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Saudi International Students' Perceptions of their Transition to the UK and the Impact of Social Media

Anas Alsuhaibani^{1,2}, Andrew Cox¹, Frank Hopfgartner¹ and Xin Zhao¹

¹ Information School, University of Sheffield, UK
{ahalsuhaibani1, a.m.cox, f.hopfgartner,
xin.zhao}@Sheffield.ac.uk

² Department of Information Systems, College of Computer Engineering and Sciences, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia
ah.alsuhaibani@psau.edu.sa

Abstract. In their transition to a new country, international students often feel lost, anxious or stressed. Saudi students in the UK in particular may face further challenges due to the cultural, social and religious differences that they experience. There is a lot of evidence that social media play a crucial role in this experience. By interviewing 12 Saudi students from different cities in the UK, the aim of this study is to investigate how they perceive their transition to the UK and how social media is involved. The analysis indicates that Saudi students' perceptions of transition tend to fall in to one of two markedly different camps. Some students see transition as an opportunity to detach themselves from their home country and to engage with the new society. Those students turn to social media as a tool allowing them to build bridges with the new society. Other students feel less enthusiastic to make a full engagement with the UK society. Those students find social media as a good tool to maintain connections and links with family and friends in their home country.

Keywords: International Students' Transition, Study Abroad, Social Media, Saudi International Students.

1 Introduction

The UK is one of the top destinations for international students with approximately 460,000 foreign students studying in the UK in 2017/18 [1]. There is great diversity in nationality of international students in the UK and Saudi Arabia is one of the top seven sending countries, with more than 14,000 higher education students in 2017/18 [2]. Study abroad for an international student is usually considered a major life event that involves multiple changes to their cultural, social, and academic environments [3–5]. Comparing international students to domestic students shows that the former face more challenges in their studies and in adjusting to university life [6,7]. The concept of transition 'indicates the progression from familiar to the unknown and involves the adoption of new challenges culturally, socially, and cognitively' [19 p. 2]. International students at their transition are more likely to suffer from different psychological issues

(e.g., anxiety, loneliness, depression or stress) [3,6,8,9]. Saudi students may encounter further challenges compared to other international students, because of the differences in culture, religion, language and academic system [10].

International students tend to spend more time on social media than domestic students [11], this is due to their increased need of social support and communication [12]. A recent study of the use of social media by Korean and Chinese students in the US found that they spend on average about 6.5 hours of their day online [13]. Sandel [14] found that international students spend on average approximately two hours per day communicating with friends and families. Social media can help in increasing students understanding of the potential host country's culture and it may facilitate their cultural transition [14–16]. Furthermore, it may be helpful in supporting the 'language adjustment' of international students [17]. On the other hand, social media may have negative social and academic impacts on international students. It can hinder the students' engagement with the new society [18] and distract them from their studies [19].

Thus, the transition is a very sensitive period for international students and social media can play a major role. However, much more needs to be understood about how international students perceive their transition and how they use social media at this point in their lives, including whether and how it affects different nationalities in different ways. Given the sensitivity of the transition period on the students' life, the increased number of Saudi students in the UK and their high use of social media, and the specific challenges and differences that Saudi students face, this research investigates the role of social media in Saudi students' transition when studying in the UK. This research builds on work published in 2019 [20]. The aim of this research will be achieved by answering the following questions:

1. How do Saudi students perceive their transition to the UK?
2. How do they perceive the impact of social media during their transition?

2 Literature review

A simple model has been proposed by Menzies and Baron [21] to explain the experience of international students' transition to a host country (see Fig. 1). This model suggests that the sojourner passes through five phases during their transition. The authors assume that student at the "pre-departure" phase anticipates their experience of studying abroad and has a neutral mood [22,23]. This is followed by the "arrival" and the "honeymoon" phases, in which students are positive, and are excited and eager to explore the new country [21,23]. The student then reaches the "party's over" stage where they begin to realise the environmental, cultural, and academic differences, which lead them to feel depressed and anxious [21,23–25]. Finally, the "healthy adjustment" phase occurs when the student feel that they adjusted to the life in the host country and they have got used to it [21]. While this model captures key aspects of experience, it does feel rather linear and simplistic. For example, Blue and Haynes [22] critiqued this model and argued that the healthy adjustment may not always happen.

Following the after the party's over phase, students may have another phase called "crisis" which is very negative and may lead them to return home.

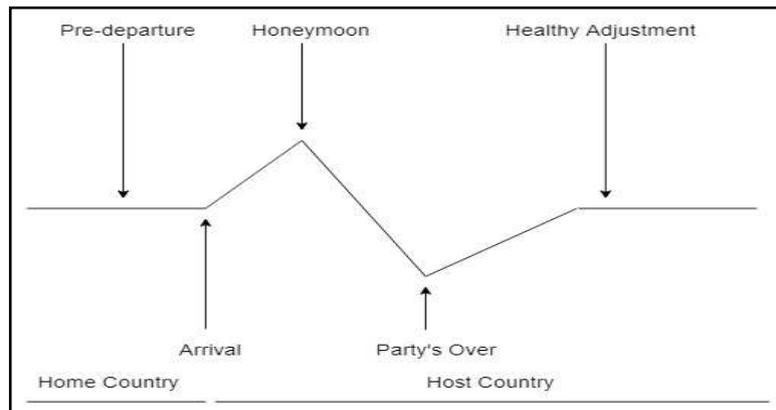


Fig. 1. International students' transition model. Adapted from [21]

Along with the increased use of social media, it has been reported by a number of studies [13–17] that social media is implicated in the students' sojourn and plays a role in their experience of transition. It has been argued that international students during their time abroad consider social media as a source of academic and daily life information [26]. Social media can also play a positive role in increasing the students' academic and social engagement [16]. Sandel [14] reported that social media can support the adjustment of international students through "relational bonds", "psychological well-being", "sociocultural skills" and meeting "informational needs" [14]. For Chinese and Indian students in Australia, Martin and Rizvi [27] claimed that students used social media as a tool to explore the new place and culture. This can increase the students' sense of belonging to a new city and positively affect their adjustment. However, despite the positive views of most authors in this area, it is important to acknowledge that social media may also negatively influence students' transition. Guo, Li and Ito [18] acknowledged that social media could have a dual impact: as well as its helpful roles, it can adversely affect international students by isolating them from the new society and making them more distracted. Other researchers [19] reported that for students as a whole, the uncontrolled use of social media negatively affects their academic performance and achievement.

There is a lot of debate about the impact of social media on students. Little of this seems to have been tied to the specific context of international students' transition. Furthermore, more studies are required to see how social media can affect different nationalities in different ways. In a recent systematic review conducted by Sleeman, Lang and Lemon [28], they reached the conclusion that future researchers are recommended to focus on students coming from "less researched" countries. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this will be one of the first studies that observes Saudi students' transition and their use of social media in the UK. Accordingly, therefore, this research aims to make an important contribution to this under explored

area by producing a strong base that can support further studies and investigations in the field of students' transition and social media.

3 Methods

This paper is a part of a larger study investigating the transition of Saudi students to the UK and their use of social media. A sequential mixed methods approach (qualitative then quantitative) will be applied, using semi-structured interviews, followed by Twitter data analysis. This paper will only focus on and report the findings of an initial analysis of the results of the first qualitative method interviews. Twelve Saudi students who are using social media and pursuing or planning to pursue their higher education in the UK were recruited. The reason for including students who are planning to study in the UK is that this study focuses on all the stages of the transition. According to Menzies and Baron [21], the experience of transition starts before arriving in the host country. Other participants in the study were already in the UK. All had been there for less than a year, as McLachlan and Justice and Prescott and Hellsten [4,29] have argued, the student's transition period usually lasts up to 12 months after their arrival in the host country. Participants were recruited from different locations in the UK and to represent different levels of study, different ages, genders and family status. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, via phone or Skype, depending on the participants' preference and lasted between 42 and 102 minutes. During the interviews, students were asked to draw their transition timeline, identify the stages which they went through, the difficulties that they had and their emotions during these phases. They also discussed what they drew with the interviewer. For phone and Skype interviews, students were asked to scan their drawing and send it to the interviewer. Table 1 shows more details about the participants.

Table 1. The interview participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital status (children)	Since when in the UK	City in the UK	Degree
M1	Male	28	Married (1)	Not arrived yet	Sheffield	Ph.D.
F1	Female	28	Single	Not arrived yet	Sheffield	Ph.D.
M2	Male	26	Single	8 months	Manchester	English course then Master
F2	Female	24	Single	6 months	Newcastle	English course then Master
F3	Female	30	Single	10 months	Manchester	English course then Ph.D.
F4	Female	31	Single	11 months	Sheffield	English course then Master
F5	Female	40	Single	11 months	Sheffield	English course then Master
M3	Male	35	Married	10 months	Durham	Masters
F6	Female	27	Single	12 months	Birmingham	Masters
M4	Male	38	Married (6)	9 months	Southampton	Ph.D.
M5	Male	35	Married (1)	12 months	Brighton	Ph.D.
F7	Female	34	Married (2)	7 months	Leicester	Ph.D.

Data was analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six steps approach [25]. In order to ensure that codes and themes were derived from the data, the coder (first author) sought to set aside, as far as possible, his own assumptions and beliefs while undertaking the analysis. Furthermore, meetings with other researchers were conducted regularly during the data collection and analysis to ensure the balance of the data interpretation. Recruitment for the interviews was based on the principle of voluntary, informed consent and approved by the University of Sheffield prior to data collection.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Transition Period

As previously mentioned, transition for international students is a major life change. Some researchers in the area have argued that students usually start to get into the mood of transition three months before their traveling day. They also argue that the transition usually lasts for six to 12 months [4,29]. Participants' views in this study varied in when they felt they started to get into the mood of transition and in when they adjusted to the life in the UK (if they did at all).

Similar to the model of transition presented by Menzies and Baron [21], on a timeline of their transition, students were asked to draw their feeling and emotions and to identify factors that motivate their happiness or sadness. Figures 2 and 3¹ below represent samples of students' drawings. In explaining Fig. 2, the student claimed that

¹ Annotations have been included near to the students' handwritings to make them easier to read.

she entered the mood of transition around 3 months before her traveling day when she received the offer of study. She was like most students in this research, nervous and stressed before traveling to the UK. For this student and most other students, this is usually triggered by fears about the new experience, place and environment. This is clearer for students who have no experience in living in a different country and for those who are weak in English:

'My mood in the days around the travel day was really bad; I lost my appetite in the last three days in Saudi Arabia. This is because I was afraid of moving to a different and western society especially for me as a Muslim girl with weak English language.' [F4].

'A few days before my departure to the UK, I was extremely nervous. I was questioning myself about my decision to study abroad' [M2].

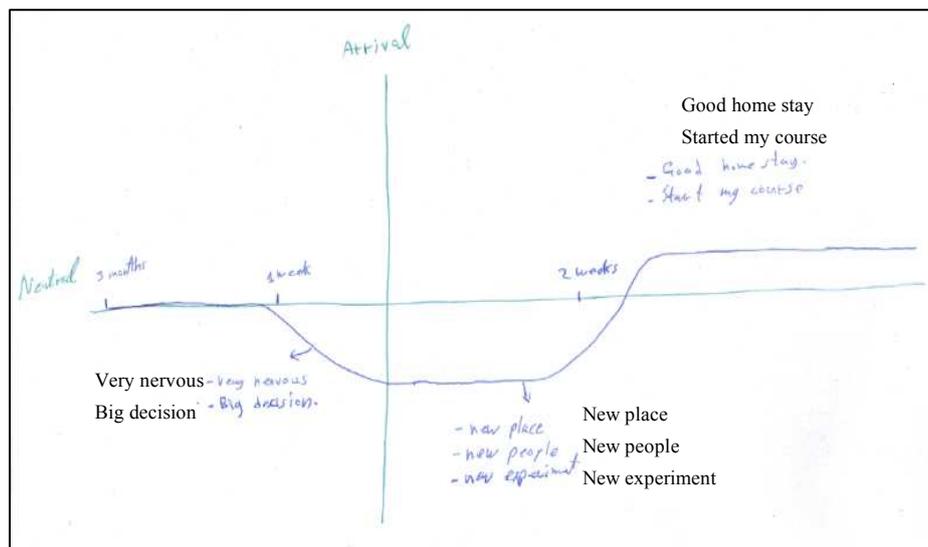


Fig. 2. Drawing of transition timeline by [F4]

For other students, their negative mood may last longer after arrival and this was reinforced by difficulties they faced in the UK. In Fig. 3, the student suggests that the stress period was after arriving and it was triggered by difficulties with searching for accommodation and adjusting to the new academic system:

'After arriving in the UK, I was very nervous due to the difficulties I faced with finding the accommodation. I started my pre-sessional course as soon as I arrived in the UK and I was very busy [...]. Anyway, after about two months, I found suitable accommodation and my family joined me in the UK. I also started my Ph.D. study, so, by that time I felt that I settled in life in the UK' [M4].

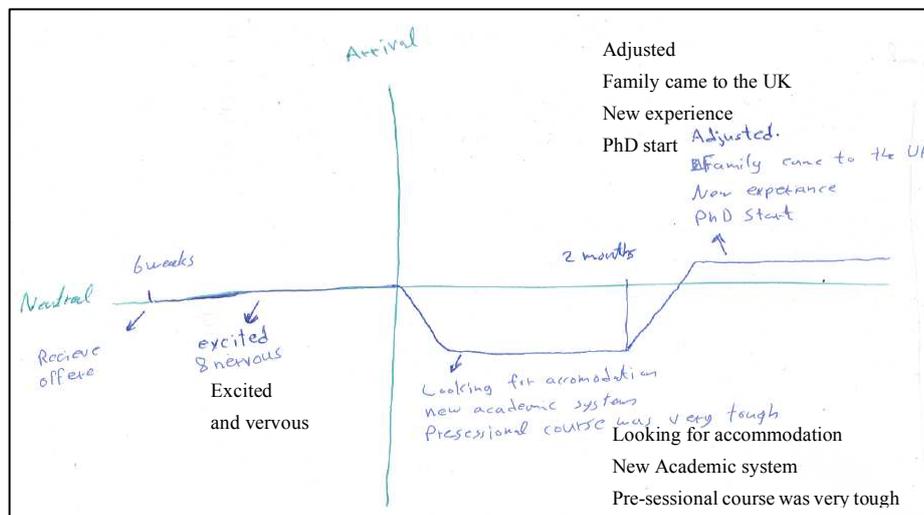


Fig. 3. Drawing of transition timeline by [M4]

A comparison of the results of this study with the model of transition presented by Menzies and Baron [21] shows that there are some differences. The model presumes that before traveling students are in a neutral mood, however, the results of this study show that the majority of students at this phase were nervous and few were excited. Out of 12 interviewees, only four participants agreed with Menzies and Baron's model on the point that the period after their arrival was positive. The model presumes that students after arrival enter the "honeymoon" phase where they find themselves enthusiastic and eager to engage with the new place. However, the majority of students in this research disagree with that and felt that this period was full of difficulties related to adjusting to the new place, adjusting to the new academic system and finding accommodation.

4.2 How students perceive transition

Perceptions of transition tended to fall in one of two markedly different camps. Some students see transition as an opportunity to make a break from their home country and to engage with the new society:

'I see my life in the UK as a good opportunity for me to engage with the UK community. In addition to the academic goals that I have, I am also planning to achieve some personal goals learning about other cultures and engaging with new people' [F5].

This is usually clear for students who are eager to know about other cultures or those who want to develop their English language.

Other students believed that they came to the UK mainly for academic purposes and they are not enthusiastic to make a full engagement with the UK society:

‘I do not see myself very excited to learn about the UK culture and to engage with the society [...]. When I have free time, I would prefer to spend it with Saudi friends. I feel that we have more things in common and I enjoy chatting with them more than others.’ [M5].

This can be attributed to the difference in culture, religious and social life, considering the conservative Muslim society that Saudi students came from [30]. Furthermore, it might be related to the fact that the majority of Saudi students are sponsored by employers in Saudi Arabia with an obligation to return immediately following the end of their studies. Therefore, these students usually see their time in the UK as a temporary period and do not see the point of mixing with other cultures as important [31]. Students with these views are usually more connected with their people in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi community in the UK.

It was also found that how the students perceive the transition is usually related to their push and pull factors. Push factors are those motivations related to why the student wants to study abroad. On the other hand, pull factors are those related to the selection of a destination, institution or specific program of study [32–34]. This study found that students who are personally motivated by the pull factor of the opportunity to study abroad perceive the transition as a life experience from which they can learn a lot. Those students are usually more willing to engage with the UK society and culture:

‘I decided to study abroad because I think that people should develop themselves; and interacting with a new culture and people is a type of development’ [F3].

On the other hand, students who are motivated to study abroad because of the lack of programs of studies in Saudi Arabia (which is a push factor for sending students abroad [35]) may see their experience of studying abroad as something they are obliged to do:

‘To be honest, I would prefer to do my Masters in Saudi Arabia, but since my major was not provided in Saudi Arabia I had to go to the UK’ [F4].

‘My main motivation to study abroad is my work; if I have the choice I will not go abroad. I have commitments with my family and children in Saudi Arabia’ [M4].

4.3 How social media is related to students’ transition

There was a strong relationship between how the students perceive transition and their behavior on and their use of social media. Students who are more willing to detach themselves from the Saudi society usually make a shift in their content and communication on social media. For example, some students reported that they created new accounts on social media (i.e. new accounts on WhatsApp, Snapchat or Twitter) as soon as they arrive to the UK. The reason for doing this is that they want to restrict

these accounts for the UK content and communications. Those students usually make limited access to the online Saudi content because they want to weaken their ties with their Saudi life. They believe that this can have positive impacts on their engagement with the new society:

‘Once I arrived to the UK, I created a new WhatsApp account, but I gave this number only to a few people in Saudi Arabia. The reason behind that is I want to focus on my studies and life here in the UK. I still contact my family and Saudi friends on social media but very rarely’ [F5].

This finding supports another result by Li and Chen [36], who argued that having host country friends on social media and exploring a host country content can make a positive impact on the cultural adjustment of international students. These students’ views also concur with those of another previous study [37] that found that social media could positively affect the language adjustment of international students:

‘In the UK, I also started to use a platform called Meetup and I have a positive experience with it. It allowed me to meet new people who have common interests; we meet and talk and that helped me to improve my English.’ [M2].

In contrast, students who were not keen to engage with the new society made few changes to their social media use. The results show little attempts from these students to use social media as a tool to help with their social engagement with the new society. Many participants who have this view reported that they found social media to be a tool to keep them connected with their family and friends back home. Families in Saudi Arabia are very connected and children even if they are adults usually spend a lot of time with their parents [30,38]. Therefore, some students thought that this is an advantage of social media because they do not want to be disconnected from their home country:

‘We are a very connected family and especially for my parents I do not want them to feel that I am far away from them, so, I am always in contact with them on social media.’[M4]

‘I feel that social media is making a link for me with my country and family. Social media is the only way that keeps me updated with them.’ [M5]

5 Conclusion and future work

This paper has investigated how Saudi international students in the UK perceive transition and how they use social media during that period. It has shown that the perception of transition can follow two different patterns. Some students see transition as an opportunity to detach themselves from their home country and to engage with the new society. For them social media allows them to build bridges with the new society and engage with it. On the other hand, others believe they came to the UK mainly for academic purposes and they do not have to make a full engagement with the UK

society. Social media is a way to maintain ties for those who want to be connected with their home family or friends.

In future work, a second quantitative method that includes retrieving Saudi students' content on Twitter will be implemented. This method includes applying content analysis and using text mining to further examine changes in behavior and to test and extend the results of the first method.

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