of COVID-19 shed light on the persistence of previously highlighted difficulties in past studies as they remain unresolved, and in certain cases, the disregard for the needs of international students has been exacerbated. The limited communication and institutional support services played a significant role in shaping the experience of some Saudi international students throughout the onset of the pandemic. It appears that higher education institutions in the United States have not made significant efforts to provide support for their international students during the pandemic. The findings revealed that the support provided by institutions was limited and did not address the complicated requirements of Saudi international students.

The findings of this research can help leaders and policymakers in higher education institutions in the United States understand the unique needs of Saudi international students. The academic challenges encountered by Saudi international students presented by the pandemic were mostly related to the online learning experience. Institutions must address numerous practical implications while attempting to alleviate academic obstacles experienced by international students during times of crisis. The effectiveness of the virtual education experience for international students depends on the availability of institutional and faculty support for these settings. The results have demonstrated that the support offered by faculty members to Saudi international students had a significant impact on their overall experience and established a strong connection

with the educational institution. In order for them to receive the necessary academic help, they might require customized attention to be provided during office hours and classes. Therefore, faculty are advised to utilize the most effective techniques and practices identified in the study to tackle typical obstacles encountered in an online learning setting. Online education may be enhanced by implementing clear instructions on course and assignment expectations, maintaining regular communication with students, and providing multiple communication platforms for students to seek clarification or raise concerns (Martirosyan et al., 2022).

In addition, the participant emphasized the importance of academic and technical support during crises as functional institutional support that could enhance their educational experience. It is crucial to ensure that international students are well-informed about campus support services available to them, whether in person or online. Several participants in my study noted that the shift to online learning made it hard for them to make use of several campus facilities, such as library services, as they were not aware of how to use them virtually. Educational institutions should introduce international students to alternative resources that could aid them in an online learning setting and actively encourage them to utilize them.

It is also recommended that collaboration between the administrative entities that supervise international students both on and outside campus be improved. The findings indicated that the lack of collaboration between Saudi students' scholarship advisers at SACM and the advisors at their institution's international student office contributed to the unfavorable aspects of their experiences. This resulted in contradictory guidance being given to the students. By efficiently coordinating between the two administrations, it

would be better to understand the expectations of Saudi students and thus tailor services to meet their needs.

Moreover, institutions must remain informed of evolving communication technology and consistently update themselves with it. For instance, a significant number of international students have demonstrated a preference for utilizing social media and communication applications as their primary means of communication, as opposed to email. Some of those applications are convenient for international students because they offer useful features for them, like instant text translation. Therefore, institutions must establish new communication channels and explore other applications that are consistent with higher education policies to enhance the effectiveness of their interactions with international students.

Other than academic difficulties, the financial and psychological consequences were substantial. Financial constraints emerged as a significant challenge for Saudi international students during the pandemic due to the limited availability of financial aid services for international students. The university should enhance the efficacy and sustainability of financial support provided to international students during crises. Institutions could implement several measures to mitigate the financial difficulties experienced by international students in times of crisis. It is recommended that an emergency fund be allocated for the purpose of providing support to international students during unprecedented challenging times. This is due to their ineligibility for financial support programs such as Federal Student Aid or other grants that are accessible to their American peers.

Although some individuals in my study experienced psychological distress during the pandemic, none of them reported seeking help. However, they offered recommendations emphasizing the need to offer counseling services that educate international students on how to navigate and cope with challenging circumstances, as well as providing additional tailored support services particularly developed for international students. It is important for higher education institutions to increase awareness of counseling services provided to international students on campus and organizations in the community. The issues of lack of knowledge and underutilization of counseling resources have been consistently addressed by researchers in international student studies. Because of this, it becomes necessary to launch awareness campaigns for international students to encourage the use of existing support services, especially counseling services, and to normalize their usage more generally.

Finally, this study developed an understanding of the perspectives expressed by Saudi Arabian international students in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the lived experiences of underrepresented groups is crucial for policymakers and regulators, as well as for those developing support initiatives, to effectively serve these populations. The recommendations for future research and professionals provide a clear direction in developing support programs for international students and enhancing the services provided to them, with the aim of promoting their well-being and facilitating their progress.

APPENDIX A
IRB EXEMPTION LETTER



Date: March 13, 2024

Study #: IRB-FY2024-256

Study Title: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Saudi Arabian International Students in the United States During the First Strike of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study.

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:

Sarah Aldaej
Julia Smith

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Notes for Researcher(s):

- Recruitment Ad in English and Arabic
- Date-Stamped Information Sheets V 3-13-24 in English and Arabic
- Interview Questionnaire

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent form in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Site(s):

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT FLYERS

RESEARCH RECRUITMENT SCRIPT/ADVERTISEMENT

I am Sarah Aldaej, under the direction of Dr. Julia Smith, Professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Oakland University in the United States. I am conducting a research study to understand the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian international students who were studying in the United States during the time COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. The purpose of this research study is to provide an opportunity for Saudi international students to speak about their experiences and unique challenges while studying in the United States during the first wave of COVID-19 and to gain a meaningful understanding of their perspectives and personal experiences.

I am recruiting individuals who are Saudi Arabian students, graduate or undergraduate students aged 20 and above who were enrolled full-time in colleges/universities in the United States during the academic years of 2019/2020, 2020/2021, and 2021/2022 or were enrolled in a course when Coronavirus was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 to participate in an interview that will be conducted online through platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, or WhatsApp, depending on the individual's preference. The researcher will use a semi-structured list of questions related to the research topic to be explored. You will have the choice to participate in the language you feel comfortable using (English or Arabic). The interview will take approximately 70-90 minutes.

Your participation in this study is voluntary.

The research will take place at a time and place that you choose. The researcher will be conducting the interviews from a home office, and you are advised to be in a private and secure space during the interviews to promote confidentiality and reduce distractions.

If you have any questions concerning the research study. Please contact me at email: saaldaej@oakland.edu or phone numbers: 0012488322838 – 00966505919960.

نص / إعلان للتطوع البحثي

أنا سارة الداعج، تحت إشراف الدكتورة جوليا سميث، الأستاذة في قسم القيادة التنظيمية بجامعة أوكلاند في الولايات المتحدة. أقوم بإجراء دراسة بحثية لفهم التجارب الحياتية للطلاب السعوديين الدوليين الذين كانوا يدرسون في الولايات المتحدة خلال الوقت الذي تم فيه إعلان فيروس كورونا (COVID-19) وباءً عالمياً. الغرض من هذه الدراسة البحثية هو توفير فرصة للطلاب السعوديين الدوليين للتحدث عن تجاربهم والتحديات الفريدة التي واجهوها أثناء الدراسة في الولايات المتحدة خلال الموجة الأولى من فيروس كورونا (COVID-19) واكتساب فهم هادف لوجهات نظرهم وتجاربهم الشخصية.

أبحث عن أفراد من الطلاب السعوديين يكونون طلاب دراسات عليا أو طلاب جامعيين تبلغ أعمارهم ٢٠ عاماً فما فوق، وأن يكون تم تسجيلهم بدوام كامل في الكليات/الجامعات أو دورات تدريبية في الولايات المتحدة خلال السنوات الأكاديمية ٢٠١٩/٢٠٢٠ و ٢٠٢٠/٢٠٢١ و ٢٠٢١/٢٠٢٢ أو عندما تم إعلان فيروس كورونا وباءً عالمياً في مارس ٢٠٢٠ للمشاركة في مقابلة سيتم إجراؤها عبر الإنترنت من خلال منصات مثل Zoom أو Google Hangouts أو Microsoft Teams أو WhatsApp، حسب تفضيلات الفرد. سيستخدم الباحث قائمة شبه منظمة من الأسئلة المتعلقة بموضوع البحث المراد استكشافه. سيكون لديك خيار المشاركة باللغة التي تشعر بالراحة عند استخدامها (الإنجليزية أو العربية). ستستغرق المقابلة حوالي 70-90 دقيقة.

مشاركتك في هذا البحث طوعية.

سيتم إجراء البحث في الوقت والمكان الذي تختاره. سيقوم الباحث بإجراء المقابلات من مكتبه المنزلي، وننصحك بالتواجد في مكان خاص وآمن أثناء المقابلات لتعزيز السرية وتقليل عوامل التشنيت.

إذا كان لديك أي أسئلة بخصوص الدراسة البحثية. الرجاء التواصل معي على البريد الإلكتروني: saaldaej@oakland.edu أو أرقام الهواتف: 0012488322838 – 00966505919960.

APPENDIX C
INFORMATION SHEET

Information Sheet for an Exempt Research

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Saudi Arabian International Students in the United States During the First Strike of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study.

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study that is being done by Sarah Aldaej under the direction of Dr. Julia Smith, Professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Oakland University in the United States.

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You can choose to stop your participation at any time or skip any part of the study if you are not comfortable. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Oakland University, the researcher, the Department of Organizational Leadership, or the institution and the department that you are enrolled in.

If you are a student or employee at Oakland University, your decision about participation will not affect your grades or employment status.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to provide an opportunity for Saudi international students to speak about their experiences and unique challenges while studying in the United States during COVID-19 and to gain a meaningful understanding of their perspectives and personal experiences.

Who can participate in this study?

You are being asked to participate in the study because you are/were:

- (1) an international student from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States.
- (2) enrolled full-time in a college/university in the United States during the academic years of 2019/2020, 2020/2021, and 2021/2022; or were enrolled in a course at the time the Coronavirus was declared a global pandemic in March 2020.
- (3) graduate or undergraduate students.
- (4) aged 20 and above.

Where will this study take place?

This study will take place online at a time and place that you choose. The researcher will be conducting the interviews from a home office, and you are advised to be in a private and secure space during the interviews to promote confidentiality and reduce distractions.

What do I have to do?

You will be asked to participate in an interview that will be conducted online through platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, or WhatsApp, depending on your preference. The researcher will use a semi-structured list of questions related to the research topic to be explored. You will have the choice to participate in the language you feel comfortable using (English or Arabic). Your responses will be recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Participation in this study will also require your review of the transcript of the interview for accuracy. All recordings and collected materials from interviews will be destroyed after the transcript is made.

How long will I be in the study?

The interview will take approximately 70-90 minutes. The review of the transcript of the interview could take as long as 2 hours, and you will receive it within a week of your interview. I am hoping you will be

able to return it with your comments within 3 weeks from receiving it. Your total time of participating in this study will be around 3.5 hours within four weeks.

Are there any risks to me?

For this study, the potential risks would include questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you do not wish to answer. To help protect against this risk, you are free to not answer any questions. You will also have the opportunity to review your answers to make sure you are comfortable with the transcript. A second potential risk is that someone else could find out your identity. Safeguards will be in place to minimize this risk by keeping your research records as confidential as possible. All recordings and collected materials from interviews will be destroyed after the transcript is made. The anonymous transcripts will be destroyed five years after the research is published. When the results of this research are published or presented at conferences, no information will be included that personally identifies you.

Are there any benefits to me?

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the results of this study may benefit others in the future.

Will I receive anything for participating?

You will not receive anything for participating in this study.

Who could see my information?

Your research records may be shared and reviewed by the following groups:

- ☐ Representatives of the Oakland University Institutional Review Board and/or other regulatory compliance staff, whose job is to protect people who are in research studies.
- ☐ Regulatory authorities who oversee research (Office for Human Research Protections, or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies)

De-identified data may be used or distributed to another investigator for future research use without additional informed consent from you.

What if I want to stop participating in this study?

If you want to stop participating in this study, you should contact the researcher.

Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?

Sarah Aldaej.

Email: saaldaej@oakland.edu.

Phone numbers: 0012488322838 – 00966505919960.

For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board, 248-370-4898.

ورقة معلومات لبحث معفى

فهم التجارب الحياتية للطلاب السعوديين الدوليين في الولايات المتحدة خلال الموجة الأولى لجائحة كوفيد-١٩: دراسة ظاهرية.

مقدمة

يُطلب منك المشاركة في دراسة بحثية تجربها سارة الداعج تحت إشراف الدكتورة جوليا سميث، الأستاذة في قسم القيادة التنظيمية بجامعة أوكلاه في الولايات المتحدة.

قرارك بالمشاركة في هذه الدراسة هو قرار طوعي. يمكنك اختيار إيقاف مشاركتك في أي وقت أو تخطي أي جزء من الدراسة إذا لم تكن مرتاحاً. لن يؤثر قرارك على علاقتك الحالية أو المستقبلية مع جامعة أوكلاه، أو الباحث، أو قسم القيادة التنظيمية، أو المؤسسة والقسم الذي التحقت به.

إذا كنت طالباً أو موظفاً في جامعة أوكلاه، فلن يؤثر قرارك بشأن المشاركة على درجاتك أو حالتك الوظيفية.

ما هو الغرض من هذه الدراسة؟

الغرض من هذه الدراسة البحثية هو توفير فرصة للطلاب السعوديين الدوليين للتحدث عن تجاربهم والتحديات الفريدة التي واجهوها أثناء الدراسة في الولايات المتحدة خلال فترة جائحة فيروس كورونا (كوفيد-١٩) واكتساب فهم هادف لوجهات نظرهم وتجاربهم الشخصية.

من يمكنه المشاركة في هذه الدراسة؟

يُطلب منك المشاركة في الدراسة لأنك/كنت:

- (1) طالب دولي من المملكة العربية السعودية يدرس في الولايات المتحدة.
- (2) كنت مسجل بدوام كامل في كلية / جامعة / أو دورة تدريبية في الولايات المتحدة خلال السنوات الأكاديمية ٢٠١٩/٢٠٢٠، ٢٠٢٠/٢٠٢١، و ٢٠٢١/٢٠٢٢؛ أو في الوقت الذي تم فيه إعلان فيروس كورونا وباءً عالمياً في مارس ٢٠٢٠.
- (3) طالب دراسات عليا أو جامعية.
- (4) عمرك ٢٠ سنة فما فوق.

أين ستتم هذه الدراسة؟

سيتم إجراء هذه الدراسة في الوقت والمكان الذي تختاره. سيقوم الباحث بإجراء المقابلات من مكتبه المنزلي، وننصحك بالتواجد في مكان خاص وأمن أثناء المقابلات لتعزيز السرية وتقليل عوامل التشويش.

ماذا على ان افعل؟

يُطلب منك المشاركة في مقابلة سيتم إجراؤها عبر الإنترنت من خلال منصات مثل Zoom أو Google Hangouts أو Microsoft Teams أو WhatsApp، حسب تفضيلاتك. سيستخدم الباحث قائمة شبيهة منظمة من الأسئلة المتعلقة بموضوع البحث المراد استكشافه. سيكون لديك خيار المشاركة باللغة التي تشعر بالراحة في استخدامها (الإنجليزية أو العربية). سيتم تسجيل إجاباتك ونسخها لاحقاً للتحليل. ستتطلب المشاركة في هذه الدراسة أيضاً مراجعة نص المقابلة من قبلك للدفعة. سيتم تدمير جميع التسجيلات والمواد التي تم جمعها من المقابلات بعد كتابة النص.

كم من الوقت ساقضي في الدراسة؟

ستستغرق المقابلة حوالي ٧٠-٩٠ دقيقة. قد تستغرق مراجعة نص المقابلة من قبل الباحث ما يصل إلى ساعتين، وسوف تتلقى نسخة من النص في غضون أسبوع من مقابلتك. أمل أن تتمكن من إعادة إرساله مع تعليقاتك خلال ٣ أسابيع من استلامه. سيكون إجمالي وقت مشاركتك في هذه الدراسة ما يقارب ثلاث ساعات ونصف خلال أربعة أسابيع.

هل هناك أي مخاطر بالنسبة لي؟

بالنسبة لهذه الدراسة، تشمل المخاطر المحتملة الأسئلة التي تجعلك تشعر بعدم الارتياح أو التي لا ترغب في الإجابة عليها. للمساعدة في الحماية من هذه المخاطر، لك الحرية في عدم الإجابة على أي أسئلة. ستتاح لك أيضًا الفرصة لمراجعة إجاباتك للتأكد من أنك مرتاح للنص. الخطر المحتمل الثاني هو أن يتمكن شخص آخر من اكتشاف هويتك. سيتم وضع ضمانات لتقليل هذه المخاطر عن طريق الحفاظ على سرية سجلاتك البحثية قدر الإمكان. سيتم تدمير جميع التسجيلات والمواد التي تم جمعها من المقابلات بعد كتابة النص. سيتم تدمير النصوص المجهولة بعد خمس سنوات من نشر البحث. عندما يتم نشر نتائج هذا البحث أو تقديمها في المؤتمرات، لن يتم تضمين أي معلومات تحدد هويتك الشخصية.

هل هناك أي فوائد بالنسبة لي؟

على الرغم من أنه قد لا تكون هناك فوائد مباشرة لك، إلا أن نتائج هذه الدراسة قد تفيد الآخرين في المستقبل.

هل سأحصل على أي شيء مقابل المشاركة؟

لن تتلقى أي شيء مقابل المشاركة في هذه الدراسة.

من يمكنه رؤية معلوماتي؟

قد تتم مشاركة سجلاتك البحثية ومراجعتها من قبل المجموعات التالية:

- ☐ ممثلو مجلس المراجعة المؤسسية بجامعة أوكแลนด์ و/أو غيرهم من موظفي الامتثال التنظيمي، الذين تتمثل مهمتهم في حماية الأشخاص المشاركين في الدراسات البحثية.
 - ☐ السلطات التنظيمية التي تشرف على الأبحاث (مكتب حماية البحوث البشرية، أو الهيئات التنظيمية الفيدرالية، الحكومية، أو الدولية الأخرى).
- يجوز استخدام البيانات غير محددة الهوية أو توزيعها على باحث آخر لاستخدامها في الأبحاث المستقبلية دون الحصول على موافقة مسبقة إضافية منك.

ماذا لو أردت التوقف عن المشاركة في هذه الدراسة؟

إذا كنت ترغب في التوقف عن المشاركة في هذه الدراسة، عليك الاتصال بالباحث.

بمن أتصل إذا كانت لدي أسئلة حول هذه الدراسة؟

سارة الداعج.

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للأسئلة المتعلقة بحقوقك كمشارك في بحث موضوعي على الإنسان، يمكنك الاتصال بمجلس المراجعة المؤسسية بجامعة أوكแลนด์، 248-370-4898.

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol and Questions

Background and Demographic questions:

Gender?

Age?

Marital Status?

Degree?

Enrollment Year?

Research Questions:

Research Question 1. What challenges did Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States experience at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2. What type of support or services did the students receive from their institutions or the government?

Research Question 3. How did the students cope and adjust as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions as They Relate to Each Research Question:

Research Question 1.

1. Please describe your initial experiences as an international student in the United States when the COVID-19 pandemic began?
2. How did the presence of COVID-19 impact your overall experience as an international student in terms of academics, social interactions, and daily life?
3. What specific challenges did you face in adapting to the sudden changes in academic and social life due to the pandemic?
4. Please describe any challenges or adjustments you had to make in your studies due to the pandemic, and how did these affect your sense of belonging in the academic community?
5. Please share any specific moments or experiences that stand out to you as defining aspects of your journey as an international student during the first wave of COVID-19 in the United States?

Research Question 2.

6. What support systems, if any, did you find helpful in navigating the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic?
7. Were there any government-level initiatives or support measures that you, as a Saudi student in the U.S., were aware of or benefited from during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic? If so, please describe it.
8. How effective were the communication channels between the university and international students regarding updates, changes, and available support during the early stages of the pandemic?
9. Did your institution offer any specific resources or assistance for international students dealing with challenges related to the pandemic?

10. Were there any specific measures in place to address the unique needs of international students, considering the cultural and linguistic differences they may face during the pandemic? If so, please elaborate.

11. What were your thoughts and emotions regarding the measures taken by the university or authorities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and how did these measures influence your experience?

12. How did your institutions address concerns related to academic adjustments, visa regulations, and potential travel restrictions for international Saudi students?

13. How did the support or services provided by the institutions or government contribute to your overall experience as a Saudi student in the U.S. during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic?

14. Looking back, do you have any recommendations or suggestions for improvements in the support systems for international Saudi students during similar crises in the future?

Research Question 3.

15. Please share your personal experiences and strategies that helped you overcome and cope with the challenges posed by the prolonged duration of the COVID-19 pandemic as a Saudi international student in the U.S.?

16. How did your daily routines and study habits evolve over time to adapt to the ongoing uncertainties and changes brought about by the pandemic?

17. Were there any specific support networks, either within the Saudi student community or beyond, that played a significant role in helping you cope with the extended effects of the pandemic? Can you please elaborate on that?

18. What particular tools, strategies, or resources did you find helpful in maintaining academic engagement and connection with peers during the prolonged pandemic period?

19. Looking back, what lessons or insights did you gain from your experiences in coping and adjusting to the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as a Saudi international student in the U.S.?

General Probes: At various times during the interviews, the following probes will be used when deemed appropriate and necessary to elicit a more detailed and rich description of the participants' experiences:

1. Tell me more about that experience.
2. What was it like for you to experience that?
3. Explain how that impacted you.
4. What happened exactly?
5. Can you give me an example of that?
6. Can you say more about that?
7. What does that mean for you?
8. Anything else you would like to add?
9. How did that affect you?

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