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International Saudi Arabia Students' Level of Preparedness: Identifying Factors and Maximizing Study Abroad Experience Using a Mixed-Methods Approach

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ABSTRACT

Given that students' level of preparedness for study abroad is malleable, this study aimed to assess Saudi students' level of preparedness academically and socioculturally to enhance their overseas experiences and success in higher education. Using a mixed methods research design consisting of survey data, semistructured interviews, and case studies with undergraduate and graduate students in a predeparture Saudi context and those enrolled in U.S. programs, the study provides empirical data to understand students' intent to study abroad, local institutions' contributions to preparation, and challenges encountered. Findings across datasets consistently corroborated that Saudi students are highly motivated, while articulating the need for substantive supports toward a better understanding of U.S. higher education, academic expectations, and sociocultural practices. Participants articulated the need for advanced English skills, especially academic literacies (academic writing and reading strategies) to cope with demanding workloads in graduate programs. The study discusses curricular implications for higher education in binational contexts.

Keywords: academic literacy, cross-cultural understanding, higher education, international students, Saudi students, socialization, study abroad

INTRODUCTION

The present study offers an empirical and multilayered examination of Saudi students' study abroad experiences by employing a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study analyzed students' intention to study abroad, their actual overseas lived experiences, and how they negotiate needs to pursue academic goals within institutions of higher education. We pay special attention to their preparation before and while in attendance. Based on the findings, we draw out implications for improving international students' academic and social success in the context of higher education.

Why Saudi Students?

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2018), there were 1,094,792 international students at U.S. higher education institutions in the academic year 2017–2018, an increase of 1.5% over the previous year. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) ranks fourth behind China, India, and South Korea as a sending nation, the only Middle Eastern country in the top 10 (IIE, 2018). The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), established by the Saudi government in 2005 to promote "a cultural exchange with the intention of being mutually beneficial for both Saudi Arabia and the host country" (Taylor & Albasri, 2014, p. 111), has played an integral role. The United States has been the leading host nation (Denman & Hilal, 2011).

Researchers know relatively little about Saudi students' reasons for entering U.S. institutions (Yakaboski et al., 2017). Few studies have looked at Saudi students' academic and social practices in the United States (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Sandekian et al., 2015; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Research has focused largely on East Asian students (Kim, 2006; J. Q. Li et al., 2013; Ra & Trusty, 2017). There is little scientific evidence to develop or adjust curricula for Saudi students' needs. An investigation of their experiences is needed to inform educators, administrators, and policymakers in both KSA and the United States, paying close attention to the factors affecting Saudi students' intentions and experiences in the U.S. higher institutions.

Theoretical Grounding

Over the past several decades, there has been increasing interest in issues surrounding international education, in particular in factors influencing the decision to study abroad and in methods of preparing students for academic and cross-cultural success in the host environment. Many scholars (e.g., Lam et al., 2011; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011) frame students' decision to study abroad through the lens of the push–pull model that represents a two-way relationship between push and pull factors that determine students' motivation for international academic mobility. More

specifically, push factors in the students' home country (e.g., economic and political status) drive students' willingness to study abroad, while pull factors from their host country (e.g., tuition, school rankings, and living expenses) primarily influence the choice of desirable institutions (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Despite the importance of the push–pull model that explained some students' decision making, there is a need to generate empirical knowledge of students' academic and social experiences as well as to theorize those experiences (cf. Perna et al., 2015). Furthermore, as Kim (2011) noted, the push–pull model pays little attention to the "geopolitics of knowledge-degree production and consumption" (p. 111) among the students; academic mobility develops "the symbolic and cultural resources to demarcate global elites from others" (p. 121). Also, much remains unknown about how students filter their decisions through their personal qualities and needs, including their personal drive to study (Li & Bray, 2007; Yakaboski et al., 2017). In this regard, Yakaboski et al. (2017) argued that the push–pull model is inadequate to explain "more nuanced or culturally specific reasons why individuals participate in study abroad and where they end up studying" (p. 95). Given that extensive research is needed to build a sound theoretical grounding for students' outbound and upward mobility through study abroad, the examination of Saudi students' international mobility in the present study incorporates elements of Perna's (2006) model of college choice that unites "aspects of economic and sociological approaches" (p. 101).

Emphasizing the necessity of students' pursuit of higher education, Perna (2006) theorized students' college choice within a multilayered framework that consists of (a) habitus, (b) school and community context, (c) higher education context, and (d) social, economic, and policy context. Each layer affecting students' higher education opportunities is systematically driven from an individual level (e.g., parental, social and cultural capital) to a societal level (e.g., features of public policy). Thus, this model stresses that students' decision-making process of college choice is not confined to one specific tier; rather, it is highly interdependent, specifically when key factors unfold in each layer and operate closely with each other (see also Perna & Thomas, 2008).

While Perna's (2006) model of college choice has been used in explaining the U.S. context, we believe that this conceptual framework lends itself to the examination of students' predisposition to study abroad due to its attention to the significance of "the situated context of the student as well as the unique characteristics of a higher education environment" (Salisbury et al., 2011, p. 125). Pursuing this line of inquiry, Salisbury and others (e.g., Salisbury et al., 2011; Salisbury et al., 2009) have sought to provide empirical evidence pertaining to issues of students' intent to study abroad, which generate a more comprehensive knowledge of "a combination of pre-college socio-economic status and the social and cultural capital accumulated before entering and during college" (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 122). Furthermore, in validating Perna's (2006) model, Salisbury et al. (2009) focused on a large survey data set from the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education to study students' intent to study abroad. Findings confirmed that students require access to four types of capital—financial, human, social, and cultural—in order to pursue academic and social mobility through overseas learning. Gender also plays a significant role, as

females are more likely to study abroad than males (for in-depth analyses of gender differences, see Salisbury et al., 2010). A recent study by Thirolf (2014) examined male students' perceptions of study abroad involvement by taking up *habitus* that pertains to the first tier of Perna's (2006) model. Thirolf (2014) integrated gender socialization theory into Perna's (2006) model to better understand "subjective, personal, and often unobservable ways in which individuals make decisions" (pp. 247–248). According to Thirolf's (2014) study, for male students, study abroad experience, in particular, one that is gained from a short-term intercultural program, is not considered an economically efficient activity. That finding suggested that gendered ideologies play a role in deterring male students from short-term study abroad programs. Such a consideration impacts how study abroad programs should be designed, emphasizing "the tangible and intangible benefits of participating, especially noting the concrete outcomes" (Thirolf, 2014, p. 256).

Most studies using Perna's model (2006) focus on economic questions in examining students' intent to participate in study abroad programs. Thirolf's (2014) study has been one of the few new departures. There is lack of research that pays attention to students' own goals and experiences to inform institutional efforts to develop programs and curricula. To fill this gap, the present study draws on Perna's (2006) conceptual model to examine the forces that affect Saudi students' intention to study abroad as articulated in their home context, together with Saudi students' lived experiences of studying abroad in the United States. Our study, therefore, offers an emic perspective and has the potential to inform institutions on how to better tailor programs and curricula to meet the demands and aspirations of Saudi students.

Students' Study Abroad Experience

Scholarly attention has begun to shift to students' social and academic experiences, engagement, and inclusion in the host country. Much of that work (e.g., Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Kuo, 2011; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007) has argued that international students' experience has mainly been characterized by a variety of factors and discourses, especially cultural adaptation, language barriers, and educational demands.

Reviews of international students' cultural adaptation have found that international students, particularly Asians, have difficulty in fully integrating into their host culture and lifestyle (Ra & Trusty, 2017; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Yan and Berliner (2011) showed the challenge for Chinese students in keeping up with the dominant culture academically and socially in the United States due to "both the unexpected nature of the difficulties and their inability to effectively deal with those difficulties" (p. 182). The challenges among Asian students in cultural adaptation may be derived from the different sociocultural orientations, norms, and ideologies between their home and host contexts (see also Brutt-Griffler & Kim, 2018a; Yeh & Inose, 2003). During their study abroad, the demotivating conditions of cultural adaptation may lead to negative indicators of psychological well-being, such as depression, homesickness, discrimination, and social disconnectedness (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Jung et al., 2007; Mori, 2000).

Some research has stressed the need for changes in host communities' perceptions of international students, particularly for students from the Middle East (Giroir, 2014; Rich & Troudi, 2006; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2018). Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013), studying Muslim students in American graduate programs, found that obstacles to societal integration are often caused by broader sociopolitical issues, including religion, or a constellation of biased beliefs about students sharing a cultural background. Rich and Troudi (2006) found that Saudi students placed themselves in "a marginalized and inferiorized position on account of their culture, colour, ethnicity, and nationality" (p. 623). Saudi students' sense of belonging in host contexts may present "limited identity options" (Giroir, 2014, p. 52).

International students' academic skills and confidence are critical, determining their socialization into academic programs and motivation to learn more about the culture and environment (Morita, 2004; Sasaki, 2011; Yang & Kim, 2011). Language proficiency constitutes one of the main hindrances to academic engagement of students from countries where English is not a first or second language (Andrade, 2006). Unsatisfactory English language proficiency carries with it an increased burden of stress and anxiety and is highly correlated with a low sense of integration into U.S. academic life (Cheng et al., 2004; Kim, 2006; Kuo, 2011).

Other crucial factors include exposure to a new academic culture. Sandekian et al. (2015) considered the challenges facing female KASP-funded Saudi students pursuing doctorates in the United States to include language barriers, new curricula and structures, as well as gender roles. Though highly motivated "for personal fulfillment, possible future employment, and as a means to give back to their communities and government" (Sandekian et al., 2015, p. 367), the subjects' narratives showed that their socially constructed reality was shifted with their effort to assimilate to new academic norms and culture. Some Saudi female students were more frustrated by the attempt to build a good relationship with Saudi male peers than with American males. They perceived the Saudi men as reluctant to accept new sociocultural values, specifically gender roles that are noticeably different from their native culture. Female Saudi students' participation was in some cases curtailed by the cultural prejudices of their male counterparts, highlighting the implications of how educators can understand and support social equity among international students in developing meaningful learning experiences.

Much of the existing research provides fragmentary evidence rather than encapsulating the entire process from the student's intention to study abroad to its close relation to their actual experience, a dynamic process constantly negotiated through practices and perceptions in the new settings. This process is not limited to a single factor and should be examined at a group and an individual level, incorporating a multilayered level of analysis. Using a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), we aim to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Saudi international students by investigating intent, level of preparedness, and academic and social experiences. Our study addresses the practical concerns of higher education necessary to maximize Saudi students' study abroad learning.

METHOD

Many researchers contend that a mixed-methods approach is beneficial to gain "*a better understanding* of the phenomena being studied" (Greene, 2007, p. 98, emphasis in original). It is indispensable to "address more complicated research questions and collect a richer and stronger array of evidence than can be accomplished by any single method alone" (Yin, 2018, p. 63). A mixed-methods approach postulates that both research methods can be complementary and offer a more comprehensive understanding of a research agenda (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Also, multiple and triangulated data sources play a crucial role in increasing and ensuring validity (Patton, 2015).

Research Design

This study purposely employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In doing so, the first research instrument, a survey completed by 34 Saudi students, was used to present "a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of the population" (Creswell, 2014, p. 155). For this purpose, we developed a survey containing 14 closed-ended and two open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions measured the degree to which the subjects perceived different aspects of study abroad, defined as "students' perceptions of study abroad." These items were considered to be possible factors in assessing students' perceived value in pursuing study abroad. The items used a Likert-type scale with five possible responses to each of the items, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). For statistical analysis, all of the positively stated items were reverse-coded to keep a consistent pattern. For all variables, accordingly, 1 refers to the most negative response, while 5 refers to the most positive response. We used IBM SPSS statistics software to analyze all statistical analyses. We analyzed all responses to open-ended questions using an open-coding process via ATLAS.ti (https://atlasti.com), a high-quality computer-assisted qualitative analysis software program that allows the researcher to facilitate thematic coding of the data objectively. In essence, using ATLAS.ti was particularly effective and efficient in handling data in this collaborative research project that "involved multiple analysts coding the same data set and then integrating their coding" (Woods et al., 2016, p. 608). We were able to analyze a large qualitative data set in an objective manner to avoid researcher-generated bias. Along with the coding procedure, the open-ended responses, which are an important source of qualitative data in the present study, were calculated in order to "establish the frequency of different kinds of reasons or explanations" (Yin, 2011, p. 198) in clarifying and supporting the previous closed-ended questions.

In accordance with our sequential mixed-methods design, we subsequently conducted semistructured group interviews and case studies. Such qualitative inquiry plays a significant role in "exploring a problem and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 16). The nature and scope of the study, quality of data, as well as the emic perspectives of the participants provided the prime motivation to adopt the qualitative research design (cf. Morse,

2000). The study adopted the "localist" approach of face-to-face interviews with the respondents (Alvesson, 2003). Semistructured interviews were conducted with 17 Saudi students in the KSA's urban university to gain an understanding of the reasons for their study abroad and any linkages to their academic and social mobility that was not fully uncovered in the quantitative data. We analyzed data collected from semistructured interviews thematically in accordance with grounded theory, which as qualitative researchers point out "successively moves from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding from these data" (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347; see also Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this way, we were able to first seek and identify the themes and patterns emerging from the semistructured interviews that were aligned with the theoretical notions in the study. Based on the underlying themes and patterns, we developed interview protocols for a case study inquiry with two PhD participants in a study abroad context in the United States, since a case study provides "a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in-depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2018, p. 15). It is consistent with one of our goals in the study, to better understand Saudi students' lived experiences of studying abroad. We expected that the emergent themes from the semistructured interviews would provide a well-grounded, holistic framework for the case studies, and ultimately a more comprehensive understanding of Saudi international students.

QUANTITATIVE DATA RESULTS

The survey was sent electronically in December 2017 to Saudi students already in a study abroad context or preparing for one. We administered the survey to a total of 150 students. We sent an electronic copy/survey to students preparing to study abroad at one KSA research university. The initial rate of response was 10%. Subsequently, to gain the students' insight in the context of study abroad, we sent the survey via Twitter accounts that are associated with Saudi international students studying at research universities in the United States. The rate of response increased after we sent the survey to the Twitter accounts. We received 14 more responses totaling 34 responses, representing 22.63% of the population. The rate of response, albeit low, is consistent with other studies using surveys in the Middle East (cf. Joshi et al., 2008). We asked students to report whether they studied abroad, as we believe that the firsthand experience would allow them to better report on the overseas challenges and whether they were prepared to handle them. We assessed the degree of preparedness using a 5-point Likert scale. This information has been added to the narrative.

Out of the total of 34 students (11 females; 23 males) there were eight students (23.5%) at the undergraduate level and 26 students (76.5%) at the graduate level. The participants represent heterogeneous academic majors: We had 12 students (35.3%) in education; seven students (20.6%) in engineering and applied science; six students (17.7%) in management, accounting, and finance; three students (8.8%) in medicine and biomedical science; three students (8.8%) in arts and sciences; one student (2.9%) in law; and two students (5.9%) who did not indicate a field of study or academic major. Most participants ($n = 32$, 94.1%) considered Arabic to be their first language, while two students (5.9%) indicated English as their first language. Of the participants, 20 (58.8%) had previously lived in or visited English-speaking countries

(the United States or the United Kingdom), while 14 students (41.2%) had never lived or studied abroad. Students also self-rated their foreign language proficiency on a 5-point scale: *fluent* (14.7%), *proficient* (20.6%), *advanced* (44.1%), *intermediate* (17.7%), and *not proficient* (2.9%).

The Identification of Factors and the Validity of the Survey

We carried out exploratory factor analysis using the principal component method with varimax rotation for the first focus of interest. It allowed us to determine the construct validity of the research instrument, which queries students' perceptions of study abroad, by identifying the underlying scales among the variables based on factor loadings. We found that the factor analysis yielded four well-defined factors without eliminating any survey items, as presented in Table 1. The first factor, which consists of four items, is categorized as "students' intention to study abroad" and operationalized with Items 1–4. The second factor refers to "students' perceptions of challenges of study abroad" and is operationalized by Items 5a–5e. The third factor represents "degree of preparation for study abroad" and is operationalized by Items 8 and 9. The fourth factor comprises three items and is labeled "areas for development" (Items 6, 7, and 10). Each factor loading score, which accounts for how strongly an item is related to the scale, was greater than .40. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was computed to evaluate the internal reliability of each factor. For all scales, Cronbach's alphas were greater than .70, indicating strong internal consistency as follows: α = .78, α = .82, α = .73, and α = .84, respectively. The results of exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach test for reliability are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: The Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis and Cronbach Test

Factors and questionnaire items	Factor loading
Factor 1: Students' intention to study abroad (α = .78)	
1. I am interested in studying abroad. (Interest in SA)	.76
2. I believe that studying abroad will be of significant benefit to me. (Significant benefits)	.90
3. I believe that studying abroad will be of particular benefit to my language abilities. (Beneficial to language development)	.76
4. I believe that studying abroad will be of particular benefit to my employment prospects. (Beneficial to employment)	.75
Factor 2: Students' perceptions of challenges of study abroad (α = .82)	
5a. I am very concerned about the following challenge I will face in my study abroad program: Language. (Perceived challenges in language)	.46
5b. I am very concerned about the following challenge I will face in my study abroad program: Culture. (Perceived challenges in culture)	.55

Factors and questionnaire items	Factor loading
5c. I am very concerned about the following challenge I will face in my study abroad program: Academic expectations. (Perceived challenges in academic expectations)	.69
5d. I am very concerned about the following challenge I will face in my study abroad program: Family. (Perceived challenges in family)	.90
5e. I am very concerned about the following challenge I will face in my study abroad program: Social. (Perceived challenges in social)	.68
Factor 3: Degree of preparation for study abroad (α = .73)	
8. I have received sufficient preparation for a study abroad program at my university. (Sufficient preparation at my university)	.78
9. I feel well prepared to face the challenges of studying abroad. (Well-prepared to face challenges)	.93
Factor 4: Areas for development (α = .84)	
6. In order to be better prepared for studying abroad, I would like the opportunity to improve my language skills. (Improve my language skills)	.85
7. In order to be better prepared for studying abroad, I would like the opportunity to learn more about the academic expectations for succeeding in foreign universities. (Learn about academic expectations)	.84
10. In order to succeed in a study abroad program, I believe that I need to participate in a study abroad orientation program. (Participate in a SA orientation program)	.79

Note. SA = study abroad.

Differences Between Undergraduate Versus Graduate Levels and Between Genders: The Results of Mann-Whitney *U* Tests

To observe the overall trends of the data, we calculated descriptive statistics for all variables by academic level and gender, separately. Table 2 displays that the examination of undergraduate and graduate students' data revealed that, on average, both groups' intention to study abroad is high. Compared with graduate students, undergraduates were more likely to worry about challenges that they may encounter during the period of their study abroad, even though they were more likely to feel that they were prepared for the challenges before leaving their home country. The findings allowed us to conduct in-depth analysis because the mean differences of all variables on students' perceptions of challenges of study abroad seem to be considerable. Also, as compared with their graduate counterparts, on average, undergraduates were more

likely to perceive the importance of the areas for development for a successful study abroad, such as improving language skills and learning about academic expectations.

Our analysis uncovered a shared high motivation to study abroad among both females and males. While comparing their mean scores, however, males were more likely to worry about the challenges they might encounter than their female counterparts. Females were more likely to perceive an insufficiency of preparation in their home institutions. Given that the mean difference of "sufficient preparation at my university" between females and males appears to be quite considerable, we are convinced that in-depth examination is needed. On average, males were more likely to perceive the importance of the areas for development for a successful study abroad when compared to females.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for All Variables by Academic Level and Gender

	Academic level				Gender			
	Undergrad (n = 8)		Grad (n = 26)		Female (n = 11)		Male (n = 23)	
Items	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Students' intention to study abroad								
Interest in SA	4.50	0.76	4.62	0.57	4.55	0.69	4.61	0.58
Significant benefits	4.75	0.46	4.62	0.57	4.73	0.65	4.61	0.50
Beneficial to language development	5.00	0.00	4.69	0.47	4.73	0.47	4.78	0.42
Beneficial to employment	4.75	0.46	4.50	0.81	4.36	1.03	4.65	0.57
Students' perceptions of challenges of study abroad								
Perceived challenges in language	1.75	0.89	2.31	1.23	2.73	1.19	1.91	1.08
Perceived challenges in culture	1.50	0.54	2.42	0.95	2.36	1.03	2.13	0.92
Perceived challenges in academic expectations	1.38	0.52	2.00	0.98	2.00	1.00	1.78	0.90
Perceived challenges in family	1.50	0.76	2.12	0.82	2.09	1.04	1.91	0.73
Perceived challenges in social	1.50	0.54	2.23	1.11	2.27	1.10	1.96	1.02
Degree of preparation for study abroad								
Sufficient preparation at my university	3.25	1.49	3.35	1.32	2.64	1.12	3.65	1.34
Well-prepared to face challenges	4.25	0.71	3.88	0.99	3.82	1.08	4.04	0.88

	Academic level				Gender			
	Undergrad (n = 8)		Grad (n = 26)		Female (n = 11)		Male (n = 23)	
Items	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Areas for development								
Improve my language skills	4.63	0.74	4.19	1.30	3.91	1.38	4.48	1.08
Learn about academic expectations	4.63	0.74	4.23	1.21	4.18	1.25	4.39	1.08
Participate in a SA orientation program	4.38	0.74	3.92	1.09	3.91	0.94	4.09	1.08

In order to find any statistical significance between students' academic level and between genders, we carried out data analysis using nonparametric tests due to the nonnormally distributed data sets, which we attribute to the small sample of data. We selected Mann-Whitney *U* tests as nonparametric equivalents to independent samples *t* tests to examine group differences in the subjects' perceptions. We used a series of Mann-Whitney *U* tests to compare the score distributions of students' perceptions of study abroad between (a) academic level (undergraduate or graduate), (b) previous study abroad experience (yes or no), and (c) gender (female or male). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

The results of Mann-Whitney *U* tests showed that, in terms of students' academic level, there was a significant difference between the groups. Undergraduates' perception of cultural challenges was greater in comparison with graduate students in the context of study abroad ($U = 44$, $p = .013$), suggesting that undergraduates are more likely to be concerned about the cultural challenges they may face. Further analysis revealed gender differences in terms of how students perceive their university preparation for study abroad. Females report a lower level of satisfactory preparation ($U = 72.5$, $p = .046$). Other statistically significant differences did not exist between females and males. The following two tables summarize the Mann-Whitney *U* analyses that show significant differences between undergraduate and graduate students (Table 3) and between females and males (Table 4).

Table 3: The Result of Mann-Whitney *U* Test for "Perceived Challenges in Culture" Between Undergraduate (n = 8) and Graduate (n = 26) Students

Mann-Whitney *U*	*Z*	Asymp. Sig.	Exact Sig.
44.00	−2.579	.010	.013[a]

[a] Not corrected for ties

Table 4. The Result of Mann-Whitney *U* Test for "Sufficient Preparation at My University" Between Female (n = 11) and Male (n = 23) Students

Mann-Whitney *U*	*Z*	Asymp. Sig.	Exact Sig.
72.50	−2.053	.040	.046[a]

[a] Not corrected for ties

QUALITATIVE DATA RESULTS

Along with the closed-ended questions, we also asked participants to respond to two open-ended survey questions to obtain more detailed evidence of their needs. The data set consisted of a higher number of response items than the total number of participants. A few students did not respond to the open-ended questions and a few of the answers were unclear or not legible due to spelling errors, and could not be included in the analysis.

Table 5 displays the analysis that yielded three significant and well-defined themes, which highlight how students understand the higher education context and specifically how they perceive their needs abroad. First, the majority reported the need to understand the characteristics of the higher education system and academic expectations abroad (procedures for applying to schools, making appropriate college and program choices, and taking advantage of academic guidance that might be specific to another country). Second, they stressed the need to understand the sociocultural context. Third, they discussed their need for adequate English proficiency for their academic level, as summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: A Summary of Saudi Students' Needs for Successful Study Abroad Experience

Domains	*N*	%
Understanding higher education context and expectations	43	100
Academic life (procedures for applying to schools, how to choose the school and program, academic guidance, understanding educational system, time management)	16	37
Academic skills (academic knowledge [subject matter], different teaching and learning experience, critical thinking, [academic] writing, research, data analysis, technology skills)	27	63
Understanding social/cultural context	18	100
Culture or social	5	28
Learning social skills [or learning socialization, cultural adaptation], learning other [diverse] cultures)	11	61
Country's role and regulations	2	11
Adequate English language skills	14	100
Language	6	43
English skills improvement (or English language proficiency, proficiency in a language, learning language, language skills)	7	50
Language school	1	7

As shown in Table 5, the first theme received the highest number of responses. It led us to differentiate students' responses into two distinct dimensions that higher

education demands from students: their "social capital competences" and strictly "academic competences." Students expressed how choosing and adapting to the college academic environment properly and quickly is necessary but challenging. They stated that knowing "procedures for applying to schools," "how to choose the school and program," "academic guidance" and the like (n = 16, 37%) can be challenging. As one of the respondents suggested, "Proper lengthy orientation and guid[ance] from the American university that I am attending the internship of the logistics, expectation, registrations, deadline, library, how to get support" and "clear academic expectations in terms of reading and writing since USA teaching is student-centered rather than teacher-centered" would be valuable. A substantive number of the respondents pointed to the need for academic skills (n = 27, 63%): "academic knowledge (subject matter)," "critical thinking, (academic) writing," "research, data analysis," and being "psychologically prepared for the high academic pressure." Some respondents noted that "even if you are fluent in the language, the academic pressure, and the expectations are high."

A second major theme pertains to their need to better understand the social/cultural rules they will encounter. A majority stated that "learning social skills" and similar expressions such as "learning how to socialize," "cultural adaptation," and "learning other (diverse) cultures" (n = 11, 61%) is very important. In some cases, social/cultural awareness was aligned with students' concerns relating to pursuing their personal life. A respondent asserted,

> We need guidance before going to the new country to prepare ourselves. The Saudi clubs must be more active with new students. The SACM (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission) should provide contact with new students when they arrive in their cities until they get an apartment [and] start studying.

Most importantly, keeping up with the "country's rules and regulations" was said to be crucial.

With respect to the third category, a majority felt that being equipped with satisfactory English language proficiency is essential. Some categorized it as "language" needs (n = 6, 43%), while others described it in terms of "English skills improvement," "English language proficiency," "proficiency in a language," and "learning English" (n = 7, 50%).

Semistructured Group Interviews: Saudi Students' Study Abroad Experience

As a follow up to the quantitative results of the survey and to gain deeper understanding of Saudi students' study abroad preparation in the KSA institutional context, we selected 17 students for a semistructured interview. We used stratified nonrandom sampling methods (Gibbs, 2008) with a purposive selection of interviewees (Creswell, 2013) to select the sample. Among the 34 students, we invited 17 for an interview session from January to April 2018 at a Saudi research university located in a major urban city. The semistructured interviews were held at the university's spacious research center at a time convenient for the students. The selection of the sample size is supported by Creswell (2013), who suggested that the number of respondents in an interview-based qualitative study generally ranges from

10 to 40. As a quality safeguard, they were informed of the nature and purpose of the research and guaranteed anonymity. Each interview lasted from 40 to 50 minutes.

We designed the main protocols for the semistructured interviews to elicit the following: students' academic background, intention to study abroad, perceived challenges to studying abroad, and the degree of study abroad preparation in KSA. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently analyzed and coded for major themes and subthemes using qualitative software (see Table 6).

Table 6: Qualitative Data from Semistructured Interviews

Major themes	Subthemes
Intention to pursue a study abroad	Individual factors • Desire to learn; enhancement of social and cultural capital Societal factors • Contribution to family, community, nation
Sociocultural/academic challenges	Linguistic challenges • Insufficient English proficiency Academic challenges • Course difficulty; knowledge gap; encounters with new teaching/learning approaches; intercultural engagement in class Sociocultural extra-curricular challenges • Finding a suitable place to live; missing family; financial uncertainty
Agency in preparing for study abroad	Gaining information • Seeking advice from mentor and students who are in the target context (Saudi student association; friends who experienced study abroad) • Online search • Seeking advice from family members Personal efforts • Investment in improving language skills (English) • Improving academic skills (content knowledge, academic writing) • Improving sociocultural skills (interpersonal knowledge, social norms and regulations)

Interview data corroborated the high level of intention to study abroad among Saudi students found in the quantitative findings. Students' decision to go abroad was linked to their own individual aspirations as well as those of advancing their communities and society. A doctoral student illustrated the sentiments of many in wanting "better education and better opportunities for his future"; others stated that "having the degree from another country…will open a new horizon when [I] come

back to my country." Many students link their intention to study abroad to "family support" and some to religious conviction.

Subjects also shared a collective understanding of the sociocultural and academic challenges of studying abroad. One student captured this intricate relation underscoring the difficulty of having to "adapt to [a] new country and culture, and to adapt to different approaches to teaching and learning and to being away from home." Most felt under pressure to succeed, especially through gaining adequate language proficiency enabling them to adapt and respond to new sociocultural environments and academic settings. Insufficient knowledge and skills in English, including accent or inappropriate expressions, produces anxiety. Doctoral students, who comprised the majority, expressed the desire to "fit in the American classrooms" and understand the "different educational system" to succeed on exams and projects. Their concern seemed to stem from the academic experiences they had so far in public institutions. Few had an opportunity to attend seminars or conferences offered by their universities. Most of the students voiced their reliance on informal contact with friends and students who had previously studied abroad, for example, the Saudi club or Saudi student association. They noted, "I have asked classmates and friends about the university and some courses and asked for their advice. I have also asked friends from my culture." They additionally stressed that searching online provided a useful pathway for them to obtain relevant information. A female student stated, "Reading through online forums and threads specific to the city, the university I am applying to." They have striven to create opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills on their own. Like many, a law student shows agency in self-preparation: "I spent a lot of time reading about my study and improving my language." A doctoral student who studied linguistics invested her time in "reading English novels and listening to English news such as CNN and BBC" to get to know the target context.

Case Studies: Amira and Laila's Study Abroad Experience

In order to support a deeper interpretation of the results, especially of Saudi students' study abroad experience, our research design further included case studies of two female doctoral students who provided first-person narratives in the study abroad context in the United States. We selected Amira and Laila (pseudonyms) using a purposeful sampling technique to provide "*information-rich cases* for in-depth study" (Patton, 2015, p. 264, emphasis in original). The two students were enrolled in doctoral programs at a large urban Research 1 university in the northeast in the United States. Each individual interview was held at the student's convenience with respect to time and place. The students chose the university's research lab that provided a secure space for being interviewed. They were selected as well positioned to illustrate Saudi student perceptions and lived experience academically and culturally in a study abroad. They share certain commonalities:

- exposure to English in a native English-speaking nation (the United States and the United Kingdom) at a very early age;
- pursuit of MA and PhD studies in the same university located in the United States;

- KASP-funded doctoral studies;
- highly academically motivated; and
- academically successful in their U.S. doctoral programs.

Prior to carrying out these case studies, we sent an invitation email to Amira and Laila separately in order to ask if they were willing to take part in an individual interview. With the two students' consent, each approximately 90-minute interview was audio-recorded while detailed notes were taken. During the two interviews, the interviewer, who has a deep commitment to social equity and justice in education, was positioned as a researcher as well as an educator in order to discern how the two students have tried to (re)define a combination of factors experienced in KSA in order to fit into new academic and social circumstances. In this sense, we asked the participants to share their insights regarding their study abroad choice, preparation, and their reflections on their current experience as doctoral students. We sum up the themes from the interview in Table 7, and subsequently, we provide a full discussion of the cases.

Table 7: Qualitative Data from Case Studies: Amira and Laila

Themes	Explanatory Reasons
Intention to pursue a study abroad	High desire and commitment to higher education in the United States (pursuit of a PhD degree) • Sufficient support from family (financially and morally) • High confidence in English language use (no language barrier) • High awareness of new social trends and needs
Sociocultural/academic challenges	Sociocultural challenges • Low sense of belonging in U.S. social communities (settlement) • Perceived gap between two cultures (cross-cultural understanding) Academic challenges • High anxiety regarding academic demands and expectations • Low ability to adapt to different culture and climate in the U.S. higher education
Agency in preparing for study abroad	Development of their own strategy • Seeking peer or mentor support • Developing their own strategies for academic skills (writing and reading) • Developing a community/networks of support

Intention to Pursue a Study Abroad

Both Amira and Laila grew up in Arabic–English bilingual families and attended bilingual or English language schools. Their families' strong support and overseas experience gave them self-confidence in speaking English. This experience gave them a sense of greater inclusion and belonging in an English-speaking nation. The parents of each encouraged them to pursue their academic goals in the United States.

Their determination of studying abroad stemmed from a couple of primary factors. Amira stated that "most of us come with a very high level of motivation because PhD degree specifically…you are coming for voluntarily." Amira emphasized that the best careers for women require a PhD. She explained,

> My study abroad strengthens my abilities in terms of language skills, teaching…and I have both knowledge and skills…I knew that the American credentials are even more valued in Saudi Arabia.

For similar reasons, Laila believes that obtaining a PhD could act as a stepping stone to her future career in KSA since its universities tend to seek faculty who completed PhD studies abroad. As young women, Amira and Laila felt motivated for their study abroad experience and took inspiration from the changing roles of women in Saudi society. Thus, their intention to study abroad reflects sensitivity to social and cultural capital that is open to the development of their social mobility.

Sociocultural Challenges

Despite their seeming preparedness for study abroad, Amira and Laila articulated their drive to acquire essential and relevant information for better adaptation to the new culture and lifestyles. According to Amira, getting to know a new culture is "always challenging," and she clarified how different the new culture is from her native one. She reflected how difficult settlement is without adequate knowledge of the target culture. Laila expressed a similar view, stressing that sufficient time is necessary to get settled in the town where she would study:

> I was more concerned about…first of all, personal…like…my family and being comfortable in the city that I'm going to live in. We arrived just before classes like a week or two…and…it was not a good idea because you have a lot of things that you need to figure out before you study. It is hard to...to start classes.

She further confessed that at some point during her transition she faced tremendous emotional challenges such as "homesick(ness) and loneliness." She stated that being away from her family for a long time made it difficult to endure studying abroad, concluding that studying in "more friendly and welcoming areas" could be a key factor fostering a sense of belonging among Saudis.

Academic Challenges

As doctoral students, Amira and Laila were exposed to stringent academic demands and expectations from their institutions. Amira reflected, "I thought I was prepared, but I was not. I was shocked." To explain her academic challenges, Amira compared how her PhD studies were different from her master's studies, saying,

> I think I was very optimistic when I became a PhD student. […] I believed that I was…way to be optimistic which was not realistic. Maybe I was too confident in my abilities because I was successful in my master's studies, successful in my work.

She stated that during "my first semester I had to write 100 pages. Each course would require about 25 pages…The reading here is required and demanding. If you are taking four courses, you might end up as PhD students reading up to 700 pages weekly." Amira described the feeling of frustration of not being able fully to comprehend the texts she read.

She was well aware that there was a difference between the cross-national curricula and educational systems. In academic writing, Amira noted that U.S. education is much more focused on critical thinking that encourages students to construct their viewpoint and process academic contents in "active and analytical ways." She was not trained in schools in this manner: "We are not prepared to write, not even in Arabic. We don't write; we are not that culture." She believed that Saudi education too much adheres to "memorizing and summarizing" and "teacher-centered learning." She further explained the differences:

> In the Saudi context, we are used to lecturing type format. But here it is more seminars, so you need to come to class, and you have to prepare for it…the professor expects you have read things and you come to discuss the material. This is different, I think. In Saudi Arabia, we go to class…we get all the knowledge from the professor.

As Amira progressed, she gradually learned how to handle the heavy course load, different curricular and instructional techniques, and academic integrity. Laila offered a similar perspective, expressing distress over her academic writing skills:

> Writing is the most important for, especially for a person in the education department because there is a lot of demand for writing…even if your writing is good, it takes more time to revise…to check the meaning…Since you are a graduate student, you have to…you know…use specialized words more.

She pointed to a notable drawback of the instructional approach to reading in her home country:

> We didn't really focus on reading that much…I mean most teachers wouldn't put effort into reading. I remember most of us didn't really read because we knew that the teacher wouldn't ask about the reading.

Laila described her anxiety about her academic ability particularly compared with native speakers of English. Laila's awareness too was heightened when she was confronted with unfamiliar academic circumstances that required her to seek support from her peers and faculty/staff members:

> When I was taking my courses, actually one of my instructors said that I should not read everything, but I keep doing it. I am just used to reading from the first word until the last word. While there are different techniques of reading, there is like a research study…you should start with…sometimes methodology and mingle back to the research questions and the method, but from my thought, I think for…Saudi students, generally we are just used to thinking it like…step by step and…follow the text.

Both Laila and Amira continued to view writing and reading competences as the greatest challenges.

Agency in Preparing for Study Abroad

Amira and Laila strongly agreed on the role of home institutions in developing a global perspective that would cultivate the space in home institutions for students to build their social and academic skills necessary for study abroad prior to departure; they reflected on their experience and a lack of preparedness for study abroad programs at home universities. Amira commented, "The university is…um…it was not very concerned whether we gonna have troubles or not." Such a lack of preparedness at her Saudi institution left her struggling with adapting to a different academic culture and climate. Laila also felt that her university in the KSA provided her with insufficient academic preparation for study abroad. She resorted to Internet sources to "get general perspectives" on academic and cultural expectations in the United States. When she arrived, she sought assistance from her friend who shared the same sociocultural background with her:

> [I had] first-hand experience from friends not local institutions. I was lucky anyway because I was able to find Fayza (pseudonym) and…I asked her about my program. Having someone in the same department can be very helpful…especially from the same cultural background and from the same first language…Fayza gave me her experience in the department. She also gave me information about a different program. I was able to take my time to review two programs.

Amira and Laila stressed the importance of a close relationship with the KSA government that plays a key role for KASP recipients in enhancing their academic mobility.

> I attended a workshop presented by the Saudi government. That was a three-day workshop. That was about academic readiness, cultural readiness…like differences between Saudi culture and American culture. They talked about plagiarism. They talked about how to get your house, how to open your bank account…They brought students who spoke about their experiences…so

they gave us an orientation…I thought that it was a very short workshop…it was not sufficient for me (Amira).

However, she pointed out that the programs or orientations were a one-off event, seldom offering students ongoing training and support. Similarly, Laila said that information provided by the KSA government was not always helpful because it was somewhat general and cursory. In this regard, she spoke of the need for an internship program designed for students' specific majors and programs, which would help students who are willing to study abroad gain more academic and professional knowledge and training. She believed that such an internship program could "make [a] difference" in students' adjustment to the new academic environment as well as in applying for a job after completing degree programs abroad.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to a richer understanding of Saudi students' intentionality of study abroad, perceived preparation, and their lived experiences in studying abroad. It synthesizes key findings uncovered in the present study through both quantitative and qualitative data (surveys, semistructured interviews, and case studies). The analysis of quantitative data reveals that Saudi students highly value study abroad; for many, it is a means of social mobility and cultural capital that they aspire to acquire. However, they acknowledge a broad spectrum of challenges in the personal, academic, and social realms.

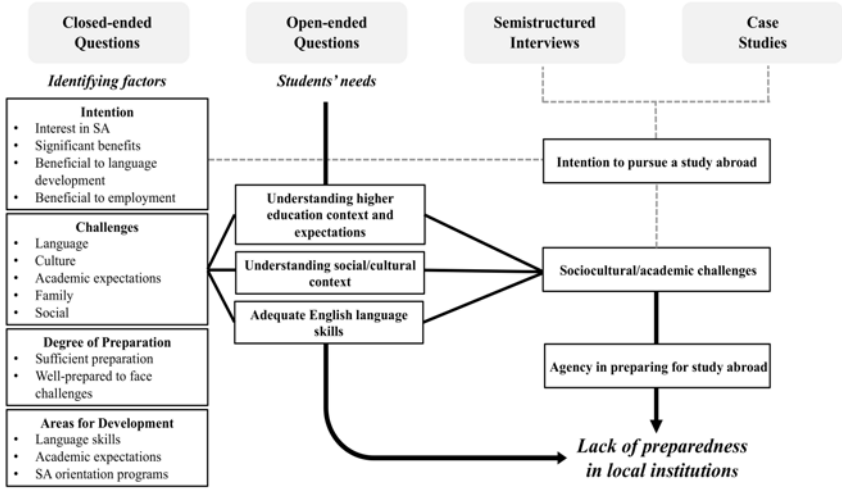

Figure 1: A Summary of Findings

The survey data show that, at an institutional level, some Saudi students do not appear to have had adequate preparation, including academic courses or training, to thrive academically or socially in a study abroad; they felt insufficiently prepared for

the challenges (see Table 2). The findings derived from the analysis of the open-ended question of the survey show three key domains of Saudi students' needs: a better understanding of the U.S. higher education context and expectations, a better understanding of the social/cultural context, and a need for adequate English language skills (see Table 5). The lack of sufficient preparation for studying abroad has left them feeling that they have limited options available for coping with difficulties in pursuing their academic and social goals in the United States or other contexts.

In addition, Saudi students' intentions, challenges, and agency emerged prominently in the interview data collected from 17 students and two case studies. Saudi students are committed to their initial reasons to study abroad—not only to promote their own social and cultural capital but also to contribute to their local communities, country, and family. What is particularly notable is their commitment to local Saudi communities, with the KASP emerging as one of the most significant factors. Saudi students elected to study abroad due to their perceived ability to gain "assets to attain higher social status beyond national boundaries" (Kim, 2011, p. 112). The choice of study abroad is consistent with their belief that it offers them the perceived rewards and outcomes, including richer linguistic, academic, and social growth, particularly when they return to their home country. In the context of the current social changes in KSA, our female case studies believed that being educated in an overseas context would allow them to contribute to these changes and, at the same time, be professionally valued. These findings are well aligned with our conceptual framework (Perna, 2006) with respect to students' college choice, specifically, underscoring the dynamic nature of variables that make up their social, economic, and policy contexts.

Our study also uncovered Saudi students' potential and lived challenges while studying abroad. As such, it underscores the significant role that institutions need to play to minimize potential and real obstacles to ensure KSA students' success. Drawing on Perna's (2006) model allowed us to delve more into the school and higher education contexts (Layers 2 and 3 of Perna's model) from which our subjects narrated their experiences. Our qualitative data has shown that Saudi students often struggle in study abroad contexts. Yet most of them, similarly to our doctoral student case studies, placed high academic demands and overwhelming workloads on themselves "to become an independent scholar through the values, norms, knowledge, beliefs, and interpersonal skills" (Gardner, 2008, p. 333). There are implications for institutions of higher education in KSA and for the United States to recognize the uniqueness of the Saudi students' experiences in order to develop support for them. Unlike our case study subjects having the benefit of prolonged exposure to English at an early age, the findings from semistructured interviews highlight language challenges as one of the chief obstacles to Saudi students' academic and social engagement. Our findings buttress the conclusion that long-term and deep involvement of local and overseas institutions and communities is important to provide "more involved guidance counseling, and additional supplemental programs and services" (Perna, 2006, p. 142) for the students.

Improving Saudi students' academic and social skills is an important task to be taken up prior to the beginning of study abroad. Based on our data, our subjects do not identify local higher education institutions and programs as playing a major role

in the development of their targeted academic skills and cultural awareness that would better prepare them. Only short preparation workshops for study abroad have been implemented at a national level; however, they pointed out that such sociocultural knowledge such as adjustment to U.S. culture, academic competences, and advanced writing are not fostered sufficiently and early in their home institutions. For these reasons, as shown in our case studies, in preparing for study abroad students relied on personal contact with individuals equipped with knowledge and experience. Our quantitative findings also suggest that attention to designing a clear, recursive, and productive mentoring program to prepare Saudi students for study abroad programs is needed. This need deserves closer consideration both from policy and practical standpoints among educators and administrators. As Salyers et al. (2015) emphasized, preparedness for study abroad in students' home country exercises a profound influence on students' global learning experiences. They further suggested that practical predeparture programs and activities should be developed, considering students' needs and expectations. It is also important, however, to involve the host nation in a legitimately binational preparation program that addresses the domains of needs to aid student success.

When looking at English language proficiency, it is important to note that there is a need for a practical consideration in order to maximize the effectiveness of study abroad. Two female students in our case studies, who each grew up in a bilingual home, clearly showed a confident attitude toward intention to pursue a study abroad, whereas others who participated in our survey and semistructured interviews appeared to believe that their lack of English language knowledge and skills was one of the crucial barriers that may bring about insufficient prospects to become a member of the new academic community. It is congruent with previous research that underscores the detrimental effects of language knowledge among international students (cf. Kim, 2006; Kuo, 2011). Our findings indicate that English language preparation must be underscored as part of predeparture guidelines for successful study abroad. In this regard, we suggest more extensive language training programs for Saudi students, particularly those who are willing to go abroad, in order to build upon the foundations of English language proficiency and strengthen their confidence in English use. As one step toward this, we also suggest the necessity of professional support for local English language teachers in order to develop a mastery of English so that they can deliver their expertise effectively to students in accordance with students' needs and requirements for study abroad.

CONCLUSION

Implications and Recommendations

In this study, preparedness to study abroad pertains to the degree of knowledge/competences and cross-cultural openness among students to be able successfully engage in a new learning context. Such knowledge includes linguistic, academic, and sociocultural domains. To maximize Saudi students' study abroad experience, below we offer recommendations for programs, practitioners, and researchers who are involved in international education.

Implications for KSA Higher Education

Our empirical inquiry underscored the need for KSA higher education institutions to identify and assess any existing preparatory programs that aid students in academic and social development for studying abroad. Such a recommendation is in the national interest to maximize the investments that are made. As Salisbury et al. (2009) pointed out, study abroad programs potentially "instill the human capital" (p. 124). That includes greater preparation in linguistic, academic, and sociocultural domains prior to study abroad. Based on our theoretical framework of students' college choice, we recommend that professional development training for KSA faculty and administrators is needed to strengthen Saudi students' intellectual interests and achievements.

Given the significance of home institutions for Saudi students, the professional development programs should be designed to promote faculty and administrators to (a) understand academic and logistical expectations for study abroad, (b) meet students' learning goals as well as foster their global citizenship, and (c) be aware of the purpose of the governmental goals and projects (i.e., KASP) to aid their objectives. In doing so, qualified faculty and administrators can play a vital role in contributing to the development of effective and systematic curricula that promote Saudi students' study abroad. In addition, challenges to access new academic and social norms and cultures that Saudi students may encounter can be alleviated when the local faculty and administrators actively seek to not only interact with the host institutions and communities but also work closely with SACM, which mainly serves as an intermediary between local and target institutions. We believe that all these efforts will fully resonate with Saudi students' academic and cross-cultural learning.

Implications for U.S. Higher Education

In a similar vein, U.S. higher education institutions should put out a concerted effort to maximize Saudi students' learning opportunities and outcomes, including reducing anxieties and challenges that may occur in new environments. As our findings have shown, Saudi students primarily and practically need to rely on the faculty and administrators of the host university in making a smooth transition and a successful adjustment to the academic culture. Yakaboski et al. (2018) noted that Muslim students often confront stereotypes. In an effort to overcome this challenge, we stress that professional development programs for faculty and administrators should be implemented in order to promote Saudi students' academic choice, retention, and academic attainment, and cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

The implementation of high-quality professional development programs should be carefully considered for faculty and administrators associated with U.S. higher education to (a) have a strong leadership role and responsibility in order to establish partnerships with KSA institutions for an easier transition for Saudi students as well as to increase institutional and educational quality; (b) provide a mentor who maintains a relationship with Saudi students to guide the students to feel connected to new academic settings and who is committed to the elimination of stereotyped and biased notions imposed on the students; and (c) develop educational and professional

services underpinned by creative and analytical approaches to learning. We emphasize that U.S. institutions' ongoing efforts in internationalizing their institutions and students align with Saudi students' academic interests and professional goals.

In addition, developing Saudi students' awareness of gender equity is an important yet sensitive topic to be dealt with in the context of U.S. higher education. Saudi society has clear and systemic demarcations for the roles that males and females occupy. From the standpoint of the U.S. context, these roles often indicate visible gender inequalities. That being said, attitudes are changing, and under the Saudi Vision 2030, there is a new level of commitment to social development and women's empowerment (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). We expect that more and more students coming to the United States will be influenced by the new changes at home and should be better prepared to make the transition. For many students, a study abroad presents a context for new learning, including understanding how to better achieve gender equity. Many Saudi women who will be educated overseas will play more prominent roles and aid gender empowerment and equality in KSA. Thus, their experience of studying abroad should be a positive factor in strengthening gender equality in KSA. Our two case studies speak eloquently to it. The two Saudi females show that the students viewed their study abroad as a means to "surmount iniquitous gender roles and provide them with a new linguistic and social space to advance their aspirations" (Brutt-Griffler & Kim, 2018b, p. 18). Of course, achieving gender equality is a prolonged process in any society. As previous literature (e.g., Sandekian et al., 2015) has indicated, Saudi male students are highly socialized with traditional gender norms and expectations; their socialization may prevent them from developing a new mindset and new cultural values in a study abroad. It seems that institutions of higher education may be sensitive to this reality and may need to raise awareness in a variety of ways that are culturally sensitive (for further recommendations, see Brutt-Griffler & Kim, 2018a).

Furthermore, building institutional partnerships between Saudi and U.S. universities holds the potential to enhance Saudi students' study abroad experience. Accordingly, it should be reiterated that a successful academic and social journey can be accomplished effectively when local and host institutions' efforts work in parallel. We firmly believe that it will positively yield short- and long-term results to meet the perceived needs of Saudi students, in particular degree-seeking students selecting to pursue a study abroad.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study are specific to the experiences of Saudi students who prepare for academic and social mobility. Despite the significance of the present study, some limitations should be addressed to continue addressing the lack of empirical evidence on Saudi students in higher education. One of the limitations of this study is the sample size. We are confident that the Saudi students' attitudes and perceptions toward study abroad revealed in the present study would be commonly observed in the general student body of KSA today; however, further research that relies on larger and more diverse samples of Saudi students should be carried out to

confirm whether they confront similar barriers. We believe that larger samples of quantitative and qualitative data will provide valuable insights to issues such as gender equality and student acculturation. Second, the present study does not include academic personnel (i.e., teaching faculty and administrative staff). Important questions remain as to how academic personnel can be a positive step toward identifying, preparing, and refining Saudi students' academic knowledge and sociocultural experience.

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