



The  
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## **An Investigation of International Students' Transition and their Use of Social Media: the Experience of Saudi Students Coming to the UK**

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Students face several simultaneous transitions when they decide to study abroad. These transitions are shaped by differences in academic, social, cultural, and everyday life between the home and host countries. Research suggests that social media play both positive and negative roles in this experience. Within this context, this research sets out to investigate what are Saudi students' experiences of the transitions to study in the UK and the role played by social media. To achieve this, the following research questions are posed:

- What motivates Saudi students to study abroad and why do they choose the UK?
- In the context of the Saudi student experience:
  - What types of transitions do international students go through during their experience of studying abroad?
  - What are the characteristics of the transitions that international students experience when studying abroad?
  - Do international students make a digital transition in their social media use during their transition experience and do social media play a positive or negative role in their experience?

**Design:** This research adopted a pragmatic paradigm with a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. A sequential multiple qualitative method-based study was conducted using two methods. In the first method, seventeen Saudi students studying or planning to study in UK higher education were interviewed and the data subjected to thematic analysis. In the second method, Twitter timelines for each participant were retrieved using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) with content and sentiment analysis applied to the collected tweets. The first method enabled a deeper understanding of the students' perspectives regarding their transition experience and their use of social media. The second method was useful to expand and confirm the understanding of transition and see how a digital transition on Twitter can occur. Applying the two methods permitted a form of data triangulation to increase this study's quality. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were also applied to assess the trustworthiness of this research. Ethical considerations for collecting, analysing and reporting interviews and social media data were respected and reported in this study.

**Findings:** This study reported various factors related to what pushes international students to study abroad. This included the students' desire to increase their cultural awareness, to enhance their academic skills, to achieve self and academic development and to increase their employment opportunities. One factor more specific to Saudi students in particular was related

to the students being pushed by their home employer. Because of the absence of some study programmes in Saudi Arabia and the higher quality of international education institutions, employers usually oblige their staff to pursue higher education abroad. As for what motivates the students to choose the host country, this study found that the positive reputation of the UK education system and the ease of application procedures were common pull factors. Saudi students choose the UK because of geographic proximity of the UK, the length of study and the lesser fear of Islamophobia.

This study also found that students go through six transitions when they study abroad. These included the social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transitions. Each of these transitions can be multi-dimensional and overlapping, with the transitions affecting and being affected by each other. There can be variations in the dominant transition experienced in a specific period or for the whole period.

This study identified seven characteristics of international students' transition experiences: (1) multi-dimensional consisting of multiple transitions, (2) unpredictable with a mismatch between expectations and reality, (3) more than an individual experience because significant others are involved in shaping the experience, (4) dynamic in terms of its start and length, (5) multi-emotional and can be positive, negative or mixed, (6) unequal with differences in gender and cultural background affecting the experience, and (7) non-linear. These characteristics were found to be interlinked, both affecting and being affected by each other. Considered together, they can build up a picture for the international students' transition.

This study, through its two methods, was able to identify changes in social media use associated with the students' physical move overseas. Therefore, a digital transition on social media was confirmed which, in this study, included changes in posted content, frequency of use, and the language of posts. Social media were found to play positive roles by enabling the students to seek necessary information and to communicate socially with new or existing others. However, it was also found to have a negative role when it isolated the student from the new society. For the students in this study, the benefits of social media outweighed the negative.

**Originality:** This study fills a gap in the literature regarding Saudi students and their study abroad transition, reporting various empirical findings related to the students' status of being Muslims from a conservative society. This study also contributes to the literature on international students' use of social media by investigating their digital transition and how social media were used throughout their transition. This study was able to make a theoretical contribution by providing a new conceptualisation of the international student transition via presenting the types and characteristics of this transition. This not only contributes to the body of work on international students but also can be applied to other transition contexts and the transition concept as a

whole. Combining data gathered from interviews with social media data in the international student transition context can be considered a methodological contribution of this study. The combination of these methods provided different angles of investigation which added more depth to the understanding of the research questions and also triangulated the data sources.

Recommendations for those interacting with international students, in the home and host countries, include the provision of social, emotional, and academic support, and pre- and post-arrival preparation for students. Future international students who will be potentially exposed to the social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital changes, are recommended to make preparations to smooth the experience of these transitions.

**Keywords:** Internationalisation of Higher Education, Transition, International Students' Transition, Social Media and International Students, Saudi Students in the UK.

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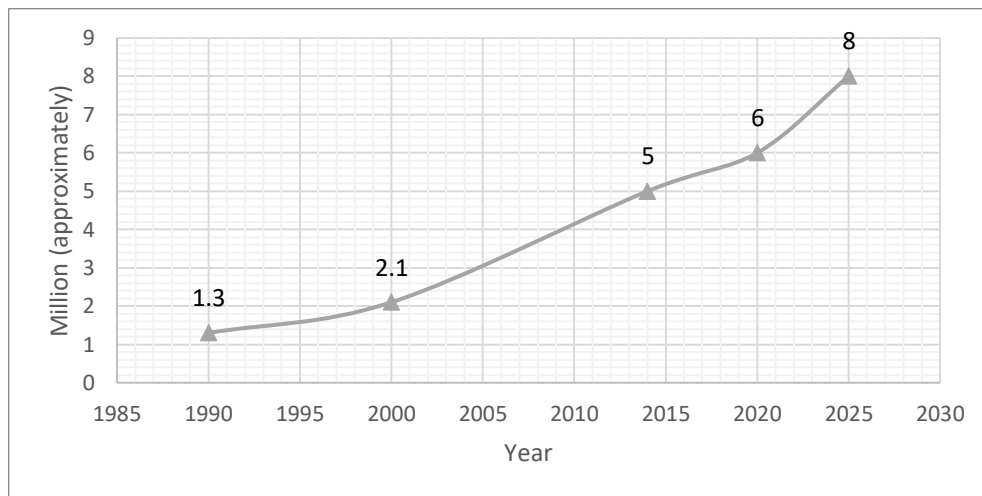
# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and significance

### 1.1.1 International student mobility

International student mobility has been growing strongly for a number of decades. The global number of international students increased from approximately 1.3 million in 1990, to 2.1 million in 2000 and then to six million in 2020 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021; Statista, 2021a). A pre covid-19 estimate predicted growth with numbers reaching eight million by 2025 (OECD, 2021), as shown in Figure 1.1. The UK was reported as one of the most popular destinations for international students with around 550,000 in 2020 rising from approximately 424,000 in 2013. The percentage of international students in UK universities is considerable with 21.1% in 2017 (Institute of International Education, 2018). The range of countries from which these students come is also diverse. The University of Sheffield, for instance, had over 7,000 international students (comprising around 25% of the total student body) from 150 countries in 2020 (The University of Sheffield, 2021a).

Figure 1.1 Number of international students worldwide. According to Karzunina, West, Moran and Philippou (2017), OECD (2021) and Statista (2021a)



The reasons behind these statistics is not solely limited to students' academic and professional development, but also their wish to further their personal and cultural growth (Carlson &



Widaman, 1988; Irwin & Hatch, 1960). Studying abroad is usually considered a major life transition that arises from changes to students' cultural, social, and academic environments (Chen, 1999; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Searle & Ward, 1990). International students face more challenges in adjusting to university compared with home students (Burns, 1991; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002). It is very common for international students to suffer from various psychological issues (e.g., loneliness, anxiety, depression or stress) during their international transition experience (Andrade, 2006; Chen, 1999; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). These difficulties and issues are triggered when students face changes in the new environment in the host country, e.g., social and cultural, (Gbadamosi, 2018; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Yu, Foroudi, & Gupta, 2019; Zhai, 2002) and by leaving the family and social environment (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016).

An increasing number of Saudi students pursue their higher education abroad with more than 95,000 in 2020, and 26% of these students are in the UK, 45% are in the US and 29% are distributed between other alternative countries (e.g. Australia, Canada, Ireland). Most of these students are sponsored, around 85%, either by their employers in Saudi Arabia (usually educational institutions), or by a government scholarship programme called 'King Salman bin Abdulaziz Program' (Ministry of Education, 2021). Previous research suggests that Saudi students face specific challenges when they study abroad (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Alsaifi & Shin, 2017; Arafeh, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Taj, 2017; Yakaboski, Perez-Velez & Almutairi, 2017). These challenges are triggered by the specific social, cultural, academic and language differences that students face. The Saudi social and cultural environment is ruled by Islamic regulations or derived from tribal and cultural traditions (Arafeh, 2017), therefore, Saudi international students may face further challenges when studying abroad. Such differences include moving from a collectivistic Muslim society to, usually, an individualistic multi-religion society (Long, 2005; Long & Maisel, 2010). They also include moving to a new society with different gender roles (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Elamin & Omair, 2010). Students from Saudi Arabia can also face being stereotyped by some people in the host countries (Arafeh, 2017). As is evident in the literature, international students from different nationalities can have some

commonality in their experiences, however, a uniqueness and interest might attach to the Saudi students experience abroad (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Alshehab, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). There is limited research focusing on the Saudi student experience. Indeed, according to Al-Hazmi and Nyland (2010), there is an 'absence of Saudi students' voices in the international education literature' (p. 73), therefore, more studies on Saudi international students are needed.

#### 1.1.2 International students' transition and the transition concept

The transition experience process for international students can be described as complicated. This is because students face various academic, social and cultural changes, both expected and unexpected, when they move to the new place (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012; Rienties, Nanclares, Jindal-Snape, & Alcott, 2013). This is in addition to the changes associated with the new rules and regulations in the host country (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Furthermore, when students move abroad to study they usually engage with a new academic and social community where they speak a different language. This can be another challenge which complicates the experience (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Brown, 2008a; Chen, 1999; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Zhai, 2002). It is not only the student who is involved in shaping their transition experience but also significant others (e.g. family members, host university, other peers) usually make an impact on the process (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Despite many studies in the field of international students and study abroad, there is a clear lack of studies focusing on the international student experience through the lens of transition. Studies in this area usually focus on a specific domain of the experience such as social engagement or academic adjustment. Carrying out these sophisticated studies is useful. However, providing a holistic view of the student experience is also needed to bring new insights to the understanding of the overall international students' transition experience. This is one of the aims of this research study.

The concept of transition as a whole has recently been a focus of much research (Benasso & Magaraggia, 2019; Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Glazzard, Jindal-Snape, & Stones, 2020;

Gordon et al., 2017; Jindal-Snape, 2016, 2018; Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2014; Newman & Blackburn, 2002; Winstone & Hulme, 2019; Yi Zhang, 2016). Jindal-Snape (2016) argued that the transition is a complicated experience consisting of multiple domains; and various factors are involved in its equation. When an individual makes transition from a state, place, work, marital status or level of study to another this can bring about various changes including psychological, educational, social and cultural changes (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Prescott & Hellsten, 2005). The multiple domains that individuals inhabit are usually dependent on the context (Gordon et al., 2017, 2020). For example, the multiple domains in the context of students moving to higher education can involve moving to a new city, a new organisational culture and starting a new academic level (Jindal-Snape, 2012). In the transition concept, Jindal-Snape (2016) created a theory called the Multiple and Multidimensional Transition theory (MMT) which indicates that a single transition does not exist, instead, the transition experience contains multiple and simultaneous transitions. The MMT also acknowledges the relationship between these transitions and shows that they can trigger and overlap with each other or with transitions of other individuals (Jindal-Snape, 2016). However, either this theory or other literature in the transition field seem to be in need for further development and elaboration. Various aspects of transition either need further investigation or even need to be acknowledged. For example, the period of transitions, when transitions start and end; the emotions, whether it is a positive, negative or mixed feelings experience; expectation and reality, whether new changes are expected by individuals or not; and inequality in the transition, is there a conflict of inequality in the process. Further empirical research on the various contexts of transition (e.g. to international study, to international work, to adulthood, to employability) is needed. Together, these studies can add to the concept of transition as a whole and help to shape its characteristics.

### 1.1.3 International students and social media

Literature has shown that social media play a key role in students' life abroad. Compared with home students, international students are likely to spend more time on social media (Gray, Chang, & Kennedy, 2010). This is usually motivated by their strong need of social support and communication (Hossain & Veenstra, 2013). Sleeman et al., (2016) and Zhao (2016) conducted

systematic reviews of studies related to international students and social media. These reviews suggest that the area of international students and social media is promising for researchers due to the increased number of international students and the frequent use of social media by university students. Regarding the role of social media and the study abroad experience, it has been reported that they play a positive role in providing students with necessary academic and daily life information (Zhao, 2016). Sandel (2014) also reports that virtual communities can support international students with informational needs, psychological well-being, sociocultural skills and relational bonds. Along with the increased use of social media, it has been suggested by some studies (Alshehab, 2017; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Park, Song, & Lee, 2014; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014) that social media are involved in the students' journey and plays a role in their experience of transition. It can help in increasing the understanding of international students about their host country's culture and it may facilitate their social adjustment (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014). Furthermore, it was suggested by Alshehab (2017) that social media are helpful in facilitating international student's 'language adjustment'. Martin and Rizvi (2014) report that social media have a positive impact in increasing the sense of belonging for international students in the new society and country, when it is used to explore the new place and culture. For Chinese students in the US, Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) stated that social media can play a positive role in increasing students' academic and social engagement.

Despite the positive influence of social media on international students, it is important to acknowledge that social media may also negatively impact students' transition to overseas study. Guo, Li and Ito (2014) reported that social media can isolate the students from the new society and make them more distracted. Social media can separate the students from their new offline community and this can negatively affect their social engagement with the new society (Martin & Rizvi, 2014). Although there is much literature about social media and international students, little of this seems to have been focused on the specific context of transition. Furthermore, the relationship between the students' physical move and their digital one on social media also requires further investigation. Digital transition on social media can occur as a result of the

student's physical move. This transition involves various forms of change, such as changes in the posted content, frequency of posting or also sentiment of posting. In various contexts of transition (e.g. study to employability, high school to university) the relationship between social media and life transitions have been considered and discussed. For example, various researchers (Haimson, Andalibi, De Choudhury, & Hayes, 2018; Herron, Moncur, & Van Den Hoven, 2016; Moncur, Gibson, & Herron, 2016) investigated transitions in relationship breakups and social media while others (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012) focused on social media and students transitioning from high school to university. However, given that none of the previous studies have investigated this type of transition, the digital transition on social media, in the context of international students, this is another goal of this research.

#### 1.1.4 Summary

Therefore, the number of international students is increasing and this trend keeps growing, as shown in Figure 1.1. It can also be noted that although the Saudi student experience seems to be fairly typical with other nationalities, there seems to be some other dimensions that are unique and worth investigation. There is also an absence of the Saudi student voice in the literature of international students. Another motivation to focus on the Saudi students in the UK is that the researcher is a Saudi international student in the UK and he is familiar with the culture, language and circumstances of the participants. This has helped provide a deeper understanding of the research topic. However, the researcher has also ensured that confirmability is maintained, more details about this are provided in Section 3.7. Focusing on this group of students does not only add knowledge to the Saudi international students' literature but also to the international student transition literature. Reviewing the literature has shown that international students' transition needs more investigation. A more holistic observation is required about how the students' experience is shaped, how the experience can be characterised and what type of transitions students go through. Furthermore, and as shown previously, there is an ongoing debate about the role of social media in the students' transition experience, however, there is still a need for further studies in this area to be conducted. It is also unclear how the students'

physical move to the host country can impact on their social media practice. See literature review for an extended discussion about the limitations in the existing literature.

## 1.2 Research aim, objectives and questions

The overall aim of this research is to investigate what are Saudi students' experiences of the transitions to study in the UK and the role played by social media. This aim is achieved by the following objectives and questions:

### **Research objectives**

- Objective 1: To uncover potential gaps in literature by undertaking a comprehensive literature review.
- Objective 2: To gain a rich understanding of Saudi students' transition experience, the international students' transition, the use of social media during transition and the concept of transition as a whole by collecting and analysing in-depth interview data.
- Objective 3: To extend the findings from the interviews by collecting Twitter data from the same students and applying content and sentiment analysis.
- Objective 4: To build a theory about international students' transition by integrating the findings from the two methods with the literature.

### **Research questions**

This research answers the following questions:

- What motivates Saudi students to study abroad and why do they choose the UK?
- In the context of the Saudi student experience:
  - What types of transitions do international students go through during their experience of studying abroad?

- What are the characteristics of the transitions that international students experience when studying abroad?
- Do international students make a digital transition in their social media use during their transition experience and do social media play a positive or negative role in their experience?

### 1.3 Importance of the study

This research is important for five reasons. First, this study focuses on Saudi students abroad. As previously stated in Section 1.1.1, there is a high number of Saudi students studying overseas and there is an absence of the Saudi students' voice in the literature. These students have special circumstances (e.g. being Muslims, having a totally different cultural background) that make their experience more interesting. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, none of the previous studies has looked to the Saudi students experience from the lens of transition. Studies are usually sophisticated on the academic (AL-Remaih, 2016; Sendi, 2019), social (AL-Remaih, 2016) or cultural (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015; Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015) differences. There is a lack of studies covering all potential challenges or issues for the before and after arrival periods. This research is useful for the students themselves and the Saudi and UK organisations involved in the students' study abroad experience. Outcomes of this research can also be in benefit of other international students from different nationalities but share similar circumstances.

Second, as presented in Section 1.1.1, international students' mobility keeps growing every year. Therefore, it is important to develop knowledge of how their transition experience is characterised, what are the challenges and opportunities that are involved. There is a lack of studies focusing on the whole experience of international students' transition. Thus, this research will fill this gap and make a holistic investigation of the phenomenon. A further strength of this research is that it listens to the students' voices about their experiences of transition. It has been argued that in general transitions are interpreted from an institutional perspective, and students

are portrayed as powerless and perhaps does not relate to what is expected of them (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett & Winstone, 2021). Winstone and Hulme (2019) stated that 'examining students' expectations in the context of their lived realities provides insight into important dimensions of the transition experience' (p. 12). This research aims to achieve this by representing the students' perspectives. At the end of this research, a set of policy guidelines and practical recommendations will be given to the students themselves, and those interacting with international students, in the home and host countries.

Third, this study could be important because it not only adds value to the understanding of the international student transition, but also the transition concept as a whole. Through the comparison of various literature, knowledge gained from a specific transition case (e.g. transition to university, employability, high school, from single to married) can also contribute to other forms of transitions and the main concept of transition. This is due to the similarities between different transition contexts. As will be demonstrated in chapter 2, there is a need for further research in the transition concept as a whole, and this research is important because it can alleviate this need.

Fourth, the use of social media has dramatically increased in recent years (Statista, 2020). In previous studies, researchers have shown a relationship between social media and the students' transition experience. However, how this relationship is characterised and how the students' physical move can impact on their social media practice is not fully understood. Furthermore, the role of social media in the whole experience of students' transition also needs further exploration. This study aims to provide insights into these gaps, and its outcomes can benefit international students and the education organisations in home and host countries on how to utilise social media to their advantage.



Fifth, using social media data to investigate a social phenomenon is a new trend in social science research (Felt, 2016). This research will rely on two data sources, interviews and Twitter. In addition to the new angle that this combination of research methods has provided, this research is also important because it provided rich details of how data from the second method are collected, analysed and presented. These details are helpful and aim to add value for future researchers who want to rely on similar data sources.

#### 1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis consists of seven chapters as follows:

**Chapter 1: Introduction.** This chapter provides a general outline, discussion and rationale for this research followed by its aim, objectives, research questions and importance.

**Chapter 2: Literature review.** This chapter provides a theoretical discussion of different conceptualisations concerning the transition concept, international student transition, social media and international students and the Saudi students transition. At the end of this chapter, a focused synthesis of the most relevant literature is conducted and gaps in the existing literature are highlighted.

**Chapter 3: Methodology.** This chapter starts by discussing the research paradigm that guides this study. It then provides justifications and details of why and how each method in this study was used: semi-structured interviews and content analysis and sentiment analysis. At the end of this chapter, ethical issues relating to the research methods are presented, and the various research quality techniques, (e.g. credibility, transferability) used in this study to ensure trustworthiness, are reported.

**Chapter 4: Interviews findings.** This chapter provides findings of the first method in this research, the semi-structured interviews. The experiences of seventeen Saudi international students who were planning to study abroad or have arrived in the UK are presented. Findings from all themes emerging from the thematic analysis of these interviews are presented and discussed.

**Chapter 5: Twitter findings.** This chapter reports on findings from the second research method used. Results emerging from the content and sentiment analysis of the first methods participants' timelines on Twitter are presented and discussed. This is followed by an interpretation of how the second method's findings can add value and be linked to the first method.

**Chapter 6: Discussion.** This chapter brings together findings from the previous two chapters and interprets and consolidates them in light of the literature review. Findings of this study were compared with the literature regarding transition, international students' transition and international students and social media.

**Chapter 7: Conclusion.** This chapter provides a summary of this study by re-visiting its research questions and shows its theoretical, empirical and methodological contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Practical recommendations for international students themselves and for those interacting with international students in the home and host countries are provided alongside the limitations of this work and suggestions for future researchers.

## 1.5 Summary

This chapter has introduced the proposed research by setting out the overall background, the research aim, questions and objectives. It also presented the importance of conducting this study and how it is structured. The next chapter will provide a comprehensive review of literature related to this research topic in order to identify gaps in the current knowledge.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Chapter overview

This chapter provided a theoretical discussion and a critical review of literature concerning the transition concept, international students' transition, social media and international students and Saudi students' transition. First, it conceptualised the transition concept as a whole, providing a critical analysis of literature and theories in this area. It then discussed the internationalisation of higher education focusing on the international students' transition aspect. The following section examined literature related to international students' use of social media. Finally, a focused synthesis of the most relevant literature was conducted and gaps in the existing literature were highlighted.

Before going through this chapter, it is important to mention how the literature search strategy was conducted and when and how this chapter was updated. A wide range of databases were used such as Web of Science, Scopus and Springer Link; and Google Scholar was employed to access these databases. Different search terms were used when searching the literature, including: 'transition', 'internationalisation of higher education', 'international students' transition', 'Saudi students' transition', 'Saudi students in the UK', 'social media and international students' and 'Saudi international students and social media'. This literature review chapter was updated continuously after the first year, after the data analysis and during writing the discussion chapter.

### 2.2 Conceptualising the transition

The traditional perspective of transition presumed that individuals moving from one state to another (e.g. childhood to adulthood, single to married) usually go through three phases: 'separation', before the move; 'liminality', a state in between the before and after; and 'aggregation', after the move (Beech, 2011). However, according to Jindal-Snape (2016) this linear and sequential approach does not fully capture the complexity of the transition concept and argues that the transition is a complicated experience consisting of multiple domains and

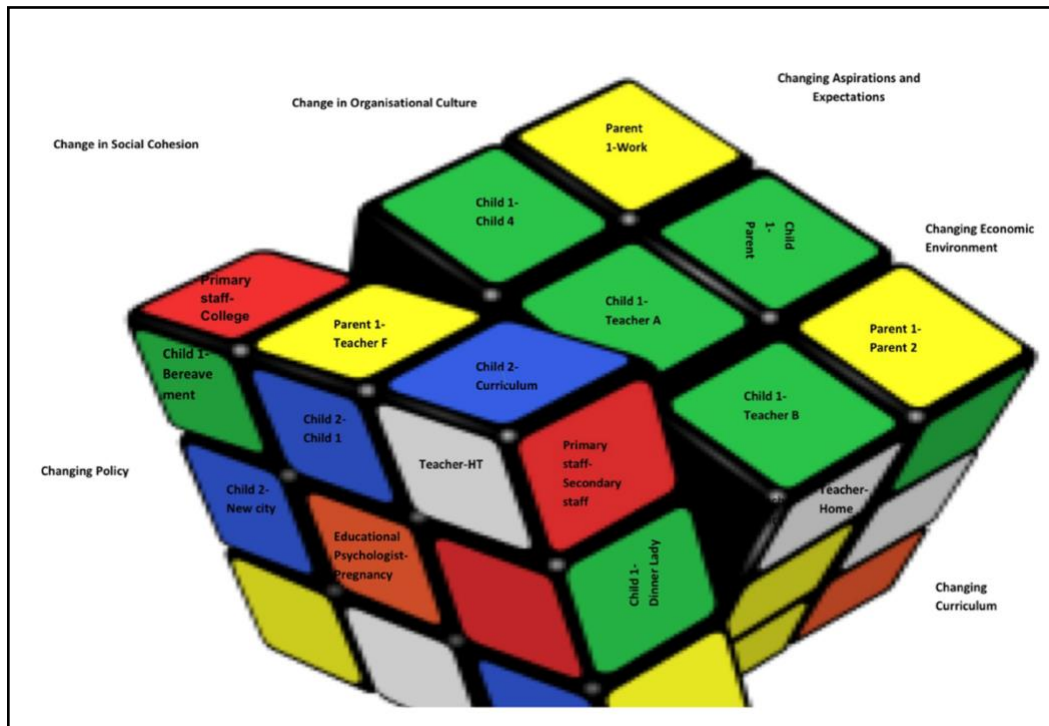
involving different factors. Based on this perspective, Jindal-Snape (2016) defined the concept of transition as ‘an ongoing process that involves moving from one context and set of interpersonal relationships to another’ (p. 11). This move can involve a variety of changes such as psychological, educational, social and cultural. They come about as a result of adjustments to the individuals’ identity and interpersonal relationships and context (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Covering the different types of changes, Prescott and Hellsten (2005) argued that the transition ‘indicates the progression from familiar to the unknown and involves the adoption of new challenges culturally, socially, and cognitively’ (p. 2).

Therefore, the transition is an ‘ongoing’ process consisting of different activities, not a one-off event. One such example is when children make the transition from secondary to high school. This starts with students visiting potential schools and attending induction days. Activities continue after the students move to their new school and begin making social connections (Jindal-Snape, 2016). However, it should be acknowledged that transition is a nonlinear experience meaning that, although children may feel they have adjusted, they only later realise that they have not. Therefore, acknowledging the non-linear nature of transition is important. The multiple domains that individuals inhabit are usually dependent on the context (Gordon et al., 2017, 2020). For example, from the perspective of students moving to higher education this can involve moving to a new city, a new organisational culture and starting a new academic level (Jindal-Snape, 2012).

In the context of transition, Jindal-Snape (2016) developed the Multiple and Multidimensional Transition theory (MMT). This suggests that multiple transitions are experienced by individuals simultaneously. It also presumes that these transitions can trigger and overlap with each other or with transitions of other individuals (Jindal-Snape, 2016). This MMT theory was visualised by Jindal-Snape (2016) as a Rubik’s cube where each colour represents one person and their interactions with others (as shown in Figure 2.1). When a change happens to this person this change can trigger changes in the whole area and for other actors in the process. Therefore, the

visualisation in Rubik's cube highlights the complexity and multiple layers of transition. It can also show that individuals' transitions can happen within a wide range of changes in the social, cultural and policies changes (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016).

Figure 2.1 MMT model. Adapted from Jindal-Snape (2012), as cited in Jindal-Snape and Hannah (2014)



One of the strengths of the MMT theory was that it not only covers the individuals experience, but rather it included other actors in the process (e.g., family members) (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Other individuals can simultaneously experience a transition either as a result of the main actor transition or because they have their own motivations for transition (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Zhou, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2011). An example of this is when an international student moves abroad to study with their family. The transition of this student can trigger the transitions of their family members as their children will need change schools and their spouse may need to quit work in the home country. Furthermore, the student will start to interact with other international students who also experience transition having just arrived from

their home country. In this case, the transition of the main actor has triggered their family members' transition and also interacted with other students who are also experiencing their own transition (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Gordon et al. (2020) highlighted how the trainee to trained transition can have changes in the context of 'individual's homes' where moving to a new place and having a new role can have an effect on significant others.

Several researchers have applied the MMT theory empirically, for example Gordon et al. (2017) who adopted the MMT theory as a conceptual framework in their study. The aim of their study was to explore the trainee to trained doctor transition, identify the different transitions involved and investigate their effects on the whole experience. They conducted longitudinal interviews with 20 trainee doctors in two stages. Findings revealed that participants went through various simultaneous transitions, both negative, positive, predicted or unpredicted transitions. They also found that these transitions can be workplace transitions such as moving to new system and starting a new role; or they could be a home-related transition such as leaving home. Additionally, Jindal-Snape et al. (2019) also conducted a study to explore the multiple and multidimensional transitions of young adults with life-threatening conditions. They carried out their study based on the main idea of MMT that individuals face multiple transitions simultaneously and their transition can motivate the transition of significant others. Therefore, this study made a holistic overview of the transitions experienced by young adults with life-limiting health conditions, life transitions including health, social or educational transitions. They also included the transition of significant others (families and professionals) in the investigation. This study confirmed the notion of MMT that individuals usually go through multiple transitions simultaneously. It found that in addition to the health transition, other social, educational and developmental transitions can also happen. These transitions may also overlap and interact, which also confirm the previous assumption by Jindal-Snape (2016).

Transitions can be positive exciting, negative challenging or both for an individual at the same time (Jindal-Snape, 2018; Rienties & Hosein, 2020). However, the context of the transition is

fundamental in identifying whether the transition experience is positive, negative or mixed feelings (Jindal-Snape, 2018). One of the factors that can help individuals to achieve a smoother and positive transition is willingness and resilience to face new changes (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). This usually requires a readiness and continuous adaptation to the new changes and continuous social support (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Newman & Blackburn, 2002; Zhou et al., 2011).

Although the MMT model was considered to be the first model to highlight the complexity and multidimensionality of transition, it still requires further refinement and discussion. This model seems to be focused on the multidimensional nature of transition, such as the multiple simultaneous transitions and multiple individuals involved. However, other aspects of transition also require further investigation. These aspects include the period of transitions, when transitions start and end; the emotions, whether it is a positive, negative or mixed feelings experience; expectation and reality, whether new changes are expected to individuals or not; and inequality in the transition, is there a conflict of inequality in the process. These aspects had little or no attention in the MMT. Another clear weakness in this theory is its linear nature. This model looks at individuals as one object and treats them equally. Individuals facing any sort of transition in their life have different characteristics such as gender, cultural background and previous experience of similar transitions which affect the individual's experience of transition. Acknowledging such characteristics is required. For example, looking at the international students' context can show that the age, gender or nationality are critical factors in their experience. Moreover, the relationship between the international students' transition experience and the cultural background is crucial (Ward, 2001). Furthermore, this theory does not seem to address that the individual experience is seen as shaped by wider social structure such as inequality (Gale & Parker, 2014). Therefore, the aspect that different characteristics of different individuals can impact on their experience when they face the same or different transitions still require more investigation and call further research. Another area in the MMT theory that requires more emphasis and explanation is the dimensions within the whole transition, potential types of transitions that individuals face in different contexts. The

relationship between dimensions within the same transition also needs to be identified, how they occur simultaneously, whether they overlap and are there key ones. Reviewing the literature in the transition area highlighted a lack of empirical studies which focus on the whole experience of transition for a specific context. This can warrant further research in different context of transition to be conducted. Section 2.3.5 focuses on the international students' transition and present and discuss literature in this area.

### 2.3 Internationalisation of higher education

Today, universities are no longer purely localised and self-enclosed institutions; Internationalisation has become an important feature of higher education (Qiang, 2003). There has been a massive increase in internationally-oriented activities in higher education around the world, such as encouraging students to go overseas for study, enhancing students' knowledge of different cultures, developing foreign language courses, supporting mobility of academic staff and conducting cross-country research collaborations (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chan, 2007).

Although there is a strong relationship between globalisation and internationalisation in higher education, they are different things (Altbach & Knight, 2007). A general definition of internationalisation in higher education is that it refers to 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education' (Knight, 2015b, p. 2). Globalisation, on the other hand, is related to characteristics of the twenty-first century such as new communication technologies that have motivated a more global outlook in higher education (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Internationalisation is, therefore, a consequence of globalisation (Qiang, 2003). According to Knight (2015) and Qiang (2003), it is difficult to settle on a single understanding of internationalisation in an education context because of the complex factors of culture and national characteristics encountered in applying the concept. However, the main activities of internationalisation in higher education include sending and recruiting international students, global collaboration in research, and mobility of academic staff (Morris, 2010).



In the case of what motivates internationalisation in higher education, Morris (2010) listed four factors of motivation. These are: worldwide integration in other areas such as commerce, health and policies; universities' desire to be up-to-date in teaching methods and research; universities' attempt to bring students' proficient to international levels or standards in order to work globally; and universities' academic, political and social objectives. Harry (1999) argues that governments, higher education organisations and universities attempt to internationalise educational systems fall into four categories: political, economic, academic and cultural or social.

Politically, some governments have used internationalisation in higher education as a way to become open to other countries and engage in global development. For example, it has been argued that the goal of one of Saudi Arabia's most popular scholarship programmes, the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme (KASP), is political: the Saudi government intends to create connections with other Western countries through this programme (Hilal, Scott & Maadad, 2015). Host countries in international exchanges also benefit from 'soft diplomacy' because international students are culturally and professionally affected by their experiences in the host country and return home maintaining a link to the country (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015).

From an economic perspective, it has been argued that internationalisation can improve the quality of teaching and training of students allowing them to work globally (Morris, 2010) and brings added income to educational organisations from international students' tuition fees and other expenditures (Morris, 2010; Qiang, 2003). In the academic sector, the internationalisation of higher education can make positive impact on universities. The combination of students from different backgrounds and cultures internationalises a university campus and increase the home students' awareness of other cultures (Harry, 1999). However, it should be acknowledged that there are different perspectives on internationalisation. For example, some researchers see it as an essentially economic concept, whereas others see it as an approach to transforming higher

education (Chan, 2007). This research will follow the latter perspective in viewing this concept, but it will also acknowledge the economic basis and effects of internationalisation.

As noted above, sending and recruiting international students is one of the main features shaping the internationalisation concept (Harry, 1999; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Qiang, 2003; Thanh, 2016). The following sections examine this practice and highlight its motivations, issues and challenges.

### 2.3.1 International students' motivations

It has been argued that the experience of studying abroad is surrounded with 'push and pull' factors (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors affect students in the early stages when they start thinking about going abroad and leaving their home countries. They are the factors pushing the student to take the experience of study abroad. Pull factors are those related to the selection of a destination, institution or specific programme of study (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Krzaklewska, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The objectives of studying abroad for international students are not only restricted to their academic and professional improvement but also their personal and cultural development (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Irwin & Hatch, 1960). A study by Bokareva (2014), on 149 Russian students between age 17 and 28, found that 118 (79%) had an intention to study abroad. Of these students intending to study abroad, results showed that the top motivations were to engage with a new culture, to obtain a qualification from a different country and to become an immigrant in a new country.

Another study examined the motivations of Erasmus students, an exchange programme created in 1987 allowing European students to study abroad for a period between 2 and 12 months

(Erasmus Student Network, 2020). In the study, Krzaklewska (2008) illustrated four main factors motivating students to take part in the programme. The first is academic, wherein students want to engage in a new academic system and compare it with their home country system. The second motivation is language, based on students' desire to develop their linguistic skills of a host country's language. The third is cultural, living in a new country with a different culture and environment will help students to know more about others and be aware of different cultures. The final factor is personal, based on students' desire to develop their personal skills, socialise with new people and make new friends from different cultures or countries. This supports another finding by Hadis (2005) who noted that studying abroad had a very effective role in increasing students' 'independency' and 'open-mindedness'. More than 90% of the participants agreed that overseas study helped them to increase their awareness of other cultures and to be open to others' ideas. Furthermore, approximately 80% agreed that their experience made them stronger in making decisions and less dependent on others.

For African students in the UK, Maringe and Carter (2007) investigated their experiences of overseas study and how they make decisions on the destination, university and programme of study. One of the questions was related to why students leave their home country and decide to study in the UK. One emergent theme was economic: some students wanted to leave their home country to get away from poor conditions and others mentioned the value of a qualification from the UK. They stated that some employers in Africa consider UK qualifications as stronger than those gained in Africa, therefore, improving their future employment prospects. The next theme was political, wherein the uncertainty and confusion in some African countries led students to seek a safer and more comfortable environment. The last theme that emerged was the lack of higher educational institution opportunities in the home countries, where the increasing number of high school graduates encounter shortages in the available seats in universities. The findings of Maringe and Carter (2007) supported those by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), who argued that economic and social factors push students out of their country.

Yakaboski, Perez-Velez, and Almutairi (2017) highlighted that for some Saudi international students with scholarships from their country, their decision to study abroad was driven by the fact that they had no choice. The absence of programmes and qualifications in Saudi Arabia, especially for Master's and PhD programmes, led these students to leave their country to study. The Saudi government and employers, who usually belong to the government, consider this a way to transfer knowledge, because students' scholarships usually have the condition of returning to the home country to work after the programme (Yakaboski et al., 2017). This was also supported by another study focused on the Saudi female students in Australia (Binsahl, Chang, & Bosua, 2019). The later study also added that the students' decision to study abroad can also be affected by their relatives. For example, a female student can be motivated to study abroad as a result of their husband's decision to go abroad.

As reported above, push factors for international students can be determined by the individuals, their home country or the host country. The academic push factor was noted in many studies (Bokareva, 2014; Krzaklewska, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Yakaboski et al., 2017). This factor might be based on the lack of higher education institutions in the home country (Maringe & Carter, 2007) or the absence of certain courses or programmes of studies (Yakaboski et al., 2017). It could also be due to students' desire to engage with a new academic system, as in the case with students in the Erasmus exchange programme (Krzaklewska, 2008). Another factor was culture, wherein students want to have the experience of engaging with different environments and people (Bokareva, 2014; Krzaklewska, 2008). Politics was also observed as a factor; this was observed in students who suffer from turmoil or uncertainty in their home country (Maringe & Carter, 2007). In some cases, it could also be related to the desire to immigrate to the host country (Bokareva, 2014). Other factors were also mentioned, such as potential economic improvement (students believing that an overseas qualification will help them to have a decent job), the ability to develop another language and the desire to improve personal skills (Krzaklewska, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007). This section covered what motivates international students to study abroad. The next section will represent challenges and issues faced by international students during their transition.

### 2.3.2 International students' challenges and difficulties

Study abroad for an international student is usually considered a major life change, bringing changes in the cultural, social, and academic environment (Chen, 1999; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Searle & Ward, 1990). International students face more challenges in adjusting to university compared with home students (Burns, 1991; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). It is very common for international students to suffer from various psychological issues (e.g. friendlessness, hopelessness, sadness or stress) during their adjustment to their new place (Andrade, 2006; Chen, 1999; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Wu et al., 2015). Ward, Bochner and Adrian (2001) divided the challenges chronologically into two phases: in the first four to six months of a sojourn, adjustment challenges occur; later, 'non-cultural' challenges, such as academic challenges, start to dominate. This section will highlight the challenges associated with international students' experience. Before going further into this section, it is important to mention that the challenges from the main stakeholder's point of view, the student, will be covered. Challenges related to the host or home countries will not be considered.

An essential factor in communicating with people from a different nation or ethnicity is to have a good understanding of their language (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). A language barrier does more than limit the students' understanding of the course texts and lectures—it goes beyond that due to the very strong relationship between language and culture. Having a language as a second language limits a student's awareness of the implicit cultural assumptions in the foreign language (Koyama, 2007). The literature shows that for many international students, the foreign language is one of the main obstacles hindering their adjustment to the host country and limiting their academic performance (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Brown, 2008a; Chen, 1999; Robertson et al., 2000; Zhai, 2002). Chen (1999) pointed out that foreign language was a key factor in academic and in social and cultural stresses. They argued that international students' level of English correlates with their self-confidence in tackling new challenges. The higher the proficiency, the less academic and social and cultural stress they encounter. Brown (2008a) added that although

international students in the UK are required to obtain a certain level of English language to start their study, weakness in English has been found as a barrier that limits them from engaging with the new society. This usually occurs at the beginning of a student's sojourn and brings anxiety and fears regarding communicating (either academically or socially) with others in a different language. 'Language shock' is a feature of the culture shock that usually happens to students in their transition to a new environment (Storti, 2011). Culture shock will be discussed in detail later in Section 2.3.5.

Johnson (1988) investigated the relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement for international students in an English-language speaking country. Johnson (1988) conducted the study with 196 international postgraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay in the US, examining the relationship between the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score and the students' academic success demonstrated by their Grade Point Average (GPA). They concluded that the overall TOEFL and GPA scores were positively correlated. This correlation was seen with all TOEFL component scores apart from the listening score. This can support another study by Light, Xu and Mossop (1987), which mentions that the listening skill is not a very important factor in the academic success of an international student. Trice (2003) observed the challenges of international students from the perspective of the academic staff at a Midwestern research university in the US and found that English language was the most mentioned issue. Faculty members stated that a deficiency in the English language could negatively affect international students' academic performance, especially in activities that require students to communicate such as group work and presentations. A low level of language was also an important factor in other issues such the segregation between home and international students.

For other academic-related issues, international students' differences in educational background can be a problem. For example, students who come from Eastern countries are familiar with a collectivist way of learning while the method of teaching in the West is more individualist

(Kingston & Forland, 2008). As a consequence, Eastern students who study in the West find themselves in a new academic system that requires them to adjust. Burns (1991) conducted a study based on 133 international students from three Asian countries during their first year in an Australian university. In terms of differences in teaching style, Burns (1991) mentioned the 'study shock' that usually happens to students from Asian countries. In the Western education system, students are expected to participate, make arguments and be more independent. In academic writing, the Western style focuses more on synthesis and critique. Students are required to combine many ideas and arguments and discuss and critique them, which is not the case in the Eastern writing style. This leads to conflict and a lack of confidence for some international students. In another study, Durkin (2008) added that international students usually find it difficult to insert their opinions or make arguments within their research. Burns (1991) also added that international students face more stresses than their home peers and universities shall be aware of this and provide more academic and social support.

Chen (1999) classified the stresses faced by international students into two themes, academic stresses and social and cultural stresses. Academically, moving to a new academic system creates stress for students, especially in the different ways that classes, activities and assessments are conducted compared to their home country. This was also reported by Bamford (2008), who mentioned that changes in learning style is one of the difficulties that international students face. For instance, students who come from some Eastern countries face difficulties with the independence expected at a Western university. Chen (1999) states that students who are not doing well academically are more likely to be stressed and poorly adapted to their new place. Low academic performance also puts students under pressure with their family and friends.

Regarding social and cultural stress, Chen (1999), McLachlan and Justice (2009) and Ward et al. (2001) stated that international students can go through a phase of feeling isolated, especially at the beginning of their experience. Wu et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the issues and challenges of international students' adjustment to the US. They found that

challenges and issues are mainly divided into three domains: academic, cultural and social. Most of their research findings were reported previously in different studies (such as Bamford, 2008; Burns, 1991; Chen, 1999; Trice, 2003). For social challenges, many students acknowledged difficulties forming relationships or making friends in a host country. Consequently, many students find themselves socially isolated, especially if they have no family members nearby. This isolation could be attributed to different ways of communication. Students may not know how to react in social situations. For example, some students reported differences in gifting interactions when they reacted based on their culture which caused some awkwardness. Regarding cultural challenges, some of the international students mentioned that American students were somewhat ignorant of other cultures and international students were stereotyped. Chen (1999) also added that racial discrimination is a major issue affecting students' overall experiences. A limitation that should be acknowledged that Wu et al., (2015) relies on a limited number of interviewees (10 students) from a single university.

McLachlan and Justice (2009) conducted a study to investigate the experiences of international students and what they do to survive during their life in the US. In the study, they started with the challenges of 'change overload', such as changes in atmosphere, food and the social and academic environments. All of the respondents agreed that once they arrived in the US, they had to adjust to the weather. Regarding the change of food, students stated that they had to adapt to the American style of food, particularly its large portions. Many students mentioned that they usually cook their own country's food rather than buying American food, especially when they feel homesick. This study also mentioned some other challenges such as social isolation, driven by a weakness in the host country language. A low level of competency in the host country language also reduces students' academic performance and causes them discomfort, especially at the beginning of their sojourn. However, even if some of the results from this study are supported by other studies (Brown, 2008a; Chen, 1999; Trice, 2003), it should be noted that the sample included students at a single university.



In summary, this review showed that international students' challenges and difficulties are mainly divided into three categories: academic, social and cultural (Andrade, 2006; Chen, 1999; Wu et al., 2015). The host language is a challenge for both academic achievement and social and cultural adjustment (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Brown, 2008a; Chen, 1999; Johnson, 1988; Light et al., 1987; Robertson et al., 2000; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Trice, 2003; Zhai, 2002). With respect to language and academic performance, weakness in the host country's language was found to be a barrier limiting students' academic achievement, especially in those activities that require communication (Brown, 2008a; Johnson, 1988; Light et al., 1987; Trice, 2003). Poor competence in the host country's language also affects students' engagement with society and leading to isolation (Brown, 2008a). Besides the foreign language, other academic challenges are also reported, for example, understanding new learning styles in which students are required to become more independent, participate in class and follow certain requirements in their academic writing (Burns, 1991; Chen, 1999; Durkin, 2008). With respect to social and cultural challenges, a considerable number of international students acknowledge that it is not easy to form relationships in the host country due to differences in culture, beliefs, and ways of communication. As a consequence, many students find themselves lonely and socially isolated (Chen, 1999; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Ward et al., 2001; Wu et al., 2015). Additionally, change in food and weather are also challenges for international students (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Finally, students acknowledged other cultural challenges, such as being stereotyped (Wu et al., 2015). After presenting those difficulties and challenges, it should be noted that international students differ in their acceptance of difficulties and challenges. Robertson et al., (2000) argues that each individual has their own characteristics in dealing with issues.

### 2.3.3 Saudi students as international students

Saudi Arabia is making a significant effort to improve its education system (Ministry of Education, 2021). Saudi Arabia has planned to spend more than 186 billion Saudi Riyal ( $\approx$  £37 billion) on Education in 2021, representing more than 20% of its overall budget (Ministry of Finance, 2021). This percentage is estimated to grow in the coming years, since the Saudi Vision 2030 sets out improvements and more spending on the education sector (Education and Vision 2030, 2020).

In terms of international students, the Saudi government clearly identified that one of the plans to improve the economic development is to send students to study at high-quality international universities (Abouammoh, Smith, & Duwais, 2014). In 2020, there were more than 95,000 Saudi students pursuing their higher education abroad, with the UK being a top destination (Ministry of Education, 2021). Abouammoh, Smith, and Duwais (2014) identified four reasons why the Saudi government encourages students to study abroad: (1) to enable Saudi students to study courses that are not provided, or not widely provided, in Saudi Arabia and which will play a role in knowledge transfer to the country; (2) to support the local economy by providing it with labour needs; (3) to provide an opportunity for students to study at high standard universities; and (4) to encourage Saudi students to engage with people from different backgrounds and cultures. In the UK, Saudi Arabia is one of the top seven non-EU home countries for international students and accounts for approximately 9,000 students in UK higher education in 2019/20 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021).

Compared to other international students, the Saudi students' study abroad experience can be fairly different (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Alshehab, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). When a Saudi student moves to study abroad, this means moving from a country with a wholly Muslim population to a country with, usually, a diversity of religions. This also implies moving from a social environment ruled by Islamic regulations or derived from tribal and cultural traditions (Arafah, 2017). There is a strong relationship between Islamic and Arab traditions and social life in Saudi Arabia (Heyn, 2013).

Differences in the social setting that Saudi students face include differences in gender roles. Al-Hazmi and Nyland (2010) stated that it is culturally known in Saudi Arabia that males take on more responsibilities for their family members, and females usually depend on them. In the international study context, responsibilities include sorting out things in the new place after arrival and the day-to-day activities (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Therefore, Saudi students may face challenges either in re-adjusting their roles in the new context or in interacting with other

individuals or families with different gender roles. Another social difference is related to the mahram tradition which concerns females in Saudi Arabia. The Mahram is a cultural tradition in which women usually cannot travel unless they have a male companion. This male is called Mahram and can be either a father, brother or husband (AL-Remaih, 2016; Arafah, 2017). The female student who believes, or from a family who believes, in this assumption has this as a condition for their study abroad experience.

It has been argued that Saudi students experience a huge cultural difference when they study abroad (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Alsaifi & Shin, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). Saudi Arabia is considered as a country with a high degree of collectivism because of its attachment to its traditions and social values (Long, 2005). These traditions and values emphasise the importance of family as the main social institution (Long & Maisel, 2010). When Saudi students study abroad they usually come with pre-conceived collectivist behaviour towards their social relationships (Caldwell-Harris & Ayçiçeği, 2006). However, the destination countries, usually western, are usually categorised as individualist societies and this can create a conflict in the students' experience (Heyn, 2013). Darwish and Huber (2010) claimed that living in a different social type than what the individual hold can cause depression and social anxiety. Auyeung and Sands (1996) added that it negatively affects the individuals' ability to create new connections in the host country.

Another potential challenge that Saudi students face can be motivated by some people at the host country as a result of the cultural differences. Stereotypes and misconceptions that some people in the host country hold about Saudi students and society can cause frustrations (Arafah, 2017). According to Poyrazli and Damian Lopez (2007), the visible differences in international students such as colour, accent and appearance can lead to discrimination and pre-judgment by some people in host countries. Saudi females, in particular, visibly Muslim due to their headscarf (hijab), can be at risk of this discrimination. AL-Remaih (2016), who investigated Saudi female perspectives about the social and cultural challenges in the US, argued that wearing

a hijab in the host country for some participants caused harsh social judgment based on their appearance.

Most Saudi international students are sponsored either by their home employer or a government sponsorship programme (Ministry of Education, 2021). This highlights another difference of this group who may have fewer financial issues and challenges in their study abroad experience (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010). However, a key aspect here is that Saudi students, because they are sponsored by their home government or institutions, are usually required to adhere to the obligation to return home to serve in the government or work in their institution after pursuing their education abroad and this, somehow, can impact on how the students observe their experience.

Another challenge that Saudi student face when moving abroad is the language difference. It has been argued that the Arabic language 'differs greatly' from the English. This is because it has different grammars, different direction in writing (from right to left), and different letters shapes (Heyn, 2013). Therefore, for some Saudi students this can be a major concern in their study abroad experience (Auty, Harris, & Holes, 1993).

In summary, although all international students are characterised by some common features, Saudi students can have some specific characteristics and challenges in their experience of studying abroad. The literature in this section has shown how students from Saudi Arabia can have further challenges when moving from their Muslim Arabic society to a multi-religious English-speaking environment. Differences can also be triggered by moving from a collectivist to an individualist society. Although some studies focus on the Saudi students' study abroad experience (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Arafah, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Taj, 2017; Yakaboski et al., 2017), this area stills need further exploration and discussion, therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap.

#### 2.3.4 The UK as a host country for international students

As mentioned previously, the selection of the destination of study is one of the major decisions that international students should make prior to their departure (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Krzaklewska, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Becker and Kolster (2012) concluded that there are two main factors pulling students to a host country: the reputation of the education system in the host country and student perceptions of the country.

Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) presented three factors behind the dominance of the US, the UK, and Australia as the top target countries for international students. First, these English-speaking countries have experience in hosting students from various countries and cultures. Second, they actively recruit and have a system to maintain constant growth. They have succeeded in targeting and attracting the top two sending countries, China and India (Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education, 2021). Third, universities in these countries have effective 'marketing strategies' to recruit more students. Ammon (2001) states that being an English-speaking country is a key factor in the dominance of these countries in pulling students. Since English is considered a language of science and international communication, it attracts students to these countries. Maringe and Carter (2007) studied the pull and push factors associated with African students in the UK. For many students, they pointed out three causes behind choosing the UK as a study destination: first, the good reputation of UK qualifications in the students' home country; second, the easy process of applying for a course or programme of study in the UK compared to other countries, like the US; and third, the good perception of the academic environment in the UK.

The UK is ranked second in receiving international students behind the US with approximately 666,000 students in 2020/21 (Universities UK, 2021). This number is more than treble that of 2001, when there were about 220,000 students (Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education, 2021). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2021) and UK Universities

(2021), in the UK, there are over 160 higher education providers and international students made up 20.7% of the total student population in 2020/2021.

International student recruitment was an important industry contributing to the UK economy (UK Universities, 2021). David Willetts, the Minister of State for Universities and Science (2010-2014) stated 'overseas students who come to Britain to study make a huge contribution to our economy. Each student in higher education on average pays fees of about £10,000 a year and spends more than this while they are here' (HM Government, 2013, p. 3). He also added: 'they boost the local economy where they study – as well as enhancing our cultural life, and broadening the educational experience of the UK students they study alongside' (HM Government, 2013, p. 3). In order to encourage international students to study in the UK, the strategy mentioned several efforts that need to be implemented. These include looking after students, encouraging their institutions to take care of their well-being, develop an effective immigration system and making changes to visa rules. In the 'five-years strategy' for recruiting international students, it was mentioned that the more the UK increases its universities' reputations, the more recruitment will be possible (Becker & Kolster, 2012).

#### 2.3.5 International students' transition

International student mobility continues to increase year by year. Starting a new academic stage, whether undergraduate or postgraduate is a challenging experience. However, for international students, it is more complex because they have to adapt to a new society, environment and culture in addition to their adapting to an academic environment (Arthur, 2003; Burns, 1991; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). During the their transition, international students may have the experience of feeling depressed, anxious, lonely and feel lost (Brown, 2008b; Zapf, 1991).

International students usually experience multiple transitions when they intend to make their physical move to the host country. They usually experience moving to a new place and environment and starting a new academic degree in a new education system. This is in addition to the changes of the social settings of students when they leave their home family and friends and start to create new social connections with people in the new place. Furthermore, students usually face new expected and unexpected changes in the new culture and policies in the new country and organisations (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Rienties et al., 2012; Rienties, Nanclares, et al., 2013). For doctoral international students, Jindal-Snape & Ingram (2013) defined students' experience as a 'triple transition' where students face three different transitions. First, they face differences associated with moving to the new country, second, they involve in a new academic system, third, they start a new academic stage with a different, more independent learning style. Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman (2008) stated that the students' expectations and reality about new academic and daily life in the host country can play a key role in their adaptation.

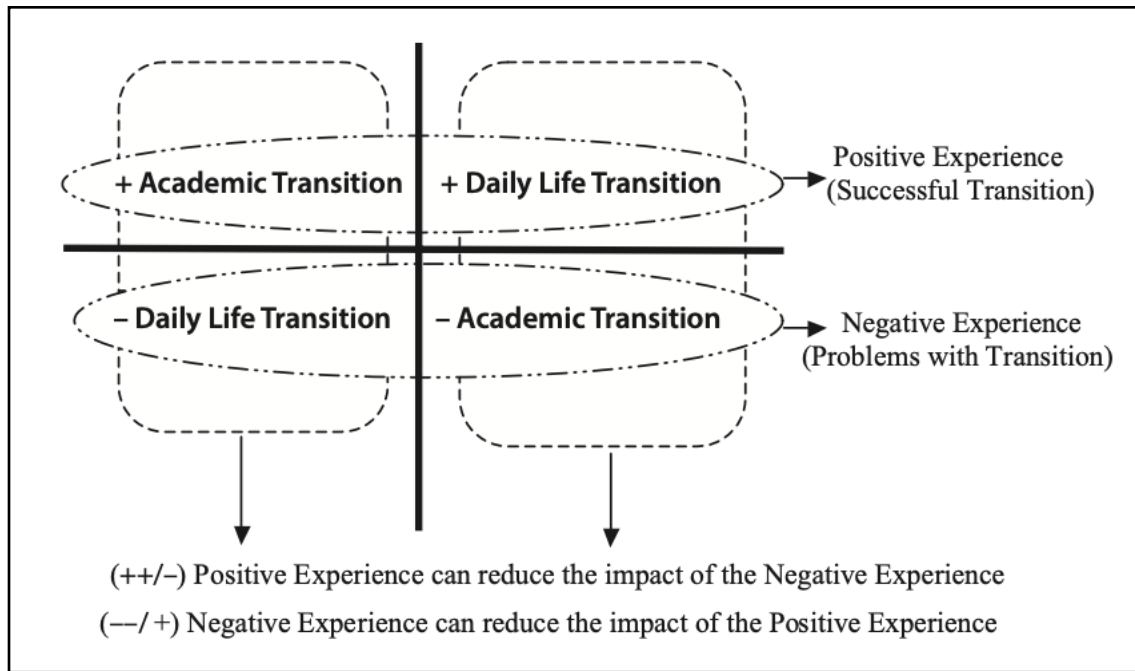
According to Jindal-Snape (2016), the student experience in the new host country can vary depending on various factors such as differences of the home and host conditions (e.g. cultural and languages differences) and the students' level of study and age. Similar to what has been highlighted in MMT, Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) argued that international students transition was found to affect the significant others such as family members and professionals in the host country in addition to the students themselves. Jindal-Snape & Rienties (2016) theorised the transition of international students as a whole to be a positive experience. This is because this experience satisfies the students' desire to study abroad, usually in a top ranked university. This usually gives the students some prestige while studying and privileges after graduation. However, this perspective of classifying the international student transition as a positive experience may fail to acknowledge the variety in students pushing factors. Some students may not necessarily have these personal motivations to study abroad, instead, they are pushed by their employer. Furthermore, there can also be some stresses associated with students' experience, such as challenges with social and cultural adaptation and the fear of failure. Gale and Parker (2014) claimed that the individual's experience of transition is seen as shaped by

wider social structures where public issues cause private troubles. All of this can show that the international student transition can be a multi-emotional experience, classified as a positive, negative or mixed feeling experience.

One model outlined in the cross-cultural and international students' transition theories is the Educational and Life Transitions (ELT) model (see Figure 2.2), similar to the MMT in its multiple and multidimensional notion (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). This model suggests that when international students move to the host country then they experience a different day-to-day transition in addition to the new educational experience. The daily life transitions can include those related to the social and cultural changes that international students face, while the educational transitions can include the academic and language changes (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). These transitions are associated with each other and have an impact on each other (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). They can also support each other. For example, when a student experiences transition and has positive academic progress this can support the negativity in the daily life transition. This can also smooth the overall experience of transition. On the other hand, when the same student is having daily life issues such as difficulties with finding accommodation or opening a bank account, then this can negatively affect their academic progress. However, a limitation of this model is that it seems to be focused on the emotional experience of students while transitioning. Furthermore, this model was built on a study focusing on PhD students, including other levels of study may make an impact on this model. Therefore, this model is less comprehensive compared with the MMT model.



Figure 2.2 ELT model. Adapted from Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013)

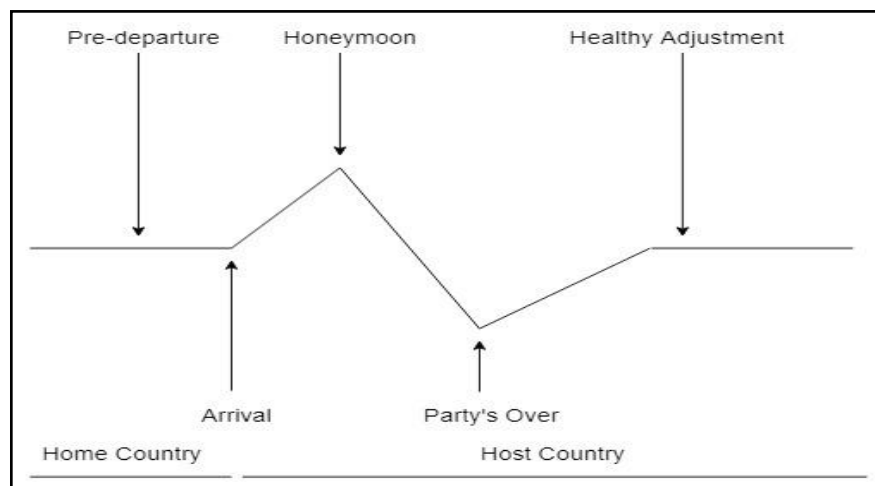


An important feature of this model is its dynamic nature, which means that individuals' experiences can change from one time to another during the students' transition period. For example, students who just arrived in the host country can be more concerned with the issues of daily life than educational issues. They usually become more preoccupied with organising accommodation, exploring public transportation options and registering with banks and local authorities (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Furthermore, the overall student experience can change according to the negativity and positivity in daily life and educational transitions.

Other literature theorised the international student experience as a standard or linear experience. Menzies and Baron (2014) suggests a model to explain the experience of international student transition based on phases adapted from an earlier study (Cieri, Dowling, & Taylor, 1991) that investigates the 'psychological adjustment' of professionals in a host country (see Figure 2.3). According to this model, the actual transition starts before departure, when the student starts realising the experience they are about to undertake. This phase may also include some preparations for the new place or environment, e.g. arranging for accommodation (Blue &

Haynes, 1977; Cieri et al., 1991). Then, there is the 'honeymoon' phase following arrival in the host country. This phase, as its name indicates, is when students are more likely to be enthusiastic about the new environment. Depending on the sojourner, this phase differs in its duration from several days to six months (Oberg, 1960). The 'party's over' phase then occurs, when students are culturally and academically in shock, which can lead them to depression and anxiety (Brown, 2008b; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Zapf, 1991). The last phase is the 'healthy adjustment' phase which happens when the students become accustomed to the new place and environment and return to normality (Menzies & Baron, 2014).

Figure 2.3 International Students' Adjustment to the Host Country. Adapted from Menzies and Baron (2014)



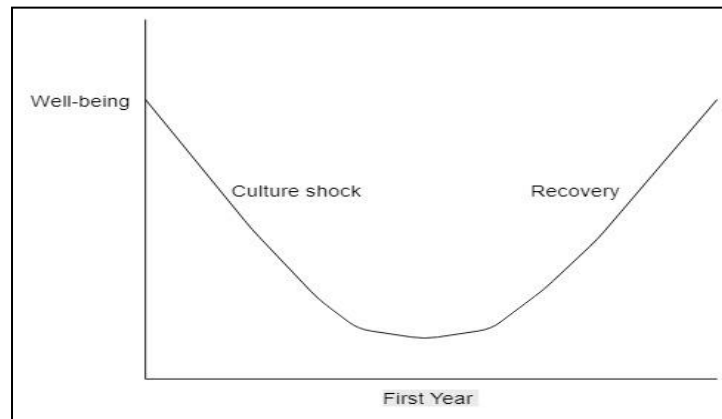
As the model can be seen rather optimistic, Blue and Horizons, (1977) added a further phase after the 'party's over' phase and before the 'healthy adjustment' phase. They posit that sojourner may fail to adjust and their situation can deteriorate leading to a 'crisis' phase which implies the students' failure and they return home. Other studies (Biddle, 2013; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Ward et al., 2001) dispute this and argue that the stress and negative mood appear immediately after arrival. They added that there can be a period of happiness and enthusiasm at the beginning, but it is shorter than the negative period. Another point to mention is that this model presumes that students in the 'healthy adjustment' phase will return to a neutral or balanced psychological state. However, being in the healthy adjustment phase does not necessarily guarantee that the student will return to neutrality. Interacting with the new environment and society will change the student's behaviour and attitudes. Additionally and

more importantly, it is worth mentioning that Menzies and Baron's (2014) model assumes that students go through linear, simple and pre-defined steps. This point of view may fail to address the complexity and multidimensional nature of transition. It also contradicts the fundamental concept of MMT and ETL theories (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). Given that the international student transition seems to be more complicated than this, it might be inaccurate to capture the students' experience of transition in such a simple linear model.

Culture shock is a well-known phenomenon when moving to a host country (Hofstede, 2001) experienced when interacting with a new culture, place, and environment. The term 'culture shock' was initially identified by Oberg (1960) as 'the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life' (p. 177). The sojourner starts to have culture shock when feeling negative emotions triggered by psychological issues (e.g. social isolation, depression or stress). A common hypothesis in the culture shock concept is the 'U-curve hypothesis' (as shown in Figure 2.4) which presumes that the sojourner starts the trip with a feeling of hope and challenge about the future. This is followed by a dip in mood and depression, isolation, and panic ('culture shock'). Overcoming culture shock can lead the sojourners to the 'recovery' phase when they become part of the new society (Zapf, 1991). International students after a long period away from their home countries can be also susceptible to 'reverse culture shock', feeling stress, isolation or panic when returning home (Gaw, 2000).

Linking the 'U-curve hypothesis' to the adjustment model shows that culture shock happens in the 'party's over' phase. Oberg (1960) presents two recommendations for sojourners to hasten their recovery: communication with local people and improvements in the language of the host country with the former strongly dependent on the latter since language is considered as a fundamental medium of communication.

Figure 2.4 Culture shock over time. Adapted from Zapf (1991)



With respect to international students and culture shock, research conducted by Gbadamosi (2018) aimed to study the adjustment of international students in the UK and presented some challenges and issues. Culture shock was reported as the greatest challenge for international students with issues adjusting to the new social life, the British weather and the new academic system. Regarding social communication, students agreed that having British friends is important in accelerating their engagement with the new society although they stated that forming relationships with British students was not easy. As a tool to reduce culture shock, the study highlights the importance of support from family and friends, especially those familiar with UK culture.

Another study conducted by Brown (2008a) aimed to investigate the stresses of 13 post-graduate international students in the UK, observing participants from their first day at university until two weeks after the courses finished. The results highlighted that stresses happen frequently for many international students. The study mentioned 'academic cultural differences', where students found themselves interacting with a new academic environment with new ways of assessment. Many students mentioned that it was difficult for them to write an academic essay in English with British standards of writing. Stresses were prominent in the first month of the study, later correlating with the academic load and assignments. Ward et al. (2001) argue that the adjustment process is based on different factors: the country of origin, the destination country, and the sojourner. Searle and Ward (1990) add that the more cultural differences there

are between the host and home countries, the more difficult adjustment the sojourners will have. Within the host and home countries, many factors are essential to facilitate the adjustment, such as political, economic, and cultural factors as well as the host country people's attitude toward the sojourner. The sojourner's attitude is also important in coping with the stresses and adapting to the new culture. Zhou et al. (2008) point out the importance of communicating and social networking with home and co-national friends. They argue that this helps maintain well-being and increases their academic achievement.

Al-sharideh and Goe (2014) investigated the elements associated with the personal adjustment of overseas students to the US. In their study, they identified personal adjustment as 'the maintenance or achievement of high self-esteem while attending a college or university' (p. 706). They conducted their study on students coming from different countries studying at an American university. The researchers agreed with Brown (2008a) that building social networks with others is a key factor in the successful personal adjustment of international students. They emphasised the importance of having friends who share the same background or culture. However, it is important to strike a balance as they noted that having a large number of co-national connections affects a student negatively. The findings also show the advantage of ethnic communities in universities. Such communities of students from the same cultural background allow them to communicate more easily and increase their self-esteem. These findings are also supported by Dawson and Conti-Bekkers (2002) who report that international students differ in how well they deal with stressful periods. They argue that students who have co-national friends tend to have less stress and problems because they support each other.

Regarding modern technology and the international student transition, a study by Martin and Rizvi (2014) investigated how social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook affect international student engagement and sense of belonging in a host city. Their study, based on interviews with Indian and Chinese students studying in Melbourne, Australia, argued that social

media facilitate the engagement of international students in the new city and the new environment.

## 2.4 Social media and international students

### 2.4.1 Social media

Social media have become an important tool for facilitating individuals' communication and sharing of information (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media were defined by Safko and Brake (2009) as 'activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media' (p. 6).

On social media, different types of data, such as texts, photos and videos, can be easily shared using web-based applications (Safko & Brake, 2010). More precisely, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) defined social media as 'mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, cocreate, discuss, and modify user-generated content' (p. 241). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argued that social media are the set of online applications created using Web 2.0 technology to allow users to produce and exchange 'user generated content'. These applications can be blogs, content communities (e.g., YouTube and Flickr) or social networking sites (e.g., Twitter and Facebook).<sup>1</sup>

To gain a deeper understanding of social media and how it works, Kietzmann et al. (2011) presented seven building blocks on which social media is based. Certain blocks are essential with others less important, depending of the type of social media platform (Widrich, 2016). The first block is identity, whereby each user has a virtual identity that may or may not reflect their actual identity. Second, conversation is an essential characteristic of most social media platforms used

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<sup>1</sup> In this research, social media is defined according to the definitions of Kietzmann et al. (2011) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). Their definition includes various platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram and WeChat.

to communicate and interact. Third, sharing enables users of social media to transfer and exchange information between themselves. Fourth, presence allows a user to know other users' availability and location. Fifth, relationships enable users to maintain their actual relationships over the Web and to create new, virtual ones. Sixth, reputation refers to being able to know others' 'social standing'; this relates to the frequent question of whether one social media user trusts another user. Seventh, groups enable different users to virtually group themselves together if they share common interests (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Along with the development of new technologies, people have changed their ways of sharing information and communicating. Social media, as a new way of interacting and communicating, has had social effects on people's lives (Selwyn, 2007). The next sections will shed light on the relationship between social media and international students and its involvement in their transition.

#### 2.4.2 International students' use of social media

It has been argued that social media play a role in students' life abroad. Compared with home students, international students are likely to spend more time on social media (Gray et al., 2010). This is usually motivated by their strong need of social support and communication (Hossain & Veenstra, 2013). In general, international students use social media during their study abroad in two ways: for academic purposes; and for everyday life activities (Sleeman et al., 2016; Zhao, 2016). Sleeman et al.'s (2016) study indicates that the academic purposes are mainly divided into two main themes: (1) support for learning activities such as arrangement of meetings; and (2) actual learning activities such as the use of e-learning platforms. Rahman (2014) presented more details on the motivations of using social media for international students, ordering them according to use. Table 2.1 presents the top 12 reasons for using social media, ordered from high to low use, and categorised further into four macro motivations. It shows that students tend to use social media for personal and entertainment reasons more than for educational purposes. Alharbi (2017) conducted a recent study to measure the importance of the new communication technologies, such as social networking applications, inside and outside the classroom. He

revealed that these technologies are very helpful for students in their language development, and students regard them as the preferred tool for communicating and learning. Guo et al. (2014) highlighted that the positive impact of social media is not related to the students' intensity of use, but rather that it is related to the type of activities. Students who use social media for social and information functions are more likely to be satisfied in their life. In contrast, students who use social media for entertainment and recreational functions tend to feel more alone in their host country.

Table 2.1 International students' reasons for using social media (Rahman, 2014)

<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Reason</b>
<b>Personal</b>	Maintaining connections with friends
	Maintaining connections with families
	Searching for new friends
<b>Amusement</b>	Chatting with friends
	Watching videos
	Listening to music
<b>Economic</b>	Keeping updated with everyday news
	Sharing global news with others
	Seeking job information
<b>Educational</b>	Discussing homework with peers
	Discussing course-related issues with peers
	Discussing other educational activities with peers

A recent study by Sin and Kim (2013) investigated the frequency of use of social media and the type of information sought by 180 international students pursuing higher education in the US. Results confirmed findings in Rahman's (2014) study that female international students used social media more than male students, and younger students used it more compared to older students. Their work also showed that individual behaviour affected the use of social media: introverted students used it less than extroverts. Finally, they found that international students mostly use social media to seek information about everyday life and most commonly for financial and health information and to be updated with news about their home country.



A more recent study at an Australian university investigated if the university's Facebook page helped ten international students to engage with the university community (Fujita, Harrigan, and Norman Soutar (2017). They applied 'customer engagement' techniques to measure the students' engagement collecting data via a mixed-methods approach. They conducted focus groups with a soft netnographic analysis. A condition for the participants was that they had to be following the university's Facebook account. This was required to apply the netnographic analysis as the students' comments and activities were to be observed. This study found that the university's Facebook page encouraged the students' engagement allowing them to share their experiences, which increased their sense of community and belongingness. The results align with the findings of Sleeman and Ryan (2015) which highlighted the benefits of social media for encouraging classmates' integration both inside and outside the classroom and for encouraging discussion. Fujita et al. (2017) also found that as the university's Facebook page becomes active, the students' satisfaction and pride in the university increase. Reading comments from the university gave the students the feeling that the university cares about them and that their voices are listened to. In a recent study on education and social media, Greenhow and Lewin (2016) showed that social media can help reduce the gap between the students and their university.

Another study by Martin and Rizvi (2014) examined Indian and Chinese students' sense of belonging and their use of social media at a university in Melbourne, Australia. It aimed to investigate how social media accelerate the exploration of the new city and culture and facilitates students' engagement with their new environment. The authors found that social media positively encouraged their sense of belonging and that it was being used as a tool for exploring their new surroundings and culture. An surprising finding was that the results were similar for all social media platforms regardless of how global they were: a positive relation was reported for both global platforms (e.g., Facebook) and home platforms (e.g., Weibo). The results give insights into whether the student's use of their home social media platform supports their adjustment. Students who used home platforms such as Weibo (an equivalent to Twitter and a heavily used social media platform in China; DeGennaro, 2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of these

platforms as an instrument to facilitate their adjustment to the new city. A Chinese participant in this study argued that Weibo supports Chinese students in Australia in two ways: (1) by helping them remain aware of what is happening in China; and (2) by fostering their adjustment to the new city. The participant mentioned that the Chinese discussions on Weibo helped the students to explore the city and find the best restaurants. However, Martin and Rizvi (2014) argued that global platforms would be more beneficial for students regarding their sense of belonging. In a more comparative study of social media platforms, Park, Song, and Lee (2014) compared the use of home and global social media platforms by Chinese and Korean students in the US. They concluded that students who use home and global platforms had a better adjustment to the host country and experience less pressure than students who use home platforms only or who do not use social media.

In a study of how the use of social media affects the social engagement of and provides social assistance for international students, Hyunjin, Ren-Whei, Husain, and Aldana (2016) surveyed 204 international students from different countries in the US and used a focus group comprising a small sample of the total number. They found a high correlation between the use of social media and social integration. Students who use social media are socially connected online with co-national friends, US friends or international friends. Another result was the lack of correlation between the use of social media and 'social support', which the researchers attributed to international students not usually perceiving social media as a tool to share their problems and receive advice. However, one criticism of this study is that there was a noticeable bias in the participants, of whom approximately 65 per cent were female.

There is a substantial body of research on the use of social media by international students. However, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic reviews into international students and social media. Sleeman, Lang, and Lemon (2016) systematically reviewed the relevant literature related to overseas students and their academic and personal use of social media. This review identified two areas on which most of the literature was focused: (1) the personal and (2) the academic use of social media. This review was very wide in scope as it

included different uses of social media on different platforms (e.g., social networking platforms, online learning platforms, or new technologies that enable communications between users) in the international students' context. For example, they included studies related to the use of online learning for international students, such as Hannon and D'Netto (2007), Wang and Reeves (2010) and Zhang and Kenny (2010); and studies that investigated the use of social networking applications, such as Park (2016), Rahman (2014) and Reddy (2014). The studies discussed in the review concerned related to a number of countries, but the US and Australia predominated. Despite the increased number of international students in the UK, it was notable that only two studies on the UK context were considered in this review. This suggests that future researchers should consider the UK context in their studies to see whether this context affects the results. Furthermore, most studies mentioned in this review used surveys and interviews for their data collection. These studies would have been more interesting if they had also considered social media as a data source. Finally, due to the importance of the transition period and its key role in student success, a more sophisticated review of studies on the use of social media in relation to international students' transition is needed.

Zhao (2016) systematically reviewed the literature related to the academic and social use of social media by international students. It is notable that most of their presented studies had already been reviewed by Sleeman et al. (2016). In this review, just as Sleeman et al. (2016) had done, Zhao divided the literature into two themes: academic and social. Zhao (2016) also further subdivided the social theme into three sub-themes: 'social media for information seeking', 'social media for transnational connections', and 'social media and socio-cultural integration' (p. 2). In the first sub-theme, he argued that social media can potentially be used as a medium for universities to deliver information to a vast number of students. It also can be used by students to gather information and find answers to their questions about everyday life. Regarding the second sub-theme, studies have investigated how social media are used for communicating across national boundaries. Social media can be used by students to maintain connections with people from home. The last sub-theme related to culture and how social media can be used as a tool to facilitate integration in the new society. Based on this review, future researchers are

recommended to investigate the use of social media within the new 'social context' in the host country.

In conclusion, this section has considered how social media are involved in the lives of international students, what motivates students to use it, and the consequences of using it. It has discussed two systematic reviews that consider the use of social media by international students. The next section will provide a focused discussion on the use of social media during the transition period of international students.

#### 2.4.3 Social media and international students' transition

As mentioned in Section 2.3.5, the international student transition is a very sensitive and complex experience. Students at this time are more likely to have psychological issues and anxiety, and to feel isolated, stressed and depressed (Chen, 1999; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Wu et al., 2015). Different factors have an impact on the student's well-being during their transition, such as making a smooth adjustment to the new culture (Wu et al., 2015) and having social networks and connections in the host country (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Along with the increased use of social media, it has been reported by some studies (Alshehab, 2017; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Park et al., 2014; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014) that social media are used for various purposes in the students' transition and affect their experience. There is a lack of research focusing on the use of social media during the overall experience of the international student transition. Various studies considered the social, cultural and academic roles of social media and they will be discussed in this section.

Several researchers (Park et al., 2014; Qiu, 2011; Rahman, 2014; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014) have focused on the role of new technologies and social media in the cultural shift associated with students' transition. Cultural adjustment is one of the key challenges facing international students with their transition (Andrade, 2006; Chen, 1999; Wu et al., 2015). In their study, Raymond and Wang (2015) highlighted the positive relationship between the use of social media and cultural adaptation by international students which was linked to three factors: the

students' level of the host country's language; the way in which the students use social media; and the people with whom the students communicate on social media. The authors found that students with a low level of language are more eager to use social media to communicate with people native to the host country (Raymond & Wang, 2015). This may be attributed to the means of communication. According to McKenna, Green, and Gleason, (2002) communication over social media is mainly classified as asynchronous, and hence students have enough time to understand what has been written and check what they type before sending it. However, it should be mentioned that Raymond & Wang (2015) stressed the importance of face-to-face communication as the main tool for cultural adaptation.

From a social perspective, Sandel (2014) explained how social media are involved in the integration of international students into their new society in the US. He relied on the 'cross-cultural adaption' theory established by Kim (2001), which describes the individual's adaptation to the new culture and advises ways to reduce the cultural stress and increase the sojourner's well-being. However, a key weakness with this theory, as argued by Sandel (2014), is that Kim's theory deals with individuals equally without considering their circumstances such as the individual's personal attitude and their cultural heritage. Sandel (2014) pointed out that virtual communities were very helpful in providing international students with sociocultural skills, informational needs, relational bonds, and psychological well-being. Students mentioned that they used social media to contact family and friends at home and that this was effective in reducing the sense of distance that usually caused their homesickness. This supports Rahman's (2014) aforementioned findings that the second most common reason for international students to use social media is to keep in touch with their family in their home country. Some participants in Sandel's (2014) study acknowledged the difficulties in making relationships with local people in the US. This was attributed to various factors such as cultural differences, language difficulties, and different commitments, and it led to international students spending more time on social media with family or co-national friends. However, Sandel pointed out that only using in-depth interviews as a research method limited his observations, and he recommended that future work

is supplemented by interviews or surveys with analyses of the content of relevant social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter.

Park et al. (2014) measured the impact of social media on Chinese and Korean higher education students in the US from two perspectives: their 'acculturative stress'; and their 'psychological well-being'. Based on their social media use, students were divided into four categories: those who use home and global social media platforms; those who use global platforms only (e.g., Facebook); those who use home platforms only; and those who do not use social media. Home platforms are those which are predominant only in the students' home country (e.g., Renren in China and Cyworld in Korea). A positive relationship was found between the use of Facebook and the students' acculturative stress and psychological well-being. Students who use global platforms were unlikely to suffer from psychological stresses and cultural contact stresses. This was interpreted as indicating that engagement with a global platform expands the student's vision about the new culture and establishes new connections with local people.

Alshehab (2017), Qiu (2011), and Raymond and Wang (2015) have highlighted the role of digital technologies and social media in supporting the 'language adjustment' of international students. It is a widely held view that language is one of the main challenges associated with international students' transition and that many students may experience 'language shock' (Storti, 2011). In their model of cross-cultural adaption, Raymond and Wang (2015) found that proficiency in the host language is a key factor in achieving a smooth adaptation for international students. Qiu's (2011) study, which was based on students from different origins, found that digital technologies are essential for international students in accelerating their adjustment to the new society and raising their confidence in the host country's language. This was particularly clear for recently arrived international students. Students in the early stages of post-arrival were more likely to be isolated and less confident in contacting others in a different language. This made the digital spaces a preferable place for practising the new language. By focusing on the pre-departure phase, a study by Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) reported that the pre-arrival use of social networking sites helped students to create offline social networks after their arrival. Friendship

with home and international students may be created in the early stages of study and even before students commence their courses. This can make a positive contribution to their life abroad and facilitate their engagement with the host country.

Through conducting interviews with eight Saudi female students who were or had been in higher education or on an English course in Australia, Alshehab (2017) examined the role of social media in creating their identities and affecting their language. Although participants agreed that their main reason for using social media was to communicate with others and to be updated about what was happening around them, they acknowledged the role of social media in developing their language and increasing their awareness of Australian culture. By communicating with English speakers on social media and watching native English speakers on YouTube and Snapchat, they improved their understanding and ability to use the language, particularly their street language or slang, and they were better able to understand people outside the university. However, the researcher included only female students in her study, which may have affected the results.

Despite the positive views of many authors in this area, some (Guo Li, & Ito, 2014; Park et al., 2014) argued that social media may negatively impact the students' transition. Guo et al. (2014) acknowledged that social media is a double-edged sword, and it may negatively affect international students by isolating them from the new society and making them more distracted. Al-Rahmi and Othman (2016) reported that the uncontrolled use of social media negatively affects the academic performance of students. Park et al. (2014) argued that social media may hinder students' integration with the new culture if their use of social media is restricted to their home content. This may be particularly noticed if the dominant social media platforms are different between host and home countries.

Overall, social media can play a role in the transition of international students from their home to the host country (Park et al., 2014; Rahman, 2014; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014). It may help to increase their understanding of the potential host country's culture facilitating their

cultural adjustment (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014). Furthermore, it may be also helpful in supporting the 'language adjustment' of international students. During their transition period, students are more likely to be isolated and less confident in contacting others. This makes the digital space a preferable place for practising the new language and communicating with others (Alshehab, 2017; Qiu, 2011; Raymond & Wang, 2015). However, social media may also contribute negatively to the students' transition, particularly if they remain isolated with their home content on social media (Guo et al., 2014; Park et al., 2014). With the continuous development of social media platforms and its increased use by individuals, there is a need for further research in this area. Furthermore, the relationship between the students' physical move and their digital transition on social media also needs to be investigated in order to understand how the students' move to a new place, environment, level of study can impact on their social media habits.

## 2.5 Summary of literature

### 2.5.1 Synthesis of the literature

First, the literature highlighted the importance of the concept of transition because transitional stages such as starting school, university and work, losing relatives or becoming parents are experiences that most people have to go through at certain points in their lives (Gordon et al., 2017, 2020; Jindal-Snape, 2016). The literature also demonstrated that the process of transition is both ongoing and complicated involving multiple dimensions (Jindal-Snape, 2016). It has been also argued that the transition can be a positive, negative or mixed feeling experience, and a transition of one individual can trigger transition(s) of other significant others (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Zhou et al., 2011). The literature also showed that transitions in various contexts can have common patterns and similarities (Jindal-Snape, 2016).

Second, the literature showed that sending and recruiting international students is one of the main features in the internationalisation concept (Harry, 1999; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Qiang, 2003; Thanh, 2016). It also highlighted that students have various motivations behind their decision to study abroad, e.g., economic, academic, cultural and political (Bokareva, 2014; Krzaklewska, 2008;



Maringe & Carter, 2007), but that there is a lack of studies including the Saudi students' voices about their motivations and choice of their destination country (Yakaboski et al., 2017).

Third, it is clear that international students face various challenges during their study abroad with studies reporting different challenges, such as friendlessness, loss of hope, sadness, and stress (Andrade, 2006; Chen, 1999; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Wu et al., 2015). Saudi students overseas specifically can face more particular challenges when studying abroad triggered by the social and cultural characteristics that Saudi students have (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Alsaahafi & Shin, 2017; Arafeh, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Taj, 2017; Yakaboski et al., 2017). As is evident, international students from different nationalities can have some commonality in their experiences, however, a uniqueness and interest might attach to the Saudi students experience abroad (Alsaahafi & Shin, 2017; Alshehab, 2017; Heyn, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). Based on the international students' literature in general, there have been some attempts by scholars in this area to conceptualise the international students' transition. Two models were produced, the ELT model by Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) and the international students' adjustment model by Menzies and Baron (2014). However, these theories and models still in need for further development.

Fourth, the literature included various studies that highlight the importance of social media for international students. Different researchers (Sleeman et al., 2016; Zhao, 2016) conducted systematic reviews of studies related to social media and international students. These reviews suggested that the area of international students and social media is very attractive for researchers due to the increased number of international students and the frequent use of social media by university students. However, the reviews encouraged future researchers in this area to narrow down the aim and scope. Various studies (Alharbi, 2017; Park et al., 2014; Rahman, 2014; Sandel, 2014) have focused on how social media are used by international students. These studies have emphasised the importance of social media as a window to the world and an essential communication tool. They reveal that social media may positively affect international students' life abroad. Some studies reported results on the role of social media in the cultural

engagement of students and revealed that social media are an essential tool in facilitating the students' engagement with the new culture (Park et al., 2014; Sandel, 2014; Shao & Crook, 2015). Other studies (Guo et al., 2014; Park et al., 2014) argued that social media may become a negative tool in the students' transition when they stay isolated with their home social media content. Some researchers reported different results about how social media relate to the students' language adjustment (Alshehab, 2017; Qiu, 2011), indicating that the use of social media may positively correlate with the student's level of the host-country language. So far, there has been little discussion about the impact of social media on the whole experience of transition and the relationship between the students physical move to the host country and their digital habits on social media.

Focusing on the Saudi student experience can bring new insights to the understanding of international students' transition. The transition concept as whole is also in need of further development. More studies are also required focusing on the use of and the relationship between social media and international students' transition. Therefore, the next section highlights the research gaps emerged from this review.

#### 2.5.2 Gaps in the literature

Reviewing the literature has shown that making a focus in this study on the Saudi students in the UK can fill a gap in the literature. There is a lack of studies considering the transition of Saudi students in the UK, and Saudi students' voices seems to be absence in the literature. The specific pushing and pulling factors and social and cultural changes and challenges that this group of students face can add new knowledge to the literature in this field.

Another gap that this research fills is related to the international students' transition. The literature reveals a lack of studies focusing on the international students experience through the lens of transition. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to consider all potential changes with no focus on a specific aspect of change (e.g. academic, social). Therefore,

by making this comprehensive investigation and focusing on Saudi students, this study aims to fill a research gap in the literature of international students' transition.

The literature also highlighted the importance of the transition concept and the need of more studies to be conducted. Therefore, this study will fill a research gap by adding more knowledge to the concept of transition through its empirical investigation. Although this study focuses only on the international students' context of transition, previous literature has shown that findings from a certain context of transition can add value and new dimensions to the whole concept of transition.

This research, by conducting its two methods, will also fill a research gap about the relationship between the students' transition and their use of social media. Much uncertainty still exists about the role of social media in the transition experience. Therefore, this research aims to provide deeper insights and add knowledge to the literature in this area. It will also be the first research to investigate the international students' digital transition on social media during their physical move to the host country through analysing their social media content.

## 2.6 Summary

This chapter started with a discussion of the transition concept as a whole with different aspects of transition presented. It then introduced literature on the internationalisation of higher education. Various perspectives of internationalisation relating to international students and Saudi students were considered, such as motivations for studying abroad, the issues and challenges faced by international students and Saudi students in specific, and the concept of international students' transition. This was followed by a definition and brief discussion of social media, before reviewing and summarising studies related to social media and international students. The review first considered studies related to the general use of social media, and subsequently focused on its use during transition. The chapter concluded with a synthesis of the literature and an identification of the gaps in existing research.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the methodology and methods used in this study. First, it is useful to clarify the differences between methodology and methods. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) outlined that methods are tools that researchers use to address their objectives with interviews being examples of qualitative methods and questionnaires examples of quantitative methods. On the other hand, the methodology is the interpretation, explanation and justification for using these methods; for instance, why a particular researcher chooses to conduct interviews and how the interviewees will be selected are methodological questions. Crotty (1998) stated that methodology is ‘the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes’ . Whilst methods are ‘the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis’ (p. 3). This chapter starts by presenting how this research is guided in terms of its research paradigm. Subsequently, the methods used in this research are provided and explained. This section also provides a justification for how the interviews as a first method and Twitter data analysis as a second method were conducted and how their data was analysed. The chapter concludes with a description of how the quality was maintained and a discussion of the ethical concerns when applying the methods .

### 3.2 Philosophical assumptions

Philosophical assumptions in the social sciences are the assumptions and beliefs that researchers have about the knowledge in their study. The terms ‘worldview’ or ‘paradigm’ may also be used to refer to the same concept (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), a paradigm can be defined as ‘the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways’ (p. 105). Guba and Lincoln stressed the importance of the research paradigm in social science research and argued that selecting the appropriate paradigm is more essential than choosing the methods since the paradigm is the lens by which researchers see their path. However, Bryman (2004) argued that research paradigm implicitly includes the choice of methods. In terms of the

researcher's view of the world, Bryman (2004) presented different types of philosophical assumption, pragmatism, realism, interpretivism and positivism.

The pragmatism paradigm is adopted in this research. Biesta (2015) defined the pragmatism paradigm as 'a combination of action and reflection' (p. 112). This means that this paradigm is characterised by implementing 'what works' to achieve the research objective and answer its questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In the pragmatism paradigm, the worldview arises out of actions, situations, and consequences (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) pointed out that the pragmatism paradigm 'is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality' (p. 28). Researchers who adopt this position can be either subjective or objective towards the investigated phenomena depending on the research questions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). They look at the 'what' and 'how' to research, based on the intended consequences (Creswell, 2009). Researchers adopting the pragmatism paradigm are more concerned with the research problem than methods using the different methods available to help them with understanding the problem (Rossman & Wilson, 1985). An advantage of this paradigm is that it focuses on the research questions and opens the door for different methods and types of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009). Morgan (2018) agreed that pragmatism is the most suitable approach for mixed methods research, arguing that the complexity of decision-making in mixed methods calls for a paradigm that makes the researcher freer to make the decision as their research proceeds.

Based on what has been presented above, the researcher in this study employs a methodological and philosophical approach if it helps with their research inquiry (Robson & McCartan, 2015). The nature of applying 'what works' in pragmatism paradigm was a motivator behind choosing it (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Researchers who adopt this paradigm believe that social phenomena can be seen from various points of view and that they should take advantage of different methods types (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, this research started with interviews in order to gain a rich understanding about the students' transition and their use of social media. The second phase, Twitter data analysis, was subsequently designed based on the outcomes of

the interviews. Having flexibility in deciding and designing the methods was helpful and needed in this research.

Two well-known aspects of the research paradigm for social science research are ontology and epistemology (Bryman, 2004). The next two sections will discuss each one and the position of the researcher in relation to each.

### 3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is defined by Matthews and Ross (2010) as ‘the way the social world is seen to be and what can be assumed about the nature and reality of the social phenomena that make up the social world’ (p. 23). From an ontological point of view, if a thing really exists, then it should be asked how real it is and how it really works (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontology is related to the study of the ‘nature of existence’, and it asks the question of ‘what is’ (Crotty, 1998). In social science research, ontological assumptions help researchers to understand why different people see things in different ways (Barton, 2012). Ontology can be divided into two main theoretical categories: objectivism and constructivism (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009).

With objectivism, social phenomena in reality exist independently from social actors. This belief indicates that social entities are isolated by themselves and not influenced by social actors (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). It also has sometimes been referred to as foundationalism ontology or realism (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). It assumes that human perception comes after the social reality, and that perceptions and reality are independent of one another and should not be affected by each other (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Researchers who adopt an objective epistemological position investigate the social phenomenon as it is, meaning that they do not allow their feeling and beliefs to affect the examined phenomenon (Gray, 2004).

On the other hand, constructivism, maintains that social entities are created by or emerged from social actors and their interactions (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). Constructivism opposes the idea of the pre-existing and pre-given social actors such as organisation and culture,

maintaining instead that these types of actors affect the social phenomena (Bryman, 2004). Constructivists also argue that social phenomena, in addition to being created by social interactions, are also in a 'constant state of revision' (Bryman, 2004, p. 33). Constructivism emphasises the relationship between social phenomena and the social actors (Saunders et al., 2009). This means that social entities are affected by their interaction and engagement with human beings (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Constructivism involves interpreting and understanding how social actors affect the social world (Gergen, 2009; Robson & McCartan, 2015). The constructivism paradigm is associated more with qualitative than quantitative approaches. The social phenomena in this paradigm is constructed based on the participants' experiences and stories, and then constructed by the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

This research adopts a constructivist ontological position. The general aim of this study is to investigate what are Saudi students' experiences of the transitions to study in the UK and the role played by social media. In order to achieve this aim, interviews with Saudi international students in the UK were conducted and their twitter data were analysed. This researcher believes that the social phenomena is constructed by the interaction between the participants and their world which, therefore, requires an in-depth exploration and examination of the relationship between the social actor and phenomena. This researcher also believes that different stories and experiences are told by different participants and they are subjective in their experiences. This is a fundamental concept in this paradigm where subjectivity between participants was expected. The researcher was able to collect different views, beliefs and perceptions from different students providing a rich and comprehensive understanding of the transition experience and the social media use.

### 3.2.2 Epistemology

Another major assumption in the social science research paradigm is the epistemological assumption (Bryman, 2004), which is related to the assumptions and beliefs the researcher has about what can be known and how (Barton, 2012; Crotty, 1998). Epistemology focuses on the relationship between the knower and what they (may) know. The epistemological assumption is

driven by the ontological assumption, whereby how reality is perceived affects how the relationship between the known and knower is measured (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In social science research, epistemological assumptions are those related to how the social world can and should be studied and investigated (Bryman, 2004). Four types of questions are asked when making the epistemological assumption: 'what is knowledge?'; 'do people really have knowledge or justified belief?'; 'how do people have knowledge and what is the scope of their knowledge?'; and 'what types of knowledge can people have?' (Moreland & Craig, 2003, p. 17). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe (2012) presented two reasons why the epistemological position is important for researchers. First, it gives more details of the study with regard to its design, meaning that the researcher will not just present their design but will also provide ideas about the perspective from which the data will be gathered, where it will be gathered, and how it will be explained. Second, consistency in the epistemological assumption helps the researcher to select the most useful research design for their study. Different scholars have different beliefs about the types of epistemological assumption (e.g., Bryman 2004; Guba & Lincoln 1994). Bryman (2004) presented two of the most common epistemological assumptions in social science: positivism, and interpretivism.

The positivist position involves applying the methods and perspectives of natural science to the study of social science and the investigation of social phenomena (Bryman, 2004). According to this assumption, in order for knowledge to exist, it should be capable of being sensed (e.g., to be touched, smelt or seen). The positivist researcher views a social phenomenon as independent, meaning that it does not affect or be affected by the social actors such as human beings (Gray, 2004). Consequently, this assumption aligns with the objectivist ontological assumption (Barton, 2012), which maintains that social phenomena in reality exist independently from social actors (Saunders et al., 2009). Positivist researchers also observe facts, and they develop their research deductively to test a hypothesis as it emerges from an existing theory (Barton, 2012; Gray, 2004).

The usefulness of using natural science methods to understand and examine a social science phenomenon has been debated. Many social scientists argue that human beings are a key factor



in understanding social phenomena. For this reason, the interpretivist position prioritises 'people's subjective interpretations and understandings of social phenomena and their own actions' (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 28). Interpretivism differentiates between research on humans and research on other social actors. Human actions can be understood and interpreted subjectively based on the meaning behind them (Saunders et al., 2009). Interpretivist researchers believe that subjectivity is involved in social science and that research on the social world requires its own procedures and logic (Bryman, 2004). This assumption is associated with the constructivist ontological position (Barton, 2012) in which the social phenomenon is created by and emerged from social actors and their interactions (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). Researchers who conduct social research from an interpretivist position collect qualitative data, conduct a subjective observation of the phenomenon, and interpret the data to reach meaningful findings (Barton, 2012; Gray, 2004).

An interpretivist epistemological position is adopted in this research. As people and their meanings are fundamental in this research, this position has allowed the researcher to give primary attention to participants' subjective understandings and interpretations of the investigated social phenomenon (Barton, 2012). Since the main aim of this research was neither to make an objective observation of its phenomenon nor to test a hypothesis, the positivist position was rejected. The selection of the subjectivist ontological position in this study has motivated the selection of the interpretivist epistemological position, since they always correlate with each other (Barton, 2012).

### 3.3 Deductive and inductive reasoning

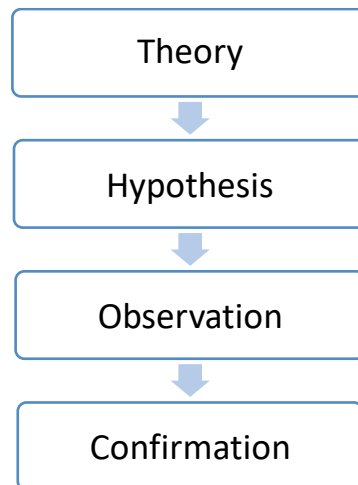
Having presented the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research, it is important to show their association with theory. Two main research approaches exist: deductive, in which the study develops hypotheses from an existing theory and then moves to its data to test these hypotheses; and inductive, in which a theory emerges at the end of the research (Saunders et al., 2009). In social science research, it is crucial to identify whether the study will develop hypotheses from an existing theory to be tested by its data, or whether it will answer

research questions based on the data of the study and then create its own theory which can be tested by other researchers (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

### 3.3.1 Deductive reasoning

In deductive reasoning, the researcher develops an assumption or set of assumptions (hypotheses) that will be tested by the study (Bryman, 2004). This way of reasoning is more popular in the natural sciences (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Trochim (2006) outlined a series of stages that researchers applying the deductive, or what is called the ‘top-down’, approach can follow (see Figure 3.1). These steps begin by exploring the literature associated with the targeted phenomena. Based on the literature, the researcher finds a related ‘established theory’. This theory will then be narrowed down into smaller hypotheses to be tested. The observation follows which aims to test these hypotheses to measure their validity based on the study’s data. Finally, the hypotheses are confirmed or rejected.

Figure 3.1 Deductive reasoning stages. Adapted from Trochim (2006)

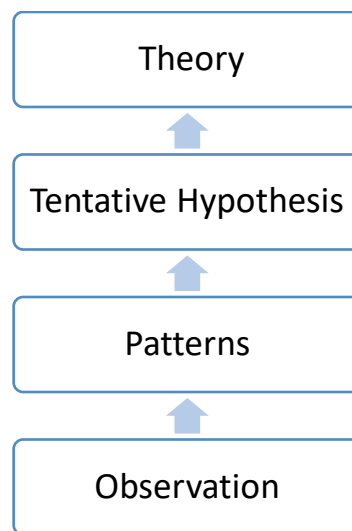


### 3.3.2 Inductive reasoning

In contrast to deductive reasoning, the theory in inductive reasoning is built at the end of the study (Barton, 2012). The main aim of this approach is to start by understanding what is going on in the investigated phenomena. An advantage of this approach is that it allows for flexibility in the study’s focus. This means that, as the research progresses, it explores the area and, based on

this exploration, the emphasis of the study can be amended (Saunders et al., 2009). As with the deductive approach, a set of stages were recommended by Trochim (2006) to carry out inductive research (see Figure 3.2). These steps are ‘bottom up’ and start with observation of the investigated phenomena (Trochim, 2006). It is the case that inductive research begins with research questions that emerge from the existing literature and the researcher’s knowledge (Barton, 2012). After observation, different patterns are identified and formulated in the form of hypotheses. Finally, the research ends up with a general theory or conclusion of what has been investigated (Trochim, 2006).

Figure 3.2 Inductive reasoning stages. Adapted from Trochim (2006)



### 3.3.3 Selected approach

This study starts with an investigation to understand the transition of Saudi students to the UK and their use of social media; no assumptions based on existing theories have been developed in its early stages due to the lack of studies in this area. Soiferman (2010) argued that the nature of the study is an important factor in determining which approach the study can take, and that ‘arguments based on experience or observation are best expressed inductively, while arguments based on laws, rules, or other widely accepted principles are best expressed deductively’ (p. 3). Since this study is based on experience and observation rather than on rules or laws, the inductive approach is, therefore, a better fit for this study. However, it should be noted that most social science studies do not adopt a single, pure approach (Barton, 2012; Gray, 2004; Trochim, 2006).

In inductive research, for example, the researcher has to consider the pre-existing literature or ideas at some point in the research (Gray, 2004). Matthews and Ross (2010) argued that social research is usually developed both inductively and deductively. A research study can be affected by the existing literature when developing its research questions and it can also generate a theory when it reaches its conclusion.

This study is conducted inductively alongside a consideration of the pre-existing literature particularly that which focused on transition, the international and Saudi students' transition and social media and international students. Furthermore, due to the design of this study, whereby the findings of the first method affected the second method, the study at some point might be seen as deductively applying the latter ideas that emerge from the former (Trochim, 2006).

### 3.4 Research methods

#### 3.4.1 Introduction

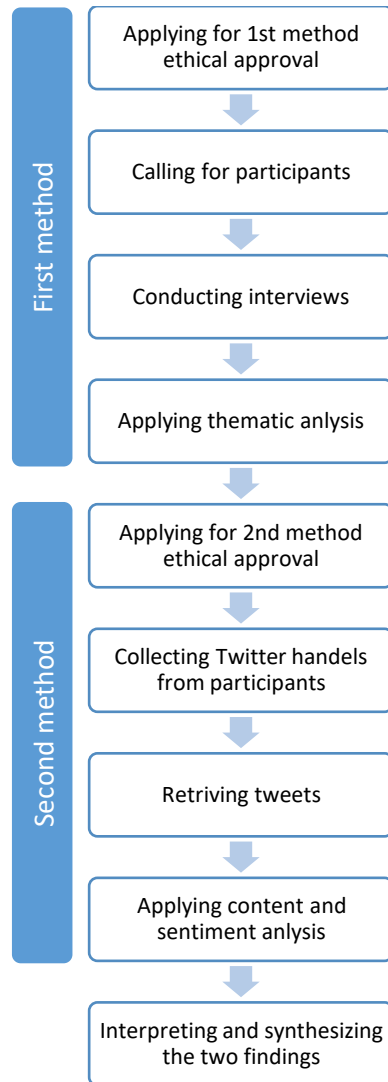
This research has conducted multiple qualitative methods in its data collection. The first method is semi-structured interviews, while the second is Twitter data analysis. Applying the two methods aims to achieve a richer understanding of the investigated phenomenon. These methods are also driven by the need to explore, explain or describe the social problem (Saldaña, 2011). Triangulation of the data resources in this study is also carried out aiming to increase its quality (Eisner, 2017). Cassell and Symon (2004) claimed that using multiple methods in research allows the researcher to increase the strength of their study, through increasing the reliability and validity.

The purpose of applying interviews first is to explore the area, gain details about the topic and achieve a deeper understanding from the students regarding their transition experiences. Bryman (2004) claimed that interviewees are considered very helpful in providing rich insights about the investigated phenomenon. After interviewing participants, the researcher looked at Twitter data to extend the interview findings and observe some practical examples of what the students have reported. Although the second method contains some forms of quantification such

as the number and percentage of tweets across codes, however, these are mostly descriptive to support a qualitative argument. Mason (2002) stated that qualitative methods 'use some form of quantification, but statistical forms of analysis are not seen as central' (p. 4). Therefore, the second method was classified and treated as a qualitative method. It appeared that, to the best of the researcher knowledge, Twitter analysis had not previously been applied to the domains of international students' transition highlighting a new methodological contribution to this area of research.

Figure 3.3 shows the set of activities applied in the two methods. However, it should be acknowledged that these activities were not always linear and at some steps the researcher moves back to previous steps. Each of these steps will be described in detail in the next sections.

Figure 3.3 Procedure of methods



### 3.4.2 Interviews

#### 3.4.2.1 Introduction

There are three common types of methods for collecting qualitative data: interviews, focus groups and participant observations (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namely, 2005).

Interviews were selected for this research for several reasons. According to King and Horrocks (2010), interviews are a very popular method for collecting qualitative data, in addition to their advantage in creating a general and in-depth view of an investigated phenomenon (Alshenqeeti,

2001), they also allow participants to use their own voices to express their feelings, ideas and opinions (Berg & Lune, 2011). In interviews, the researcher can gain rich and informative responses from participants (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). The person-to-person discussion and the relationship that occurs during the interview can engage the interviewees, which can increase their participation in the research (Cassell & Symon, 2004). The main aim of the first method in this research is to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon and in-depth details about it from the students' perspectives. Interviews are ideal for this purpose as they enable students to use their own words to express their ideas, thoughts, opinions and feelings (Berg & Lune, 2011). Furthermore, interviews will allow consideration of the social dimension of the research, and this can be by face-to-face discussion during interviews (Gray, 2004). The nature of research questions in this study also motivated the selection of interviews. This study aims to find answers to how and why questions from its human participants about its investigated phenomenon (King & Horrocks, 2010). For these reasons, interviews have been chosen as a method for collecting the qualitative data.

Focus groups and participant observation were not considered for this research for several reasons. Focus groups are similar to semi-structured and unstructured interviews, but they aim to collect data from many participants simultaneously. They can be conducted in mixed methods research to obtain an initial understanding and to 'collect group language' relating to the observed case. They can also be implemented as a later method to verify or extend results from earlier methods (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Since the use of the first method in this research was neither to gain a basic understanding nor to verify or expand results, focus groups were not adopted. More importantly, the researcher's familiarity with the conservative nature of some participants can suggest that students can feel freer and more comfortable to speak if they are interviewed in person.

Participant observation is usually carried out in ethnographic studies to help understand the embedded perspectives of participants regarding the research questions. It often works with participants who belong to a certain community and are located in one place. The researcher

enters the community and take notes of what they observe in order to help them answer their research questions (Mack et al., 2005). This method does not work with this research as the participants are not gathered in one place. Furthermore, the participants' experience of transition is not restricted to a certain time but occurs during the 24-hour period, therefore, making observation is impossible in this case.

#### 3.4.2.2 Type of interviews

Interviews have been conducted in this research to collect its first method's data. There are three main types of interview: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews are completely controlled by the interviewer, and the interviewee simply responds to a fixed set of pre-prepared questions, sometimes referred to as 'quantitative research interviews' (Saunders et al., 2009). These can generate numerical values that can then be presented in tables (Alshenqeti, 2001). In semi-structured interviews, there is more space for the interviewee to contribute to the interview. There is usually a set of pre-prepared questions, known as an 'interview guide', but the interviewer does not have to adhere to it (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). Interviewee feedback is important for generating new questions for further explanation of some points, and the order of questions can be changed (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Unstructured interviews are known as 'informal' interviews, and they are used when the interviewer has an idea of what they want to investigate with the interviewee but, apart from an initial question, have not prepared questions to ask. The interviewee is very important in leading the interview and is free to talk about the investigated area (Bryman, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). Usually, the interviewee is an expert on the investigated case allowing the interviewer to learn from the interviewee's experience (Mack et al., 2005).

Bryman (2004), who used the term 'qualitative research interviews' to describe semi-structured and unstructured interviews, mentioned that the researcher can choose between these types of interview depending on how deeply the topic is understood by the researcher. He argued that structured interviews are used by the researcher to validate and find an answer to their clearly identified research questions or set of objectives, while in qualitative research interviews (semi-



structured and unstructured) there are initial research questions or objectives which may be reformulated based on the interviewees' feedback.

This study has used semi-structured interviews as its first data collection approach due to their exploratory nature. The researcher needed to ask open-ended questions to students where he can build a better understanding of the international student transition and its relation to social media. An interview guide was developed in advance of the interviews. However, the answers given by the participants also generated new questions with current and a group of further participants. This also explains why structured interviews with a fixed list of questions and unstructured interviews with no prepared questions were not selected.

#### 3.4.2.3 Interviewees recruitment and sampling

Seventeen participants were recruited for the interviews, all Saudi students pursuing or planning to pursue higher education in the UK at either undergraduate or postgraduate (Master's and PhD) level. Students studying an English language course as a preparation for their higher education in the UK were also recruited. The reason for including students from different study levels is related to the aim of achieving a holistic understanding of the students' experience, therefore, including students from different paths of studies was useful to include different perspectives and build an overall picture. However, this has been acknowledged as a limitation of this study where some researchers might see the inclusion of students from different study levels to make the study too broad. Furthermore, the inclusion of students who had not yet arrived in the UK was inspired by the previously mentioned model by Menzies and Baron's (2014). This model presumes that the transition period starts before arriving in the host country, therefore, students preparing to travel were included as participants. Recruiting students at this phase gives the advantage of involving students currently living the experience of preparing to travel. Participants in the UK were limited to first-year students. This was based on McLachlan and Justice (2009) and Prescott and Hellsten (2005)'s argument that a student's transition period usually lasts up to 12 months after their arrival in the host country. However, at a later stage of the data collection, the researcher also included students who were in the UK for more than 12 months following the

realisation that the post-arrival transition period may last for more than a year. More details regarding the start and length of the transition based on findings from this study is provided in the findings section.

A purposive sampling strategy was followed in this study, which works by gathering participants who have certain criteria. This was employed because the researcher wanted to choose participants who best suited the aim of this study (Daniel, 2011). Due to the researcher's membership of the group being studied (Saudi students in the UK) and its online communities, different social media platforms (Saudi Clubs' Twitter accounts, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages) were used to call for participants. The announcement was sent to different online groups in different cities across the UK allowing the researcher to gain a variety of thoughts, ideas and opinions from participants who were geographically distributed.

The following conditions were applied to the recruitment of participants, both who arrived or not arrived yet:

- They are from Saudi Arabia.
- They should be active users of a social media platform.<sup>2</sup>
- They are studying or planning to study in the UK on a long-term course. Long-term course in this study means undergraduate, postgraduate or English language course leading to higher education study.
- They are in their first year in the UK (this condition was only applied to participants in the UK, however, as previously mentioned the first year condition was discarded for later interviews).
- Arabic is their first language.

Since this research is equally interested in the experience of both genders, a balance of male and female participants was maintained (9 female and 8 male). This division seems to be representative of the actual split of Saudi students in the UK (Ministry of Education, 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of an active user in this research is based on Google's '7 day active users' approach, which states that the user should have at least one session on social media in a seven-day period (Optimize Smart, 2021).

Furthermore, participants were not restricted to a specific age, instead, university and language students were included regardless their age. However, in this study the minimum age of participants was 22 and this is because sponsors in Saudi Arabia usually send students for Master's and PhD courses only. It rarely happens that sponsorship programmes in Saudi Arabia send students for undergraduate degrees. This can explain the lack of undergraduate students (one student) in the sample, where it was difficult to find a Saudi undergraduate student in the UK. This has been acknowledged as a limitation of this study in Section 7.5.

All interviews were conducted in the main language of the researcher and participants, Arabic. According to Mark et al. (2009), interviewing participants in their main language allows them to express their ideas and thoughts easily. At the analysis stage, these interviews were transcribed in English and quotations were translated, how the translation was applied is provided later in Section 3.4.2.6.

Interviews were planned to be conducted face to face. However, this was difficult in some cases due to the geographic distance of some interviewees. Therefore, some interviews were carried out by Skype or by a telephone call, depending on the interviewee's preference. Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face, two by Skype and five by telephone calls. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were recorded using an audio recorder while computer software was used to record the Skype interviews. The interviews ranged in duration between 42 minutes and two hours and seven minutes. There was no noticeable difference in duration between the face-to-face, phone and online interviews, which can lead to a claim that both ways had equal or close to equal quality.

In terms of conducting empirical qualitative methods, it can be difficult for researchers to predict how many interviewees are required to be included (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Patton (2002) argued that the sample size is related to the research questions and objectives of the study. Before presuming a number, researchers have to think about what they want to find out, what creates value and what are their limitations in regards of resources and time. Matthews & Ross

(2010) pointed out that compared with quantitative studies the number of participants is relatively small in qualitative research because the generalisation is not a concern. For interviews, the depth is usually more important than breadth (Bryman, 2004; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Therefore, the sample size is not as important as exploring the case with participants and obtaining greater details (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Bowen (2008), Mack et al. (2005) and Mason (2010) recommended qualitative researchers to conduct interviews until data saturation is achieved, which means no new codes can be added when working through further interviews at the coding stage. Corbin and Strauss (1998) argued that for qualitative sampling 'saturation is central' (p. 5). However, in order to identify the data saturation point, researchers need to apply the sampling, data collection and data analysis concurrently (Bryman, 2004). In this research, when the researcher reached the 15<sup>th</sup> interview he felt that the saturation has been achieved. However, the researcher conducted two more interviews after this to ensure that there were no new codes or themes to add.

#### 3.4.2.4 Interviews procedures

In this study, ten interviewees were invited to a face-to-face interview and conducted with students who live in the same city of the researcher or nearby cities. However, for students geographically located far away from the researcher's city, they were interviewed by video or audio calls on Skype or by telephone calls. Furthermore, some students preferred their interviews to not be face-to-face, therefore, they were interviewed on call. According to Mark et al. (2009), the most common way of carrying out interviews is face to face. However, in some circumstances, such as when participants are located far away from the interviewer, this may not always be practical. Therefore, telephone and online calls are suitable alternatives to face-to-face interviews. They allow interviewees who live far from the researcher to participate and quicken the data collection phase (Saunders et al., 2009). In this study, the researcher also noticed no differences between the face-to-face, phone and online interviews in terms of information gained and duration of interview.

All interview types were recorded allowing the researcher to focus on what the interviewee says during the interview and, by leaving the researcher's hands free, to make notes on things 'outside the immediate context of the interview', such as ideas to improve future interviews or difficulties that may occur with the analysis (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003, p. 133). As the university allows students to borrow audio recorders (CiCS - The University of Sheffield, 2021), the researcher used this service by hiring the recording equipment for the face-to-face and telephone interviews. Skype interviews were also recorded using the built-in option to record calls (Skype Support, n.d.). As recommended by Taj (2017), all the recording equipment and software were tested before the interview to avoid any inconvenience and to save the interviewer and interviewee's time.

The interview questions were inductively developed, however, the researcher's reading of previous literature in international students' transition, Saudi students abroad and international students and social media influenced the questions asked. During the interviews, students were asked to draw their transition timeline, identify the stages which they had gone through and the difficulties that they had and their emotions during their whole experience. They also discussed what they drew with the interviewer and provided further clarification of it. The idea of asking the students to represent their emotions in models was inspired by the previously mentioned model by Menzies and Baron (2014). For phone and Skype interviews, students were asked to scan their drawing and send it to the interviewer after the interview.

Prior to the interviews, all participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, which was handed to face-to-face interviewees and emailed to remote interviewees. Further details are provided in Section 3.6.

#### 3.4.2.5 Interviews piloting

Before the data collection stage, the researcher discussed the interview guides and the clarity of and order of questions, focus and time estimated for each question and the demographic survey with his supervisors to ensure the feasibility of the interviews and the consistency with the study

objectives. The interview guides were also tested on a fellow international student in the UK. One resultant change was the inclusion of the interviewee's arrival date in the demographic details to allow the researcher to identify which stage the student is at, and to help with the Twitter analysis. Since some participants have not yet arrived in the UK, two interview guides were developed, one for those in the UK (the majority) and the second for those in Saudi Arabia. The process of updating and refining the interview guides also continued during the data collection stage. This is because the 'qualitative data collection and analysis is often progressive' (Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley & Dphil, 2001). This means that the researcher obtains more insights and thoughts for improving their research as they go through their interviews. This was the case in this study, where the data collection was a learning journey. After each interview the researcher summarised the interview and shared it with his supervisors in order to identify any requisite changes for the following interviews. This refinement of the interview questions and structure occurred many times. For example, as the researcher conducted the interviews, he found that the transition concept is more complicated than expected requiring a deeper investigation. Therefore, over time, the emphasis on questions related to how students define their transition and what are the experiences associated with it was increased. Multiple meetings were conducted with supervisors during the interview stage in order to discuss the outcomes of each one. Updating the interview guides during the data collection was very helpful in improving the process of data collection in the interviews (Krauss et al., 2009). The last versions of the interview guides for the two interview types are attached in Appendix 1.

#### 3.4.2.6 Interview transcription and translation

To prepare the interviews for analysis, transcriptions need to be made of the recordings (Saunders et al., 2009). According to Bryman (2004), transcribing in research methods is to convert the recorded interview or focus group into a written transcript. Converting the voice to text is required for analysing the qualitative data and preventing it from being lost (Mark et al., 2009; Simon & Goes, 2013). Although the transcribing of interviews is relatively time-consuming<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mark et al. (2009) estimated that each hour of interview usually requires six to ten hours of transcription, this was also the time range for transcribing interviews in this study.

(Saunders et al., 2009), the researcher has performed this himself which has allowed him to obtain a deeper understanding of the interview content and to make a recall for the 'visual observations' that happened during the interviews (Simon & Goes, 2018). Transcribing also helped the researcher to overcome the issue of losing the non-verbal signs, since he was the interviewer (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). The researcher has annotated the text with some notes, conventions (e.g. !!, ??, bold text) and also noted the fillers in participants' speech (e.g. uh, um, you know). All of this combined has facilitated the analysis and made the writing more meaningful. According to Green and Thorogood (2018) it is recommended that researchers transcribe the interviews directly and immediately once completing the interview. Therefore, the researcher transcribed and conducted the interviews concurrently which enabled him to summarise each interview and share it with his supervisors. This increased the early engagement of the researcher and his supervisors with the data. Transcribing after each interview was also helpful in recognising the data saturation point (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

To preserve the meaning of words, interviews were transcribed in Arabic. However, all quotes presented in the findings were translated. Before translating, translation literature were reviewed to increase the quality of translation and avoid any linguistic mistakes (Denzin, 1989; Esposito, 2001; Regmi, Naidoo, & Pilkington, 2010; Temple, 1997; Twinn, 1997). These writers advised that the translator requires a knowledge of both languages and an awareness of the cultural aspects behind the main text. Therefore, the researcher translated the transcriptions himself. The main goal for the researcher while translating was not to lose the meaning of the collected data, as advised by Denzin (1989). Although the translation stage was time consuming, it familiarised and engaged the researcher with the data.

#### 3.4.2.7 Interviews analysis

The analysis phase involves the researcher finding meaning in the collected data (Creswell, 2009). This researcher thematically analysed the data collected from the interviews. For studies with qualitative data and aims to 'discover using interpretations' (p. 10), Alhojailan (2012) argued that thematic analysis is the most appropriate approach. Thematic analysis is defined as a 'process

used for encoding qualitative information' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4), and is the most common type of analysis for qualitative methods (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2009). Thematic analysis is well known for its simplicity of application, its role in providing logical explanations for the data, and its ability to outline the main features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theme that is the output of this process is identified by Boyatzis (1998) as 'a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (p. 4). In general, thematic analysis is implemented by going through the transcript and dividing it into different codes based on the conveyed meaning. The relationship between codes is then identified and similar codes are gathered to make themes. The whole process should be conducted while keeping the research questions in mind in order to make sense of the categorisation of data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2004). In thematic analysis, codes can be created inductively, whereby they are created from scratch by the data itself, or deductively, whereby codes are more driven by theories or previous studies than the data. During the categorisation, codes and themes can be combined to shape the codebook which will be produced at the end of the analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

In order to avoid subjectivity in the analysis, the researcher ensured the involvement of his supervisors in the analysis phase. Two complete interviews from the beginning of the data collection were translated and shared with the supervisors so that they could give a second opinion on coding the data. Furthermore, during his study, the researcher was also able to prepare some publications (Alsuhaibani, Cox, & Hopfgartner, 2019; Alsuhaibani, Cox, Hopfgartner, & Zhao, 2020, 2022, 2019), and sharing his findings with other scholars and receiving feedback was also helpful in avoiding bias in the analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) have suggested six steps to be followed in thematic analysis. This research has followed these steps in its thematic analysis of the interview data. Table 3.1 outlines these steps with a brief description for each one.



Table 3.1 Steps for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006)

<b>Step</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Familiarisation with data</b>	1	By reading and looking through the data to generate initial thoughts and ideas.
<b>Generating initial codes</b>	2	By categorising the data in a way that helps to achieve the research objectives.
<b>Searching for themes</b>	3	By identifying the themes through looking at the codes and making groups of similar ones.
<b>Reviewing the themes</b>	4	By revising the identified themes to ensure the un-redundancy in themes.
<b>Defining and naming themes</b>	5	By giving an appropriate and reflective names and definitions of the themes.
<b>Producing the report</b>	6	By writing up the results of the analysis and linking them with the research objectives.

The application of these steps in this study is described below. However, it should be acknowledged that these steps were applied by the researcher in a non-linear way moving back and forward between the steps depending on the needs of the analysis.

- **Familiarisation with data**

The aim of this step is to become familiar with the data by reading and looking through it to generate initial thoughts and ideas for likely codes and themes. It is also recommended that the researcher in this step makes notes of the themes and codes expected in the next steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the transcribing and translating of the interviews were undertaken by the researcher himself after listening carefully to each participant's recording. The audio recording was transcribed using Microsoft Word. This process increased researcher familiarity with the data and encouraged the formation of ideas for analysis. The researcher also read and re-read the transcriptions which also increased his involvement with data, not just in this phase

but also throughout the data collection and analysis. By doing this, the researcher was able to note some patterns, potential codes and themes.

#### - **Generating initial codes**

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this step involves categorising the data in a way that helps to achieve the research objectives. In this study, to properly apply this step, a qualitative analysis software (NVivo) was adopted (NVivo, n.d.). The use of this software saved the researcher time and increased the proficiency of organising and analysing the data (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009). The value of this software is that it helped the researcher in ordering, linking and searching different forms of data, such as interview transcripts and recordings (Saunders et al., 2009). It was also helpful in sorting and searching the interviews and themes or codes, enabling the researcher to retrieve all pieces of scripts related to a specific theme or code and to group them together (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, it facilitated the linking of themes and codes arising from the transcript analysis by annotating passages with codes and codes with themes (Creswell, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009). In this research, NVivo was used due to its free access for students at the university. Although NVivo does not work properly with right-to-left languages such as Arabic leading to some errors, the researcher was able to overcome these issues by applying several workarounds such as changing the interviewer and participant names in the text to English and adding at least one empty line between passages.

Once the coding approach was chosen, the researcher started an open inductive coding to allow the data to speak for itself (Bryman, 2004). At the early stages of the analysis, the researcher came up with some initial patterns and codes. The process of coding was iterative and continuous, with the researcher continuing to analyse the transcriptions as new codes emerge. However, during the final interviews, and when the researcher started to reach the data saturation, no new codes were added. Table 3.2 shows an example of how data was extracted into codes in the interviews.

Table 3.2 Data extractions and coding examples

Data extract	Translated	Coded for
"قبل ما أجي لبريطانيا، كنت جداً متوترة ومضغوطة أغلب الوقت، هذا كان بسبب انه راح اترك اهلي وبالتحديد أمي، انا وأمي علاقتنا مره قوية. بالإضافة، كنت اسمع بعض الكلام السلبي عن الناس ببريطانيا، سمعت انهم مو سهل تكوّن صداقات معهم وتسولف معهم وبعض الناس قالوا لي انه ممكن اواجه عنصرية هناك. ممكن صحيح الناس ليسوا اجتماعيين لكني اشوفهم جداً خدومين."	'Before leaving for the UK, I was nervous and stressed most of the time, and this is because I would leave my family and my mother in particular. We are very close! Furthermore, I was hearing some negative comments about people in the UK. I heard that people are not friendly and it is not easy to talk to people. Some people also said that I may face some racism there. It might be true that people in the UK are not easy to meet and get to know, but it is not true that they are not supportive.'	Strong ties with home country  Negative stereotype about people in the UK  UK  Change of serotype after arrival

- **Searching for themes**

This step involves looking for potential themes – that is, to identify how several codes can be combined into a theme. Therefore, this step aims to reconcentrate the analysis on the broader level of themes than codes and combine different codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the codes generated in the previous step were first examined to see how they are related and then were gathered into different themes. This phase resulted in a combination of themes containing codes with links to the data extracts. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), it is acceptable in this stage to have some codes that do not fit in any of identified themes and they can be kept temporarily in an ‘others/miscellaneous’ theme. This occurred in this study where some codes were assigned to a theme called ‘other codes’. The following are the set of potential themes resulting from this phase:

Table 3.3 Potential themes

Themes			
Push factors	Pull factors	Social transitions	Cultural transitions
Academic transitions	Language transitions	Rules and policies transitions	Economic transitions
	Digital transitions	Other codes	

**- Reviewing themes**

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), in this step, all themes are revised to ensure the validity of themes and the accuracy of the thematic map with the whole data set. In this study, the themes generated from the previous step were reviewed and refined. This resulted in a reduction of the number of themes by breaking up two themes, the economic transitions theme and the other codes theme. The researcher found that codes under the economic transitions theme were a better fit under other themes such as the social transitions theme. Codes under the other codes theme were also transferred across the other themes. After reviewing the whole themes and making some changes to some of them, it was clearer where the codes in these themes fit. For example, the code called issues with accommodation was moved from the other codes theme and transferred to the everyday life arrangements theme where it fit better. Furthermore, the name of rules and polices theme was also modified to be more reflective. This resulted in a new list of themes, as shown in Table 3.4 below. Appendix 2 provides a mind map for all themes and their assigned codes.

Table 3.4 Final themes

Themes			
Push factors	Pull factors	Social transitions	Cultural transitions
Academic transitions	Language transitions	Everyday life arrangements transitions	Digital transitions

**- Defining and naming themes**

The aim of naming and defining the themes is to show the ‘essence’ of each individual theme and what sort of data is expected in each theme. Key advice here is to return to the data extracts in each theme and ‘identify what is of interest about them and why’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). Table 3.5 present themes in this study and a definition for each.

Table 3.5 Themes book

Theme	Definition
<b>Push factors</b>	This theme contains motives when deciding to undertake international study, factors which push the students to study abroad. Various factors were included in this theme.
<b>Pull factors</b>	This theme contains motives leading the participant to choose the UK as a destination of their study abroad. Various factors were included in this theme.
<b>Social transitions</b>	This theme presents the changes and challenges associated with the participant leaving their home society and starting to build a new social life and networks in the host country. It also involves changes related to the participants' social settings (e.g. starting to live alone or with a host family). These changes and challenges can occur before or after the participant's physical move to the host country.
<b>Cultural transitions</b>	This theme presents all the cultural differences and changes that participants face when they move to the host country. It also contains challenges that can result from this transition.
<b>Academic transitions</b>	This theme presents the academic changes that participants in this study faced when they moved or planned to move to the host country. These changes can be related to interacting with a new academic system or the process of applying to the degree. They can be either before or after the student's physical move to the host country.
<b>Language transitions</b>	This theme involves various language changes, issues and difficulties that participants face when they move to the host country. They can be issues with English at university or in daily life. They can also be before or after the participants' move to the host country.
<b>Everyday life arrangements transitions</b>	This theme includes changes related to the routine daily tasks that participants face after their move to the new country. This includes

	differences in the accommodation, healthcare, banking and transportation systems.
<b>Digital transitions</b>	This theme presents changes in social media use that participants reported in association with their overall transition experience. These changes can be either before or after the student’s physical move to the host country.

- **Producing the report**

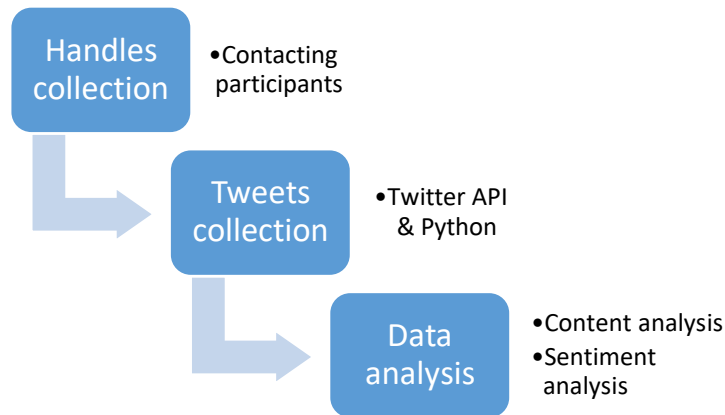
The final phase in this process involves summarising the entire research by producing the results of analysis, synthesising them with the literature, and linking them to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, participants’ complicated stories was told in a way that show the validity and merit of the analysis. The writing up of the analysis is told by the data. It includes data extracts, provides a coherent, non-repetitive and logical account of the stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings of the interviews are presented in chapter 4. These findings are discussed and linked back to the literature in chapter 7.

3.4.3 Twitter data

3.4.3.1 Introduction

Twitter is the data source for the second method and three main steps were followed as presented in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4 Second method steps<sup>4</sup>



The same participants from the interviews were contacted after completing its analysis. A purpose of the second method was to see how a digital transition on Twitter can occur (and to observe some practical examples of digital transition on social media). It was not to generalize the findings from the first method with a larger sample. This is why the second method was restricted to the participants from the first method. Participants were asked to provide their Twitter handles and they also signed another informed consent allowing the researcher to retrieve their tweets. The researcher then collected the participants' tweets along with other metadata, such as the time and language of the tweets. Then, a content and sentiment analysis were applied to the collected tweets. The following sections will provide more details about the stages in this method.

#### 3.4.3.2 Tweets collection

There are two main ways to retrieve Twitter data. The first is using third-party applications such as DiscoverText, TAGs, Mozdeh or NodeXL; and the second uses the Twitter API (Ahmed, Bath, & Ginluca, 2017; Twitter for developers, 2021). Issues with using third-party applications are that they are usually not free and they have more limitations regarding the metadata of tweets. This means that the researcher may be allowed to retrieve the content of the tweet but not the time

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<sup>4</sup> In Twitter, a handle is the username or the name that appear after the '@' symbol.

it was posted. Although some applications, such as DiscoverText, provides a free 3-day trial for its users, the user has to pay once their trial has finished (DiscoverText, n.d.).

Twitter API is the most used channel for retrieving Twitter content by researchers (Ahmed et al., 2017). Through Twitter API, tweets can be collected in two ways: by Representational State Transfer (REST-API); or by Streaming-API (Chitrakala, 2018; Jungherr, 2016). The first way relates to historical data and involves the researcher adding their specific parameters which then allow Twitter to provide access to past tweets related to these parameters. These parameters can be user handles, keywords, or hashtags. The second way allows researchers to stream and collect on-time or live data using parameters that the retrieved tweets are related to (Jungherr, 2016; Twitter Docs, n.d.). Both methods require the researcher to create a Twitter developer application (Jungherr, 2016; Twitter Docs, n.d.).

This researcher has used Twitter API with the REST-API method for several reasons. First, the necessary metadata for this research can be retrieved along with tweets. Examples of such metadata are: 'created\_at' to indicate the time that the tweets were posted; and 'lang' to indicate the language of the tweet. All these metadata were needed in the analysis. Second, data is freely available through Twitter API, whereas with third-party tools, such as DiscoverText, requires payment for the service. Third, retrieving data through Twitter API addresses the ethical issue of giving access to third party companies to the research data. Although some restrictions have recently been imposed by Twitter, such as limiting developers to the collection of tweets from the past seven days, these do not apply to those collecting tweets from users' timelines (Twitter Docs, n.d.). This option requires the researcher to be technically qualified to do some Python programming with Twitter API. However, the researcher has a technical background and he worked hard to develop his skills in this area. This allowed him to take advantage of the above mentioned benefits of collecting data through Twitter API.

The researcher followed the following steps to collect the participants' tweets using Python and Twitter API. First, he created a free Twitter developer account (Twitter for developers, 2021) to



access the Twitter API. This account gives developers some keys and secrets which are needed in their code when they connect to Twitter API. These are consumer key, consumer secret, access key and access secret. Second, the researcher did some coding in Python and used some algorithms (attached in Appendix 3) to connect to Twitter API. In this code, the researcher included the participants' handles as their tweets are those targeted for collection. The code was designed to separate the students' tweets where tweets for each student were grouped in one file. Third, the collected tweets were stored in JSON format files and then they were transformed to CSV files where they can be accessed by the Microsoft Excel software. They were also cleaned and sampled after they were transformed, this means that all unnecessary metadata were deleted and tweets outside the time frame for each student were also deleted. Further information about cleaning and sampling is provided in the next section.

### 3.4.3.3 Tweets analysis

#### 3.4.3.3.1 Cleaning and sampling of tweets

The corpus of this study includes all interviewees' tweets starting from one year before they moved to the UK until one year after their arrival. The reason behind limiting tweets to one year before the student's arrival is based on the interview results which found that students usually start to enter the transition mood at most one year before their arrival in the host country. Furthermore, restricting tweets to one year after arrival is to avoid having to consider different time periods for each student. Different students have different lengths of their timelines after their arrival, therefore, restricting the time to one year after arrival will ensure consistency between participants. Therefore, for each individual, the researcher removed tweets which are less or more than one year from the arrival date.

By using this method, a relatively high amount of tweets was collected in the restricted timeframe (23,493 tweets). These tweets were distributed between students' timelines. Due to the large dataset and the time restrictions, a data sampling technique was needed. There are some common sampling techniques which can be applied in the content analysis of Twitter data

such as simple random sampling (SRS), constructed week sampling and convenience sampling (Kim, Jang, Kim, & Wan, 2018). The final selection from these techniques usually depends on the purpose of the study and the characteristics of its dataset (Kim et al., 2018; Riffe, Lacy, Watson, & Fico, 2019).

In SRS, researchers make a list of the whole sampling units (tweets) and then they randomly select a particular number of units from the main corpus (Kim et al., 2018). 'Throwing dice' is a simple example of how sampling units can be selected from the dataset when sampling in SRS (Krippendorff, 2004). In SRS, there is an equal opportunity for each sampling unit to be selected. This means that certain terms will be more obvious in the sample if they appear more in the population (Krippendorff, 2004; Riffe et al., 2019).

Constructed week sampling works by grouping similar days of the week together and then randomly choosing one of these days. For example, all Mondays in the data collection period are collected together and then one Monday out of these Mondays is randomly selected. This process is also applied for Tuesday, as is Wednesday and so on. At the end, a representation for the seven days of the week will be obtained (Kim et al., 2018; Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). This approach can be categorised as a stratified sampling method (Krippendorff, 2004). It is mainly designed to overcome the variation between weeks which, for instance, can be caused by the news stories (Riffe et al., 1993).

Convenience sampling works by including posts that only serve the study purpose. It is motivated by the researcher's interest in which they only include data that they are concerned with (Krippendorff, 2004). The sample is categorised as a convenient sample when the analyst do not find it difficult to be categorised in codes (Krippendorff, 2004). The sampling process in this approach is always associated with data collection, where the collected data should be related to some certain aspects (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Krippendorff, 2004). This method better

suits researchers who are focusing on specific aspects and the subject is more 'readily accessible' (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). An example of the use of this sampling approach is work by Adams and McCorkindale (2013) who retrieved all tweets for five US presidential candidates with a total of 605 tweets. They analysed these tweets with the purpose of how the candidates used Twitter focusing on the engagement and transparency with followers.

Taking this into account, this study used SRS as a sampling approach for its second method of data collection. Compared with alternative approaches for sampling Twitter data, SRS seems to best fit the purpose of this study and the characteristics of its dataset. As previously mentioned, SRS can give an equal opportunity for each sampling unit in the corpus to be selected. It also helps to make the sample more representative. In contrast, this may not be possible in the constructed week sampling approach which is mainly designed to overcome the variation between weeks which is not an issue in the data of this study. Kim et al., (2018) compared SRS with constructed week sampling in social media and found that the former is more efficient and produces a more representative sample. SRS was also useful for this method because it does not focus on a specific aspect as in convenience sampling. The aim of applying the second method is to expand the researcher's understanding of the transition and how social media are involved. A sample of all the students' posts during their transition needed to be observed in order to investigate their use. As this is inapplicable in convenience sampling, it was discarded as a possibility for this study. Looking at similar studies which relied on social media as a source of their data, Zafar, Bhattacharya, Ganguly, Gummadi and Ghosh (2015) argued that SRS can be classified as the top sampling approach. Cavazos-Rehg et al., (2016), Chew and Eysenbach (2010), Giglietto and Selva (2014) and Takahashi, Tandoc, and Carmichael (2015) are some examples of studies which used SRS as a sampling method for their Twitter data. SRS in this method was therefore applied using the data sampling Toolpack in Microsoft Excel, and it was applied for each student individually.

After deciding on the sampling technique to be used, the researcher made the decision regarding the sample size of tweets. According to Rafail (2018) the sample size is one of the key aspects to consider when applying a sampling method. However, the sample size is associated with resources at hand (Riffe et al., 1993). For instance, researchers should be careful to achieve a balance between the sample size and the time constraints. Kim et al., (2018) argued that in social media studies which apply content analysis, the size of sample should be appropriate for the coder(s) to do the manual coding. In this research, since the size of the population was known, a formula called Slovin's Formula was used. This formula is commonly used by researchers to estimate random sampling size with a countable population (Etikan & Babatope, 2019). This formula is described as:  $n = N / (1 + N * e^2)$ ; where  $n$ = sample size,  $N$ = population size,  $e$ = margin of error. In this method, the margin of error is assumed to be 0.05 (5%), which is the most common value to be assigned to 'e' (Etikan & Babatope, 2019; Tejada, Raymond, & Punzalan, 2012). Assigning this small margin of error will play a key role in increasing the sample accuracy (Bel & Isip, 2015). The formula was applied for each student individually and the overall sample size for all students was 3,459 tweets. For each student, the tweets were ordered based on their time and they were stored separately in CSV files.

#### 3.4.3.3.2 Content analysis

Content analysis is an effective analytical technique that can be applied in quantitative and qualitative studies (Krippendorff, 2004; Payne & Payne, 2004). Krippendorff (2002) defined content analysis as 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use' (p. 18). According to Jupp (1988), content analysis is a 'method of analysing the contents of documents that uses quantitative measures of the frequency of appearance of particular elements in the text. The number of times that a particular item is used, and the number of contexts in which it appears, are used as measures of the significance of particular ideas or meanings in the document' (p. 40). Content analysis can be applied quantitatively or qualitatively (Krippendorff, 2004; Payne & Payne, 2004). Quantitatively, it is used for 'counting how frequently words or topics were included, how much space or time was devoted to themes, and how much importance was drawn to them' (Payne &

Payne, 2004, p. 51). Qualitatively, it can be used to interpret the underlying meaning of the content and its social values (Payne & Payne, 2004). Qualitative content analysis is known for its 'subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015, p. 1278). In addition to counting the occurrence of concepts or texts, qualitative content analysis also 'pay attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of the phenomenon' (Mayring, 2015; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016, p. 2).

In light of the above, and because the aim of applying the second method is to expand the researcher's understanding of the transition and how social media are involved, a qualitative content analysis was conducted in this method. The content analysis also helps with the time distribution of data in this method. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2015) the content analysis is helpful when the researcher is interested in comparing patterns at different time periods.

Hsieh and Shannon (2015) presented three approaches for conducting content analysis: directed, conventional and summative. Although relatively similar to each other, they differ in the creation of their code schemes. In the conventional approach, the coding scheme emerges purely from the content of the study. In the directed approach, the code frame for the study is created using existing relevant theory or results. Summative content analysis involves counting certain keywords identified by the researcher from existing knowledge and reading the literature. In this study, the conventional approach was adopted. The codes were directly derived from the raw data, and the data were allowed to speak for itself. However, the previous findings from the first method were also useful in this method. Themes, in the first method, such as academic, social, cultural and language were helpful in giving insights to the researcher of what codes are expected in the second method.

As mentioned above, content analysis has to be conducted systematically (Payne & Payne, 2004; Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2014). The eight steps applicable to content analysis by Zhang and Wildemuth (2016) were followed. These steps are relatively similar to the thematic analysis steps

suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and followed in the first method. These steps are (1) preparing the data, (2) defining the unit of analysis, (3) developing the coding scheme, (4) testing the coding scheme on a sample, (5) applying the coding on the entire data set, (6) assessing the consistency of coding, (7) drawing conclusions and (8) reporting methods and findings. However, it is necessary to clarify that this is a non-linear process, meaning that the researcher can move backward during implementation. The next sections will provide further details about each step.

- **Preparing the data**

This step involves identifying the sample of the study, which means clarifying the scope of the data set that the researcher will work on (Rose et al., 2014). In this study, tweets were collected together with other metadata (as previously shown in Section 3.4.3.2). After the collection, the data were cleaned and sampled, as presented in Section 3.4.3.3.1. The data were stored in CSV files to help with sorting and allow visualisation later on.

- **Defining the unit of analysis**

This phase involves identifying the 'code unit' on which the classification will be based, such as words, sentences or paragraphs (Krippendorff, 2004; Rose et al., 2014; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). Kim, Jang, Kim, and Wan (2018) argued that the usual way of 'uniting' the content in traditional media by using a day or set of days as the unit does not work appropriately with Twitter. This is because of inconsistencies in content. On some days, content may be very high, but on others it may be lacking. Alternatively, the researcher can consider each tweet as a unit of coding (Kim et al., 2018), which is considered in this research.

- **Developing coding scheme**

In this phase, the researcher starts to develop their code book or scheme through identification of codes and categories from the data (Rose et al., 2014). According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2016), the coding scheme can be developed either in an inductive or a deductive way. It can be

derived from the data itself, previous studies and literature. In this method, the coding scheme was developed inductively based on its data, however, the findings of the first method were helpful in developing this coding scheme. After analysing and writing the first methods' findings, and after reading the new data multiple times, the following questions were raised:

- How, if at all, does the type of content in tweets shift?
- How, if at all, does the frequency of tweeting shift?
- How, if at all, does the language used shift?
- How, if at all, does sentiment shift?

An initial coding scheme was built based on the data and to help in answering these questions.

- **Testing the coding scheme**

The aim of this phase is to validate the coding scheme in early stages of the analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). The intercoder reliability was implemented for both analysis of this method, content and sentiment analysis, and it is provided in Section 3.4.3.3.4. The level of agreement in the test was sufficient enough to proceeding to the next step.

- **Coding the entire data set**

The actual coding starts in this phase, whereby each unit should be assigned to a category (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). In this phase, advanced computer software and tools can help with coding (Krippendorff, 2004; Rose et al., 2014). In this study, Microsoft Excel was used for coding the data saving the time that manual coding would have taken to cover the whole data set. This software also helps with providing visualisations to be used in presenting the findings.

- **Assessing the coding consistency**

This phase implies checking the consistency of the coding scheme after applying coding for the whole data set. It is very often that new codes or concepts can appear since the first intercoder

reliability test (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). Therefore, the researcher has made changes to some codes, changing the definitions of two codes and adding more accurate examples after seeing more examples from the data. The intercoder reliability test was implemented again, this is shown in Section 3.4.3.3.4. This section also shows the final version of the code book.

- **Drawing conclusions from the data set**

According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2016), this step aims to make sense of the themes or categories identified, and their properties. In this study, the researcher identified the relationship between codes and highlighted emerging patterns from the data. By using mind maps, he noted ideas and thoughts about relationships between codes and how they could be reported in the next step.

- **Reporting methods and findings**

This is the last step of the process where the researcher makes a final report of any findings emerging from the data. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2016), the aim of this report is to uncover patterns, themes, and categories important to a social reality. The report should also have a balance between the description and interpretation in the report. In this study, this has been considered and the analysis report is presented in Chapter 5.

#### 3.4.3.3.3 Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis is the process of observing people's opinion or feeling towards a certain topic. It can also be called as 'opinion mining, opinion extraction, sentiment mining, subjectivity analysis, affect analysis, emotion analysis, review mining' (Liu, 2012, p7). Sentiment analysis in social media works by assigning posts to positive or negative categories (Pang & Lee, 2016). It has become one of the most common techniques for analysing social media data (Kouloumpis, Wilson, & Moore, 2011; Pak & Paroubek, 2010). In this study, a manual sentiment analysis was applied to the extracted sample of student tweets. The aim of applying sentiment analysis is to



observe the students' emotions on Twitter during their transition, and to compare their sentiment on their timelines on Twitter with their models that they drew in the first method. Although there are some computational methods that can implement sentiment analysis, these were, however, discarded for two reasons. First, these techniques sometimes misclassify tweets, particularly if there is sarcasm. Second, the accuracy of these techniques with Arabic language is not sufficient. It is expected that some tweets in the data set of are posted in Arabic. In a recent study, Alsalman (2020) claimed that due to the high volume of informal noisy content and morphology of Arabic language, automated sentiment analysis of Arabic text is highly complicated and existing techniques require improvements in regards accuracy and efficiency. The sentiment analysis in this study was applied concurrently with content analysis. This means that it went through the whole steps suggested by Zhang and Wildemuth (2016). Furthermore, a sentiment code frame was developed along with the application of an intercoder reliability. These are presented in the next section.

#### 3.4.3.3.4 Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability also known as 'reality check' (Saldaña, 2011) is the process of measuring the level of agreement between two independent coders who code the same data using the same codebook (Cho, 2008). It is the most common measure for ensuring the quality of coding in content studies (Zhao, Liu, & Deng, 2013). In this study, the intercoder reliability was applied in two phases. The first phase took place after developing the coding frame while the second was conducted after the whole sample was coded by the researcher. A second independent coder<sup>5</sup> was trained and given the codebook in order to apply the intercoder reliability test. On regards the sample size to be tested, Lombard, Snyder-duch, and Bracken (2002) stated that 'the appropriate sample size should not be less than 50 units or 10% of the full sample' (p. 601). For both phases, the second coder was asked to independently code a randomly selected 10% (350

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<sup>5</sup> The second coder was a colleague who has a Master's degree in education and speaks Arabic and English. It was required that the second coder should be fluent in Arabic and English because the tweets can be posted in these two languages.

tweets) of the whole sample from different individuals. The intercoder reliability was applied on both content and sentiment code frames. This means that the 350 tweets were coded by the second coder twice, for their content and sentiment. The results of the first phase test based on different instruments is presented in Table 3.6:

Table 3.6 Intercoder reliability results (first phase)

<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Sentiment</b>
<b>Percent Agreement</b>	88.9%	90.9%
<b>Scott's Pi</b>	0.869	0.848
<b>Cohen's Kappa</b>	0.869	0.848
<b>Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)</b>	0.869	0.848

According to Mary (2013), percent agreement with more than 80% is considered reliable in social science studies. The Scott's Pi, Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's Alpha measures are considered acceptable when they are over 0.80 (Lombard et al., 2002; McHugh, 2012).

By applying this measure, the researcher was able to receive feedback from the second coder on the coding frame, which then improved, based on this process. For example, in the content code frame, some disagreement occurred between the 'Emotional expressions' code and 'Religious expressions and prays' code as they seem to have some overlap. However, after meeting and discussion with the second coder, these codes' definitions were revised and made more accurate and supported with more examples. Another instance of disagreement occurred between the 'Social and cultural topics' code and the 'Religious expressions and prays' code. The second coder was experiencing some misunderstanding of the later code, however, this issue was solved by a discussion with the second coder and the definitions of these codes were made reflective with more accurate examples being provided. In the sentiment code frame, disagreement usually arose in the 'Neutral' code. Similar to the content coding frame, this issue was solved through discussions with the second coder, revising its definition and the addition of more examples.

The second coder was also asked for help after the whole tweets were coded by the researcher. She was asked to code another 10% of the tweets. The second phase of the reliability test resulted in a greater level of agreement compared to the first. Table 3.7 shows the results:

Table 3.7 Intercoder reliability results (second phase)

<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Sentiment</b>
<b>Percent Agreement</b>	95.1%	96.9%
<b>Scott's Pi</b>	0.943	0.947
<b>Cohen's Kappa</b>	0.943	0.947
<b>Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)</b>	0.943	0.947

After this reliability measure, only a few tweaks were applied to the coding schemes such as, updating some code names and definitions and adding more examples. The final versions of the content and sentiment code books are provided below in table 3.8 and table 3.9. Examples presented in the tables were randomly selected, tweets were posted either in Arabic or English, with Arabic tweets translated to English.

Table 3.8 Content codebook

Code ID	Code	Definition	Example(s)
1	Academic related topics	<p>These tweets contain questions related to the student's academic experience.</p> <p>Questions can be about the UK academic system, UK universities or courses. The tweet may also contain or discuss academic topics.</p> <p>It can be related to the student's course in the UK or other context such as discussing academic events (e.g. conference).</p>	<p>'I was very happy to participant at the [...] conference, many thanks to those who organised it'</p> <p>'Could anyone recommend a website where I can find UK universities' rankings?'</p> <p>'I would always recommend having a look at past students' dissertations, they are always available on the school's website'</p> <p>'Urgent!! Does anyone know of someone who is doing a computer science Master's at UCL??'</p>
2	Social and cultural topics	<p>These tweets contain questions or information related to the UK social and cultural life. It can be posted either before or after the student's arrival to the UK.</p>	<p>'Women who are wearing Hijab in the UK, can you share your experience with me!!'</p> <p>'For those who are in the UK, how difficult is it to make local friends there?'</p>
3	Everyday life arrangements matters	<p>These tweets contain questions relating to the new systems in the UK such as healthcare, accommodation and transportation systems. It can also contain information given by the student to others about new systems in the UK. These type of</p>	<p>'For my friends in the UK, I am leaving my flat before the contract ends, so, will I have to pay any fees to break the contract??'</p> <p>'My daughter is not feeling well today ☹ does anyone knows how I can see a doctor in the UK?'</p>

		tweets can be posted either before or after the student's arrival in the UK.	'For those wanting to apply for a driving license in the UK, this mobile app is very helpful for the theoretical test [...]'
<b>4</b>	Language related topics	The content of these tweets is related to English language. It can be a question or sharing of linguistic information with others. This can be related to academic or non-academic English topics and can be posted either before or after the students' arrival in the UK.	'I found this YouTube channel and it helped me a lot with my IELTS exam preparation...' 'I am suffering with my English accent, does anyone knows how to improve it!! Give me your tips!'
<b>5</b>	Saudi news and trends	These tweets contain discussions about trending topics in Saudi Arabia or Saudi news. The content of the tweet can also be related to the country of Saudi Arabia. The student can share information about their home country. Usually, this type of tweet is tagged with a Saudi trending hashtag.	'The good news about the new Saudi Arabian VAT rules is that it is not imposed on all products. Follow this link for excluded products... #VATInSaudiArabia' 'Alhilal [Saudi football club] will always be the best football club in Saudi Arabia, and it is 100% that we will win #Alhilal_vs_Alناصر' 'From the UK, we say that we support you, we love you and are proud of you 🇸🇦#SaudiNationalDay'
<b>6</b>	UK news and trends	These tweets contain UK news or a discussion about a trending topic in the UK.	'They are expecting a rainstorm in northern England tomorrow ☹️☹️'

		Usually, this type of tweet is tagged with a UK trending hashtag.	'BREAKING: The United Kingdom will leave the European Union in one hour' '#Brexit will fuel research for years and will have an impact on all fields including #language 😊'
<b>7</b>	International news and trends	These tweets contain international news or a discussion about a global topic. The topic can be about a global politics or economic issue.	'One of the key challenges facing the global economy is global warming! Let's be honest, the planet is constantly getting hotter. This looks OK to the average person, but these few degrees will be a very important criteria in demographic change, crop production and consumption and international trade, which we are currently experiencing #GlobalWarming #GlobalEconomy'
<b>8</b>	Religious expressions and prays	These tweets are religiously motivated and contain Islamic content. Students in these tweets post prayers, Quran (Ayah), about Ramadan or about religious festivals (e.g. Eid Alfitr and Eid Aladha).	'Oh Allah, please forgive me for all of the bad that I've done, and I continue to do...' 'Happy Eid to all ❤️❤️'
<b>9</b>	Maxims and quotes	These tweets contain a statement of a philosophy or a concisely expressed principle, general truth or rule of conduct.	'A stimulating environment is one of the most important factors for success. If you are surrounded by negative individuals, leave them and look for others...'

			<p>'Be the change that you wish to see in the world - Mahatma Gandhi'</p> <p>'Things get worse before they get better.'</p> <p>#quote_of_the_day'</p>
<b>10</b>	Emotional expressions	<p>These tweets contain an emotional content. It can be lyrics from songs. The tweet can also contain expressions of homesickness, or an expression of the student's feelings of being away from home.</p>	<p>'You'll always be with me, like a handprint on my heart'</p> <p>'Life is treating me so well these days, I wish my sister was around, well and healthy to share the joy'</p> <p>'All things remind me of you ♡♡'</p> <p>'I miss everything in my home country, I miss my family, my friends and my mother's cooking ☹'</p>

Table 3.9 Sentiment codebook

Code ID	Category	Definition	Example(s)
<b>1</b>	Positive	<p>These tweets contain positive emotional content and the nouns and adjectives used tend to be positive or complimentary. Expressions of happiness or optimism are always presented in this type of tweet.</p>	<p>'I like how the transportation system work in the UK, there is no need at all to use a car in my city'</p> <p>'These are some super nice photos taken by me this morning in London [...]'</p>

2	Negative	These tweet contains negative emotional content and the nouns and adjectives used tend to be negative or derogatory. This code contains expressions of anxiety, fear or sadness.	<p>'I miss everything in my home country, I miss my family, my friends and my mother's cooking ☹'</p> <p>'That feeling when you wake up at night and remember the bad news from yesterday and realise it's not a dream. It's real 💔'</p> <p>'I hate it when you have two hard exams in one week!!'</p>
3	Neutral	Mixed emotions (positive and negative) are expressed in the tweet or, there is no sentiment presented.	<p>'I would always recommend having a look at past students' dissertations, they are always available on the school's website'</p> <p>'Could anyone recommend a website where I can find the UK universities' rankings?'</p> <p>'Does anyone know how to get a SIM card in the UK?'</p>



### 3.5 Research context

Research context is a decision that researchers have to make at an early stage in their study (Saunders et al., 2009). In inductive research, it is very helpful for researchers to be close to and understand their research context (Saunders et al., 2009; Soiferman, 2010). Saudis studying or planning to study in UK higher education are the context for this research. Section 2.3.3 in the literature review chapter highlighted how Saudi international students in the UK can have special characteristics and challenges in their study abroad experience. It also showed there to be a lack of studies focusing on Saudi students' perspectives in their study abroad.

In terms of social media, according to Statista (2021), the active social media penetration in January 2021 was 79.3 per cent. One of the factors driving the increasing use of social media is the high adoption of smartphones: in 2020, 87.4 per cent of Saudis used at least one smart phone with Twitter being one of the most used platforms in Saudi Arabia, with over 21.4 million active users. This places the country first among MENA countries and fourth globally (Global Media Insight, 2021; Statista, 2021b).

In light of the above, five factors motivated the selection of UK based higher education Saudi student participants for this study. First, there is an increasing number of Saudi students in the UK. Second, there is a lack of studies on Saudi students and their use of social media during their transition to the UK, so this study attempts to fill a research gap. Third, there is an increasing use of social media by Saudis. Fourth, a focus on Saudi students using global platforms (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) avoids the issue affecting some nationalities whereby the popular platforms in their home country differ from those encountered in the host country. For example, some international students, such as Chinese students, shift to global platforms as soon as they arrive in the host country, or they may stick to their home-country platforms (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). However, it is beyond the scope of this research to explore the topic of shifting from home to global platforms. Fifth, the fact that the researcher is from Saudi Arabia is an advantage for this study. The researcher knows the culture, language and circumstances of the participants, which helps him obtain a deeper understanding of the research topic.

### 3.6 Ethical aspects

It is essential that researchers are aware of the ethical issues they may face during their research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Anticipating these potential issues is important for protecting both the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2009). McAuley (2018) stated that 'the ethics of social research is about creating a mutually respectful, win-win relationship in which participants are pleased to respond candidly, valid results are obtained, and the community considers the conclusions constructive' (p. 95). As previously discussed, data in this research was gathered by two approaches, interviews and Twitter. In both cases, the researcher followed The University of Sheffield Ethics Policy governing research involving human participants, personal data and human tissue (The University of Sheffield, 2021b). The researcher also considered the Research Ethics Policy Note on research involving social media data (The University of Sheffield, 2020). The researcher applied for ethical approval for both methods separately; and they were both approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Sheffield. The ethical approvals are attached in Appendix 4 and 5. More details about the ethical issues related to the two methods in this research are provided and discussed separately below. How data in this study was stored and accessed is also discussed in this section.

#### 3.6.1 Interviews

Ethical research requires voluntary informed consent; therefore, participants in this study were fully informed about why their data was collected and how it will be used (The University of Sheffield, 2020). The purpose of the study was explained to the interviewees in the recruitment call. Informed consent was handed or sent to participants prior to interviews (attached in Appendix 6). Face-to-face participants were asked to read and sign the form before the interviews began. Skype and phone participants received the consent form by email, where they were asked to sign and return it to the researcher. The informed consent advised the participants regarding research aim, procedures, and any potential risks or benefits that may arise from their participation. It also informed participants about their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; The University of Sheffield, 2021b). The researcher followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) advice that participants should be treated 'fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice, in recognition of both their rights and of differences arising from age, gender,

sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant characteristic.’ (BERA, 2018, P.5).

The confidentiality of interview data should also be maintained (The University of Sheffield, 2021b). Confidentiality in research concerns agreements with participants about how their data will be used and what information from their participation will be presented (Kaiser, 2009). In this research, participants were informed that any personal information, such as their names, were anonymised. They were also told that if there is a need to present any script from their interview in the study, then, their names will be replaced by codes. Participant codes consist of two characters, a letter to represent the gender and a serial number. For example, F1 stands for female participant with serial number 1.

### 3.6.2 Twitter data

As a result of the complexity of social media platforms, it is impossible to provide certain rules regarding how social media data can be used ethically (The University of Sheffield, 2020). However, during the consideration of ethical issues for Twitter data in this research, different guidelines were reviewed, including the University of Sheffield Ethics Policy, the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society, and the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (British Psychological Society Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research, 2017; The University of Sheffield, 2020; The University of Sheffield, 2021b; Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Researchers who obtain their data from social media are advised to check the terms and conditions of their targeted platforms to ascertain whether users have to approve the use of their posts by others (The University of Sheffield, 2020). The Twitter Terms of Service (2021), which were updated after applying the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), indicates that users should agree that their tweets may be used for research purposes as part of their registration. This gives researchers the right to use Twitter data as a source for research, especially if it concerns non-sensitive topics, such as the topic of this study. However, in this study the researcher ensured the anonymisation of the identity of the tweeter and the paraphrasing of tweet content if it needs to be presented. The paraphrasing was required to avoid retracing the tweet’s owner from its content using search engines.

In addition to the approval gained from the Twitter terms of service, the researcher also asked participants to sign an informed consent to allow use of their tweets. A copy of the informed consent for this method is attached in Appendix 7. A separate ethical approval was also gained for this method and attached in Appendix 5.

### 3.6.3 Data storage and accessibility

All the data – the interviews from the first method and the Twitter data from the second method – are stored on the University of Sheffield hard drive, and password protected. The data were accessed only by the researcher and his supervisors.

### 3.7 Research quality

There is a lack of consensus between scholars on how to assess the quality of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Different methods were suggested by different scholars in this field to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. Trustworthiness refers to the process of ensuring the confidentiality of research findings by determining their accuracy (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1979). This means that trustworthiness also helps researchers ensure that their research questions were been answered to a high standard (Saunders et al., 2009). Patton (2002) argued that the researcher should take a key role in determining the quality of their work. The degree of diligence, care, and skill that the researcher has can help to increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Neuman (2014) emphasised on the richness of data and argued that the more data collected, the greater the accuracy and validity. Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggested four techniques for assessing the trustworthiness of a qualitative research, these techniques include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. How each of these techniques was maintained in this study is discussed below.

**Credibility** aims to check whether research findings are valid (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility in this study was maintained by applying a triangulation method and using multiple data collection methods. Interviews and Twitter data were collected and the researcher was able to ensure the validity and plausibility of findings in this research. By adopting this two

method approach, the researcher was able to observe the investigated phenomenon from different viewpoints, gaining an overall comprehensive understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

**Transferability (generalisability)** aims to check whether findings emerging from the study are applicable to other similar settings or contexts (Polit & Beck, 2010). Although generalisation is not the main target for qualitative research, case-to-case transferability is a key aspect for assessing its quality (Given, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1979; Schwandt, 2014). This means that knowledge inferred from a particular study can be transferred to a new context or position. One way to ensure the transferability in qualitative research is to provide a thick description which involves providing rich details about the study context and the phenomenon itself (Polit & Beck, 2010; Tracy, 2010). This technique was applied to this research, providing a description of data collection procedures, participant characteristics and the design of its methods. According to Holloway (1997) and Ryle (2009) by providing thick description, the researcher moves the responsibility to generalise the findings to the reader who can then compare the context and settings of this research with other similar ones. This was termed by Misco (2007) as 'reader generalisation'.

**Dependability** aims to ensure whether the research findings are consistent and repeatable if the same research scenario was implemented. This can be achieved by conducting a step-by-step 'audit trail' whereby the researcher collects all the influences and materials that lead to different actions or decisions during their research. The reason for doing this is to increase the reflectiveness of the study, and is achieved by accounting for all research decisions made and showing the motivations for choosing them (Lincoln & Guba, 1979). To ensure this, the researcher maintained a full record of documents including interviews questions, records and transcriptions, ethical applications and approvals, Twitter raw data, notes during the analysis, intercoder reliability results and notes and study challenges.

**Confirmability** aims to ensure that the study's outcome is derived from the data obtained from the informants rather than from the researcher's own biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Although the involvement of the researcher's biases is inevitable, researchers are advised to increase the level of objectivity as much as they can (Misco, 2007). Because the researcher in this study is a Saudi international UK based student familiar with the culture, language and circumstances of the participants, they were able to obtain a deeper understanding of the research topic. However, The researcher has ensured that confirmability is maintained in his research by taking measures that set aside, as far as possible, his own assumptions and beliefs while undertaking the analysis in order that the study is data driven. Miles and Huberman (1994) claimed that researchers can achieve a high level of confirmability when they admit their own predispositions. In this research, for the two methods, the activities and procedures were documented and the data analysis procedures were detailed. The previously mentioned audit trail was fundamental in maintaining confirmability of this study.

### 3.8 Summary

This chapter presented how the research was guided in regards its research paradigm. It also explained how its methods were applied including the collection and analysis of data and the order of methods. The ethical issues correlated with method application were also presented and the researcher discussed how these ethical aspects were managed. The end of this chapter discussed how quality was maintained throughout this research.

## Chapter 4 Interviews Findings

### 4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the first method of this research. The analysis of the interviews in this study has produced eight themes, as presented in Section 3.4.2.7; this chapter is divided according to those themes. It will start by presenting the push and pull factors for students. Those factors are related to the students' decision to study abroad (push) and choosing the UK as a place of study (pull). According to the findings of this study, students face multiple transitions associated with their study abroad. These transitions will be then presented separately; they are: social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transitions. At the end, this chapter will conclude with a section on characteristics of transition, where seven fundamental characteristics that can enrich researchers' understanding about the whole concept of transition in general and the international students' transition in particular are presented. Before presenting the findings of this method, Table 4.1 presents the demographic information of participants in this study.

*Table 4.1 Demographic information of participants*

<b>Participant code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status (children)</b>	<b>Since when in the UK</b>	<b>Degree</b>
<b>M1</b>	Male	28	Married (1)	Not arrived yet	PhD
<b>F1</b>	Female	28	Single	Not arrived yet	PhD
<b>M2</b>	Male	26	Single	8 months	English course then Master's
<b>F2</b>	Female	24	Single	6 months	English course then Master's
<b>F3</b>	Female	30	Single	10 months	English course then PhD
<b>F4</b>	Female	31	Single	11 months	English course then Master's
<b>F5</b>	Female	40	Single	11 months	English course then Master's
<b>M3</b>	Male	35	Married	10 months	Master's

<b>F6</b>	Female	27	Single	12 months	Master's
<b>M4</b>	Male	38	Married (6)	9 months	PhD
<b>M5</b>	Male	35	Married (1)	12 months	PhD
<b>F7</b>	Female	34	Married (2)	7 months	PhD
<b>F8</b>	Female	27	Married	8 months	PhD
<b>M6</b>	Male	25	Engaged	14 months	Master's
<b>M7</b>	Male	31	Married	16 months	PhD
<b>F9</b>	Female	27	Single	1 month	PhD
<b>M8</b>	Male	22	Single	24 months	Undergraduate

## 4.2 Push factors

### 4.2.1 Understanding the push factors

As previously discussed in the literature review chapter, push factors are those factors motivating students to decide to undertake international study: factors which push the student to go abroad. Presenting these factors at the beginning of the findings chapter is essential as they seem to be connected to how the students perceive their transition and life in the UK. For example, students who are personally motivated to study abroad either to increase their knowledge about other cultures or to learn to be independent may have a different social and cultural transition experience than those who are obligated by their employer to study abroad. More discussion about this will be presented later on in the chapter.

An important point to clarify before presenting the results is that Saudi students in the UK can be classified into three types in regard to who sponsors their studies abroad. First and most common is that students are sponsored by their employers in Saudi Arabia (usually educational institutions). These employers, in most cases, are funded by and belong to the government. Second, students can be sponsored by a government scholarship programme called 'King Salman bin Abdulaziz Program' (Ministry of Education, 2021). Students in this programme usually, but not always, are promised a job after they finish their study abroad.



Third, students can be self-funded, where they or their families pay for their tuition fees and living expenses. However, it should be acknowledged that the last two options rarely happen. According to the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2021), approximately 25% of students in the UK fall under the second and third options. Out of the 17 students interviewed in this research, only three students were sponsored by the king's scholarship programme and only one student was self-funded.

#### 4.2.2 Personal motivations

The personal motivation factor was one of the highly mentioned push factors for why students decide to study abroad. A variety of perspectives were expressed within this factor; they are presented in the following sections:

##### 4.2.2.1 *Increasing cultural awareness*

One of the participants in this study reported that she wanted to study abroad to increase her cultural awareness:

*'I think people should always continue developing themselves. A good way of development is the interaction with new culture, interaction with new people and new world. This was a main motivation for me to study abroad.'*  
(F3)

Another participant also stressed having international exposure and talked about her desire to look at the differences between the UK and the Saudi cultures. She also wanted to compare what she hears in the media about the western culture and what she will see in her life in the UK.

*'I have always heard about the western culture and I always wanted to see what it looks like in reality. So, honestly, this was one of the reasons why I decided to study abroad, to look at the western culture and compare it with our culture [Saudi culture]'* (F6).

#### 4.2.2.2 Opportunity for self-development

Another perspective within the personal motivation factor was expressed by another two participants: about self-development. Some participants looked at their study abroad as a good opportunity to increase their life experience since they would face their day-to-day activities by themselves. They believe that this can lead to increased independence:

*'When I decided to study abroad, I was looking to live alone and become more independent. In Saudi Arabia, I was totally depending on my family for most things, but here it is different, I became more independent. I am doing my daily things by myself. For example, I am paying my bills (Internet, water and the electricity) by myself and this is something I learned here.'* (F9)

*'I always wanted to study abroad; it is not about just studying but also it is about the life experience. I always wanted to try a new lifestyle, a different lifestyle than the Saudi one [...] There is a difference between my life here and in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, you cannot be independent, I live with my family and I rely on them in many things, but here, things are different. I became more responsible and I wanted to try this kind of life [...]'* (F3)

What is interesting about these two quotes is that they are from female students, and according to the Saudi culture, there is a difference in roles between genders. It is culturally known in Saudi Arabia that females do not take these kind of responsibilities. Therefore, these females believe that moving to the UK will give them the space to do their day-to-day activities by themselves and learn to be independent.

#### 4.2.2.3 Self-assessment and new start

Another participant (M7) who came to the UK with his wife reported that he and his wife share the same main motivation to study abroad. They considered leaving their community and society as a good opportunity to re-evaluate themselves:

*'I will tell you the same answer that I gave to my niece when she asked us why we are travelling to the UK. I said: we want to discover ourselves [...]. Living in the UK will help us to re-evaluate our life and abilities. In Saudi*

*Arabia you are restricted to the evaluation you receive from your people and society there, however, by travelling to the UK, people will look at you in a different way and this will help you to re-assess yourself [...]. I always believed that some experiences in life will not be gained until you live abroad.’ (M7)*

This can show that for some students, their transition to the UK is perceived as an opportunity to make a self-assessment that can lead to changes in personality. This view is also supported by another participant (F7) who commented that the experience of study abroad will allow her to have a ‘new start’ in her relationship with her husband:

*‘I was excited to study in the UK to start a new life with my husband, and thank God it worked well. My husband and I believed that moving to the UK will help us to make a new start in our relationship.’ (F7)*

#### 4.2.2.4 Academic development

Two other participants reported that their personal motivation is related to enhancing their academic experience, either because the student wants to try a new academic system (the UK academic system):

*‘Another motivation is that I wanted to study in a new environment.’ (F6)*

Or because they want to look at their area of study from a new angle or perspective:

*‘I did my undergraduate in Saudi Arabia, however, when I decided to do my Masters and PhD, I was looking to do them in a new environment. I believe that study abroad increases the student’s experience by allowing them to have new perspectives and views about their area of study.’ (F1)*

These two quotes show that these students were aware of the academic differences between the UK and Saudi Arabia and they wanted to go through this academic transition.

Talking about the academic perspective, two participants reported that their personal motivation came from their desire to serve the community. They wanted to have a role in transferring knowledge from the UK to Saudi Arabia:

*'I can say that the personal motivation part in my decision to study abroad was because I wanted to serve my country, Saudi Arabia. Since I am a specialist in speech difficulties, it is unlikely to see qualified Saudis in this area. I always see cases for people with heart attacks and autism who need support in their ability to speak. Therefore, I wanted to have a role in transferring this knowledge to Saudi Arabia.'* (F9)

*'I wanted to leave my comfort zone and try something new. Something that can help me to develop myself, my country and my society [...] developing my country and society can happen by transferring the knowledge to Saudi Arabia'* (M6)

These two quotes show that there is a lack of knowledge in some areas of study, which leads the Saudi government or employers in Saudi Arabia to send their staff to study abroad. This point (pushing students to study abroad) will be presented as another push factor in Section 4.2.3.

#### 4.2.2.5 Employability

Two of the participants who are sponsored by the king's programme reported that looking for better job opportunities is a primary reason for their decision to study abroad. As previously mentioned in this chapter, students who are sponsored by the king's scholarship programme may or may not be guaranteed a job after they finish. M8, who is guaranteed a job after he finishes, reported that he decided to study abroad for the purpose of seeking a guaranteed job at the end. He was a student in a Saudi university with good academic progress; however, he dropped out of his course in Saudi Arabia and joined the scholarship programme because this is something that will give him a job directly after he finishes. M8 said:

*'I was a student in Saudi Arabia. After a term and a half I got the opportunity to study abroad, therefore, I decided to drop out of the Saudi university and leave for the UK. I did this because my scholarship contract has a job at the end. So, I knew that at the end I will have a job; and it is a good job by the way.'* (M8)

F3 provided a similar view to M8 and reported her experience of resigning from her job and joining the king's scholarship program. Although F3 is not guaranteed by the government to have a job after she finishes, she attributed her decision to her belief that studying abroad and having a PhD will increase her opportunities in having a better job in the future:

*'Studying abroad will open new opportunities for me. I was working in a bank in Saudi Arabia and I was not happy with that work. Therefore, I decided to resign from my job take the study abroad opportunity. I am sure that once I finish my PhD I will have more opportunities either in the private sector or for the government because there are only a few people who have a PhD in my major.'* (F3)

With regard to participants who are on institutional scholarships, M3 mentioned that study abroad could increase his chances to get promotion in his job or to get a better opportunity in a different organisation:

*'In my organisation in Saudi Arabia most of the top managers have an overseas qualification [...]. There is support from my organisation for the good staff to study abroad. It is always the case that when the staff return from the scholarship, they get a higher position either in our organisation or in a different organisation.'* (M3)

Getting a better position after returning from overseas study can be attributed to different reasons. First, as the above quote reported, the organisations may only send the 'good staff' to study abroad, and those staff are more likely to succeed in their career path. Second, staff who study abroad will have the benefit of speaking the English language, and this is a key factor for getting higher positions in most organisations in Saudi Arabia. Third, in most institutional scholarships students are restricted to study in top universities in the world. Having a qualification from a highly ranked university will make a positive impact on the staff profile.

#### 4.2.3 Pushed by employer

Another highly mentioned factor by students is the pushing by government or employer to study abroad. This factor is motivated by the absence of some programs of studies in Saudi Arabia. Many participants reported that their specialisation is not available in Saudi Arabia or that the number of spaces is limited. This occurs especially for master's and PhD programs, and this can explain why it is so rare for the Saudi government to sponsor students for their undergraduate studies:

*'We [Saudi students] don't have a PhD course in my major in Saudi Arabia.'*  
(F7)

*'Personally, I wanted to study in Saudi Arabia, but I couldn't find my major there [Saudi Arabia].'* (F4)

*'The first reason why I decided to study abroad is that my major is not provided in Saudi Arabia.'* (F9)

*'At the beginning, I was looking to do my masters in Saudi Arabia but as you know universities in Saudi Arabia only accept a small number of students for master's and PhD.'* (F2)

From the above presented quotes, it can be seen that some programs of studies are not provided in Saudi Arabia (F7, F4 and F9) or there is high competition in others (F2).

One of the main aims of the Saudi government for funding these scholarship programs is to transfer the knowledge to Saudi Arabia. This can explain why employers in Saudi Arabia (universities in most cases) obligate their staff to return to the country after pursuing their education abroad. Sending students and then obligating them to return back with what they learned is a strategy by the Saudi government to transfer the knowledge to Saudi Arabia.<sup>6</sup> All of the sponsored students in this research admitted that they have the 'obligation return' role in their sponsorship contract:

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<sup>6</sup> More discussion about how the obligation return policy can affect the student's perception about their life in the UK will be presented later on in this chapter.

*'As you know, we [Saudi sponsored students] are required to return to our works when we complete our studies abroad.'* (M6)

*'When I signed my contract for the scholarship, there was a condition that I should return to my work in Saudi Arabia after finishing my study.'* (M2)

Another reason that leads the Saudi government and employers to send their staff abroad is the quality of education. According to some participants, the low quality of some programs provided in Saudi Arabia has led their sponsor to require them to study abroad. Two of the participants reported that the quality of education and the rank of the overseas university is an important aspect for their sponsor:

*'Currently, I am doing a Master of Business Administration (MBA), and this programme is provided in some universities in Saudi Arabia but I doubt its quality [...]. In Saudi Arabia there are only three universities that provide an MBA programme and I don't think that my employer will allow me to study at any of them because these three universities are not highly ranked. My employer cares about the quality of the education.'* (M3)

*'I do not know if my programme of study is provided in Saudi Arabia or not but what I am sure about is that my employer will not allow me to study in Saudi Arabia. I do not know why, but maybe because they think that the quality outside is higher than in Saudi Arabia.'* (F8)

The importance of quality for the Saudi sponsors can be also noticed in the list of overseas universities that the Saudi government and employers maintain for their staff. Students who are sponsored by the king's programme can only choose to study at a university taken from a list of 100 (Ministry of Education, 2021). Furthermore, the majority of other institutions also maintain their own lists of approved universities. For example, at Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, which is a medium size university in Saudi Arabia, staff are restricted to study at one of the top 100 universities around the world according to the ShanghaiRanking system of

universities (ARWU, 2021; PSAU, 2021). This was also mentioned by some of the sponsored students during interviews:

*'My employer cares about the quality of the university, they only accept the top 30 universities in the UK and 100 in the US.'* (M3)

*'My Saudi university [his employer] has their approved list of universities which includes only 200 universities around the world.'* (M2)

The students' perspectives about how they see the government or the sponsor rule in obligating them to study abroad are various. Few students perceive the 'pushed by employer' factor as a main factor in why they decided to study abroad. M4, who works as a university lecturer in Saudi Arabia, stated the following:

*'To be honest, the main reason why I decided to study abroad is my job. If I had the chance to study in Saudi Arabia, I would definitely study there. You know, I am a lecturer at the University, and we [university lecturers] are required to study abroad.'* (M4)

This quote can show that the decision to study abroad for M4 was because he needs to complete his education and he does not have a choice other than studying abroad. When M4 was asked about the reasons why he did not want to leave the country, he stated the following:

*'I did not have the passion to study abroad because of my family and children. I have a big family and I thought that it would be difficult to move with them to the UK. If I were single and would move alone to the UK, then I think things would be different.'* (M4)

M4 is a married male with 5 children; this can show that marital status and the size of family may add extra challenges and obstacles which make the student more hesitant about their coming experience. This view was echoed by another informant (F7) who indicated that being married and having two children made her less willing to study abroad:



*'I wanted to do my PhD in Saudi Arabia because my husband cannot leave his work and join me. I am also a mother of two children and moving with them to the UK is very difficult.'* (F7)

Turning to a different perspective, another participant was considering the 'pushed by employer' factor as a supporting factor in their decision to study abroad. M5, who joined the university after pursuing his masters from Saudi Arabia, claimed that he knew that the university would obligate him to study abroad and he did not have a problem with this:

*'I had my master's degree before joining the university, when they weren't able to obligate me doing my master's degree abroad. When I decided to join my Saudi university, I knew that they would require me to do my PhD abroad. So, in my case, I already had the idea of study abroad, but the university pushed me to do it.'* (M5)

It was also interesting that the 'pushed by government/employer' factor was attracting some students to join the university. One participant commented:

*'I was looking for a job in the university because I wanted to study abroad.'*  
(M6)

#### 4.2.4 English language motivation

Some participants in this study reported that studying in an English-speaking country was a motivation to undertake international study. When talking about study abroad in Saudi Arabia, it always comes to the students' minds that the study will be in an English-speaking country such as the US, the UK, Australia or Canada. This is because of the frequency of these countries as destinations for students in Saudi Arabia and around the world.

For all participants who mentioned this factor, it was acting as a supporting factor to another more primary one. M3 expressed the following:

*'Another reason why I wanted to do my study abroad is that I wanted to develop my English language. Studying abroad will allow me to do more*

*practice for the English language. For example, in the UK, I will be able to do assignments, interact with other classmates and lecturers and do presentations in English. I will also have the chance to develop my non-academic English through the daily life interactions with people on the street.'* (M3)

This quote started with 'Another reason', which can explain how the development of English language was acting as a second factor for the student. However, the student in this quote shows how he will have the chance in the UK to improve his academic language ability through doing academic activities and interacting with people in the university in English. He also stated that studying in the UK will improve his non-academic English through the daily life interactions with people outside the university.

Although most of the English, science, technology, and medicine courses in Saudi universities are taught in English, some participants thought that studying in an English-speaking country would add more benefits for them. F6, who studies a master's in English literature, commented the following:

*'I am doing my master's in English literature and I believe that it is better to do this course in a country where the English is the first language.'* (F6)

Furthermore, M5, who is studying for a PhD in electronic commerce, shared a similar view to F6 and claimed that the strong link of his major with the English language is a motivation to engage with an English academic community.

*'My programme of study [electronic commerce] has a strong connection with the English language. Being in the UK and involved with its academic community will help me improve my language skills in my area of study.'*  
(M5)

Few students talked about choosing the UK over other English-speaking countries; however, these views will be presented in Section 4.3 when the pull factors are discussed.

#### 4.2.5 Summary

Before giving a summary of the push factors, it is important to acknowledge that individuals are usually motivated by multiple factors together. However, the strength of each factor can vary from one student to another. The results of this research showed that three reasons can push students to undertake their study internationally, they are summarised in Figure 4.1.

Students can be motivated personally either to increase their cultural awareness, increase their self-independency or to make a self-assessment. Engaging with a new academic system and the desire to serve the community by having a role in transferring the knowledge to Saudi Arabia are also observed as types of personal motivations. Students may also decide to study abroad as a reason to seek better job opportunities. For unemployed students, they may see their scholarship opportunity as a good chance to guarantee their job after graduation or to give them better job opportunities. For institutionally sponsored students, study abroad can play a positive role in supporting them to take higher positions in their jobs.

The government or employers can push their staff to study abroad and this was observed as another frequently reported motivation for students. The reason behind doing this on the part of the sponsor is the lack or absence of some courses in Saudi Arabia. This is why Saudi students have the obligation return rule. The employer may also push their staff because they are looking for more quality in education. Students can have different perspectives about being obligated to study abroad: some may see it as a necessary evil, while others may see it as a supporting factor or as an attractive factor to join the university.

Finally, students can also be motivated to study abroad for linguistic reasons, to improve their English language. This factor usually acts as a supporting actor for other factors where some students believe that being in an English-speaking country can develop their academic and non-academic English.

Figure 4.1 Summary of push factors for participants

Personal motivations	Pushed by government/ employer	English language motivations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cultural awareness</li><li>• Increase independence</li><li>• Make self-assessment</li><li>• New academic system</li><li>• Having role in transferring knowledge</li><li>• Guaranteed job</li><li>• Better job opportunities</li><li>• Getting promotions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack or absence of courses in Saudi Arabia</li><li>• Transferring the knowledge</li><li>• Quality of education</li><li>• Obligation to return</li><li>• Different perspectives about obligation of study abroad</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supporting factor</li><li>• Improve academic and non-academic English</li><li>• Course association to English</li></ul>

### 4.3 Pull factors

#### 4.3.1 Understanding the pull factors

As previously discussed in the literature review chapter, pull factors are those factors leading the student to choose the destination of study. The importance of presenting pull factors in this research is their relationship with the student's experience of transition. There is always a link between the motivations of choosing the destination of study and how the student perceives their transition to the host country. For example, students who choose to study in the UK because of the geographic proximity or because the period of the study is shorter than alternative countries may be more likely to be more connected with their home country, this can affect their whole transition experience. More details about the pull factors will be presented in this section.

#### 4.3.2 The geographic proximity

One of the most reported reasons for choosing the UK as a destination of study for students was the geographic proximity between the UK and Saudi Arabia. When asked about their motivations for selecting the UK over other alternative countries, the majority of participants gave a decisive answer such as:

*'Why I chose the UK? It is the location, it is all about the location, this is the main reason!!' (F2)*

*'When I decided to study abroad, I considered the UK as a destination of study and this is all because of the location, not far from Saudi Arabia compared to the US.' (M8)*

*'The main reason for choosing the UK is the location!! Not far from Saudi Arabia.' (F3)*

The dominance of the UK location can be attributed to different reasons:

First, it can be simply attributed to the short journeys between the home and host countries. Some students reported their previous experience of study in other countries and how difficult the trip was:

*'Of course, I would prefer to travel for five hours from Riyadh to London than 15 hours from Riyadh to Texas or another city in the US [...]. My experience in the US was in Oklahoma state, so the trip takes about 35 hours from leaving my flat in the US to arriving to my family's house in Riyadh. The trip usually has three stops and the last flight takes about 15 hours. This was very tiring and I usually became jet lagged for 3-4 days after arrival. For this reason, I did not return home during the last two years in the US.' (M3)*

*'I studied in Canada before, I did an English language course for a year there. The city [Vancouver] was very nice and in my opinion it is better than all UK cities, however, you need 17 hours to reach it from Saudi Arabia which is very tiring.' (M7)*

From these two quotes, it can be seen that the relatively short trip between the home and host countries can be an important aspect. M3 presented his negative experience of being jetlagged for a couple of days after the trips when he was studying in the US. Furthermore, M7 reported that during his experience in Canada, although the city was nice, the journey to that city was long and exhausting. However, later on in the interview, M7 acknowledged that after studying in the UK, he realized that the trip was longer than what he thought and it was not as easy as what he was expecting:

*'By the way, I discovered that the trip takes more than ten hours between my home city in Saudi Arabia and the UK. It includes the train to the UK airport and then a flight to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and then another flight to my home city in Saudi Arabia. So, it is harder than what I was expecting.'*  
(M7)

The geographic proximity is also an important factor for students who visit Saudi Arabia very often. The students' visits can be motivated by different reasons. It may be because they have strong ties with their home countries, which somehow has a relation to their social and cultural transitions to the UK:

*'My husband and family live in Saudi Arabia, my husband could not come with me. Therefore, I always make visits to them and thanks to the UK location it is not difficult to have a flight of six hours to my home city in Saudi Arabia.'* (F8)

*'The location of the UK is very important for me because I go to Saudi Arabia almost every holiday. I like my life in Saudi Arabia, I do not think about travelling around Europe in the holidays because I know I will feel more happy in Saudi Arabia. I have my family and friends there and I enjoy being with them.'* (M8)

Choosing the UK because of the ease of making visits to Saudi Arabia can affect how the students see their social life in the UK. For example, both of these two participants have shown during their interviews that they are socially unengaged with the new host society. F8 reported her experience of being socially disconnected from the people in the UK and her desire to finish her PhD as soon as possible and go home. M8 had a similar social experience; he thought that his social life in the UK was restricted, with few co-national people, and he enjoyed his life more in Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, the high number of visits to Saudi Arabia can be attributed to the special circumstances that some students have, such as those mentioned by F3 and F5:

*'Studying in a faraway country was a problem because I have to visit Saudi Arabia constantly. During the first three months in the UK, I had to go back four to five times. At that time, I needed to visit Saudi Arabia once or twice a month due to some issues with my family there.'* (F5)

*'I have some family issues that require me to return home from time to time. This is why I chose the UK, because it will not be difficult to return and the flight ticket will not be expensive.'* (F3)

Second, many students who highlighted the location as a factor pulling them to study in the UK mentioned how the close distance can make them feel safer and more comfortable. This was mentioned by the majority of students who reported the location as a factor for choosing the UK. F9, who is a single female student, reported that living in a relatively close country to her home country makes her feel more confident that she can easily reach her family if something were to happen:

*'The location of the UK is important for me because I feel more safe in the UK. It is not far away from Saudi Arabia and if anything bad happens I can easily return home.'* (F9)

Therefore, F9 preferred the UK location not because of a need to return occasionally to her home country, but because of the feeling of safety; later on in the interview she commented:

*'I don't go home very often, but I like the UK location because I feel more safe.'* (F9)

F4 agreed on this point and added that having no big difference in the time zones between the two countries was important for her. It is interesting that similar time zone can be a pull factor that influences the students' choice of host countries. F4 stated:

*'You know, I feel that it is about the feeling that you are not very far from your family. Also, there is no big difference in time between Saudi Arabia and the UK; with the little difference, it is easier to contact my family at home.'* (F4)

The students' desire not to have a big difference in time zone can show how some students are connected to their family and home country. This can also affect the students' social transition: the students who care about the time zone of the host country are usually more connected to their home country and people. M7 also stressed the time zone point and mentioned that he needs to be connected with his parents:

*'My parents are a bit old and they live alone, so, due to the little difference in time zones I can easily contact them.'* (M7)

F6, who is a single female student, showed another perspective about why the location of the UK is important. She thought that being in a relatively close country was a supporting factor for her to convince her family to study abroad. For some families in Saudi Arabia, it is culturally unacceptable that women live alone in another city or country. Therefore, although F6 will be living alone in the UK, she believes that it was much easier to convince her family to study in the UK. She stated:

*'The location of the UK is important for me because, you know, as a girl when I tell my family that I want to study in a faraway country such as the US they will not allow me. They feel that it is far away and they will not feel comfortable with that. But in the UK and due to the relatively short distance, they felt more relaxed and it is also easier for them to visit me occasionally.'*  
(F6)

The existence of Mahram is another cultural aspect for Saudi females in the UK.<sup>7</sup> The location of the UK has a link to this aspect; F2 reported that her father (her Mahram) is not living with her but he visits her very occasionally; therefore, the UK location can facilitate these visits.

*'The location is important because of the Mahram, it is much easier for him to visit me occasionally in the UK.'* (F2)

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<sup>7</sup>Mahram is a word that is difficult to translate literally because it has some religious and cultural meanings. However, it refers to the male companion that women should travel with. The Mahram can be the father or brother for single women, and husband for married women.



#### 4.3.3 The length of study

The period of study in the host country was another factor pulling the students to a specific country. It was interesting how some students mentioned that the relative short period of study in the UK is a motivation behind why they decided to choose it. Compared to other alternative destinations such as the US, the length of time the student takes to complete a higher education degree in the UK is usually less. For example, the average length to complete a master's in the UK is one year, while it is usually two years in the US.

Overall, there are two main factors behind why the period of study is important for some students:

First, for sponsored students who already have job contracts with an obligation return rule in their home country, some of them see that their future career path is in Saudi Arabia. Having a job and the definite return to the home country has led some students to maintain a kind of loyalty with their home employer. M6 stated:

*'The short length of study in the UK was a motivation for me [...]. This will allow me to return to my work and start my career at a young age.'* (M6)

The employer in Saudi Arabia can also have an effect on the student's decision. F5 thought that her employer in Saudi Arabia did not want her to stay too long abroad:

*'My plan was to go to the US, but my employer did not allow me to do this. They wanted me to go to the UK because of the length of study, you know the length of study in the UK is less than the US. This is because I am holding a high position in my organisation and they did not want me to be absent for more than one year.'* (F5)

Second, as previously mentioned in the push factors, some students are not personally motivated to study abroad. Instead, their decision of going abroad was a result of the absence of programs in Saudi Arabia or because they are required by their employer to do so. For most of those students, the period of time to complete the degree is crucial as they want to return

home as soon as possible. F4, who mentioned earlier that she decided to study abroad because she could not find her major in Saudi Arabia, stated the following:

*'I did not want to spend a lot of time in the UK, I like the master's here where the student can finish it within one year.'* (F4)

F7 also shared a similar view and claimed that the time commitment was a main factor when she decided to study her master's in the UK. Due to the commitment of her husband to his work, they cannot leave the country for more than a year; she stated:

*'When I decided to study for my master's, the period of the course was very important because my husband and I wanted to go together and he cannot stay abroad for more than a year because of his job.'* (F7)

The social relationship was also mentioned by F8, who claimed that she is leaving her family and husband back home and she wants to return to them as soon as she can:

*'The time is important for me because I recently got married and my husband cannot leave his work and join me [in the UK]. Therefore, I want to finish my PhD and return home as soon as possible.'* (F8)

Overall, from what has been presented in this section, it is interesting how having a contract with employers in Saudi Arabia and the push factors to study abroad can affect the choice of host country for international students. It is also interesting how the student's desire to finish their study abroad in a short time can affect how they see their life in the UK.

#### 4.3.4 The reputation of the host country institutions

The reputation of the higher education institutions at the host country also acted as a factor for students in choosing their destination of study. For the majority of students in this study, the positive reputation of the UK higher education system has supported their decision to study in the UK. These reputations were usually based on popular international metrics such as ShanghaiRanking and Times Higher Education (ShanghaiRanking, 2021; Times Higher Education, n.d.):

*'The high academic level that many universities in the UK have was a motivation for me to choose the UK.'* (M1)

*'The UK has many high-quality universities and this was another attractive point for me.'* (F9)

*'You know, the education level here [the UK] is much better than most of the other countries, it is always the US and the UK at the top.'* (F4)

The students usually measure the quality of the educational institution in two ways:

First, they look at the international ranking of the university. Many participants have shown an awareness of these rankings when choosing the host university; M1 stated:

*'There is a high number of universities at the UK which are top ranked.'* (M1)

This can be motivated by the condition that most institutional scholarship students are restricted to study in top universities:

*'My Saudi university [his employer] has their approved list of universities which includes only 200 universities around the world. However, the UK has a good number of these universities.'* (M2)

Second, the reputation of the institution can be influenced by the opinion of friends and relatives who already have an overseas qualification. F3 stated:

*'I was unsure between choosing the US or the UK to study. I asked many people who received their PhD from both countries, and they told me that both are good but I need to pick a highly ranked university.'* (F3)

Another interesting point here is the reputation that UK courses are more research-based, and this was attractive for some students. Three students reported that their desire to be involved in a more research-based environment has motivated them to choose the UK. F4, who is a self-funded student, claimed that she wants to work as a researcher in the future and she believes that doing her master's in the UK will help her to develop her research skills:

*'For people in my specialisation [human nutrition], there are two types of career paths. First, to have a clinical position in the hospital. Second, to work in a research centre. For me, I wanted the second option, therefore, I chose the UK. You know, comparing with other countries, the UK academic system is very useful for people interested in research.'* (F4)

F5 also shared a similar view and thought that as she already had experience in industry, she wanted to add some research experience to that. Therefore, she believes that the UK is a good destination for gaining these research skills:

*'One more thing I like in the UK academic system is that students do a lot of research. Honestly, I don't have the research skills but I am sure that I will need them one day in the future. Therefore, I believe that study in the UK will add this value to me.'* (F5)

#### 4.3.5 The ease of applying

It was interesting how the ease of obtaining an offer of study acted as a supporting factor for some students when they decided on their destination of study. Some students thought that compared with other alternative destinations, it was not difficult to obtain an offer of study in the UK. This is particularly noted for master's students in this study. M3, who studies a master's, reported that the easy process to apply for master's programmes in the UK was not just a motivation for choosing the UK but also a motivation to study abroad. He stated:

*'When I got the initial approval from my employer to study abroad, I started to apply for UK universities and since my English language was good I did this myself. I applied for six universities from the top ten universities and I found it not difficult to apply. Honestly, this increased my ambition to study the master's.'* (M3)

M7, who is a PhD student but also did his master's in the UK, shared a similar view. He thought that the additional requirements that the US universities usually require from applicants made the process more complicated. In contrast, he found that it was easier to obtain an offer for a master's programme in the UK and this was a kind of motive for choosing the UK:

*'It is much easier to apply and to get accepted in a master's course in the UK than the US. To apply for a master's programme in the US you will need to do a GRE<sup>8</sup> exam and there are certain deadlines for applications; the process is much complicated than here [...]. My wife and I have chosen the UK because the probability of being accepted in a master's programme is higher than the US.'* (M7)

For PhD students, there were two different opinions in this regard. On one hand, a student reported that it is not easy to get a PhD offer in the UK; she highlighted some challenges with writing a PhD proposal:

*'It was very challenging for me to get a PhD offer. I was required to write a proposal with around 3000 words and this was very difficult for me. I was not used to the academic writing. Honestly, this has emotionally affected me, I was feeling down because I was struggling to get a PhD offer.'* (F3)

However, this can be attributed to the fact that F3 did her master's in Saudi Arabia in Arabic language; therefore, she may face some challenges with academic English.

On another hand, F1, who got her masters from the US, showed an opposite opinion and thought that compared with Canada and the US, it is easier to get a PhD offer from the UK:

*'I was not preparing for a specific country, I applied for Canada, the US and the UK. There was no specific interest in the UK, however, the first offer that I got was from the UK, therefore, I decided to go with it. Comparing with the other two countries, I feel that it is easier to get an offer from a university in the UK.'* (F1)

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<sup>8</sup> GRE is a standardized exam that is usually required by US universities for their applicants when they apply for postgraduate programs (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/gre.asp>).

#### 4.3.6 Less Islamophobia

Two students reported that the reputation of a diversity of races and religions in the UK was a supporting factor for their decision in choosing the UK. Although F4 has reported that she has been in two racism situations in the UK, she claimed the following:

*'Furthermore, I feel that we [Saudi students] will feel less strange in the UK society compared to other societies. Before I came to the UK, I was reading that there is a high number of Muslims and Arab people and they support each other and you [Saudi student] will not feel alone.'* (F4)

This quote shows an interesting point, which is how the existence of Muslims in the host country can be an important factor for some students. Later on in this chapter, it will be discussed how fears of islamophobia can affect students' life in the UK.

M5 showed a similar view to this; he pointed out that since his wife has an Islamic appearance, they were looking for a country where she would not have difficulties with that:

*'The low level of racism in the UK is very interesting. I still remember an interview with the British Foreign Secretary discussing France's ban on face coverings [Niqab]. She stressed the woman's freedom in making her own decisions. In fact, I watched that video at the very beginning and it has some impacts on how people will look at my wife there [...]. Furthermore, my wife had contacted a girl who wears a Niqab and she had lived in Manchester for two years; the girl confirmed not being bothered.'* (M5)

Therefore, what M5 was hearing about the racism in some countries was a motivation for him in discarding some other countries such as the US; he stated:

*'Indeed, I had many choices to go for, the US, Australia, the UK and Malaysia; anyway I have decided to go to the UK. By the way, the social media was one of the reasons which encouraged me to choose the UK. I have read in social media about some racism in the US. Especially the way they treat women wearing the Hijab. Hijab was an important factor for me because my wife wears a Niqab, face cover. We tried to find a place in which*

*she would be satisfied without any pressure. Actually, she did not want to take it off, as there is no need!’ (M5)*

On the same point, M8 stated that he discarded the US from his options because of his worries about how they would treat foreigners:

*‘When I was thinking about the destination, Trump had just become President of the US. I heard that the US started to prevent citizens of some countries from entering the US. I was worried that Saudi citizens would be banned from entering the US. I also felt that the racism against foreigners would increase.’ (M8)*

#### 4.3.7 Summary

Different reasons can pull the students to choose their destination of study. It was interesting that the geographic proximity is a main factor motivating the students in this study to choose the UK. The reputation of the host country institution and the length of study were also highly mentioned factors. Figure 4.2 presents these factors:

*Figure 4.2 Summary of pull factors for participants*

The geographic proximity	The reputation of host institution	The length of study	The ease of applying	Less Islamophobia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most reported motivation</li> <li>• Short journeys               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strong ties with home</li> <li>• special circumstances</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Feel more safe               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No big difference in time zone</li> <li>• Very connected to home</li> <li>• Mahram</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From university ranking organisations</li> <li>• Word of mouth marketing</li> <li>• Reputation of research based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack or absence of courses in Saudi Arabia</li> <li>• Transferring the knowledge</li> <li>• Quality of education</li> <li>• Obligation to return</li> <li>• Different perspectives about obligation of study abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noted for master's students</li> <li>• Requirements are less than other countries</li> <li>• Not usually the case for PhD students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity of religions and races in the UK</li> <li>• More fears of Islamophobia in other alternative countries</li> </ul>

## 4.4 Social transitions

### 4.4.1 Understanding the social transition

The social transition has been defined in this study as the changes and challenges associated with the students leaving their home society, including family and friends, and starting to build new social networks in the host country. It also involves changes related to the students' social settings (e.g., starting to live alone or with host family). The social transition was observed to be one of the highly mentioned themes among students in this study compared to other types of transitions. It was noted that the social transition for international students could start before they leave for the host country. Its early start is usually motivated by the student preparation of leaving their close community and preparing to join a new potential society, whether it is a co-national or a host community. Based on the students' experiences, the following parts in this section give more details about the student social transition.

### 4.4.2 Leaving family and friends

As previously mentioned, the degree of connectedness between family members in Saudi Arabia is very high and the social life is an important aspect for many people in Saudi Arabia. This makes the change in social settings for the students a major change among other changes (e.g., cultural, academic, etc.) for most of the students. This can be more noticed for single students who are expecting to live by themselves abroad. It may also be more noticed for students who experience this kind of transition for the first time. M8, who is a single male student, stated the following:

*'Leaving my family was a problem for me, it was putting some stress on me before I came to the UK [...]. Not only leaving the family but also my friends and community.'* (M8)

Furthermore, F3, who is a single female student, claimed that due to her expected social transition, she had difficult days prior to her departure to the UK:

*'Before leaving for the UK, I was nervous and stressed most of the time, and this is because I would leave my family and my mother in particular. We are very close! [She and her mother]'* (F3)



On the other hand, a few students reported that the social change was not a big challenge during their transition. M3 stated:

*'I was not nervous before travelling. I slept very normally the night before my flight and in the morning, I went to my family to say goodbye but I was not nervous. Things were very normal for me.'* (M3)

Being less stressed by leaving the family for this participant can be attributed to the fact that he was leaving for the UK with a companion (his wife), which can create a kind of social support abroad, more details about leaving the country alone or with a companion will be discussed in Section 4.4.5. Furthermore and more importantly, this participant has an experience of study abroad when he did his undergraduate course. This is also supported by F1, who thought that her social departure from her community was more stressful during her first experience than the second:

*'Leaving my family was more stressful when I did my master's. There will be less pressure this time [her current experience]'* (F1)

From what has been presented above, it can be concluded that leaving the home community is a major transition for some students; however, to what extent this can affect the student may be influenced by four factors: (1) the degree to which the student is connected with their home society, (2) the previous experience of living abroad or travelling, (3) whether the student is leaving alone or with a companion and (4) having social ties in the host country (friends and family members in the UK).

#### 4.4.3 Expectations about social life in the UK

The students' expectations about their social life abroad can be motivated by their perception about people in the host country. Two students reported that they had a negative stereotype about British people before they left for the UK:

*'I was hearing some negative comments about people in the UK. I heard that people are not friendly and it is not easy to talk to people. Some people also said that I may face some racism there.'* (F3)

*'Before I came to the UK, I had a negative stereotype about British people; I was thinking that they are arrogant, isolated and not supportive' (M5)*

This stereotype is often created by what the students hear from people surrounding them in the home country and what they see in the media, particularly on social media. M5 later on in his interview stated:

*'It was on Twitter where I read someone talking about how arrogant British people are.'* (M5)

Both of the two participants mentioned above reported that they changed their negative stereotype after living in the UK:

*'It might be true that people in the UK are not easy to meet and get to know, but it is not true that they are not supportive.'* (F3)

*'After arriving in the UK, my stereotype about the UK people has changed.'*  
(M5)

Although these two students changed their negative stereotype, they (and other students) still had the view that people in the UK are not social or not as social as people in Saudi Arabia.

#### 4.4.4 Role of co-national peers during student's preparation

Most of the students in this research show the importance of contacting co-national peers during the preparation for their study abroad. The pre-arrival contact usually occurs due to the students' seeking of help or advice. The information needed for students is mainly related to accommodation, the academic system and everyday life arrangements in the host country. Students sometimes have a face-to-face discussion with their friends who already have experience of study in the UK:

*'Two weeks before my travelling to the UK, I met one of my friends who just finished his course in the UK. Meeting him was very helpful for me because I was going to the same city that he used to study in. He told me about a host family, gave me more details about the city and he even brought me a SIM card.'* (M6)

Furthermore, institutional scholarship students may also contact their colleagues. F5 stated:

*'I asked some of my colleagues who were students in the UK about how to find accommodation. They told me about some mobile applications to help with that.'* (F5)

Another way of contacting co-national peers (which is the most popular one) is social media; the majority of the participants reported that social media were a facilitating tool in linking them with co-national peers in the host country before and after arriving:

*'Social media was a very helpful tool for me to get information about the UK. I contacted a Saudi student on Twitter to ask about an English language school, and he gave me some options there.'* (F3)

Two main reasons can be identified regarding why there is a high reliance on co-nationals during the preparation time. First, students usually prefer to refer to those who have similar experience and circumstances. Different participants have mentioned that there are some common characteristics that apply only to Saudi students, such as being sponsored by the Saudi government and rules related to this, and having a Muslim and Saudi culture:

*'On social media you can find students who have similar experiences. I feel that we [Saudi students in the UK] have many things in common and this is why I ask them.'* (F1)

Second, many students believe that supporting and helping each other is something they have to do. Students are usually encouraged by their religious and cultural values to help each other, which is an inherent characteristic. This can be seen from some examples that were given by participants. F2 reported her experience of contacting a Saudi student in the UK that she only knew on social media to help her with arranging her accommodation:

*'Before arriving, I used Twitter to contact a student in the UK to help me with arranging my accommodation. This guy was very helpful; the real estate office required me to do a viewing for my flat and he did it on behalf of me.'* (F2)

Another participant also agreed on this and commented:

*'We [Saudi students] trust and would love to help each other, so that was a motive to ask them.'* (M5)

The Saudi societies in the UK<sup>9</sup> also played a role in supporting some students before arriving. M4 highlighted:

*'The first thing I did before travelling to the UK was to make contact with the Saudi society in my potential UK city; I followed their account on Twitter and joined their WhatsApp group. My experience with them was very good; they helped me in many things, like how to open a bank account, how to arrange the accommodation and what to do when I arrive.'* (M4)

#### 4.4.5 Moving with a companion to the UK

The students' experience of moving to the UK with a companion, such as a wife, husband, children, brother or sister varied from being supportive to adding more challenge to the student. It was interesting that it was usually the male participants who reported this as something that added more challenge for them. M4 reported how moving with children can make the transition experience more complicated. M4, who has a relatively big family (five children), reported that he had to be careful with some of his decisions (e.g., location of accommodation, children's schools) to ensure that his family would be well settled:

*'The family can be a big challenge; I wanted my family to come with me to the UK but I also wanted them to be comfortable here. Therefore, having them with me has affected my decisions regarding the area where to live, the accommodation and whether to buy a car or not.'*(M4)

This participant also mentioned that he first came to the UK alone, and then when he felt that things were sorted he brought his family:

*'I was alone when I arrived in the UK. I did not bring my family with me. I wanted to sort things out before my family came.'* (M4)

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<sup>9</sup> It is usually the case that there is a Saudi society or club in most of the UK cities, where there are some students volunteering to help others.

Another male participant told of his experience of moving to the UK with his wife and how she was more worried about their transition than him. For this participant, this was due to this being the first time for his wife to have this kind of experience:

*'I did not tell her [his wife] all the details about the life in the UK, especially the ones that I felt that she would not like [...]. It was the first time for my wife to be away from Saudi Arabia for a long time. Furthermore, she is not used to the changes there would be in the UK, like how the day is so long and the night is short in summer and how it may rain for two or three days continuously. For me, I am used to most of these changes due to my previous experience, but for her these are new things.'* (M3)

On the other hand, female participants showed an opposite view. Most of them agreed that coming with a family or family member facilitated their social transitions. F4 stated:

*'I came with my brother to the UK. I feel that coming with a member of the family helped me a lot to be less afraid.'* (F4)

F7 also showed a similar view to this and added that her husband's previous experience of study abroad had helped them in their settlement in the new place:

*'My husband has already done his undergraduate degree in Australia. Therefore, this helped us a lot; he knew better than me how to sort things out and also he helped me with my course.'* (F7)

Another experience was also reported by F2 who stated that her whole family travelled with her to the UK:

*'I came to the UK with my family and this was very supportive for me. I came with my parents and brothers [...]. They have helped me a lot, I did not feel homesick because they were with me. They also supported me economically.'* (F2)

The two opposite perspectives presented in this section from males and females can be attributed to two cultural reasons. First, many females in Saudi Arabia are not usually used to travel alone; therefore, they may be in need of someone to support them. Second, it can be

also attributed to the Saudi cultural assumption that males always take more responsibilities than females in things related to day-to-day activities; therefore, males will do more work in sorting out things in the new place after arrival. Furthermore, females may find themselves having less experience in arranging things abroad and they need help.

#### 4.4.6 Living alone transition

Leaving the family and living alone is a type of social transition that was reported by some students. Single students or students leaving their partners or family at home are more likely to encounter this kind of transition. It can be one of the reasons for some students to decide to live with a host family. Some of the students who faced this kind of transition started to think about it in the early stages before they left their home country. F6 stated:

*'I was worried about my life in the UK, especially how I would live alone and how I would do my day-to-day things on my own.'* (F6)

This transition can be seen as a challenge or it can also be seen as a good chance to make a personal development. F9 stated:

*'It is very difficult to live alone, it is not easy at all, especially for someone like me who came from a big family.'* (F9)

However, later on in the interview, F9 stated that she realised that living alone had some positive impact on her life; she claimed:

*'There are some positive sides to living alone; I can control my time here and I also feel that I started to know myself more. It [living alone] had some positive impacts on my personality.'* (F9)

Some students may not face this type of transition; although F5 and M6 came alone to the UK, they thought that this was not an issue. This can be attributed to two reasons: either because (1) they got used to travelling alone (e.g., F5) or (2) because they had the experience of living alone in Saudi Arabia (M6):

*'I feel that I am independent, I can do my own things by myself. It is not my first time travelling alone.'* (F5)

*'I feel that I have never felt homesick in the UK, maybe because I already lived alone in a different city than my family's city for a couple of years.'*  
(M6)

Another reason for M6's feelings might be that he was living with a host family as soon as he arrived to the UK; more discussion about the role of the host families in students' social transition will be given in the next section.

#### 4.4.7 Host families' role in social transition

Several students in this study reported their experience of staying with host families abroad. All of these students acknowledged that host families can play a positive role in facilitating students' social transition to the host country. They usually help the students to cope with stress created by leaving the family atmosphere. M6 thought that the host family acted like a *'new family'* for him and they played a role in helping him to forget about the homesick feeling:

*'When I arrived in the UK, I stayed with a host family and they were very nice. Our relationship started from the first day; we used to talk, go out and cook together and they were like a new family for me. They helped me to not feel homesick. Now, it has been about six months since I left them, but we still contact each other.'* (M6)

The benefit of having a family away from home was also something reported by another participant; M8 stated:

*'I stayed with a host family after arriving; she was an old lady. Although the house was located far away from the city centre, I felt very comfortable with her and she was very helpful and kind. I called her my British mom because she was acting like my mother; she woke me up in the morning to go to school, made meals for me, and she was taking care of me.'* (M8)

Living with a host family can also play a role in increasing the students' cultural awareness of the host country and developing their English language.

In this regard, it was interesting that the gender of the participant can be an important factor. It is culturally and religiously unacceptable for Saudi females to live in the same place with non-Mahram adults. This can lead some females to consider *'a family where there are only females'*. F4, who stated that living with a host family helped her to adjust to the new country, expressed the following:

*'Finding the host family was difficult for me; I was looking for a family where there are only females. You know, I cannot live in a house where there is a non-Mahram male.'* (F4)

#### 4.4.8 Engaging with co-nationals in the UK

Due to the relatively high number of Saudi students in the UK, it is not difficult for them to interact with other co-nationals either in or outside of the university. In most UK cities there are Saudi communities (or clubs) where Saudi students can gather and communicate. The majority of participants in this study reported that most of their social connections in the UK were with people from their home country. The extent to which the student engages with co-nationals in the host country can vary from one student to another. For some students (e.g., M4), building social connections with Saudis and engaging with the Saudi community in the UK is essential for them. On the other hand, a few students (e.g., M6) reported that although they have some co-national friends, they are not very keen to engage with the Saudi society and people in their city. Different reasons can motivate each side. The reason of the dominance of co-nationals in the students' social network in the UK can be attributed to the following points:

##### 4.4.8.1 Cultural connections with co-nationals and cultural contrast with others

Many students thought that the cultural connections with people from home and the cultural contrast with locals or other international people are major reasons for the dominance of co-national peers in their social network in the UK. M7 stated that due to the cultural differences with locals in the UK, sometimes he has the feeling that he *'does not fit'*:

*'It is true that I have a British friend but I don't have a group of them, he is only one. I think the reason behind that is that sometimes I feel that I don't fit with them. For example, if you go to a pub with a group of your British*



*friends and they drink alcohol but you do not, you will feel that you do not fit. Another example is the jokes; I do not always understand their jokes and this is because most of them are culturally oriented.'* (M7)

Therefore, the cultural differences with others can be a main reason for students to contact people who share a similar culture. M7 then stated:

*'So, I feel more comfortable with people like me. We [Saudi students] have the same culture, language, religion and even jokes.'* (M7)

The cultural contrast is also reported by other female students. F9 stated that she would prefer to spend her time with Saudis as there is no need to explain her cultural assumptions:

*'Sometimes, I go out with my colleagues who are not Saudis, but honestly I don't feel as comfortable as with Saudis. This is due to the cultural differences; sometimes I feel that they don't understand what I mean. Also, I don't like to discuss some cultural aspects with them, like why I don't have a boyfriend. Furthermore, sometimes they go to pubs or bars but I don't want to go to these places, you know, it is very awkward for women wearing a hijab to be there.'* (F9)

Therefore, the cultural differences can be a main reason why the Saudi students prefer to socialize or engage with their co-national peers in the UK. More details about this will be presented in the cultural transition section.

#### 4.4.8.2 Language issues

The language was another motivation for the dominance of the co-national peers in the students' social network. Due to the difficulties with speaking the English language, some students may prefer to communicate with those who have the same language. Two of the participants reported the following:

*'Sometimes, I feel that the language is an obstacle in communication with people outside. For example, it is difficult for me to start a conversation with*

*people in English and it is also embarrassing to keep asking others to explain what they meant. So yes, the language is a big obstacle for me.’ (F3)*

*‘My English language is a reason why I mainly socialize with Saudi students. I am not confident enough to speak with them [local people]; I don't want to be in a situation where they ask me a question but I don't understand it.’ (M2)*

However, it should be acknowledged here that both of these participants were at the foundation year<sup>10</sup> or pre-sessional stage<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, this factor may become less strong or disappear when their English level increases or when they become more confident about their language.

#### 4.4.8.3 Little interaction with locals

Some students have reported that creating social networks with a majority of co-nationals was due to the lack of interactions with locals. These students claimed that in their daily life there is only a small chance of interaction with people who are not co-national or international. This is clearly observed for students doing English courses where there are no home students in their classes. M6, who is doing his foundation year as a preparation step before doing the university course, stated the following:

*‘In my current course, I am only communicating with international students, mainly students from Arab countries or China because home students do not do the foundation year. Honestly, my friends are only Arab students and I like this because I feel that we understand each other.’ (M6)*

F4 who is also doing a pre-sessional course, also agreed on this and stated:

*‘It is so rare that I make contact with British people, you know, I am doing a pre-sessional course and all students are international. I do have some*

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<sup>10</sup> A foundation year is a one year program of preparation for international students to support their English language and other academic skills before they start their undergraduate course (UKUni, n.d.).

<sup>11</sup> A pre-sessional course is an English language course designed for international students aiming to study an undergraduate or postgraduate degree at UK universities to help them to improve their academic English (Foundation Courses in the UK, 2020).

*international friends and we usually go out together for lunch or hang out at weekends.’ (F4)*

F4’s quote can lead to another interesting point regarding the interaction with other international students. Some students reported that they do have international students as friends in their social network in the UK and they are more likely to interact with international students than home students. This can be attributed to what F4 mentioned: that sharing an ultimate goal (learning English and obtaining the certificate) with other international students can make them feel similar:

*‘I feel that we [international students] came for one main goal: learning English and getting the certificate. Therefore, this common thing can make us similar.’ (M4)*

#### 4.4.8.4 Different social nature

Some students thought that it was not easy to make friends from the UK as Saudi students thought that UK people were unsocial. This can be applied for students who are doing academic courses, where there is more opportunity to interact with home students, or for English language students. M4 claimed:

*‘I am a social person; I like to talk to people and I tried to engage with the British community. However, I feel that they did not give me the opportunity to engage with them. I think people here seem to be anti-social and it is not easy to make friends.’ (M4)*

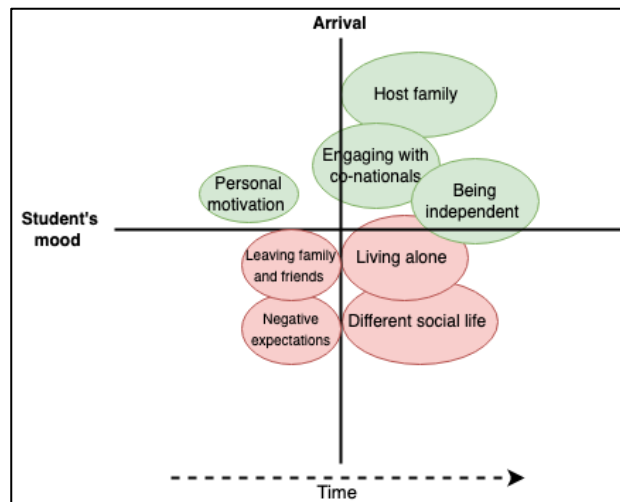
F8 also agreed on this and added that based on her previous experience in the US, people in the UK are less social, or are not social as people from other countries:

*‘I feel that people here in the UK are very close to themselves, they are not like the people in the US. It is much harder to have a friend from the UK.’ (F8)*

#### 4.4.9 Summary

The above discussion reveals that social transition is a highly mentioned type of transition among students in this study. Figure 4.3 shows the set of challenges and changes that students may face on a timeline of their transition. For this figure and following similar ones in other sections, the size of the oval indicates how big the challenge or change was, and the green colour represents positive ones while red represents negative. It is also assumed ovals below the student's mood line are negative while ovals above it are positive. The oval in this figure have been located based on what was commonly reported by students; they were located based on the majority of students. Signs or marks of this transition start to appear before the student departure to the host country, when they prepare to leave their home family and friends. Few students were observed to possess an expectation about their potential social life in the UK, and usually this expectation is negative and motivated by the students' negative perception about people in the UK. After arrival, students start to create new social networks with co-nationals, other international students or host people, who are usually their colleagues. Findings of this study revealed that students usually prefer to spend their time with other co-nationals and this is due to different reasons: (1) the cultural connections with co-nationals, (2) the language barrier with others, (3) the lack of opportunity to interact with others and (4) the different social nature of locals. Depending on their social status, students may also encounter further types of social transitions, such as the transition to living alone or with a host family. These types can be seen as sub-types of social transition, and may occur simultaneously or separately.

Figure 4.3 Social transition timeline



In social transition, it can be noticed that many of the signs are motivated by cultural factors; however, more details about the cultural changes and challenges associated with the students' movements around study abroad are presented in the next section.

#### 4.5 Cultural transitions

##### 4.5.1 Understanding the cultural transition

The cultural differences and changes that students face when they move to the host country is another type of transition called cultural transition. This transition usually starts when the student arrives in the host country, where they start to face new cultural changes and may encounter what is known as culture shock. One of the interesting results in this transition type is that students do not usually consider changes and challenges related to the cultural transition as a key transition type. This can be attributed to the fact that students deal with the new culture on the basis of how to behave towards it, but not how to adopt it.

##### 4.5.2 Students' awareness of the host culture

The level of awareness that students have towards the host culture before they leave can vary from one student to another. Students who already have an experience in study abroad in a western country or travelling to a western culture country are more likely to be aware of how the UK culture will be. A student who has a previous experience in study in the US reported:

*'This is my second time to study abroad, therefore, I am aware of how their culture is different' (F1)*

Another student felt that due to his experience of travelling to Europe, he found himself familiar with the UK culture:

*'I feel that I was familiar with the UK culture when I arrived. Maybe because I have been to different European countries before [excluding the UK]'. (M6)*

It is interesting to see how these two participants looked at the UK culture as a part of the western culture, and how their experience and knowledge about the western culture helped them to not be culturally shocked in the UK.

On the other hand, students who are studying abroad for the first time or have no experience in travelling to other countries may encounter a more stressful culture shock. M2 mentioned:

*'This is the first time for me to leave the Gulf [Gulf countries]. When I arrived in the UK, I felt that things are different, people are different and even the food is different. It took me a couple of weeks to get used to these changes.'*  
(M2)

F4, who also left the country for the first time, reported that she was worried about her Islamic appearance and how people in the UK would look at her:

*'I was stressed about the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the UK. You know, I am an eastern Muslim girl wearing a hijab; therefore, I was stressed about how the UK people would look at me.'* (F4)

#### 4.5.3 Cultural contrasts

The cultural differences reported by students in this study can be illustrated by the students' unfamiliarity with the local lifestyle and social norms. As previously presented in the social transition section, these differences can be a barrier to the students' engagement with local people. It can be also a motivator for the students' attachment to people who share the same

culture. The difference in 'lifestyle' and 'way of thinking' has given the sense of 'it is not where I belong' to M5 when he socialised with locals:

*'They [local colleagues] would call me to hang out with them and I would go, but I was feeling like it is not where I belong. Their lifestyle, way of thinking and even their joking differs.'* (M5)

M7 also showed a similar view to M5 regarding the locals' jokes; he thought:

*'Another example [of cultural differences] is the jokes, I do not always understand their jokes and this is because most of them are culturally oriented.'* (M7)

The student's beliefs and values can play a role in preventing the student from integrating with the new culture. M8 thought that due to the fact (as with most Saudi students) that he does not drink alcohol, he was not able to engage with local people:

*'I do not like the British lifestyle, I do not like to go to pubs and night clubs. Maybe this is because I do not drink.'* (M8)

It is interesting how M8's perception of the lifestyle in the UK is linked to the night life and pubs. F9 thought that being a Muslim girl could restrict her from integrating with the host culture:

*'Sometimes they go to pubs or bars but I don't want to go to these places, you know, it is very awkward for women wearing a hijab to be there.'* (F9)

Although M6 had a period of time where he restricted his social connections to local people in the UK as a way to develop his English language, he shared the idea of the previously mentioned participants that the adoption of the new culture was difficult for him. He thought that by the time he realised that there is a gap between the two cultures, it was hard to minimise this gap:

*'When I was doing my English language course [in the UK], I lived in a small town where I was the only Saudi there. I was only having the option of socializing and engaging with local people. I had some local friends and we used to hang around together. During the weekends, we used to go to pubs*

*and honestly this had a very positive impact on my English language. However, what I conclude from this experience is that we [Saudis and locals] are different. We have different culture, different customs and different social life. It is true that this has helped me to develop my language; however, I feel that I cannot continue in restricting my social connections to [only] them. I need my people where we can understand each other.'* (M6)

#### 4.5.4 Host culture impact on students

Most of the participants in this study reported difficulties with creating a relationship with the host country culture. It can be seen that these students were dealing with the new culture on the basis of how to behave towards the new culture but not how to adopt it. For students in this research, it was observed that two reasons can play a role in hindering their integration with the UK culture:

First, the religion and set of values that students hold, which sometimes can contradict with the new culture. This can be a key reason because many students have shown a high attachment to their cultural values and religion. M7 in his interview clearly stated this when he commented the following:

*'We [Saudi students] come [to the UK] with a different religion, culture and values. We cannot change these things; therefore, I do not blame myself when I do not feel that I am engaged with the British culture'* (M7)

F6 also agreed on this and thought that the values and beliefs that she held could restrict her integration with the host culture:

*'I believe in my own values and principles and I am happy with them. It is true that these beliefs may restrict my integration with the UK culture and people; however, I cannot waive them.'* (F6)

When F6 was asked to give an example of this, she stated:

*'I can have male friends, but we cannot hang around together alone; I also cannot shake hands with them.'* (F6)



Although F5 claimed in her interview that she was very eager to know about the UK culture and life, she commented the following:

*'I have some ground rules and values that I should not break even if I am here [in the UK]. For example, I know that I cannot go to some places and I have to be home by 8 pm.'* (F5)

Without any intention to discount students' opinions, it is important to register the possibility that students' cultural assumptions may change without the students realising these changes. Nevertheless, students shared their perspectives that they have a rigid belief in their culture and religion and they felt that it would be difficult to change this.

Second, the limited time that the student has in the host country and the obligation return rule that most students have in their scholarship contracts can also play a role in preventing the student's integration with the new culture. These two conditions can lead the students to learn how to behave towards the new culture but not how to adopt it. This can be noticed more in students doing courses with shorter periods, such as master's courses (one year). M3 stated the following:

*'I came here for one year, and you know the student on the master's course is very busy with their assignments and exams. Therefore, honestly I feel that I don't have time to explore and engage with the UK culture. I am also not very interested.'* (M3)

After reporting a situation of being culturally misunderstood by a British colleague, M4 claimed that he is looking at his time in the UK as a 'temporary' time and he will definitely return home at the moment that he finishes:

*'I feel that I am happy and satisfied with my family and the Saudi community in the UK. I am not keen to engage with the UK culture and people [...]. I always have the feeling that my life here is temporary. I will return home as soon as I get the certificate.'* (M4)

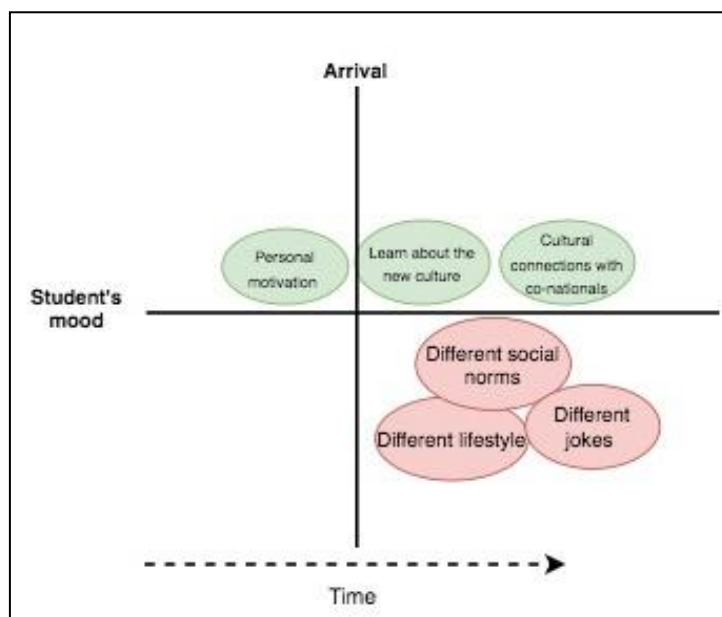
With regard to the lack of interest in adopting the UK culture, M2 shared a similar view. When he talked about his experience of adding UK celebrities on Snapchat, he claimed that he was mainly following them for English language purposes, not for cultural reasons. M2 clearly stated that he is *'not very keen' to be exposed to the new host culture:*

*'I added some British celebrities on Snapchat. However, honestly the UK culture is not my goal; I mainly added them to develop my English language. I am not very keen to know about the UK culture.'* (M2)

#### 4.5.5 Summary

The findings above demonstrate that students usually face a set of cultural challenges and changes associated with their study abroad experience, which can be called a cultural transition. Before they leave for the host country, students vary with regard to their awareness of the host culture. It is more likely that students who have a previous experience in studying or travelling abroad are unlikely to face a strong culture shock. Similarly to what was presented in the social transition section, Figure 4.4 presents a set of signs for the cultural transition that students usually go through during their transition to the host country.

Figure 4.4 Cultural transition timeline



The personal motivation that some students have related to exploring the new culture can add some positive vibes to the student's experience and increase their enthusiasm about their

coming experience. After arrival, students start to interact with the new culture and face challenges related to it. Most participants in this study reported difficulties with creating a relationship with the host country culture. Students were observed to deal with the new culture on the basis of how to behave towards the new culture but not how to adopt it. This is usually motivated by two factors: (1) the religion and values that students hold which may contradict with the new culture and (2) the time limit that most students have regarding their stay in the UK. This can impact on the students' social transition and create a barrier to the students' engagement with the local community. The next section will shed a light on another type of transition that students encounter, which is the academic transition.

## 4.6 Academic transitions

### 4.6.1 Understanding the academic transition

The academic transition can be defined as a set of academic changes that international students face when they move or plan to move to the host country. Based on the findings of this study, this type of transition usually revolves around the process of applying to the university, the methods of assessment, the teaching style and the transition to a new academic stage. For some students, this transition can start in the early stages of their study abroad when they start to prepare academically for their coming study. This type of transition can be considered as a continuing transition, where challenges continue to appear to the student as they go through their study. In this type of transition, multiple academic transitions can occur simultaneously, such as moving to a new academic system and starting a new degree. More details about this type of transition will be given in the following sections.

### 4.6.2 Pre-arrival preparation

The academic transition is a type of transition that can start in early stages before travelling to the host country. This can be more noticed for PhD students, who usually have to write their 'research proposal'. In most UK universities and in addition to other requirements, students aiming to do a PhD course are usually required to write a research proposal explaining their potential research. How substantial the research proposal is can vary from one university or a department to another. Developing the research proposal can be a time

of preparation for students. M5 highlighted this point and thought that his preparation started six months before he travelled to the UK; he spent three months just on writing the proposal:

*'It took me about six months to prepare myself for studying abroad. The process of preparation for a PhD is harder than the master's or language study; I needed to write my PhD proposal. There were many emails between my supervisor and me about my research idea and how to develop it. After three months, we agreed on the proposal and she sent me the application form to officially apply to the University.'* (M5)

With regard to how writing the proposal can affect the student, F1 positively thought that writing the proposal helped her to *'get into the academic mood'*:

*'I think writing the proposal helped me a lot to get into the academic mood.'*  
(F1)

Furthermore, M1 agreed with F1 and added that writing the proposal allowed him to build a bridge with his potential supervisor and *'increased his motivation'* to study:

*'I am very excited to start my PhD for many reasons [...]. I worked with my supervisor for three months to develop my proposal; this allowed me to get to know my supervisor and my field more. I feel that this also increased my motivation to start.'* (M1)

However, it should be acknowledged here that these two students had the experience where they were required to develop a full proposal. Different students may report different experiences. Although M5 thought that he spent a relatively increased amount of time on developing his PhD proposal, he claimed that writing the proposal did not play a role in increasing his academic engagement with the new academic system:

*'When I was writing my proposal in Saudi Arabia, I was not really engaged with the academic system in the UK and how to do research. I was not getting a good overview about the UK academic environment and being a student there [...]. My supervisor sent me some proposal styles that I could*

*follow. I compared some different proposals and there was no specific form to use.’ (M5)*

Furthermore, later on in the interview, M5 also told of his friend’s experience of writing a short proposal:

*‘I remember one of my colleagues in [another] University, her proposal was a page and a half! I still doubt if my supervisor looked up my proposal carefully; she had only reviewed its research purpose and quickly approved. Therefore, I doubt that writing the proposal can increase the student’s engagement with the UK academic system.’ (M5)*

For master’s students, two participants thought that their academic preparation started a long time before their leaving. The kind of preparation for these students is located around searching universities’ websites to look for an appropriate program. F5 stated the following:

*‘Looking for the appropriate master’s programme took me about a year.’ (F5)*

M6 also showed a similar view and reported that searching and applying for his specific major took him around six months:

*‘They [his employer] wanted my master’s to be in a very specific major [automatic control engineering]. This took me a long time of preparation, about six months just to look for universities who do this course.’ (M6)*

However, both of these two participants had their own reasons for starting the preparation early. For F5, at the beginning of her searching, she was including the US universities but then she was obligated by her employer to study in the UK. The reason for M6 was also the employer, who compelled him to find a master’s programme in a very specific topic, which took him a longer time.

Students starting their studies with an English course (then an academic course) seemed to be more relaxed and not worried about preparing themselves academically. M8, who did a language course in preparation for a university course, claimed the following:

*'During the preparation, I was not worried about how the academic system and processes would be in the UK; I started to think about it three months after arriving.'* (M8)

However, for language students like M8, their preparation may go toward other transitions, as another language student (F3) stated:

*'In Saudi Arabia [in her pre-arrival phase], all I was thinking about was how to find accommodation'* (F3)

#### 4.6.3 Challenges with the academic adjustment (after arrival)

Different types of challenges have been reported by the majority of students regarding their academic adjustment to the host academic system. These challenges are usually located in the frames of adjusting to the new academic system and the high load of some university programs. The most common challenges that students reported in this study are presented in the following sections:

##### 4.6.3.1 Research-based style

Although the research-based style was a motivation for some students to choose the UK, adapting this style of learning and acquiring the skill of how to do research was a challenge either for these students or others. It is well known that students in the UK are encouraged to develop their critical thoughts and be creative, which is not usually the case in Saudi Arabia. During her preparation time, F1 expressed her awareness and worries towards the differences between the two academic systems; she stated:

*'I am worried about how the new academic system will be. It will be the first time for me to do research.'* (F1)

With regard to what type of changes Saudi students may encounter in their new academic experience, F7 stated the following:

*'It is a new academic system. I have never used references or citations in my writing in Saudi Arabia, the concept of doing research was new for me.'* (F7)

More details about the differences were also given by another student, M3 stated:

*'I think the UK style is 180 degrees different than the Saudi style. In the UK, critical writing is a very important aspect. One of the key things to get a good mark in the UK is to do a critical analysis. Also, in the UK you need to critique others' ideas. In the beginning, I was very hesitant and not confident to critique an author who is a big name in the field and has many publications, but later on, I started to learn how to do it' (M3)*

However, it should be acknowledged here that M3's previous experience was with an undergraduate course. Students at the level of this course may not be required to be as critical as in postgraduate courses.

A different form of challenge was also reported by F6 regarding the different grading systems between the UK and Saudi universities:

*'I felt very disappointed when I got my first assignment's mark; it was 58 and this is very low by Saudi standards. The grading system is different between Saudi Arabia and here. In Saudi Arabia, it is not very difficult to get a mark over 70, but it is the opposite in the UK.'* (F6)

#### 4.6.3.2 Independent learning style

Another challenge that has been reported by some students is the independent learning style. This challenge is more noticed for PhD students; F1 stated that she started to learn to be independent in the early stages when she worked on her PhD proposal:

*'One of the challenges with writing the proposal was that I needed to be more independent. My supervisor was giving me some comments and feedback; however, I was taking the lead, and this is something new for me.'* (F1)

F9 looked at this type of transition as a positive change and claimed that being in an independent learning system has also positively affected her life in general:

*'I learned how to be independent in learning, how to search for information by myself. I feel that I personally changed, I became more independent, more confident in handling things. I also feel that I know how to search for any information I need.'* (F9)

On the other hand, F8 was more negative about this kind of transition and thought that being an independent student was very challenging:

*'It is very difficult to be independent in your study. Sometimes, I spend a lot of time searching for a specific point and do some writing about it, then, I figure out that I was looking for the wrong thing or in the wrong way'* (F8)

An interesting point to be highlighted here is that this challenge may not be triggered only by moving to a new academic environment, but also by starting a new academic stage. An interesting characteristic of this transition is that different types of academic transitions can occur simultaneously. This usually happens due to the student's movement to a new academic environment and starting a new academic phase at the same time, more details about the multiple transitions will be given in Section 4.10.1.

#### 4.6.3.3 High academic workload

Having a high academic weight has also been reported by some students as a challenge with their study in the UK. For students in this study, complaints about the high academic workload are more likely to be heard from master's students. As previously mentioned, master's programs are usually one year in the UK and this is relatively short, which can add more pressure on the student. F7 stated the following regarding her master's experience in the UK:

*'Everything was okay apart from the weight of the courses. My master's required a lot of time.'* (F7)

This argument may be supported by M3 (master's student) who reported that in the UK he spent most of his day at university:

*'Currently, I go to university every day from 9am to 7pm. I spend a high amount of time at university!!'* (M3)



When F9 compared her life during the master's and PhD, she claimed that she is '*more relaxed*' in the PhD:

*'I think, in the PhD, I have more time for myself and I am more relaxed. My study is not as tough as it was in the master's. It is very tough when you do a master's here [in the UK]; you will not have time even to look after yourself.'* (F9)

F8 (PhD student) disagreed with F9 on the point that students during the PhD are more relaxed. She thought that although she was not spending most of her time on studying, she was having '*continuous thinking*' about her research. She stated the following:

*'I feel that I have a continuous thinking about my PhD. Even if I physically stop working on my research, I feel that my brain does not. Therefore, this can add some stress on me.'* (F8)

#### 4.6.4 Role of orientation programs in the academic adjustment

A few students reported their experience with starting their academic journey in the UK with an orientation programme (e.g., English language course, foundation year, pre-sessional course). In addition to the benefits of these programs in social and cultural adjustment for students, these programs were also found to help the students to develop their English language and to engage with the new academic style. F4 thought that in the pre-sessional English course, she learned how to do some academic activities that she was not familiar with:

*'In the pre-sessional course, I learned how to write essays in English and how to do presentations and attend seminars. So, yes the pre-sessional course is good as a first step to the university'* (F4)

M8 also shared a similar view when he talked about the foundation year that he did before his undergraduate course; he also added that professionals were supportive for international students in this stage:

*'Although the foundation year is very difficult, I am not bothered about it. I cannot imagine the difficulties that I will face at the university without doing*

*this kind of preparation. A good thing in this year was that the lecturers understand that we are all internationals, therefore, they were more patient with our questions.’ (M8)*

Another student (F7) highlighted how not doing an English course before her master’s negatively affected her:

*‘I started my master’s without doing a pre-sessional course, which was a big mistake. It is true that my English language was good; however, I was not aware of the academic system in the UK, the academic writing, how to use the references and how to avoid plagiarism.’ (F7)*

#### 4.6.5 Continuous transition

One of the most interesting characteristics that has been noticed in this kind of transition is the continuity of it. The academic transition can be considered as a ‘continuous transition’ where the academic challenges are continuously appearing during the students’ study in the host country. This is unlike other types of transitions where they seem to become stronger around the arrival time and then they decrease or disappear. Several students referred to this point; M8 mentioned that he had several academic challenges and they were occurring after each other. He is also expecting more academic challenges to happen as he continues with his study. He thought the following:

*‘I would say that most of my challenges since I arrived in the UK are related to my study. When I arrived in the UK, I was having some issues with the IELTS exam and how to get the needed score to start the foundation year. I was having some difficulties with the academic writing in that phase. Then, when I moved to the foundation year I had some issues with the exams there, especially with maths and physics exams. We also used to do some lab experiments, and this is something new for me. I also believe that when I start university I will come across new challenges.’ (M8)*

Another example is M4, who already mentioned that he started to get into the academic transition six months before travelling, when he wrote his PhD proposal. After arrival, M4 also highlighted another challenge related to the pre-session course and its high load:

*'The pre-session course was very tough. I used to go to the university from 9am to 5pm and then I spent the rest of my day on doing assignments and preparing for exams. This was a big challenge for me.'* (M4)

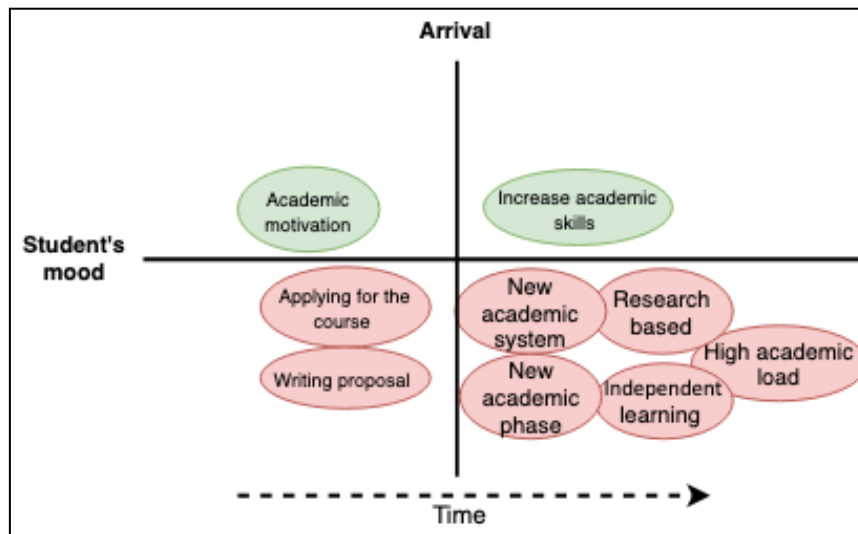
However, academic challenges seem to be also apparent in his PhD (the time of the interview); M4 stated:

*'The hardest academic challenge I am facing now [during the PhD] is how to do critical thinking and writing; I think this is a challenge, particularly for Saudi students.'* (M4)

#### 4.6.6 Summary

The findings in this section highlighted that students can face various challenges and differences related to their academic transition to the UK. This transition has three interesting characteristics: (1) it can start in early stages before the student leaves for the host country; (2) students may go through multiple academic transitions simultaneously; and (3) it can be a continuous transition where its symptoms or signs keep appearing. Figure 4.5 shows a set of signs for the academic transition that students usually go through during their transition to the host country. For some students, the academic transition can start a long time before they leave for the host country and this is motivated by the process of applying for the course, which may include some academic task such as writing a proposal. After arrival, students usually face three main academic challenges: (1) being in a research-based style environment; (2) becoming more independent in learning; and (3) the high academic load for some students. However, it should be admitted that some students looked at moving to a research-based environment with an independent learning style as an opportunity for their academic development.

Figure 4.5 Academic transition timeline



The language can be also considered as a challenge motivating the academic transition; however, more discussion about the language transition will be discussed in the next section.

#### 4.7 Language transitions

##### 4.7.1 Understanding the language transition

Moving to a country where people in and out the university speak a different language can be a challenge for international students, the language transition. This type of transition can be seen more clearly for students travelling to study abroad for the first time. The language transition can start at the students' preparation phase when they start applying for their courses or contacting agents in the UK (e.g., accommodation agents). Signs of this transition can happen inside and outside the campus. It also can be classified as a continuous transition where challenges with the new language may continue to appear. Social media have been noted to play a key role in the students' language transition. Types of changes and difficulties related to the English language will be reported in the following sections.

##### 4.7.2 Fears about English language before departure

Having a weak level of English language can have a negative influence on students' emotions during their preparation time. F4, who reported that she had a very negative mood during her preparation time, stated the following:

*'I was very stressed before travelling to the UK; I lost my appetite for food during the last three days. This was due to many reasons [...]; the language is one of them, I was worried about how I would talk to people there, will my English language allow me to sort out things there?' (F4)*

On the other hand, F5, who previously claimed that she was excited for her coming experience in the UK during her preparation time, thought that having a good level of English language is a key motivator to be excited and to not be worried:

*'I think that having a good level of English language increased my confidence to not face difficulties in the UK.'* (F5)

M7 thought that although his English language was not weak before coming to the UK, he had some fears about the British accent and how he would adapt to it:

*'When I was in Saudi Arabia, I heard some people speaking English with this accent [British accent] and felt that this would be a challenge for me in the UK.'* (M7)

More details about difficulties with the host country's accent will be given later on in Section 4.7.4.

#### 4.7.3 Difficulties with English for settlement

Difficulty in understanding the English language on some official UK websites such as university, council and accommodation sites was reported as a challenge by some students. This challenge is more likely to appear for students before they leave for the UK, where they may feel unfamiliar with the English language and particularly with some phrases or terminologies. However, it was noticed here that as the students go on with their life in the UK, this challenge becomes less stressful for them. An example of these challenges is what F4 mentioned when she expressed her negative experience of being rejected for the UK visa; she attributed this issue to not having a good understanding of what was written on the visa website. She reported the following:

*'I had some issues with the UK visa; they rejected me the first time when I applied. This is due to the condition that I should have the tuition fees in my bank account at least 28 days before submitting the application. I was relying on myself when I applied for the visa and this condition was on the visa website but I did not understand it.'* (F4)

On this regard, M7 presented his argument about the university website and claimed that during the preparation for traveling, he was having difficulties in understanding information at the university website:

*'When I was in the preparation time, I visited the university website many times; however, I always find it difficult to read instructions and information there. It has a lot of text and sometimes I think it requires a high level of English. I think the university website is not designed for international students.'* (M7)

Having the language barrier with official websites has led some students to seek support from other peers in the UK or to search for alternative sources of information. M8 stated:

*'My friend who has experience in study in the UK helped me a lot in my preparation. Because my English language was not strong, I relied on him. I was also searching in Arabic; there was only one website [Mobtath] that can provide information for students who are studying or planning to study abroad and some of the information there can be a bit old.'* (M8)

M2 also presented a similar view and stated:

*'I was struggling with the university website; I had some difficulties with the language there. There was only one university whose website supported the Arabic language, and it was not for all pages.'* (M2)

M3 presented an opposite view to what has been mentioned above and denied the difficulties in accessing these websites; he stated:

*'Either before or after arrival to the UK, I did not have problems with the official websites. When I need to know about academic information or*

*information related to my course, I visit the university website. When I need to know about life in the UK and how to sort out things there, I visit the related website; for instance, the council website.’ (M3)*

However, it should be acknowledged here that this student has the experience of study abroad before and had a relatively high level of English.

One of the most interesting points in this part is that having difficulties with English language on official websites was one of the reasons that led some students to rely on social media for seeking help and information. There is a relationship between the student’s level of English before they leave for the UK and their use of social media. Students with weak English rely more on social media; M5 stated:

*‘Due to the language barrier, I can say that I relied on social media where I can find the Arabic content.’ (M5)*

More details about this will be given later on in the digital transition section.

#### 4.7.4 Difficulties with the British accent

Difficulties in understanding the spoken accent by local people on or off campus have been reported by some students. These difficulties can be triggered by challenges in understanding the British accent as a whole or in understanding some local dialects. M9 reported the following:

*‘I am a PhD student, so, presumably my English language is good. However, I find it sometimes hard to understand what British people say. It is more related to their accent; sometimes it is difficult to grasp.’ (M9)*

M7 also reported difficulties with the British accent in academia, after he started his study:

*‘These challenges were also occurring in classes; sometimes, I get lost and find it difficult to follow the teacher due to their English accent.’ (M7)*

M4 agreed on that and added that this issue is more likely to appear with people outside the university:

*'This issue [the British accent] happens most of the time with people on the street rather than in the university. One of the challenges that I am facing in the UK is the British accent. I did my undergraduate and master's in English and I think my English is good. However, I found that people here in the UK are speaking in a different way than what I used to hear. For example, one day I went to a grocery and I met a guy there; he talked to me for around two minutes but honestly I couldn't understand any word of what he was saying!!' (M4)*

Both of these two students claimed that the accent issue starts to decrease with time in the UK. M4 mentioned:

*'This challenge [the British accent] was much more at the beginning of my life here in the UK.'* (M4)

In this regard, M2 highlighted an interesting point that speaking English with an Arabic accent can increase the gap between the student and the new community and decrease the student's sense of belonging with the new society; he stated:

*'Sometimes I find it embarrassing to speak with my Arabic-English accent to the people in the UK, especially when they ask me where I am from after hearing my accent. With having a different accent than them [host country people], I feel that I am a different person from them.'* (M2)

On a different note, the accent challenge for M6 is not restricted to understanding what others say but also on developing his accent to be similar to the British accent. He thought that developing his accent is a continuous challenge that he is working on since he arrived in the UK. He stated:

*'I am still working on the British accent, how to develop it and how to understand it. I had this challenge since I arrived [in the UK] and I feel that this challenge will continue with me even when I do my master's and PhD. I*



*am trying to get closer to the British accent with my speaking, which is very hard.’ (M6)*

#### 4.7.5 Social media to develop English language

Social media can play a role in the students’ language development in the UK. In different ways, some students reported that using social media has helped them to improve their English language. F4 acknowledged the positive impact of watching YouTube videos and host country channels on her listening skills; she stated:

*‘I always look at YouTube as a good educational and entertainment platform. I think that watching English videos on different topics has helped me to improve my listening skills [...] I also started to watch the BBC since I came here’ (F4)*

M2 presented another way of using social media in this context and stated his experience of using Skype to attend IELTS online classes:

*‘I used Skype to attend an online course to help me with my preparation for the IELTS. There was a lecturer who gave online courses for students preparing for IELTS exams but he was in another city. I used Skype to join them and the course was very helpful.’ (M2)*

Regarding Twitter, F3 stated how her engagement with the British trending topics has increased her *‘familiarity with English words and phrases’*:

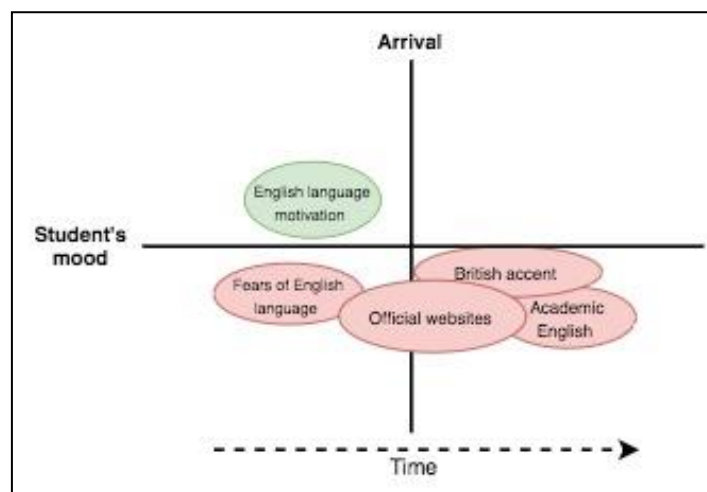
*‘Since I came here, I started to look at UK news websites. However, I am a big fan of Twitter and since I arrived in the UK, the trending news section on the application became related to the UK context. I usually go there to see news and updates about the UK. I feel this helped me to develop my language; on Twitter, I see how they write and explain things. I don’t know but I feel that this has increased my familiarity with English words and phrases’ (F3)*

Despite the positive views mentioned above, social media can play a negative role by isolating the students from the new community; more details about this will be given in the digital transition section.

#### 4.7.6 Summary

Different participants in this study reported that difficulty with the English language was an issue for them before and after they travelled to the UK. Students can start their language transition before they leave for the host country, when they start to use some official UK websites, such as universities' and accommodations' websites. This challenge can also continue to appear after arrival in the UK. Students may also encounter other challenges after arrival, such as challenges related to academic English and challenges with the host country's accent or local dialects. Social media can play a role in the students' language development in the UK; some students reported that using social media has helped them to improve their English language. The language transition has also been classified as a continuous transition, where its challenges keep appearing during the student's life in the UK. Figure 4.6 shows a set of signs for the language transition that students usually go through during their transition to the host country.

Figure 4.6 Language transition timeline



## 4.8 Everyday life arrangements transitions

### 4.8.1 Understanding everyday life arrangements transition

Along with the international students' transition to the new place, they usually face different changes related to their mundane everyday tasks. Such changes can hinder their settlement in the new place or make it more complicated. Students in this study highlighted several types of differences in systems including the accommodation system, healthcare system, banking system, transportation system and children's schools system. These transitions have been grouped into one transition called everyday life arrangements transition. This type of transition can be classified as a continuous transition where changes do not occur at a certain time; instead, they continue to appear as the students go on with their life in the UK. Per its name, this transition consists of multiple transitions, where individuals can face all or some of them. The following sections will present these changes in detail; they will show how, why and when the changes occur.

### 4.8.2 Different accommodation system

One of the most highly mentioned challenges that students in this study reported in relation to their transition to the host country is the process of finding accommodation. Most students in this study highlighted that finding a comfortable accommodation is a key factor in settling successfully in the UK. F5 highlighted this relationship and stated the following:

*'I believe that a large part of my successful adjustment to the new country is linked with finding good accommodation. Having a cosy accommodation with good neighbours will make your home a comfort zone for you. In contrast, if you are staying in a place where you feel uncomfortable, this will negatively affect your health and study' (F5)*

During their preparation time, many students have shown an awareness of the coming challenges related to the process of searching for accommodation. They were aware that the accommodation system in the UK is different than Saudi Arabia. M1, who was interviewed in his preparation time, reported the following:

*'Honestly, I am worried about the accommodation system in the UK; I know that sorting accommodation will be one of the main challenges there. I heard from some friends that the process of finding accommodation is very different in the UK than in Saudi Arabia.'* (M1)

After arrival, for some students, finding accommodation can be classified as the '*biggest challenge*' and it may take more time than what is planned. M5 and M3 stated:

*'Finding accommodation is the biggest challenge after arriving to the UK. I can say that the process of searching and sorting accommodation is more complicated than what I thought [...]. It took me about 28 days to move into my flat.'* (M5)

*'I could say that the biggest challenge when I arrived the UK was the accommodation system. It was a good idea that I arrived around 20 days before my course started. Honestly, I spent all of that period looking for accommodation.'* (M3)

Two factors can explain why these students believe that the accommodation system in the UK is complicated and the process of finding accommodation is challenging and time consuming.

First, according to the accommodation system in the UK, tenants are required to do a viewing for their potential property before they rent it. Based on the students' views, this condition can delay the process of renting the accommodation. It has been reported by some students that they started the accommodation process while they were in Saudi Arabia. However, these students claimed that they were unable to continue the procedure prior to their arrival due to this condition. M7 stated:

*'I wished that I could sort out the accommodation while I was in Saudi Arabia. However, I was unable to do that; the agent asked me to do a viewing before signing the contract, therefore, I had to wait until I arrived in the UK.'* (M7)

M7 also added that even after arrival, arranging the viewings can take time while the student waits for the agent to sort out the appointment:

*'Arranging the viewings in the UK took me a longer time than what I was expecting. This is because I did many viewings and usually I had to wait for a couple of days between them. Sometimes, I contacted the agent to arrange a viewing and they asked me to wait until they had sorted the viewing out with the current tenant.'* (M7)

Some students tried to tackle this issue and asked some friends to do the viewing on behalf of them; F2 commented:

*'With regard to the accommodation, a friend who I already know has helped me with the viewing. I asked him to do the viewing on behalf of me.'* (F2)

Second, many students reported that the process of signing the accommodation contract is based on other arrangements. For example, F2 claimed that her friend was able to do the viewing on behalf of her while she was in Saudi Arabia. However, she was unable to sign the contract because a document from her sponsor in the UK was needed:

*'Although I was able to arrange the viewing before I arrived in the UK, I could not sign the contract. They asked me for a financial guarantee from my sponsor, which I could not get until I arrived in the UK.'* (F2)

A similar experience was also presented by M5, who stated that he could not complete the contract procedure until he finished some arrangements with his sponsor. M5 claimed that he needed to arrive in the UK to be able to get proof of funding from his sponsor, which was required by the agent:

*'I was unable to sign the contract for the accommodation in the UK until I brought an official paper from my sponsor to confirm that I am a funded student. However, I was unable to get this paper until I opened an account on the sponsor's website, and this process usually takes days.'* (M5)

On the other hand, few students in this research reported a less negative experience with their accommodation in the UK. These students are less stressed, either because they are

joining a relative or friend in the UK or because they are staying with host families. F8 stated the following:

*'I did not face any issues with the accommodation. This is because my sister was in the UK and when I arrived, she was just finishing her course. Therefore, I stayed with her and when she finished, we just transferred the contract.'* (F8)

M6, who joined a host family when he arrived in the UK, admitted that he faced less stress compared to other friends who were looking for private accommodation:

*'Sorting the accommodation with host families is much easier than the private accommodation. Most of my friends are living in private accommodation and I can see some of the challenges that they face. The process of searching for accommodation is very complicated. They also need to sign a contract to stay in that accommodation at least 6 months.'* (M6)

#### 4.8.3 Different health care system

Another type of difference that students in this study reported is linked to the new health care system; this has been highlighted by a few students. M6 thought that challenges were always coming from the differences between the health care systems in the UK and Saudi Arabia:

*'It is a bit challenging to know how the health care system is working in the UK; it is different than Saudi Arabia. I was unsure where to go if I get sick. Can I go to the hospital and see a doctor, or do I need to go to the emergency department?'* (M6)

One form of differences is related to the procedure of seeing a doctor in private hospitals. This was reported by M3, who stated the following:

*'In the UK, if the patient wants to go to a private hospital, they have to see a doctor in the NHS first. It is not like Saudi Arabia where you can go to a*

*private hospital directly. This looks very strange for me; I have health insurance so why can't I go directly to the private hospital?' (M3)*

Another form of differences is related to medicine prescriptions; this was added by M5:

*'Another issue after arriving was the health care system. When my son got sick, we went to see a doctor and waited for four to five hours but they did not prescribe a medicine for him. I think that the procedure of prescribing a medicine for patients is more complicated in the UK than in Saudi Arabia.'*  
(M5)

It may be true that students may not encounter these types of differences continuously. However, differences in the health care system can be critical and strong at the time of their occurrence. Directly after reporting his experience of not getting a medicine for his child from the doctor, M5 stated the following:

*'I feel that life in the UK is completely different than Saudi Arabia, even in simple things.'* (M5)

#### 4.8.4 Different transportation system

Only one student in this study reported difficulties with using the transportation system in the UK. F8 claimed that she needed some time to adapt to the transportation system in her city:

*'I feel that it took me a while to become familiar with the buses and underground system in my city. It was very complicated for me at the beginning.'* (F8)

However, it should be acknowledged here that F8 was living in a large and busy city where public transportation tends to be more needed and complicated.

#### 4.8.5 Different children's school system

For students who come to the UK with their family, they may face an extra type of transition related to their children's schools. F7 highlighted this issue:

*'Coming with children to the UK is very challenging; in addition to setting up yourself at the university, you also need to set up your children with their school.'* (F7)

Furthermore, M4 agreed with F7 and added that he still needs to find out how the process of registering his child works:

*'I feel that I am still not engaged with life in the UK yet. One of my children will start school next year; therefore, I need to learn how the application system works in the UK schools. All I know at the moment is that the system is different than in Saudi Arabia.'* (M4)

#### 4.8.6 Issues with banking system

All of the participants in this study said that they needed to open a bank account when they arrived in the UK. A main issue that students mentioned in this regard is that this process is based on other processes. This is similar to what has been mentioned before regarding the accommodation procedure, where students are required to provide proof of funding before they complete the accommodation procedure. For example, students are usually not allowed to open a bank account until they have a residency address in the UK. F5 highlighted this and stated that she had to wait for five weeks to be able to open a bank account:

*'I was not able to open a bank account before I moved in to my flat, which means I could not open a bank account for my first five weeks in the UK. I was temporarily staying in a hotel and the bank did not allow me to use my address there.'* (F5)

M7 presented a similar experience and stated that completing his registration at the university was a prerequisite for opening his bank account:

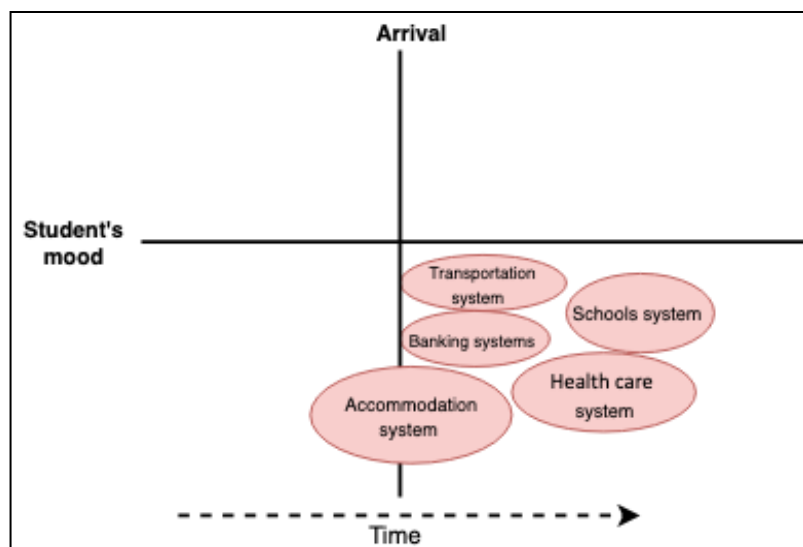
*'I could not open a bank account when I arrived in the UK, I had to wait until I registered at the university. The bank asked me for a certificate of status from the University.'* (M7)



#### 4.8.7 Summary

These findings above demonstrate various types of transitions that students reported in relation to their interaction with new systems in the host country. Many students in this study reported that changes in the everyday life arrangements for the accommodation system seemed to be the biggest change that students face in this regard. This challenge usually started in the preparation phase before the student leaves for the host country. Based on the students' experience, the complexity of this change is motivated by two factors: (1) the process of renting an accommodation requires the student to do viewing and this usually takes time; and (2) signing the accommodation contract usually depends on other arrangements such as having a UK bank account. Different students also reported other sorts of changes such as changes in the transportation, health care, children's schools and banking systems. These changes are presented in Figure 4.7, which shows that students' opinions about these changes are usually negative.

Figure 4.7 Everyday life arrangements transition timeline



#### 4.9 Digital transitions

##### 4.9.1 Understanding the digital transition

The majority of students in this study reported that their use of social media has changed since they decided to study abroad. The change in use has been observed for students either before or after their physical movement to the UK. In this study, the term digital transition is used to refer to all types of changes in social media use that students reported in association

with their study abroad experience. Changes can include engaging with new communities, creating new accounts on social media and increasing or decreasing time spent on social media. The digital transition can start during the students' preparation for travelling, where most of the students admitted how social media were a helpful tool to seek information or to foster their engagement with potential communities. After arrival, the shift of use becomes more intense, and new social and cultural environments can make an impact on this. Only one student in this study thought that their use of social media had not changed; more details about this and other points will be given in the following sections.

#### 4.9.2 Role of social media in the preparation phase

Social media were highly involved in the preparation phase for most students in this study. Two main factors can demonstrate the importance of social media for students before their departure:

The first factor is that social media were an essential tool for students to seek information. Many students in this study reported that social media acted as a main channel in achieving their information needs before travelling. M4 stated:

*'Honestly, I can say that my transition experience to the UK will be much more difficult if there is no social media [...]. In some ways and during the preparation phase, I was receiving a high amount of information from social media.'* (M4)

The dominance of social media as an information channel for students can be attributed to two reasons:

First, on social media, students can find other co-nationals who share similar circumstances and have experienced the transition of studying in the UK. This has been highly mentioned by students when they were asked about reasons for their reliance on social media in their preparation phase. F3 stated the following:

*'Before travelling to the UK, I needed to know about the Saudis' experiences in the UK and how they coped with challenges there. Honestly, social media was a good provider for this content.'* (F3)

F4 added that social media have provided her with people *'who share the same culture and religion'* to answer her questions:

*'What I like about social media is that you can find others who share the same culture and religion. Sometimes, I have questions related to these things, so, social media can link me with others who can answer my questions.'* (F4)

M2 also added that the information provided by the university website tends to be general and the advantage of social media is the availability of some *'real experiences'*:

*'The information provided at the university website was very general. For example, when I read the course information on the university websites, I feel that I still have more questions. I feel that I need some real experiences about assessments, and this can be found on social media groups.'* (M2)

Second, the language can be another reason. Some students reported that the lack of Arabic content about study abroad on other online sources (e.g., online forms) is a reason behind their reliance on social media before travelling. This can be particularly noticed by students who have no experience with study abroad, where their English language tends to be weaker than other students. F4 brought this out and highlighted that having Arabic content regarding her potential life in the UK is an advantage of social media:

*'My English language was not good before I came to the UK. On social media I found a good amount of information in Arabic about the UK and the social and academic life there'* (F4)

The second factor that motivates the importance of social media during the preparation time is that social media were acting as a supporting tool in exploring the students' potential communities in the UK. These communities can be either co-national communities or the potential academic community. When M1 was asked about changes in his behaviour on Twitter after his decision to study abroad, he thought the following:

*'Recently, I can say that I started to follow new accounts on Twitter. I followed my potential supervisor and my school and university accounts. I also added some people who are popular in my field of study. I believe that when I arrive to the UK, I will change my profile information on Twitter [bio information].'* (M1)

F1, who was also interviewed before her departure to the UK, reported a similar experience; however, F1's experience was more related to the co-national community in the UK. She stated:

*'I joined three WhatsApp groups where group members are Saudi students in the UK. They are very helpful; you can see other people's experiences there and ask questions.'* (F1)

#### 4.9.3 Role of social media after arrival

Social media were also involved in the students' life after arrival; students reported various positive roles. M5 highlighted how social media were helpful in information seeking after arrival:

*'These groups [WhatsApp groups] are very helpful for me. Whenever I have questions about any matter in the UK I ask them, and I always find answers; the group members are very supportive and helpful.'* (M5)

M7 stated that social media also played a role in creating new ties with people in the host country; he stated:

*'Twitter and WhatsApp in particular allowed me to make new friends in the UK. One of my friends here in [his city], I started to know him from Twitter.'* (M7)

Social media were also helpful in maintain the existing ties with people in home country; for example, F9 stated that social media allowed her to stay connected with her family back home. She stated:

*'I always call my family in Saudi Arabia, either using Snapchat or other applications. I make video calls with them; I feel that video calls can give me the feeling that they are not far away. These tools [social media] are very helpful; I need them to connect me with my family.'* (F9)

#### 4.9.4 Transition on social media use

Changes in the use of social media associated with the physical move to the UK were reported by the majority of students in this study. Students reported this when they were asked about their use of social media before and after their transition to the UK:

*'On Twitter, I feel that I updated the list of people who I follow as a result of my study abroad experience'* (M7)

*'I feel that my use of WhatsApp has completely changed since I arrived in the UK'* (M5)

Different forms of changes were reported by students, and one individual may have one or more changes during their transition. These changes are provided in the following sections:

##### 4.9.4.1 Shifting to engage with new co-national communities and people in the UK

The majority of students acknowledged that as a result of their transition to the UK, they started to communicate and engage with co-national people and communities in the UK on social media. This shift can be a result of the social engagement for these students with co-nationals in the UK, as has been reported in the social transition section. M5 highlighted this change and reported that he joined four WhatsApp groups after his arrival in the UK:

*'Since I arrived in the UK, I joined four WhatsApp groups where members are Saudi students in the UK. Two of these groups are the main ones; I check them on a daily basis.'* (M5)

When M5 was asked to give more details about these groups and why he joined them, he stated the following:

*'These two groups are for Saudis in [name of his UK city]; one of them is focused on questions that students can ask other peers. The other group is*

*for general discussion where we [group members] discuss general topics and organise some events.’ (M5)*

F4 claimed that she did not have a WhatsApp account before leaving to the UK; however, she created one after her arrival and her account was mainly to stay connected with her new friends in the UK. She stated:

*‘I created my WhatsApp account after my arrival in the UK [...]. Mainly, I use WhatsApp to communicate with my new friends in the UK and the Saudi community in my city. My WhatsApp account is restricted to the people I know in the UK. I feel that I have created my new Saudi community on WhatsApp.’ (F4)*

Regarding Twitter, some students, such as M3 and M2, claimed that they started to follow some Saudi accounts (either for individuals or organisations) as part of their digital transition:

*‘I have followed some Saudi accounts on Twitter and most of them are related to my study and life in the UK. These accounts are like a content provider for topics related to my study in the UK.’ (M3)*

*‘One of the new accounts I followed recently on Twitter is the Saudi society in [his city]; I also followed some Saudi students that I knew here in [his city].’ (M2)*

Only a few students reported that their digital transition did not include contacting or engaging with Saudi people or individuals in the UK. Those students are not keen to engage with the Saudi community or they are selective with their social network in the UK. F5, who claimed that she is not keen to interact with co-nationals in the UK, highlighted the following:

*‘I am trying to decrease my contacting or engaging with the Saudi content or people on social media since I arrived. The reason behind that is I wanted to live the new experience without distractions; I wanted to see myself without the Saudi connections.’ (F5)*

F5’s desire to be disconnected from the Saudi community has led her to create new accounts on social media platforms; more details about this will be reported later in Section 4.9.4.3.

#### 4.9.4.2 *Shifting to engage with new people and community*

Another shift in social media use that has been reported by students is the shift to engage with non-co-national people, either other international students or local friends. M3 highlighted this shift and stated:

*'When I started my course, we [the students in this course] created a group on WhatsApp. It is an active group and the discussion in this group is general; we talk about the classes and the city and sometimes we share jokes. For each piece of coursework we also created a WhatsApp group where we organise meetings, share thoughts and discuss assignments.'*  
(M3)

From M3's quotes, it can be seen that the shift was academically motivated. This can be also applied to Twitter, as previously mentioned by M1.

This type of shift may be more reported by language students, who are more eager to engage with non-Arabic speakers to develop their English language. M2 stated the following:

*'I added some British celebrities on Snapchat [...]. I mainly added them to develop my English language.'* (M2)

M2 also presented his experience on another platform:

*'I also joined some boot camp groups on Facebook; I also downloaded an application called Meetup to join some exchange language groups. Again, my main goal from doing this is to develop my English language.'* (M2)

#### 4.9.4.3 *Two accounts on social media*

Some students in this study reported that they created new social media accounts when they moved to the UK. This can be observed more for personal platforms such as WhatsApp and Snapchat. M2 reported his experience on this and stated the following:

*'Here in the UK, I have two mobile phones with two numbers, UK and Saudi numbers. The UK phone is the one that I always carry with me; I have created a new WhatsApp account linked to this number. My friends and people in Saudi Arabia do not know about the number, so, I do not receive messages from them on this WhatsApp account. My Saudi number has my Saudi WhatsApp, but anyway, I rarely check it, usually before I sleep; I am not active there.'* (M2)

F4 agreed with M2 on the point of restricting the WhatsApp account to UK contacts only; she commented:

*'My WhatsApp account is only restricted to the people I know in the UK. I feel that I have created my new Saudi community on WhatsApp.'* (F4)

When students were asked about the reason for creating these new accounts, their views revolved around the student's desire to create a space between them and their home country's people. F5 clearly stated that and presented her desire to avoid *'distractions from Saudi Arabia'*; she reported:

*'When I arrived in the UK, I created new WhatsApp and Snapchat accounts [...]. In these two new accounts, I only added the people I met here in the UK and a very limited number of people in Saudi Arabia, people where I needed them to do something for me in Saudi Arabia, like one of my colleagues. My friends in Saudi Arabia do not know about my new WhatsApp account. I feel that I have created my own new community on these two platforms and I am happy with it. The reason for excluding these two platforms to the people I meet here is that I don't want to add some distractions from Saudi Arabia to my life here in the UK. For example, I don't want to see my friends in Saudi Arabia talking in the WhatsApp group about a new coffee shop that has been recently opened. I feel that I need to use my life here [in the UK] with things that only exist in the UK.'* (F5)

M6 presented a similar view to F5 and stated:



*'On the phone that I carry with me, I only have my UK WhatsApp account. Other platforms are on the other phone that I usually leave at home. I can say that I disconnected myself from the Saudi community on social media during the day. I have many groups in my Saudi WhatsApp and people there are very active, therefore, I do not want them to distract my life here. Honestly, I feel very comfortable with this decision.'* (M6)

#### 4.9.5 Decrease in social media use

The majority of students in this study reported a decrease in their use of social media as a result of their transition to the UK. Two main reasons can motivate this:

First, many students have reported that they have a more busy day in the UK than in Saudi Arabia. M3 stated:

*'I spend less time on social media in the UK than Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, my lifestyle is different, my work is less tough than my course here. Therefore, I have more free time there to use the social media [in Saudi Arabia]'* (M3)

This can be particularly noticed for M3 as a master's student who previously mentioned that his academic load is very high. However, F9, who is a PhD student in the UK, showed similar views and added that there are more responsibilities in the UK:

*'My use of social media has decreased since I came to the UK. I feel that I am busy with my study here. Also, I have more commitments here in the UK than Saudi Arabia, so, I spend my time on them rather than social media'* (F9)

The second reason is related to what has been mentioned in the previous section regarding the desire of some students to create a gap between them and their home country. This desire has led the students to make less use of social media. M2, who previously reported his experience of creating two accounts on some social media platforms, reported the following:

*'My use of social media has decreased since I arrived [in the UK] and I am happy with that. One of the techniques that I did to decrease my use is that I disabled the notifications of social media applications on my mobile phone. By doing this I feel that I can focus more on my life in the UK, and I am less distracted by the social media.'* (M2)

M5 reported a lack of interest in the Saudi topics on social media. He also claimed that he became more passive and his behaviour on social media has changed from a contributor to a reader:

*'My use of social media has changed since I arrived in the UK. On Twitter, for example, I do not tweet about general topics as I was doing before. The reason for this change is that I have been busy with my studies, so I cannot find time to give my opinion about women driving in Saudi Arabia, for example. The second reason is related to the geographic proximity; I feel that my interest in the Saudi news has been affected by being away from Saudi Arabia. I still read about what is happening there, but I do not share my thoughts.'* (M5)

#### 4.9.6 Increase in social media use

Some students reported an increase in their social media use associated with their transition to the UK. F6 said:

*'I would say that I am using social media more in the UK than in Saudi Arabia.'* (F6)

There is a relationship between the increased use of social media and the free time that students have in the UK. Later on in the interview, F6 stated the following:

*'I am living by myself in the UK [...]; I feel that I have too much free time here.'* (F6)

When F3 was asked about her high use of social media in the UK, she attributed that to her lack her social relationships in the UK, stating the following:

*'I would say that it is because I do not have many friends here in the UK. I have two or three friends but they are students and they are busy with their study, so we don't always hang around together. I spend most of my time alone, particularly when my brother goes home for a holiday.'* (F3)

Another reason that was found to increase the time spent on social media by students in this study is related to their need to stay connected with their home family and friends. Social media were found to be a preferred tool to keep in touch with people in the home country. F3 stated that she used social media to call her family, and that is a daily routine for her:

*'I use social media to contact my family in Saudi Arabia. I use different platforms, I call my family every day, so, this is like a daily task for me.'* (F3)

F3 also agreed on having a routine for social media calls with family; she stated:

*'I use social media to make a video call with my family every Saturday, so, this is like a fixed time for both of us'* (F5)

However, it should be acknowledged here that the high engagement with the home country's content and communications on social media can bring some obstacles to the students' cultural and social engagement in the new place. F3 stated:

*'Well, because I call my family every day and most of these calls are video calls, sometimes I get the feeling that I am so engaged with them and live with them'* (F3)

#### 4.9.7 No shift in social media use

Only one student in this study reported no changes in their use of and behaviour on social media. M8 clearly ignored his digital transition on social media and stated the following:

*'If someone is observing my use of social media before and after traveling to the UK, they will not notice any difference. For example, I see some friends start to tweet or snap in English when they arrive to the UK; however, I don't usually do this. I feel that the content that I read and add on social media is the same.'* (M8)

Having no changes in the use of social media with the student's transition can be attributed to how the student perceives their life in the UK. A relationship between how the student's life in the UK is and their digital transition can be observed. Students like M8, who are not personally motivated to study abroad and see their life in the UK as something that they have to do, are not keen to make a digital change. On the other hand, students who perceive their life in the UK as an opportunity to change and make a difference are more likely to make a digital transition on their social media platforms. When M7 was asked about whether he was perceiving any changes in his social media use after arriving in the UK, he replied with the following:

*'A main reason for my decision to study abroad is to broaden my knowledge in life, therefore, I think Twitter is a good tool to help with that. I think updating the people you follow on Twitter is required with my physical movement to the UK.'* (M7)

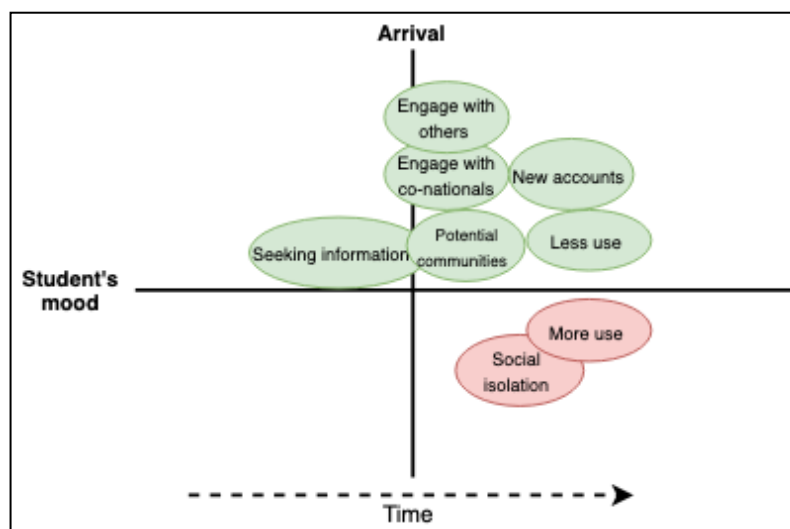
#### 4.9.8 Summary

Social media were highly involved in the students' experience of study abroad. Students usually use social media as effective tools for information seeking or social communications. Changes in the use of social media associated with the physical transition to the UK were reported by a majority of students in this study. These changes are referred to by the term digital transition, which includes all types of changes in social media use that students reported in association with their study abroad experience. These changes include engaging with new people or communities on social media. The majority of students acknowledged that as a result of their transition to the UK, they started to communicate and engage with co-national people and communities in the UK on social media. This shift can be a result of their physical engagement with the co-national community in the UK or for information seeking purposes. Other students reported a shift to engage with non-co-national people, either other international students or local friends. Another form of change is reported by some students, who presented their experience of creating new social media accounts, which was usually motivated by the student's desire to create a space between them and their home

country's people. The amount of time spent by students on social media is also another form of change.

Most of students in this study reported a decrease in their time on social media in the UK compared to in Saudi Arabia. This is usually motivated by the less free time that students have in the UK and the beliefs of some students that reducing the use of social media can make them less connected with their home country. Students in this study acknowledged the positive roles of social media in their life in the UK. Different roles were reported, such as using social media as an information seeking tool and a tool to create new connections and keep connected with family and friends back home. However, a downside was also noticed relating to the role of social media in isolating the students with their online home content, which can hinder their social cultural adjustment to the new place. Figure 4.8 gives more details about how and when the digital changes on social media can occur.

Figure 4.8 Digital transition timeline



#### 4.10 Characteristics of transition

The findings of this chapter have revealed that there are seven fundamental characteristics that can enrich researchers' understanding about the whole concept of transition in general and the international students' transition in particular. These characteristics are: (1) transition is multiple and multidimensional experience; (2) transition is unpredictable experience; (3) transition is more than individual experience; (4) transition has a dynamic start and length; (5) transition is a multi-emotional experience; (6) transition is an unequal experience; and (7)

transition has a non-linear pattern. These different characteristics were found to be interlinked and affected by each other. This section will shed light on these characteristics and give more details about them.

#### 4.10.1 Multiple and multidimensional experience

##### 4.10.1.1 Multiple transitions

*'I was facing different differences when I came to the UK; it is not just studying a new course in a new country, but there were also other changes, such as the social and cultural changes. The people and the social life were also different. A set of changes were happening at the same time.'* (M4)

These words from the interview of M4 can suggest that there were a lot of changes taking place for one student during their transition. This can highlight a main component of the international students' transition concept, which is that transition is a multiple and multidimensional experience. This means that students usually face various transitions associated with their movement to the UK. These transitions can occur simultaneously and each of them can contain different changes.

The idea that international students face multiple and multidimensional transitions appeared during the interviews. When students were asked about differences and challenges related to their transition experience as a whole, it was noticed that different types of challenges and changes were reported, including social, cultural and academic. These challenges and changes have been clustered into types of transition in this chapter, which are social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transition. M4 admitted the idea of having various transitions and stated the following:

*'When I came here [to the UK], I faced many differences in different contexts.'* (M4)

Students can go through some or all of these types of transitions and the strength of each type can vary from one student to another. When M3 was asked about challenges and

changes associated with his study abroad experience, he reported that changes in the social settings seem to be the strongest challenges:

*'I would say that my main concern was about the new society and how people live there; I wasn't worried too much about my academic course.'*  
(M3)

On the other hand, when F2 was asked the same question, she replied with the following:

*'I think the main challenges in my experience are always academic. For example, I was suffering in terms of how to find my specific major in the UK universities.'* (F2)

Therefore, students may come across some or all of the transition types and the strength of each type can vary from one student to another. More discussion about the strength of transition types will be presented later on in this chapter.

#### 4.10.1.2 Sub-transitions

The findings of this study revealed that transition types can have sub-transitions. For example, although a large portion of the views presented in the academic transition were related to the students' movement from one academic system to another, this can only be considered as a type of the academic transition. It is always the case that the student moves to another academic level when they start their study in the host country (e.g., move from undergraduate to postgraduate level). This can be considered as another type of transition in the academic context. During his discussion about his academic challenges, M3 mentioned the following:

*'I think the UK style is 180 degrees different than the Saudi style. In the UK, critical writing is a very important aspect. One of the key things to get a good mark in the UK is to do a critical analysis [...].'* (M3)

However, M3 was making a comparison between the master's course that he was currently doing in the UK and his previous undergraduate course. Such differences may occur between

these two levels which can call for another type of academic transition related to the level of study.

Another example of sub-transitions can be applied to the social transition. Although most of the presented views in the social transition were related to changes associated with the students' involvement with a new community and people, other sorts of social transition have been stated, such as the transition to living alone or living with host families. F9 is a good example of a student who went through more than one type of social transition. She presented her view about the differences in the social life between Saudi Arabia and the UK as a type of social transition:

*'The social life is different here in the UK; the way people socialise and where they gather are different than in our home country.'* (F9)

F9 also reported her experience of living alone and how this was a '*big change*' that required her to adjust:

*'living alone is a big change; it is not necessarily negative, it has some positive sides[...]. However, this took me time to adjust.'* (F9)

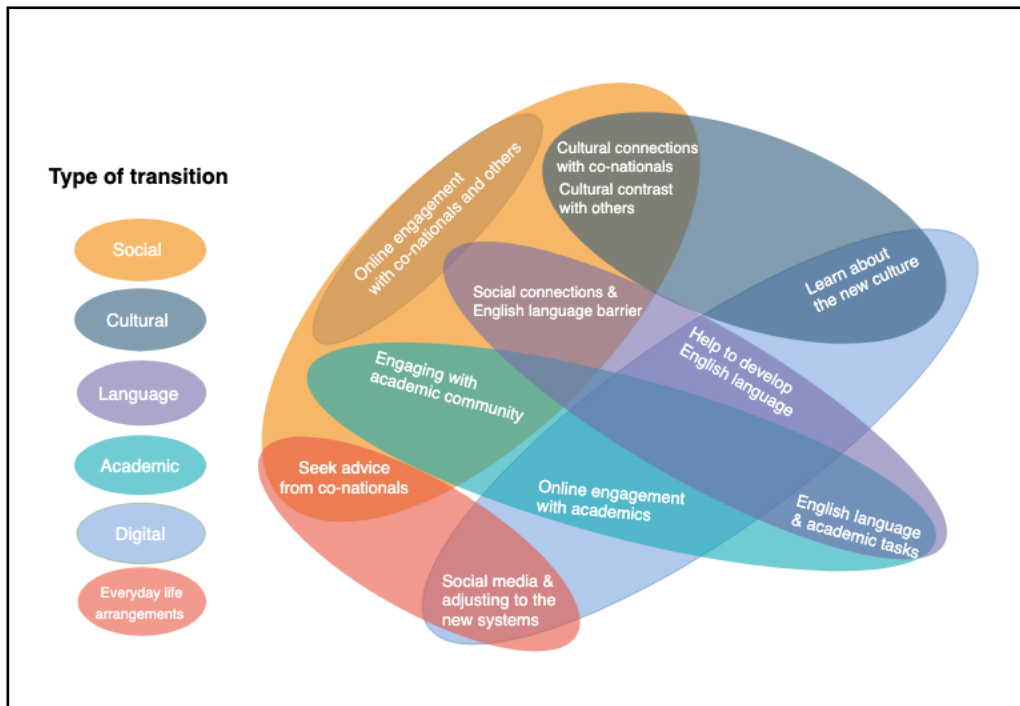
#### 4.10.1.3 Overlapping transitions

The findings of this study have shown that different types of transition can overlap, motivate and affect each other. Figure 4.9 shows how the different types of transitions identified in this study can be interrelated. From this figure, it can be seen that the digital and social transitions are the ones that have an interaction with all other types. It was noticed that all types of transition usually have an impact on the students' use of social media. The digital transition can interact with the social, language, and cultural transitions where the student shifts their use of social media to engage with a new online community, help to develop their English language or learn about the new culture. It also interacts with the academic and systems transitions where the student engages online with the new academic environment and seeks information on social media about their new life arrangements. The social transition has also been noticed as a type of transition that interacts with all other types.



There is a strong relation between the social and cultural transitions; social connections always tend to be affected by cultural connections. The social transition can also be affected by the language transition, where some students avoid socialising with home people due to the language barrier. Students may also socially engage with the new academic environment as a result of their transition.

Figure 4.9 Transitions overlapping



To give more detail, the following sections provide two examples of how two transition types can overlap:

#### 4.10.1.3.1 The cultural and social transitions

The cultural transition can make a strong impact on the social transition for international students. For students in this study and as has been previously mentioned, the social transition for the majority of them is hovering around leaving the home country's community and engaging with co-national people and communities in the UK. This can be strongly affected by cultural contrast with local people and the cultural connections with co-nationals. M7 talked about his social relationships in the UK and how they are restricted to the co-nationals; he stated the following:

*'I would say that most of my friends in the UK are Saudis or at least Arabs.'*

(M7)

M7 attributed this to the cultural gap between the Saudi students and the UK people.

#### 4.10.1.3.2 The social and digital transition

As mentioned earlier in this section, the social transition overlaps with most of the other types of transitions. Its overlap with the digital transition is a good example to discuss. Students who reported that they are mainly communicating and engaging with co-national communities and people in the UK are more likely to do the same on social media. For example, M4 stated the following:

*'Honestly, I was feeling strange [in the UK] until I met the Saudi society, [and then] I felt very comfortable.'* (M4)

He also mentioned the following when he talked about his use of social media:

*'The first thing I did before travelling to the UK was that I made a contact with the Saudi society in my potential UK city, I followed their account on Twitter and joined their WhatsApp group.'* (M4)

Furthermore, students who are willing to weaken their ties with their home community in Saudi Arabia may apply some techniques such as creating new social media accounts in the UK. F5 stated:

*'When I arrived in the UK, I created new WhatsApp and Snapchat accounts [...]. In these two new accounts, I only added the people I met here in the UK and a very limited number of people in Saudi Arabia, people where I needed them to do something for me in Saudi Arabia, like one of my colleagues. My friends in Saudi Arabia do not know about my new WhatsApp account. I feel that I have created my own new community on these two platforms and I am happy with it.'* (F5)

She then mentioned:

*'The reason for excluding these two platforms to the people I meet here is I don't want to add some distractions from Saudi Arabia to my life here in the UK'* (F5)

#### 4.10.1.4 Key type of transition

It may be difficult to say which type of transition is the most common transition because different students have different experiences with their transition to the UK. As previously presented, findings of this study can show that there may not be a static picture for the student's experience of transition. At different stages, certain transition will take a more prominent position than others; furthermore, students differ in how they perceive each transition type. However, findings in this study may show that the social, academic and digital differences are highly mentioned by students. The reasons behind the dominance of social transition can be attributed to two factors:

First, the social life is an important aspect for many people in Saudi Arabia and the degree of connectedness between family members is very high. This had made the change in the social settings for most students a major change among other changes. Therefore, leaving the home family and community can be a big issue for some students due to their strong social ties in Saudi Arabia. With regard to the importance of the social life for Saudi students, F8 stated the following:

*'Like most of the families in Saudi Arabia, we are very connected and I really miss my family and friends there.'* (F8)

Furthermore, difficulties in engaging with the new community can also make the student's social transition more complicated. Reasons for these difficulties have been previously mentioned, including cultural contracts, language issues and the social nature of the UK community. Later on in her interview, F8 added:

*'When I compare the UK community with us [Saudi community] I can see that we are much more social than them [the UK people].'* (F8)

The second reason behind the dominance of the social transition is that it usually affects all types of students. Symptoms and signs of this transition were reported by students regardless of their level of study, their previous experience, their gender and their marital status. For example, students who came alone to the UK faced the challenges of living alone or with host

families. On the other hand, others who came with their families may not encounter this social transitions type, but they will face other types such as the transition of engaging with new people or community. Therefore, various types of students have reported changes related to their social life and this may explain the frequency of the social transition among students.

The same as social transition, two factors can explain the frequency of the academic changes or differences among students:

First, one of the main reasons for students in this research to be in the UK is to study. Although some students have mentioned that they are personally motivated to study in the UK, completing a degree is their top priority. This can explain the increased worries of students about their academic transitions and why students may become sensitive about their academic matters.

Second, according to students in this study, there is a big gap between the Saudi and the UK academic systems. Many students felt strongly about the differences, F6 stated:

*'I did all my previous studies in Saudi Arabia, so, when I came here [to the UK] I found the academic system very different.'* (F6)

This gap can be motivated by two factors: (1) the difference in the academic system itself and (2) the difference in the academic stages (since students usually move to a new academic stage when they study in the UK). This gap can place many challenges on the students, such as challenges related to adapting to the research-based style and being a more independent learner. F7 stated:

*'The concept of doing research was new for me.'* (F7)

Therefore, being in the UK mainly to study and having a big transition between the two academic systems can increase the students' worries about their academic adjustment.

With regard to the digital transition, social media were highly involved in the students' transition to the UK. One of the students thought the following:

*'Honestly, I can say that my transition experience to the UK will be much more difficult if there is no social media [...].'* (M4)

The reason for the dominance of this type of transition is the high reliance on social media that students make. During their transition, students usually use social media as tools for information seeking and social communication. Furthermore, other types of transition are also reflected on social media. For example, the students who are socially transitioning to engage with a new community in the UK are usually making the same online shift on social media. Therefore, the reflection of other types of transition on the use of social media can explain its dominance.

#### 4.10.2 Unpredictable experience

The findings of this study reveal that the experience of transition for international students seems to be unpredictable. This means that there is a mismatch between the expectations and reality in the students' transition experience. The diversity of students' experiences can be seen from the models that they were asked to draw during the interviews.<sup>12</sup> Figure 4.10 shows that the student concerned was having a negative mood a week before her departure to the UK and the negativity continued for two weeks after arrival. This was triggered by the student's fears of being in a new place and encountering a new experience. The student then started to feel positive; starting her academic course was a major factor in increasing the positive mood. In contrast, Figure 4.11 shows a different experience, where the student was excited and experiencing a positive mood from one week before arrival to six months after his arrival. The student's mood then went down, because he started to feel bored and he had to compare and decide between different universities' offers. The student in Figure 4.12 showed another different experience; she entered the transition only a week before her departure and this was because of the late notice from her sponsor. She also reported a negative feeling during the first seven months, triggered by having a strong social transition and, particularly, leaving her family.

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<sup>12</sup> As previously mentioned, during the interviews students were asked to draw their transition experience on a timeline to show the challenges that they faced and how their mood changed over time.

Figure 4.10 F4 drawing

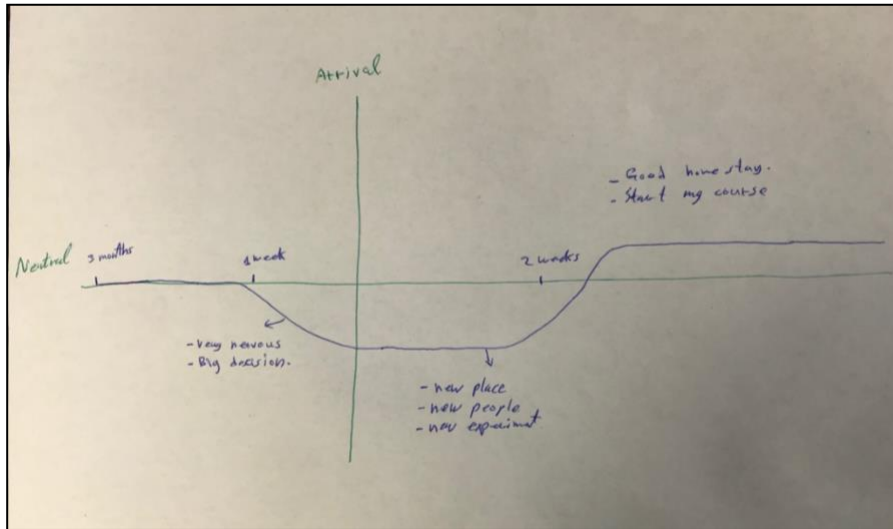


Figure 4.11 M6 drawing

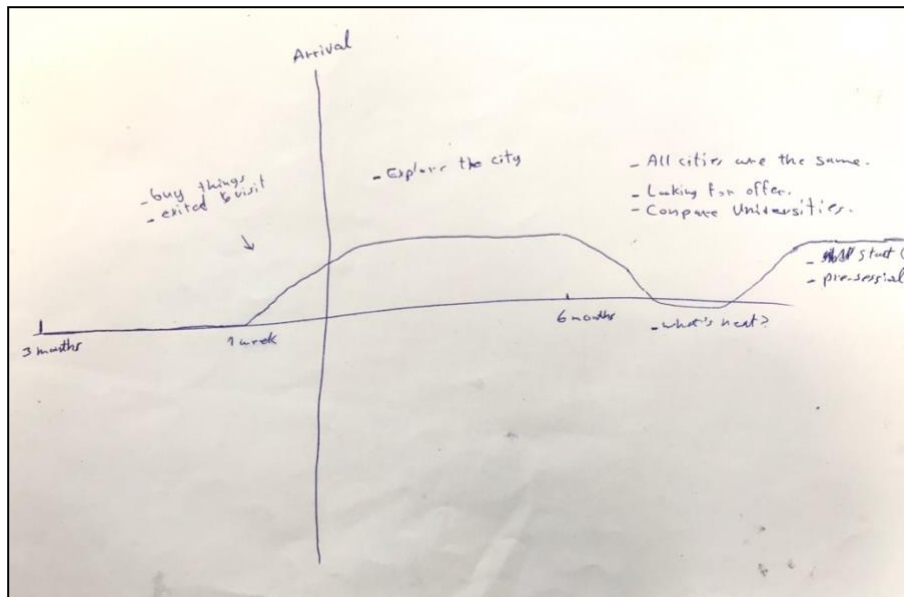
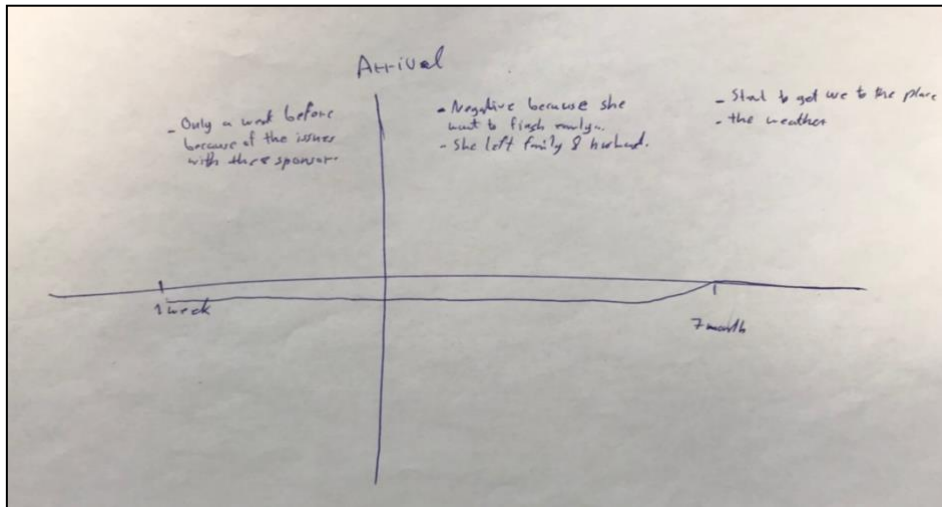


Figure 4.12 F8 drawing



Three main reasons can explain the variety of experiences for students. First, students can have different personal circumstances which can play a role in how they perceive their life in the host country. Different aspects can have impact here; for example, whether the student is coming alone to the UK, how connected they are with their family, which city or university they study at, the existence of co-national students in the host city and what level of study they will do. These questions and others can play a role in how the student faces the new changes. Second, students are different in regards to whether they have a previous experience with study and traveling abroad. Students who had these experiences tended to encounter the changes more smoothly and seemed to be less stressed about the new changes. Third, students have different motivations to study abroad; therefore, they differ in how they perceive the challenges and changes, and their feelings towards them are different. For example, students who are academically motivated to study abroad usually see the academic transition as an opportunity to make a development, but not a challenge.

#### 4.10.3 More than individual experience

Results of this study revealed that different actors can be involved in crafting the transition experience for international students. Those actors can be the students' family members (e.g., partners, children or parents), other peers of home or international students and the host

families or the host university. This section will focus on the students' family members as they seem to be the most important actors and highly mentioned ones by the students.

Students who are transitioning with their family members to the UK can have their experience as a multidimensional experience: their transition to the UK and the transition of their companion(s). Different types of transitions have been reported by some participants regarding the transition of their family members. M3 reported how the experience of living abroad was more challenging for his wife and how she faced a transition with adjusting to the new environment and weather:

*'It was the first time for my wife to be away from Saudi Arabia for a long time. Furthermore, she is not used to the changes that there would be in the UK like how the day is so long and the night is short and how it may rain for two or three days continuously. For me, I am used to most of these changes due to my previous experience, but for her these are new things' (M3)*

Similar to this, M5 also explained how his wife was facing a transition related to her Islamic appearance:

*'After arrival, my wife was a bit nervous about wearing a hijab in public places, you know in the UK people are not used to this kind of clothing' (M5)*

Another form of transition was reported by M4, who claimed that his children were also having a transition related to moving to a different school system in the UK:

*'When my family arrived in the UK, two of my children started to go to school. Honestly, they needed some time to adjust to the style of teaching in the UK. This was a bit challenging for all of us' (M4)*

M7 claimed that he and his wife were having almost a similar degree of transition, because they both came to study in the UK:

*'My wife and I are both doing our PhD here in the UK, so, I can say that we always share the same challenges and difficulties, both academic ones or related to the life here in the UK.' (M7)*



With regard to the impact of the transition of the family members on the students themselves, opposite views have been provided. For male participants, they usually look at this as something that adds an extra challenge to them. On the other hand, female participants showed an opposite view. Most of the female students agreed that coming with family member(s) had facilitated their overall transition to the UK. This can be attributed to the two reasons which have been previously presented in the social transition part: (1) females in Saudi Arabia are not usually used to travel abroad alone and (2) the Saudi cultural assumption which presumes that females are usually in less charge of responsibilities outside the household than males.

#### 4.10.4 Dynamic start and length

##### 4.10.4.1 *Start of transition*

Findings of this study revealed that there is no one standard point of when the transition starts. Different types of transition can have different starting points. The social, academic, language and digital transition can start before the student's departure from their home country.

The academic transition was noted to be the earliest type of transition that students may encounter. For some students, their academic preparation can start one year before they depart for the UK. Students at different levels (undergraduate and postgraduate studies) seem to start their academic transition in the early stages. For PhD students, this transition usually starts when the students begin to search for a potential supervisor and write their research proposal. F1, who was interviewed three months before her departure to the UK, thought the following:

*'I feel that I started very early to prepare for my study abroad. I started to write my proposal about seven months before my actual start and it took me about three months.'* (M1)

M5 also agreed with M1 and highlighted that there was an ongoing discussion with his supervisor regarding his PhD research before he travelled to the UK:

*'It took me about six months to prepare myself for studying abroad. I needed to write my PhD proposal. There were many emails between my supervisor and me about my research idea and how to develop it.'* (M5)

For master's students their early start of the academic transition seems to be motivated by their searching for their potential course and university. F5 presented this and stated the following:

*'Looking for the appropriate master's programme took me about a year.'*  
(F5)

M3 also agreed with F5 that his academic preparation started one year before leaving for the UK:

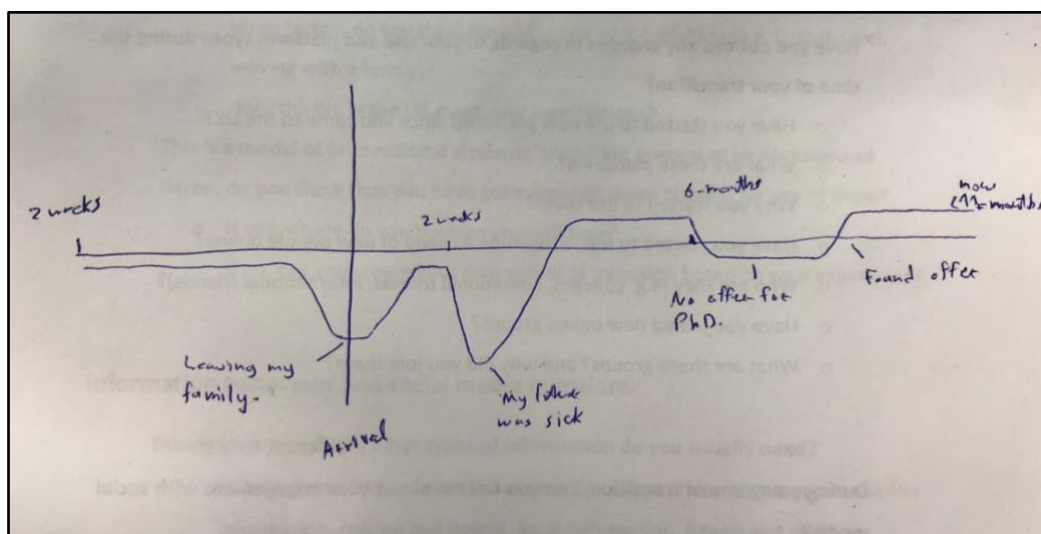
*'It was one year before my course started when I started to search and apply for the master's course. After I received the offer, I started the procedure with my sponsor.'* (M3)

Findings of this study suggest that the social transition can begin when the student starts their preparation to leave their home family and community. The early start of this transition can be more noted for students who have this experience for the first time or are not used to travelling. F3, who is studying abroad for the first time, highlighted her early social preparation and stated the following:

*'Before leaving to the UK, I was nervous and stressed most of the time, and this was because I would leave my family, and my mother in particular. We are very close!! [She and her mother]'* (F3)

F3's quote is also reflected in her drawing as presented in the below diagram. In Figure 4.13, F3 showed that she was nervous and anxious two weeks before her departure to the UK and a main motivation of her negativity was leaving her family in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 4.13 F3 drawing



The language transition can also start before the departure for students like F2, students who are coming to study English language course and then an academic course. Due to their weak English language, these students usually report symptoms of the language transitions during their preparation phase. These students usually find it difficult to explore English websites and make arrangements to study and live in the UK. For example, they usually report difficulties with applying for their English course, applying for the visa or searching for accommodation. F2, who started her study in the UK with an English language course, stated the following:

*‘Before travelling to the UK, I was having some difficulties reaching people there, and this was due to my weak English language.’ (F2)*

The digital transition is also a type of transition which can start before the student’s departure to the host country. This can be attributed to the important role that social media play as a tool of preparation. The digital transition for engaging with a new online community on social media usually starts while they are in Saudi Arabia, as M4 stated:

*‘The first thing I did before travelling to the UK was that I made a contact with the Saudi society in my potential UK city, I followed their account on Twitter and joined their WhatsApp group.’ (M4)*

On the other hand, other types of transition, cultural and everyday life arrangements transitions were noticed to be starting when the students arrived in the host country. For the cultural transition, this can be attributed to the fact that students do not face the cultural challenges or culture shock while they are in their home country. Furthermore, students also do not do any preparation for their potential interaction with the new culture. This is also the same for the everyday life arrangements transition: students may hear about how the systems are different in Saudi Arabia and the UK; however, they usually only encounter these changes when they arrive to the host country and start to settle themselves in the new place.

#### *4.10.4.2 Length of transitions*

One of the most difficult questions to be answered from the findings of this study is when the transition ends or how long it lasts. This question is hard to answer because, as previously mentioned, the students' transition consists of multiple transitions and they have different ending points. Furthermore, it was observed from the findings of this study that some transition types are continuous transitions where their signs or marks keep appearing in the students' life in the UK. When the transition ends and whether it is a continuous transition or not is presented as follows:

First, there are some types of transitions, social, cultural and digital, where the transitions' ending points can be noticed when the students start to adjust or learn how to behave towards the new changes. This usually occurs for the students in their first year in the UK. For example, the end of social transition for M4 can be defined as being in the UK with his family and having a good co-national community:

*'Honestly, I was feeling strange until I met the Saudi society, [and then] I felt very comfortable [...]. I feel that I am happy and satisfied with my family [his wife and children] and the Saudi community in the UK. We are socially connected; we help and support each other.'* (M4)

For most students in this study, the cultural transition usually tends to end when they know how to behave towards the new culture but not how to adopt it. As previously mentioned in the cultural transition section, students usually do not adopt the new cultural changes, but they learn how to live with them. This is because (1) students hold their own set of values, which sometimes can contradict with the new culture, and (2) some of them look at their time in the UK as a temporary time that does not require them to integrate with the new culture.

Second, other types of transitions, academic, language and everyday life arrangements, can be categorized as continuous transitions. This means that changes and differences associated with these types of transitions may keep appearing in the student's life in the UK. M8 is a good example here, when he talked about the academic challenges and differences that he faced in the UK. First, his academic transition started with the challenges with the English language test and the academic writing:

*'When I arrived in the UK, I was having some issues with the IELTS exam and how to get the needed score to start the foundation year. I was having some difficulties with the academic writing in that phase.'* (M8)

Second, when he moved to the foundation year, he highlighted his unfamiliarity with some types of assessments such as lab experiments:

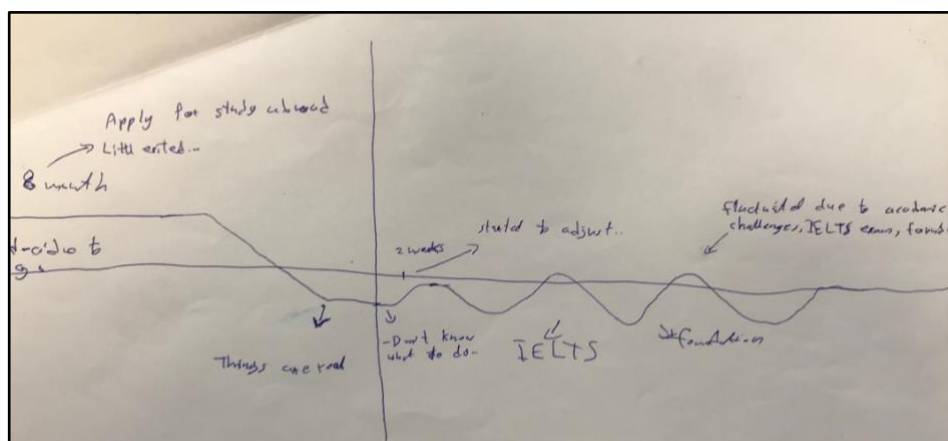
*'When I moved to the foundation year, I had some issues with exams there, especially with maths and physics exams. We also used to do some lab experiments, and this is something new for me.'* (M8)

Lastly, M3 is also expecting more differences when he starts university; he mentioned:

*'I also believe that when I start university, I will come across new challenges.'*  
(M8)

When M8 was asked to draw his model of transition, he also presented the continuous 'ups and downs' and the fluctuation in his mood, which is motivated by the academic differences, as presented in Figure 4.14.

Figure 4.14 M8 drawing



The everyday life arrangements transition can be also categorized as a continuous transition. During his interview, M4 reported several differences between the Saudi and the UK systems, such as differences in the accommodation systems and the health care systems. M4 started by describing the differences in the accommodation system, then he mentioned that he faced some differences related to the process of buying a car. Later on and when his family joined him in the UK, he reported his need to use the health care system for his children and he highlighted some challenges around this. Furthermore, M4 also added that he still needs to find out how the process of registering his child in the school works.

#### 4.10.5 Multi-emotional experience

The findings in the first method reveal that there is no definite answer on whether the student's experience is positive or negative. This means that different students can have different emotional experiences and the experience of an individual can fluctuate over the time. This can be attributed to different factors such as the student's push factors to study abroad, the daily challenges that they face and the role of significant others involved in the student's experience.

The factors pushing the student to study abroad were found to be a key motivator for the student's overall emotional experience. Students who are personally motivated to study abroad are usually found to be more enthusiastic towards their experience. On the other hand,

students who are forced to study abroad (e.g., pushed by their employer) are usually less ambitious and more likely to have a negative overall experience. In the previously presented model in Figure 4.12, F8 claimed that she was stressed and experiencing a negative mood because she was not personally motivated to this experience, but instead, she was pushed by her employer. F8 stated:

*'If I have the opportunity to choose between Saudi Arabia or the UK, I will definitely choose Saudi Arabia [...]. I recently got married and my husband cannot leave his work and join me [in the UK]. Therefore, I want to finish my PhD and return home as soon as possible' (F8)*

On the other hand, M6 had an opposite view, which was reflected on his presented model in Figure 4.11. M6 claimed that his choice to come and study in the UK was motivated by his academic development desires. This was a main trigger for his enthusiasm and positivity in his overall experience. M6 stated:

*'It was always my dream to study abroad [...], I was looking for a job in the university because I wanted to study abroad'. (M6)*

This was reflected in his model. Figure 4.11 shows that the student's mood was positive for most of his time in the UK.

The daily challenges that students face after they intend to travel is another factor that can play a role in their emotional experience abroad. These challenges can be varied and related to all types of transitions, such as challenges associated with transportation and accommodation systems, the social and cultural transitions, and being in a new academic environment. The last type was highly mentioned by students; this study found a strong connection between the students' academic transition and their mood in the host country. The stresses and negativity in the academic transition can bring negativity to other transitions and the overall experience of transition. These stresses vary between students and are usually determined by (1) the students' stage of study and (2) their previous experience of study abroad.

The significant others involved in the students' experience can also play a role in the main individual's emotions. As previously mentioned, the transition of international students is not an individual experience; instead, other actors are involved, such as the student's family and peers. These others can be in the UK, such as family members who travel with the student, or peers who study with the students, who can be either home or international students, and the host families and universities. Others can also be in the home country, such as the student's family and friends back home. Leaving the student's family at home was reported to be a stressful experience that could add negativity to some students. This was particularly noticed for students who were closer to their family at home and had no experience of leaving their family or study abroad. Other students may move to the host country with their family members, who can also participate in shaping the student's emotional experience. Students' opinions about the emotional impact of family members moving with them are varied. Some were looking to it as something adding challenge to their experience, where they found travelling with someone to be adding more commitments and stresses. Others were more positive about it, where they found that having a family member present could provide some social and emotional support. This is related to what has been presented in Section 2.3.3 about the differences in gender roles in the students' home country. In Saudi Arabia, it is usually the male's responsibility to take care of everyday life arrangements. The host family and university can also be other significant actors involved in the student's emotional experience. As presented in the social transition section, host families usually play a positive role in facilitating the student's social adjustment in the host country. It is also presented in the academic transition that host university and lecturers are also included in the students' emotional experience. This can be particularly noticed because, as previously mentioned, challenges associated with academic transition are key ones in the student experience.

The international students' emotions were also found to be dynamic, meaning that students' mood usually fluctuates during their time in the host country. This was clearly shown in the students' models that they were asked to draw. In most of the students' drawings, their presented mood fluctuated over their time of transition. This also implies that there is no standard pattern that all students can go through in regards of their emotional experience in the UK. More details about the students' sentiment during transition is presented in the next



chapter, where sentiment analysis is applied to investigate the students' emotions on Twitter during their transition time.

#### 4.10.6 Unequal experience

The findings of the first method revealed an interesting point about a conflict of inequality between participants in this study. Having unequal experience of international students' transition means that opportunities and advantages faced by the students are different based on other personal, social and cultural factors such as the student's gender, age, marital status and cultural background. It also means that a conflict may occur to the individual, caused by these factors. Some conflict in the process of transition was reported as result of being a female student, a younger student, a married student or being impacted by local culture or context, including religion.

The gender inequality noted in the differences between the male and female participants' experiences needs to be acknowledged. This kind of conflict was noticed more for female students in the study. For example, as previously presented in the cultural transition section, F9 highlighted how some of her cultural and religious beliefs may hinder her from engaging with the new society. She stated:

*'Sometimes they [her non-Saudi colleagues] go to pubs or bars but I don't want to go to these places, you know, it is very awkward for women wearing a hijab to be there.'* (F9)

Another example is reported by F4, who stated that her experience of searching for a host family was more complicated due to a cultural condition that she imposed. F4 reported:

*'Finding the host family was difficult for me; I was looking for a family where there are only females. You know, I cannot live in a house where there is a non-Mahram male [...]. For you [men] the process might be easier.'* (F4)

A third example demonstrating the conflict of gender inequality is related to the cultural assumption about traveling with Mahram, which some female participants reported. As previously stated in Section 4.3.2, for some families in Saudi Arabia, they can only travel with a male relative. This can affect the female experience in various ways. As reported in Section 4.3.2, a female participant claimed that a factor behind choosing the UK as her destination of study is its location, where her Mahram can make visits to her while she studies. The UK has a relatively short travel time compared to other potential countries, such as the US and Australia. F3 acknowledged the differences that females traveling with Mahram have; she stated the following when she was asked about her feelings about having the experience with a companion:

*'I am not bothered by him [her brother]; we always help and support each other, and he is now doing his master's in the UK. However, I think my experience would be different if I came here alone; maybe my experience would have more adventure.'* (F3)

However, it should be acknowledged that the Mahram condition was not applied by all families in Saudi Arabia. F5 stated:

*'My family don't mind me traveling alone. I came here to the UK by myself.'*  
(F5)

The conflict of inequality caused by the gender differences was also reported by male participants. Their conflict was always created by the cultural assumption in the Saudi society that men take more responsibilities in everyday arrangements and setting up things after arrival. In Section 4.4.5, M4 reported his experience of travelling before his family to the UK to sort out things before they arrived. This was encouraged by his sense of responsibility towards his family.

The cultural background of a student can also make another form of inequality in the experience. The transition experience for students in this study was noted to be affected by their Saudi cultural background. This can be noticed from Section 4.5.3 when the cultural contrast with home nationals was reported. Such differences can act as a barrier for the

students' engagement with the new culture and society. It can also impact on how the students behave towards the new cultural and social changes. The main point here is that other students, from different cultural backgrounds, may not report the same cultural issues and contrast in the host country. This can create a cultural background inequality where students vary in their experiences based on their culture. F9 stated:

*'Well, I find my European colleagues to be more engaged with the social life in the UK. Maybe this is because they look similar to other people in the street, you know, they are white, or maybe because their cultures are not very different than the UK.'* (F9)

#### 4.10.7 Non-linear experience

In light of what has been presented in this chapter, an interesting feature about the non-linearity of transition has emerged. This feature implies that there is no standard pathway that international students go through. This means that one linear story about the international students' transition cannot be told. In this research, various reasons can lead to the assumption that international students' transition is a non-linear experience.

First, the multiple and multidimensional nature of transition has shown that students vary, and which transition they go through, and the strength of each transition, is different from one student to another. This can highlight the non-linearity of transition, where different transitions with different strengths can make different experiences.

Second, findings of this method showed that transition is more than an individual experience; different actors, other than the student themselves, can be involved. Variety in which actors were involved in the students' experience was noticed. For some students, the main actors involved were their parents, while for others they were their spouses. The effects of involvement of these actors for the students were varied. All of this can lead to the finding that students have different experiences in this, and it can affect their overall experience.

Third, the non-linearity can also be noticed in the dynamic nature of transitions in this research. According to the findings in the first method, there is no fixed point of when transitions start and end. Having a dynamic nature for each transition type identified in this research implies having various experiences and timelines.

Fourth, the multi-emotional experience of transition is also another reason for the non-linearity of it. Students in this method varied in whether they saw their experience as a positive or negative and where on the timeline these emotions are located. This can show that transition is a multi-emotional experience and this highlights its non-linearity.

Fifth, the non-linearity in transition can also be motivated by the inequality of it. Individuals who go through a transition vary in their gender, age, and cultural background and this can impact on their experience. Different examples of how these factors can play a role in the transition experience were presented in the previous section. Therefore, the inequality of transition is another reason for the non-linearity of it.

In light of what has been presented above it can be seen that international students' transition is a non-linear experience. Different reasons supporting this argument were presented to show how there is no standard pathway that international students go through.

#### 4.10.8 Summary

The above discussion reveals that the transition of international students can be seen as a complicated experience. According to the results of the first method, the transition experience of international students have seven characteristics. They are: (1) there are multiple and multidimensional transitions; (2) it is an unpredictable experience; (3) it is more than an individual experience; (4) there are no fixed start and length of transition; (5) it is a multi-emotional experience; (6) inequality can occur in the process; and (7) it is a non-linear experience.

Figure 4.15 Characteristics of transitions

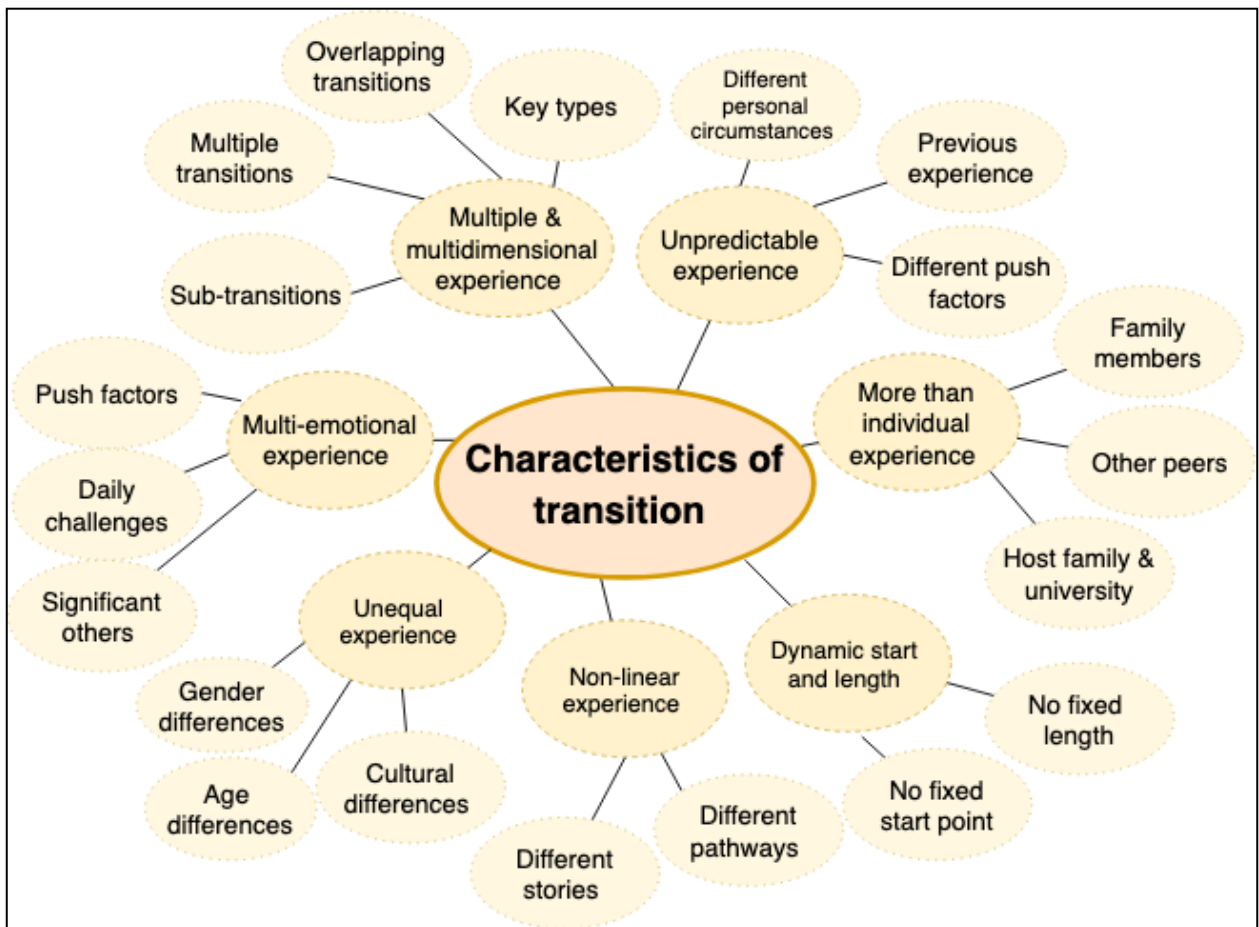


Figure 4.15 also shows that each of these characteristics are composed of sub-characteristics. Each of these characteristics is further summarised as follows:

First, this experience includes multiple types of transitions and these types can also involve sub-types. The identified types for international students in this study are the social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transitions. Students during their transition may go through some or all of these types and the strength of each type can vary from one student to another. Furthermore, these types may overlap or interact and some of them can trigger or impact on the others. The social and digital transitions seem to be the types where they make more interactions with other types. From the results of this study, each transition by itself, such as the academic and social transitions, can be split into sub-transitions.

Second, the transition can be seen as an unpredictable experience, meaning that there is no one standard journey or planned phases that students usually go through during their transition. This also means that there is a mismatch between the expectations and reality in the students' transition experience. Therefore, moving to the new country brings unexpected or unpredicted experiences to the students. This can be for the whole transition when students face different and unexpected transitions; or it can be within the transition types themselves, where students face different unpredicted experiences within each type. This is usually attributed to three reasons. First, students can have different personal circumstances, which can play a role in how they perceive their life in the host country. Second, students are different in regard to whether they have a previous experience with study or travel abroad. Third, students have different motivations to study abroad (push factors); therefore, they differ in how they perceive the challenges and changes, and their feelings towards them are different.

Third, findings of this study have also revealed that this is not an individual experience; other actors, in addition to the student themselves, can also be involved in crafting the students' transition experience. Those actors can affect or be affected by the student's transition experience. They can be the student's family members (e.g., partners, children or parents), other peers, the host families or the host universities. To what extent these actors can affect or be affected by the student's experience can vary from one student experience to another. According to this study, students' family members seem to be the most highly involved actors in this experience. Students who are transitioning with their family members to the UK can have their experience as a multidimensional experience: their transition to the UK and the transition of their companions. Different examples were presented regarding how the student's companions can face various types of transitions as a result of the student's transition. Opposite views were presented with regard to how the family members can affect the main actor in the transition (the student).

Fourth, findings of this study have also shown that there is no rule in when the transition starts and how long it lasts. This is usually based on the student experience and the type of

transition(s) that they go through. For some transition types, social, academic, language and digital transitions, students may start to encounter them before they leave for the host country. This can be up to one year before the students depart to the host country (see F5 and M3 experiences in Section 4.10.4.1). In contrast, other types of transitions (cultural and everyday life arrangements transitions) were noted to start when the student arrived in the host country. Regarding the ending point for the transitions, it is also the case that there is no standard rule to be applied. There are some types of transitions, social, cultural and digital, where the transitions' ending points can be noticed when the students start to adjust or learn how to behave towards the new changes. On the other hand, other types of transitions, academic, language and everyday life arrangements, can be categorized as continuous transitions, where changes and differences associated with these types may keep appearing in the student's life in the UK. This was one of the most striking results in this study, which assumes that some transition types may have continuous changes; some examples of this have been provided in Section 4.10.4.2.

Fifth, students vary in their emotions towards their transition. There is no one answer that can be given to whether the students see the overall transition as a troublesome negative or optimistic positive experience. Therefore, this study suggests that the transition is a multi-emotional experience where it could be a positive, negative or mixed feelings experience. As shown in the students' models in Section 4.10.5, different emotions at different time points were presented by students in their models. This is usually affected by the motives behind the student's decision to study abroad, the significant others involved in the experience and the daily challenges that students face. The motivations to study abroad, push factors, were found to play a crucial role here and affect the students' emotions towards the new changes. For example, students who have strong personal motivations to study abroad usually face smoother cultural and social transitions. On the other hand, students who are mainly motivated to study abroad because of their job may become more negative towards the new changes and see them as challenges.

Sixth, a conflict of inequality in the transition concept has been reported by participants in this study. Students can have unequal experience of their transition, which means that opportunities and advantages faced by the students are different based on other personal, social and cultural factors. Those factors can be the student's gender, age, marital status and cultural background.

Seventh, according to the findings presented in this method, it has been illustrated that there is no standard pathway that international students go through. This means that one linear story about the international student's transition cannot be told. Various reasons leading to the assumption that international students' transition is a non-linear experience were provided. These reasons are the multiple and multidimensional nature of transition, being more than an individual experience where different actors can be involved, the dynamic nature of transition, being a multiple emotional experience and the inequality that can occur in the process. All of these reasons can build up the concept of non-linearity in transition.



## Chapter 5 Twitter Findings

### 5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the findings that emerged from the analysis of the participants' timelines on Twitter. For each student, a sample of their tweets was analysed which resulted in 3,450 tweets distributed in the time period both before and after the students' arrival to the UK. This analysis aims to determine whether there is a digital transition reflected in the students' use of Twitter during their transition and to observe some practical examples of what the students reported in the first method. This method does not aim to generalize the findings from the first method on a larger sample. This is why the second method was restricted to the participants from the first method. This aim will be achieved by answering the following questions:

- How, if at all, does the type of content shift?
- How, if at all, does the frequency of tweeting shift?
- How, if at all, does the language used shift?
- How, if at all, does the sentiment in the tweets shift?

This chapter is divided according to these pre-defined questions. Section 5.2 will answer the first question and provide a discussion of whether there was a shift reflected in students' twitter content and on which topics. Section 5.3 will shed light on the change in the frequency of tweeting. Section 5.4 will provide additional focus on the shift in language on Twitter. Section 5.5 will focus on the sentiment on Twitter in-order to ascertain whether there is a sentiment shift reflected on Twitter and how the students' previous models are linked to it. At the end of this chapter, Section 5.6 will synthesis ideas from the two methods: interviews; and Twitter data.

### 5.2 Shift in content

The findings show that most participants appeared to have a shift in their twitter content as a result of their transition to the UK. Three general patterns were observed during the analysis: (1) shifting to the UK and international context; (2) shifting to the academic and language

topics; and (3) having unnoticeable shift on the posted content. The following sections will provide more detail concerning each of these patterns.

### 5.2.1 Shifting to the UK and international context

One of the most common patterns emerging from the analysis was the shift towards sharing news and trends of the host country. The analysis shows that there was an increase in the frequency of the 'UK news and trends' and 'international news and trends' codes, while there was a concomitant decrease in the 'Saudi news and trends' code following the students' relocation to the UK. Further, the analysis reveals that there was a shift to the UK everyday life arrangements and to the UK academics topics. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide selected examples of students who evidenced an increase in the 'UK news and trends' and 'international news and trends' on Twitter. For these tables and the next ones in this chapter, the presented percentages relate to a specific code in the overall tweets for a specific student. Furthermore, for this trend and the next trends, only selected examples are provided to support each pattern. This is because the aim of showing these tables are to confirm the digital transition in social media, and there are four main patterns of transition (content, frequency, language and sentiment). In each of these patterns, there are different sub-patterns (e.g. increase in UK news and trends, increase in international news and trends). Therefore, each of these tables represents a sub-pattern and shows students who had this pattern. However, every student in this study had a digital transition in their social media use but they may not transition in all patterns. This is why not all students are reported in all tables.

*Table 5.1 Increase of UK news and trends code*

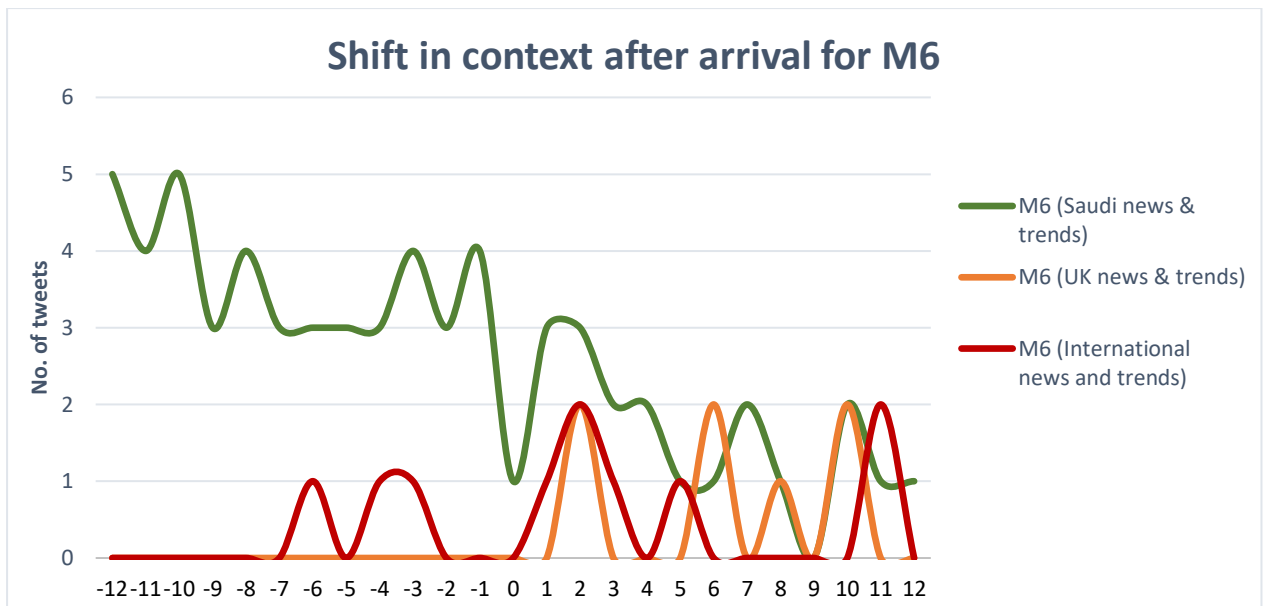
		Student						
Code	Period	M1	F3	F4	F5	M4	M5	M6
UK news and trends	Before	2.4%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	After	4.0%	3.0%	4.2%	1.0%	3.8%	7.5%	8.0%

Table 5.2 Increase of international news and trends code

Code	Period	Student						
		M1	F2	F5	F6	F8	M6	M8
International news and trends	Before	7.1%	1.7%	17.9%	1.4%	1.3%	2.2%	0.0%
	After	12.0%	3.3%	24.5%	3.0%	6.7%	6.9%	8.0%

As can be seen from the above tables, there was low coded tweets, if at all, under the UK and international codes before many of the participating students arrived at the UK. However, this changed after their arrival: many of them evidenced an increase in these two codes. Figure 5.1<sup>13</sup> presents M6 as an example of a student who had a shift in these two codes. The figure shows how the UK and international context codes started to increase after the student arrived at the UK. It also shows how this shift can be considered as a continued shift where tweets in these two codes continue to appear during the student’s time in the UK.

Figure 5.1 M6 shift to ‘UK news and trends’ and ‘International news and trends’ codes



An interesting result shown by Figure 5.1 is the decrease in the ‘Saudi news and trends’ code post-arrival. Although this code was the dominant code for most of students in this study, this usually changed after their arrival to the UK, when other codes started to increase and take

<sup>13</sup> Negative numbers in the horizontal axis represent months before arrival, zero represents the arrival date and positive numbers represent months after arrival.

the place of the ‘Saudi news and trends’ code. Table 5.3 shows the drop in percentage of tweets tagged with this code for some students.

Table 5.3 ‘Saudi news and trends’ code examples

		Student						
		F1	F2	F4	F6	F7	M6	M8
Saudi news and trends	Before	41.9%	48.3%	34.0%	28.4%	50.5%	33.6%	73.5%
	After	5.3%	3.3%	18.3%	16.0%	39.3%	26.4%	62.7%

However, although students’ twitter activities indicated a high uptake of UK and International news and trends, a few students were found to be still tweeting about the latest news and trends of Saudi Arabia following their arrival (e.g., F7 =39.3%, M6 = 26.4% and M8 = 62.7%). An in-depth exploration of M6’s tweets shows that a great deal of them were to share historical information about Saudi Arabia, showing popular places and presenting Saudis’ achievements. For example:

*‘Saudi Arabia’s ranking among the world’s most competitive economies has climbed 13 places from 39 in 2018 to 26 in 2019 #KSA #SaudiArabia’ (M6)*

Another interesting result in M6’s tweets is that a considerable amount of them are in English and one of the reasons behind this can be the change of audience after arrival, more details about the shift in language will be given later in Section 5.4.

The shift in context can be also noticed in other codes including ‘everyday life arrangements matters’ and ‘academic related’. Tweets in ‘everyday life arrangements matters’ were mostly noticed after the students’ arrival and they are always linked to the UK context. This is because this code is associated with queries and information related to students’ adjustment to the new everyday life arrangements in the UK. An example of this is a tweet posted by M3 who asked for advice regarding some UK rules:

*‘My friends in the UK!! any advices on how to sort out the accommodation and how to apply for a driving licences...’ (M3)*

A shift in context also occurred in the ‘academic related’ code. Most of the academic tweets post-arrival were associated with UK academic topics (e.g., discussing issues related to the transition to the UK academic system or posting in UK academic conferences). The next section will provide more detail about shifting to the academic code.

### 5.2.2 Shifting to the academic and language topics

Another shift in context within this study was that of a change towards academic or language topics. Many students were found to have an increase in either their ‘academic related’ or their ‘language related’ tweets. Tables 5.4 and 5.5 below show the frequency of this pattern and highlight how its related codes, ‘academic related’ and ‘language related’, increased for many study participants following their arrival in the UK.

Table 5.4 Increase of academic related code

Code	Period	Student										
		F1	M2	F2	F3	F4	F6	M5	F7	F8	M6	M8
Academic related	Before	19.4%	17.6%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.4%	2.8%	1.1%	9.2%	20.1%	0.0%
	After	31.6%	53.0%	13.3%	14.5%	59.2%	7.0%	11.8%	16.9%	9.6%	29.9%	8.0%

Table 5.5 Increase of language related code

Code	Period	Student					
		M1	F1	M2	F4	M4	M6
Language related	Before	0.0%	3.2%	11.1%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	After	4.0%	10.5%	25.9%	8.5%	9.6%	13.8%

The following sections will provide a detailed discussion of how these shifts occurred.

**Shifting to academic topics.** The analysis shows that during the time of and after students’ arrival, there was an increase in: (1) academic queries and question related to students’ academic transition; (2) sharing of academic information about their subjects of study; and

(3) discussions about academic events in the UK (e.g. academic conferences and scientific meetings). Illustrative examples of these tweets are provided below:

*‘For cyber security students, I would strongly recommend you to have a look to these articles [...]’ (M5)*

*‘This website [...] is created by #Nottingham university and contains a lot of #podcasts to help early carer researchers in their work’ (M6)*

The change to academic topics is visually highlighted in Figure 5.2, which presents an example of the shifts for M2 and F4 for the ‘academic related’ and ‘Saudi news and trends’ codes. This figure illustrates that after their arrival, academic tweets increased for these students whilst tweets regarding Saudi related topics decreased for both students.

Figure 5.2 Academic shift on Twitter for M2 and F4

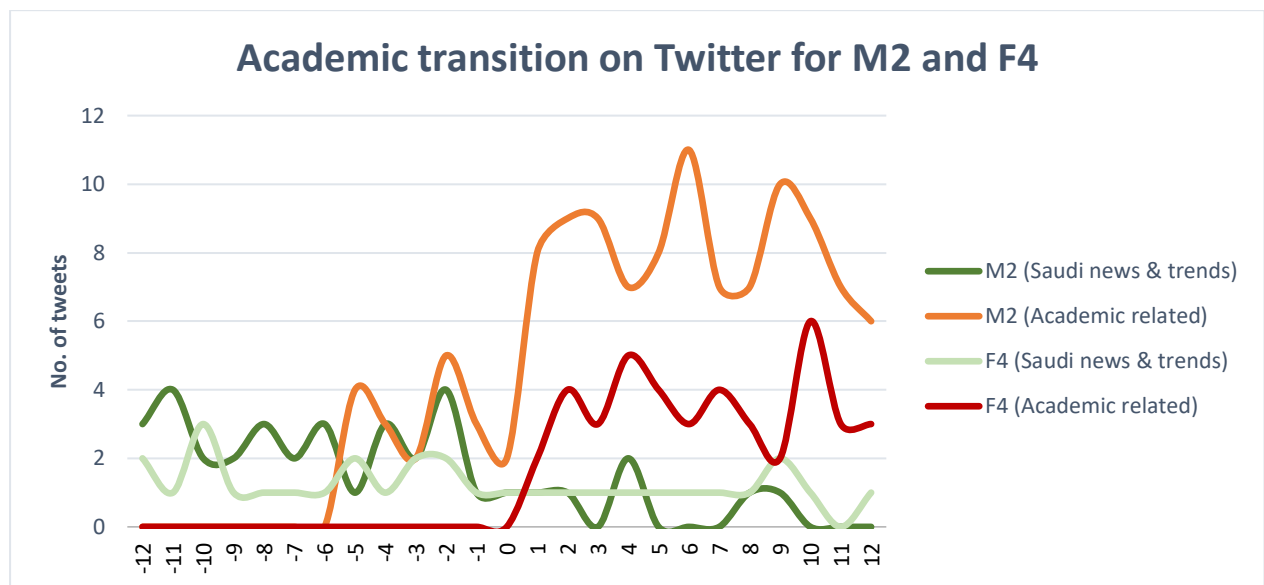
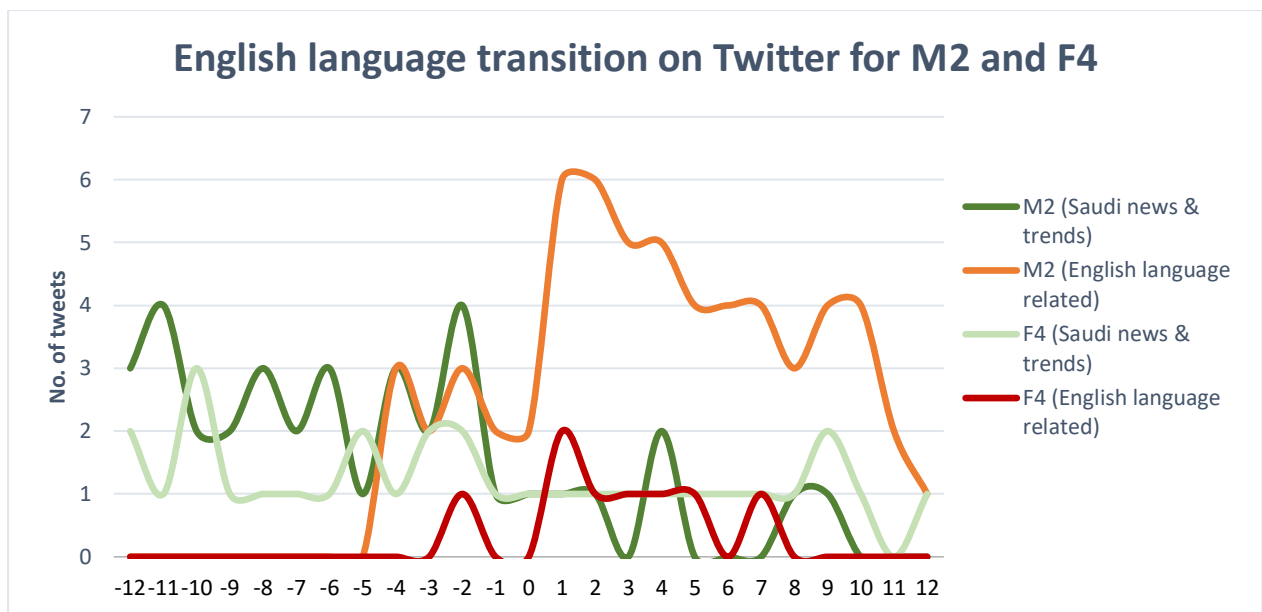


Figure 5.2 further highlights that the M2 academic code started to increase around six months prior to his arrival. This type of pre-arrival academic transition on Twitter has been noticed for many students in this study, with the content of the tweets in this code being largely related to academic issues. Figure 5.2 also shows that the academic code for both students continued at an increased level during the whole post-arrival investigation period.

**Shifting to language topics.** This study also found that some students increasingly tweeted about English as a second language. This was seen to occur around and shortly after their

arrival to the UK. Since all of the students in this study are native Arabic speakers, issues with learning English was reflected on their Twitter timeline. According to the data, tweets were usually related to: (1) the best English language centres; (2) accent difficulties and challenges; and (3) the process to speed up language acquisition. Figure 5.3 presents an example of this shift for M2 and F4, showing the increase in the ‘English language related’ code prior to and after the students’ arrival.

Figure 5.3 English language shift on Twitter for M2 and F4



Similar to the shift seen in the academic code, it was noticed that the ‘English language related’ code started to increase before the students arrived in the UK. This code usually peaks at an early stage in the students’ time in the UK. Tweets at the pre-arrival phase usually contained questions concerning English language requirements or English standard tests (e.g., IELTS). For example, M2 posted the following:

*‘For those who did the IELTS exam, any advice for someone who’s preparing to do it’ (M2)*

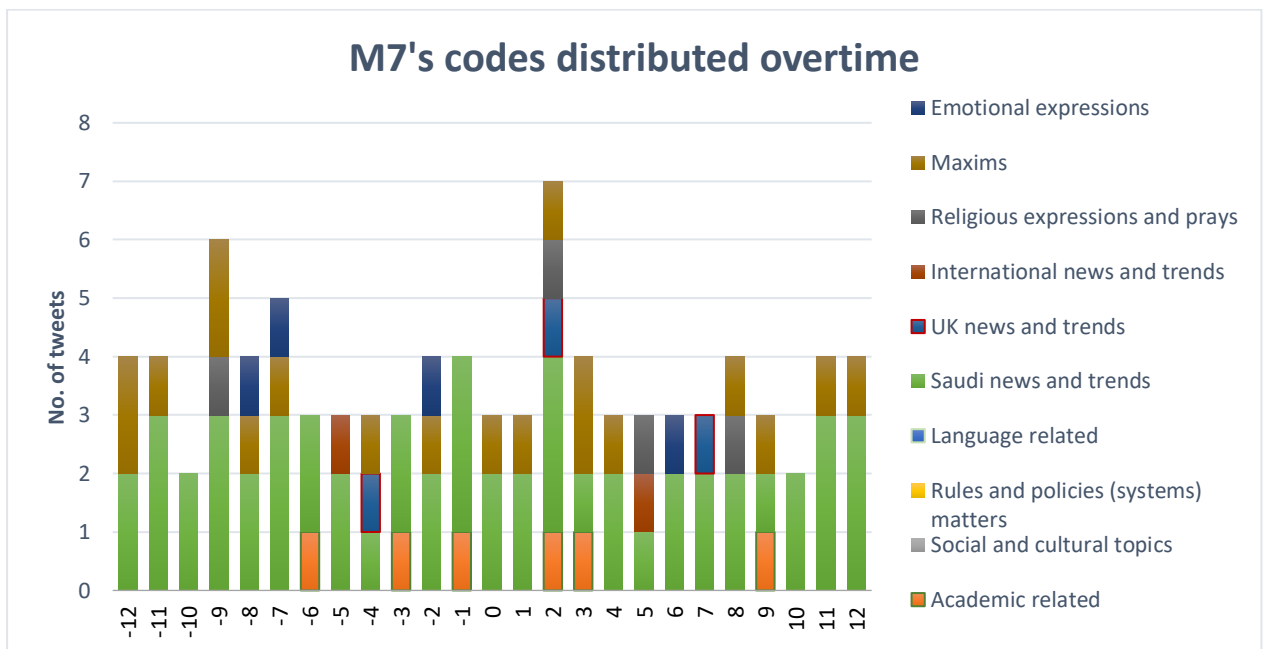
### 5.2.3 No or unnoticeable shift in content

Only one student was found to have no or an unnoticeable content shift in this study (M7). In other words, his Twitter content does not seem to be affected by his physical transition to

the UK. Although this pattern was rarely observed in this study, no shift in content like this presents an interesting point for further investigation. From a qualitative point of view, this pattern may have been seen to occur more frequently if the study had targeted different participating groups. Therefore, this pattern was included in the discussion as part of this section.

Figure 5.4 presents the frequency of M7's tweets in each code per month. As can be seen from this figure, there does not seem to be a shift between codes, with the 'Saudi news and trends' code (green bar) being the dominant one. This was consistent for both periods (before and after arrival). This finding supports the previously mentioned argument in Section 5.2.1, stating that this code may stay dominant for both periods. Figure 5.4 also shows that there is consistency pre and post-arrival in other codes such as 'academic related', 'maxims' and 'emotional expressions', where they appear equally throughout the whole investigatory period.

Figure 5.4 M7's codes overtime



In this regard, it can be argued that two points should be acknowledged. First, students who do not show shifts in content may still be experiencing other types of shifts on Twitter such as in the frequency of tweeting, and the language and sentiment used. These types of shifts will be discussed later in Sections 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5. Second, it is also important to acknowledge



that students, despite not experiencing a digital transition in Twitter practice, may still be undergoing transitions on other social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook).

#### 5.2.4 Summary

The results presented in this section suggest that the move to the host country affected the twitter content of most students participating in this study. Their online activities indicated a high uptake of UK and international context, and academic and language topics. This high uptake is noticeable from the decrease in the 'Saudi news and trends' code and the increase in the 'UK news and trends' and 'international news and trends' codes, and other codes where it was found that many tweets started to become more linked to the UK context such as the 'everyday life arrangements matters' and 'academic related' codes. This shift can be considered to persist in these two codes with tweets continuing to appear throughout the student's time in the UK. Furthermore, it was observed here that some shifts commenced on the Twitter timelines before the students arrived in the host country. The move to the host country also affected students' activities on twitter in terms of tweeting about academic and language issues. Many students were found to have an increase either in their 'academic related' or 'language related' codes following their arrival. Again, both of these codes were noticed to have started before the students arrived in the UK.

### 5.3 Change in frequency

#### 5.3.1 Overview

The results of this study showed that student engagement on twitter varied during their transition. According to this variability, students were divided into three types: (1) those who have an increase in tweets; (2) those who have a decrease; and (3) those who have no significant change in their frequency of tweeting. Table 5.6 shows the percentage of tweets for individuals before and after their arrival. It shows that some students tweeted less before their arrival while others were more active on Twitter before arrival. The table also shows that some students did not experience a significant change in their twitter activities after arrival.

Table 5.6 Frequency of tweeting before and after arrival<sup>14</sup>

	Participant	Before arrival	After arrival
<b>Decrease</b>	M1	72%	28%
	F2	67%	33%
	F5	57%	43%
	F6	74%	26%
	F8	70%	30%
	M6	61%	39%
<b>Increase</b>	F9	79%	21%
	F1	38%	62%
	M2	37%	63%
	M3	39%	61%
	M8	31%	69%
<b>No change</b>	F3	32%	68%
	M4	54%	46%
	F7	51%	49%
	M7	53%	47%
	M5	60%	40%
	F4	41%	59%

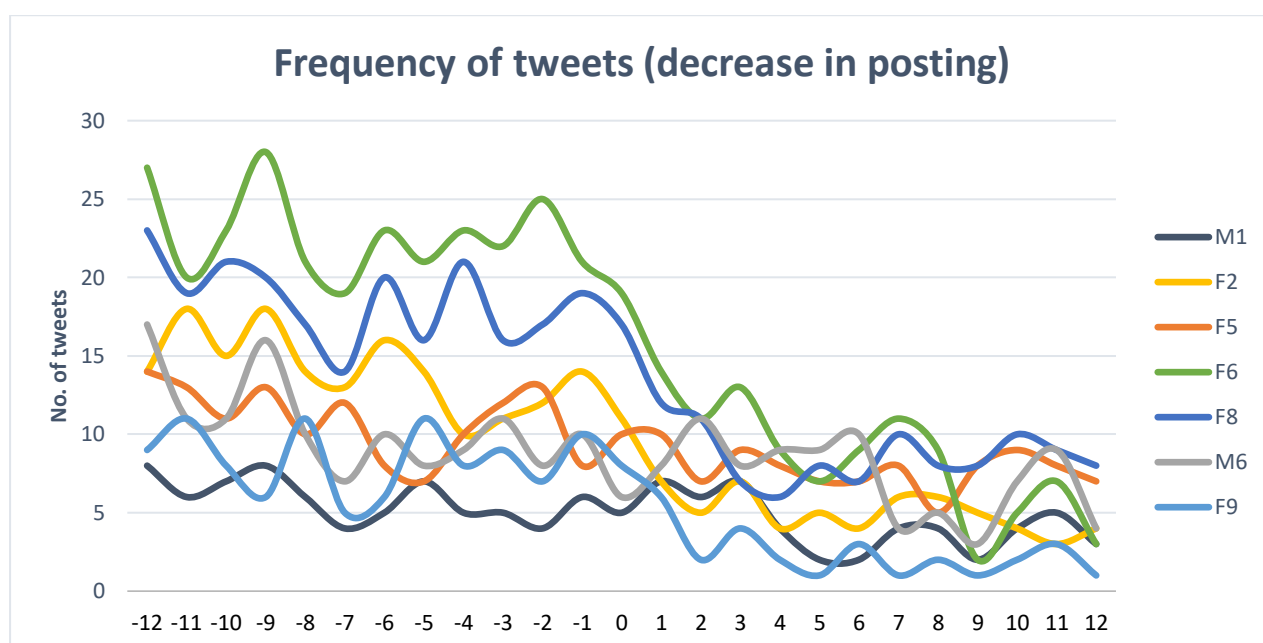
The following sections presents the three types in detail, along with the decrease, increase or having no significant change in frequency.

<sup>14</sup> Students with less than 10% difference in the after arrival phase (either more or less) are considered as having unnoticeable or no big change in frequency.

### 5.3.2 Becoming less active in posting

For many students in this study, the number of tweets that they posted on Twitter after their physical arrival in the host country saw a decrease (see Figure 5.5). This was in comparison to the pre-arrival period, where the average number of tweets was 174 per individual, dropping to 75 tweets after their arrival. Specifically, Figure 5.5 shows that there was a dramatic decrease after the arrival time for (F6, F8, F2, F9). Other students (M1, M6 and F5) were found to have a steadier decrease over time following their arrival. Notably, these students evidenced an overall lower number of tweets compared with others.

Figure 5.5 Students with a decrease in frequency

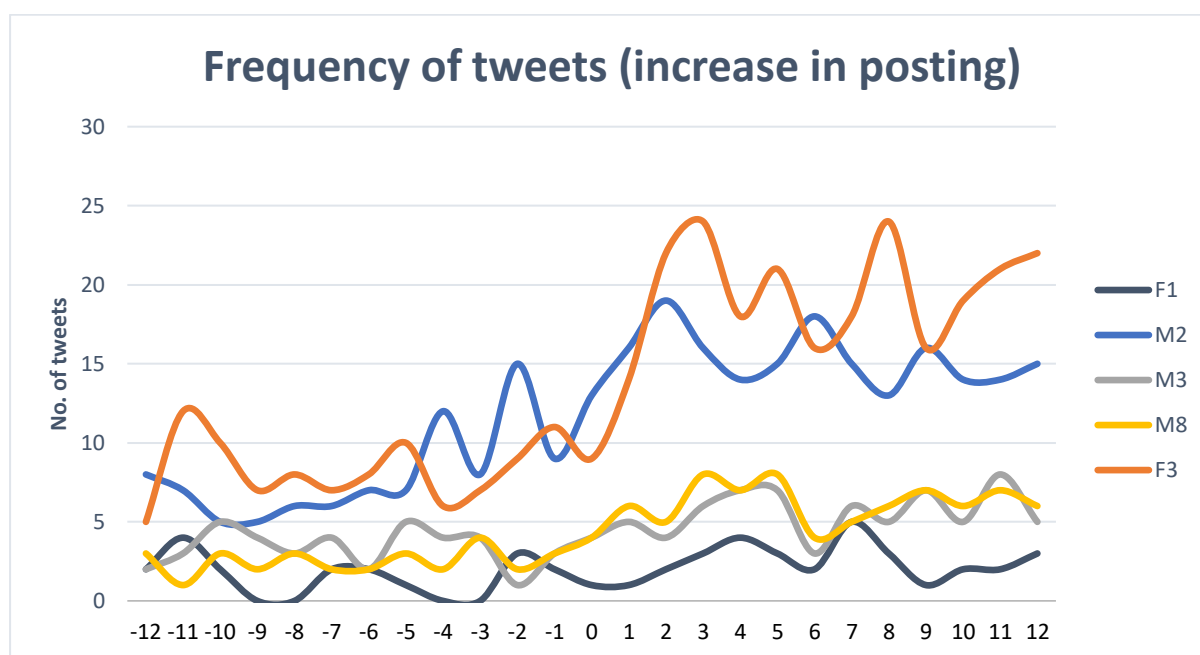


An interesting result from this was that there appears to be no relation between the most frequent code for the majority of students in this study, Saudi news and trends, and the overall frequency of students' tweets. Some students were found to have a decrease in this code after arrival, but an increase in the overall number of tweets. This supports the previously mentioned arguments in Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2, namely that the decrease in this code is always associated with an increase in other codes. Another interesting result regards the level of education that these students were attending. This study found that most students whose tweets decreased after their arrival were usually studying English language courses that lead towards their academic course or they were doing their masters in the UK.

### 5.3.3 Becoming more active in posting

Some students in this study were found to have an increase in the number of tweets they posted after their arrival. Figure 5.6 displays the number of tweets per month for those students according to their Twitter timelines. This figure shows a dramatic increase in tweeting for F3 and M2 around their arrival time, while M3 and M8 maintained a steady online activity. Similar to those who had a decrease in tweets, it was noticed that students who experienced a substantial change in tweets around their arrival tweeted more frequently.

Figure 5.6 Students with an increase in frequency

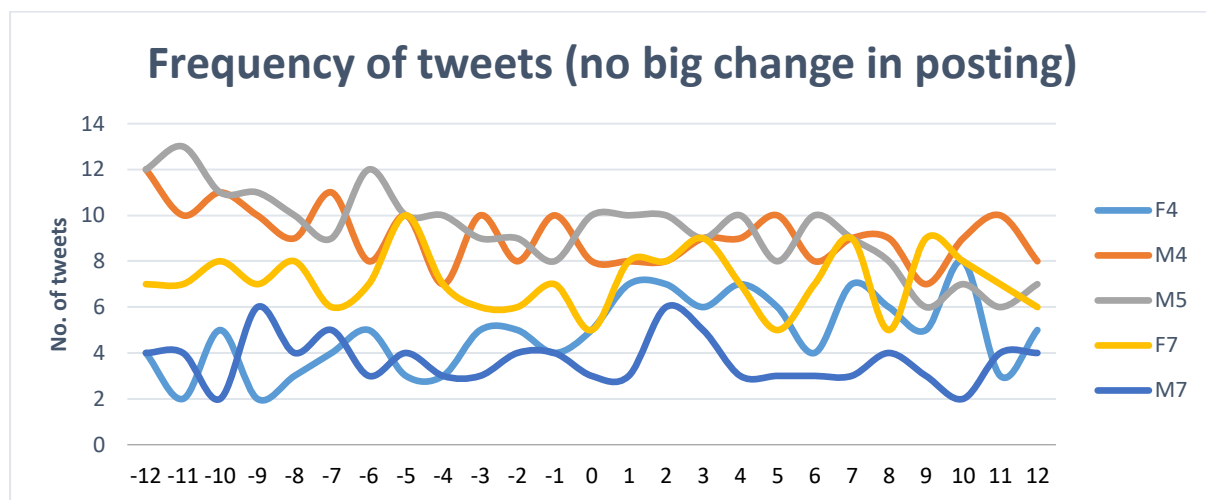


Exploring the content of tweets for students in this group can provide some justification for their increase. It was found that the increase in tweets is always associated with the shift in content that some students make when they move to the host country. For example, the shift to the academic and language topics by M2 could have played a key role in increasing his overall volume of tweets after arrival. M2's academic and language tweets increased from around 17% to 53% and from 11% to 25%, respectively.

### 5.3.4 No change in frequency

In addition to the students who registered either increases or decreases in tweets after arrival, some students were also found to have no significant change in their frequency of tweeting (See Figure 5.7). This figure shows that the number of tweets for each student fluctuated within the same range for both periods (before and after arrival). This study found that there was no significant difference in the average number of tweets for these students before and after their arrival, at approximately 89 and 82 tweets, respectively.

Figure 5.7 Students with no change in frequency



Students who had unnoticed shifts in frequency were also found to have an overall lower number of posts. The average number of tweets over the whole period under investigation for all students in this type was 126 tweets. This can be considered as a low number compared with those who increased their posting, with an average of 242 tweets. A relationship was found between having no change in content and frequency. M7 who was reported in section 5.2.3 as a student whose codes did not shift, is also presented in Figure 5.7. The time-series of M7 shows that he had an almost consistent number of tweets during the investigatory period.

### 5.3.5 Summary

The above analysis shows that students were classified into three types in relation to the frequency of tweeting during their transition to the UK. First, most of the students decreased the number of tweets after arrival. This decrease was dramatic around the day of arrival,

showing the association between the physical movement and the digital transition. Second, some students were found to have an increase in the number of tweets after arrival. This increase in activity seems to be associated with shifts in content, where shifting to other codes can motivate an overall increase of tweets. Third, other students were found to have an unnoticed change in the frequency of tweets. Those were usually the students who did not shift in their content.

## 5.4 Shift in language

### 5.4.1 Overview

This study found that the shift in the language of tweeting is another component of the digital transition that students usually have with their physical movement to the host country. This section will provide more detail about this and presents other factors which might account for this shift.

### 5.4.2 Shift to the English language

This shift was noticed in all the students' twitter activities. As shown in Table 5.7, the percentage of English tweets increased after students' arrival to the UK. Even though there was an increase in tweeting in English after arrival, Arabic was still the dominant language for both periods.

*Table 5.7 Percentage of English tweets, before and after arrival*

Participant	English tweets	
	Before	After
M1	17.5%	22.0%
F1	41.9%	57.9%
M2	0.9%	2.2%
F2	0.0%	3.3%
F3	0.0%	5.1%
F4	0.0%	2.8%

F5	18.7%	19.6%
M3	0.0%	26.5%
M4	21.0%	26.0%
F6	2.7%	4.0%
M5	0.0%	2.2%
F7	30.8%	32.6%
F8	11.7%	25.0%
M6	0.0%	25.9%
M7	12.2%	18.6%
F9	0.9%	3.6%
M8	0.0%	2.7%

The most common topics students discussed in English are presented below.

#### 5.4.3 Discussing UK or global topics

As previously mentioned in Section 5.2.1, some students in this study experienced a shift to a UK and international context after their arrival to the UK. Most tweets in the ‘UK news and trends’ and ‘International news and trends’ codes were typed and posted in English after arrival. This played a key role in increasing English language tweets after arrival. The following is an example of tweets discussing a UK context in English:

*‘These are the effects of #Brexit on the #UK economy [...]’ (M5)*

#### 5.4.4 Academic tweets in English

Posting academic tweets in English was another motivating factor behind the increase of English tweets after arrival. Academic tweets were posted before and after the students’ arrival (as mentioned in section 5.2.2); however, their frequency increased after arrival with some of them being in English. A reason that could justify this shift to tweeting in English is

the change of academic environment. This can be noticed from the content of the academic code after arrival. For instance, some students began academic discussions about courses and modules with their peers in the UK:

*'This is very helpful video for the next assignment [...] #COM106' (M3)*

Others posted tweets related to academic events (e.g. conferences), dominated by use of the English language:

*'I was very happy to participate at the [...] conference, many thanks for those who organised it' (M5)*

#### 5.4.5 About Saudi Arabia

It was interesting to notice that some students started to tweet in English about their home country after their arrival in the UK. These tweets were coded in the 'Saudi news and trends' code. Some of these tweets conveyed information about places in Saudi Arabia:

*'Madin Saleh & Edge of the World are two of the most beautiful places in Saudi Arabia. Places you should visit when you go there!! #SaudisInTheUK #KSA' (M4)*

They also mentioned the Saudi national day:

*'89 years of prosperity and glory!! Happy Saudi National Day of #SaudiArabia #KSA' (F3)*

Tweeting about the home country was noticed before and after arrival. However, writing these tweets in English was more noticeable after arrival.

#### 5.4.6 Emotional tweets

An increase in English language posts in the 'emotional expressions' and 'maxims' codes was noticed amongst a small number of students in this study. The following are some examples from these two codes:



*'I'll give you the world even if mine is falling apart' (F8)*

*'Let's cross that bridge when we come to it' (F7)*

Although the tweets in the maxim code might not necessarily be in the students own words as shown in the second example, students however tended to pick English maxims to post.

#### 5.4.7 Summary

The findings in this section highlight that all students in this study usually increase their English language tweets as part of their digital transition. This increase can be attributed to different factors. First, the increase in discussions about UK and international topics that some students have when they arrive in the UK. These tweets are always typed in English because of the UK and international context. Second, due to the change of academic environment, some students were found to change the language of academic tweets. Third, posting tweets about Saudi Arabia was also another factor that increased English tweets. Tweets about Saudi Arabia after the students' arrival to the UK were usually posted in English. Fourth, few students were noticed to increase their use of English language when tweeting in the 'emotional expressions' or 'maxims' codes after arrival.

### 5.5 Shift in sentiment

#### 5.5.1 Overview

This section aims to present the findings that emerged from the sentiment analysis of students' tweets. It will start by giving an overview of the shift in sentiment findings. It will then show how the content and sentiment codes are related. Finally, it will show whether there is a correlation between the students' models that they draw in the first method and the sentiment of their timeline on Twitter.

### 5.5.2 Shift in sentiment

Before talking about whether the students experienced a shift in sentiment on Twitter during their transition, it is important to present an interesting result in respect to the dominance of the neutral code over the whole study period. Interestingly, this study found that the neutral mood was the dominant for both periods, before and after arrival. Table 5.8 illustrates this and shows the percentage of the three sentiment codes over the two-year period.

*Table 5.8 Sentiment results*

Participant	Positive	Negative	Neutral
M1	40.9%	11.4%	47.7%
F1	42.0%	14.0%	44.0%
M2	30.4%	2.4%	67.2%
F2	26.7%	20.0%	53.3%
F3	37.5%	20.6%	41.9%
F4	24.8%	13.2%	62.0%
F5	39.0%	17.8%	43.2%
M3	7.1%	8.9%	83.9%
M4	32.5%	13.6%	53.9%
F6	35.5%	21.2%	43.4%
M5	34.2%	18.8%	47.0%
F7	36.1%	30.6%	33.3%
F8	21.5%	38.1%	40.4%
M6	42.5%	11.8%	45.7%
M7	27.2%	13.6%	59.2%
F9	30.9%	37.5%	31.6%
M8	38.5%	9.2%	52.3%

This table clearly shows that for most students the neutral code had a consistently higher percentage compared with other codes. This can be explained by the nature of Twitter use by the students. The findings of this study suggest that the participating students did not usually use Twitter for emotional posts. This justified the low percentages of some of the more emotional codes, such as ‘religious expressions’, ‘maxims’ and ‘emotional expressions’. Overall, few tweets were noticed to be placed in these codes.

Regarding the shift in sentiment, the results of this study suggest that the students’ sentiment shift on Twitter is strongly associated with their content shift. According to Table 5.9, no general patterns were identified in regard to the students’ sentiment shift. However, this transition was more related to individuals’ experiences in their content transition. This means that the increase or decrease in sentiment codes is highly associated with the shift in content codes.

Table 5.9 Sentient results (before and after arrival phases)<sup>15</sup>

Participant	Positive		Negative		Neutral		The dominant	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
M1	33.3%	[ 60.0%]	[14.3%]	4.0%	52.4%	36.0%	Neutral	Positive
F1	[48.4%]	31.6%	9.7%	[ 21.1%]	41.9%	[47.4%]	Positive	Neutral
M2	[32.4%]	29.2%	[5.6%]	0.5%	62.0%	[70.3%]	Neutral	Neutral
F2	21.7%	[36.7%]	[23.3%]	13.3%	[55.0%]	50.0%	Neutral	Neutral
F3	27.5%	[42.1%]	20.2%	[20.9%]	[52.3%]	37.0%	Neutral	Positive
F4	[30.0%]	21.1%	[26.0%]	4.2%	44.0%	[74.6%]	Neutral	Neutral
F5	[39.6%]	38.2%	[19.4%]	15.7%	41.0%	[46.1%]	Neutral	Neutral
M3	4.5%	[8.8%]	[9.1%]	8.8%	[86.4%]	82.4%	Neutral	Neutral
M4	31.5%	[33.7%]	[13.7%]	13.5%	[54.8%]	52.9%	Neutral	Neutral

<sup>15</sup> The square brackets ([ ]) in Table 5.9 highlight the period that had the top percentage for each code.

F6	33.2%	[42.0%]	[22.9%]	16.0%	[43.8%]	42.0%	Neutral	Positive
M5	34.0%	[34.4%]	[19.1%]	18.3%	46.8%	[47.3%]	Neutral	Neutral
F7	[44.0%]	28.1%	25.3%	[36.0%]	30.8%	[35.9%]	Positive	Negative
F8	[21.5%]	21.4%	37.9%	[42.9%]	[40.6%]	35.7%	Neutral	Negative
M6	40.3%	[46.0%]	[11.9%]	11.5%	[47.8%]	42.5%	Neutral	Positive
M7	[28.3%]	25.6%	[15.0%]	11.6%	56.7%	[62.8%]	Neutral	Neutral
F9	[32.4%]	25.0%	[38.9%]	32.1%	28.7%	[42.9%]	Negative	Neutral
M8	23.5%	[45.3%]	[17.6%]	5.3%	[58.8%]	49.3%	Neutral	Neutral

The next section will provide more detail in how the content codes are associated with sentiment codes.

### 5.5.3 Content and sentiment relationship

A strong relationship was found between the students' content and sentiment codes. This means that the way students use Twitter, the content analysis findings, is strongly correlating with their sentiment on Twitter, the sentiment analysis findings. The following are different examples showing how the relationship between content and sentiment codes can occur:

Example 1: F1 was seen to make a high number of academic tweets during the whole investigation period (24%), and this was reflected in her neutral code. This was also noticed with other participants in this study where an increased percentage in the academic code can be linked to an increase in the neutral code.

Example 2: M3 evidenced a high number of tweets located in the 'academic related topics' and 'everyday life arrangements matters' codes: 39% and 48% of his overall tweets, respectively. Concomitantly, he also evidenced a very high percentage of tweets in the neutral code (around 84%). Similar to the academic code, the 'everyday life arrangements matters' code was also noticed to have a high number of neutral tweets and this could explain the increased number in neutral code for this student.

Example 3: F7 was the only student in this study who had a higher percentages of sentiment codes than neutral, as previously shown in Table 5.9. Reviewing the content analysis findings of this student showed that she was making a high number of tweets in the 'religious expressions', 'maxims' and 'emotional expressions' codes. This can be seen as more evidence of the relationship between the content and sentiment codes. This could also support the previously mentioned argument that these three codes are always contained within sentiment tweets.

#### 5.5.4 Correlation with students' models

In the first method and during the interviews, participants were asked to draw diagrams representing how their mood fluctuated over their transition time. In this method, a sentiment analysis was applied to the students' Twitter timelines. One of the aims of applying this kind of analysis is to find if there is a correlation between what students have drawn and their sentiment on Twitter. Interestingly, this study found that students mood during their time of transition did not seem to be reflected on their Twitter activities. This means that there was no correlation between the students' diagrams and the sentiment of their timelines on Twitter. Therefore, Twitter did not seem to act as a mean of emotional expression during students' transition to the UK.

The following are some comparisons between the students' diagrams and their sentiment on Twitter. F8 in her drawing in Figure 5.8 claimed her mood was negative from one week before her arrival in the UK and for seven months after. However, this did not seem the case in her Twitter timeline. The positive and negative moods were almost equivalent in the first four months. Furthermore, the neutral code was dominant over this time period which shows that most of F8's tweets during that time were non-emotional. Figure 5.9 provides another example of how the students' models and Twitter timelines do not correlate. An interesting result from Figures 5.8 and 5.9 is the increase of neutral tweets in the early stages of the students' life in the UK. This is because this code is always associated with non-emotional codes and they tend to appear in the early stages of the student's life in the UK. This supports

the previously mentioned findings in Section 5.5.3. Figure 5.10 also supports the lack of correlation between the student drawings and sentiment on Twitter. The model shows that students' mood was negative for most of the time. However, the twitter analysis shows that positive tweets outnumbered negative tweets.

Figure 5.8 Comparison of F8's model and sentiment on Twitter

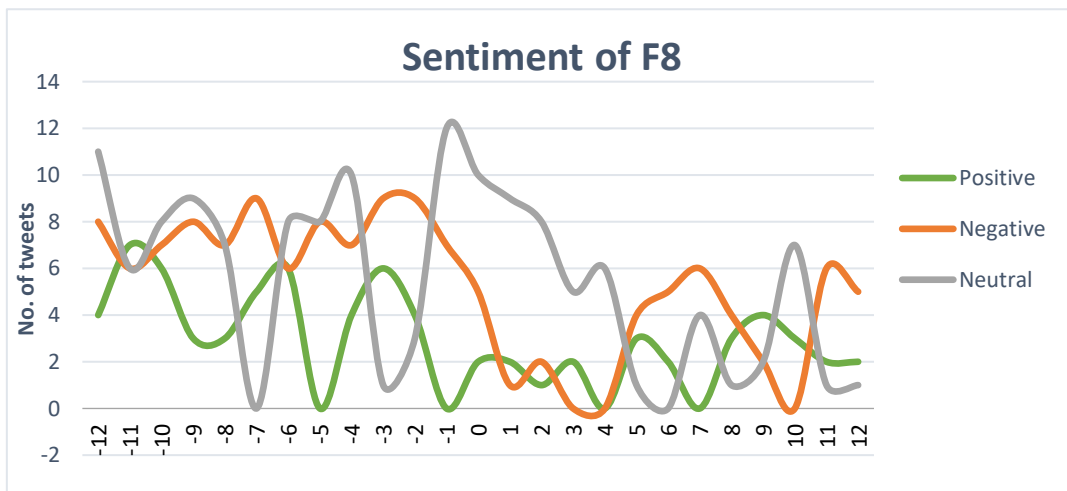
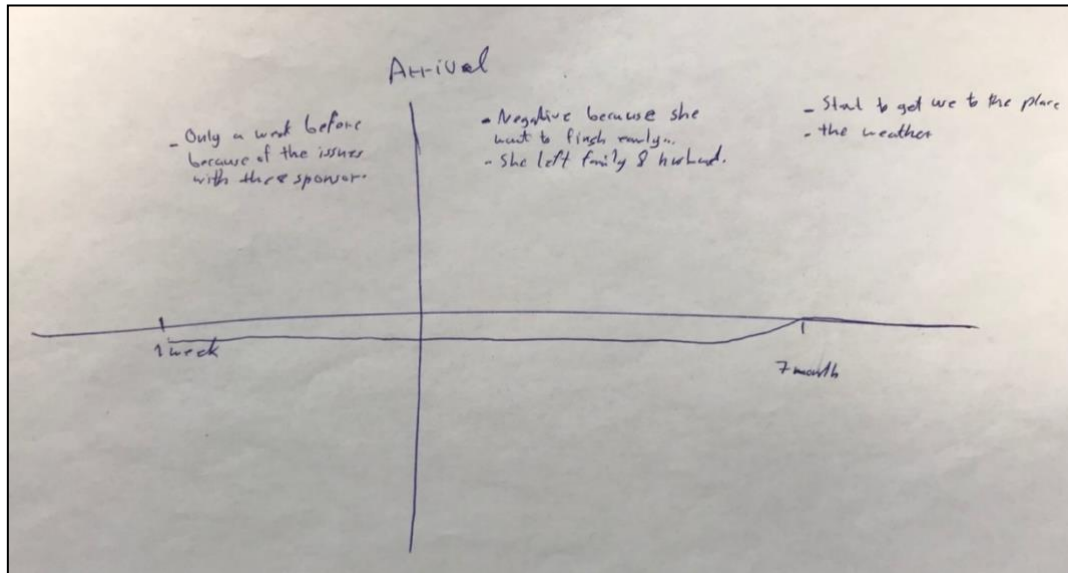


Figure 5.9 Comparison of F3's model and sentiment on Twitter

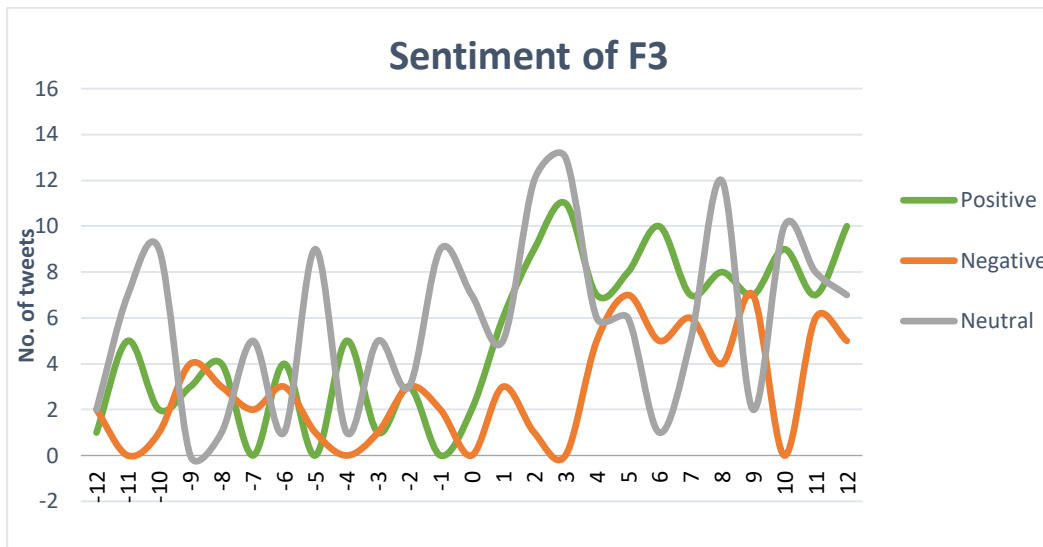
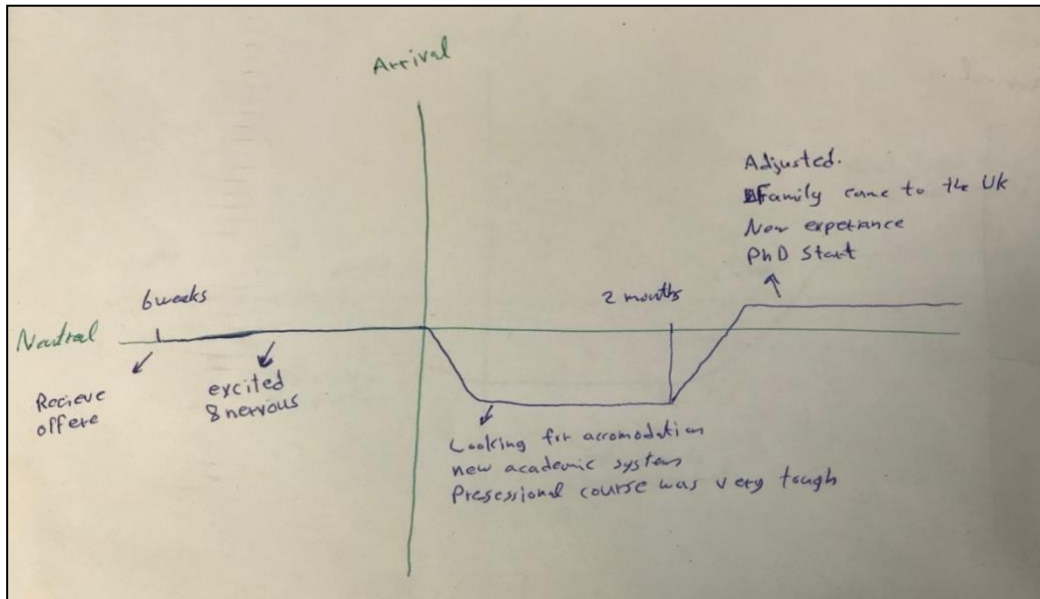
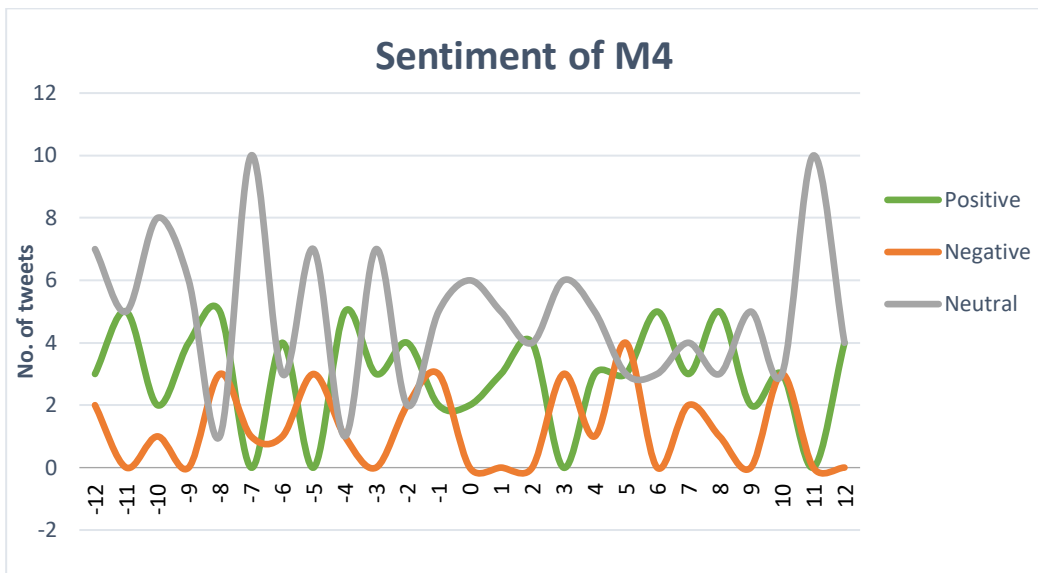
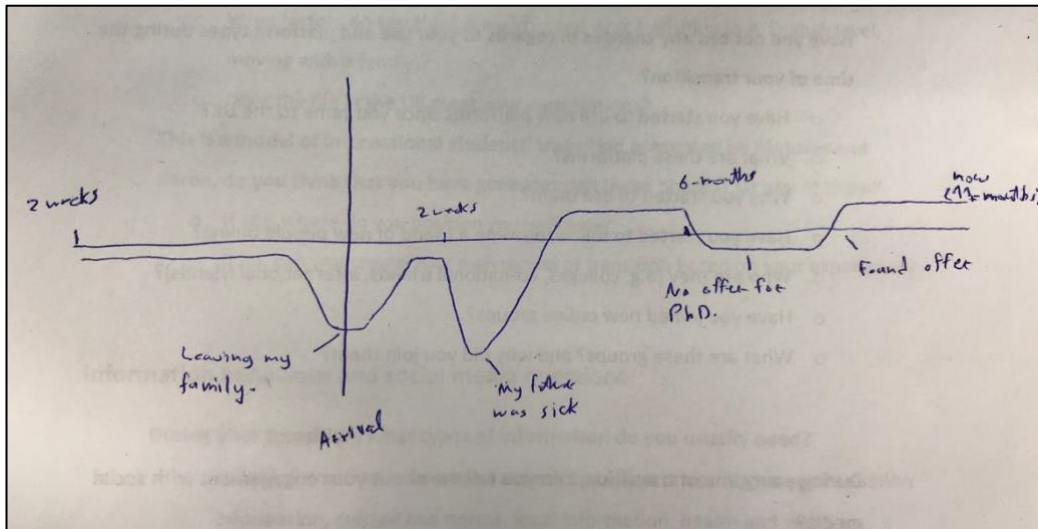


Figure 5.10 Comparison of F3's model and sentiment on Twitter



### 5.5.5 Summary

The findings above demonstrate that a high volume of student tweets in this study tends to be non-emotional tweets. This is shown by the dominance of the neutral code comparing with other sentiment codes. This can be explained by the nature of Twitter use by students. The findings of this study suggest that students did not often use Twitter for emotional posts. Instead, they used it mostly to tweet about news, facts, and information rather than the emotional content such as 'religious expressions', 'maxims' and 'emotional expressions'.



The findings of this study suggest that the students' sentiment shift on Twitter was strongly associated with their content shift. Different examples were provided to show how the sentiment and content codes were related. The 'academic related' and the 'everyday life arrangements' codes were found to be linked with non-emotional tweets, the neutral code. The 'religious expressions', 'maxims' and 'emotional expressions' codes were more associated with emotional content where positive and negative emotions are more evident.

Regarding the students' models and their correlation with the students' sentiment on Twitter, this study found that the students' mood during their time of transition did not seem to be reflected in their twitter activities. In other words, there was no correlation between the students' diagrams and the sentiment of their timelines on Twitter. Selected examples were provided to show how students' diagrammatic emotional presentations did not seem to be correlated with the sentiment analysis of their tweets.

## 5.6 Linking the two methods

This section will synthesis ideas from the two methods: interviews; and Twitter data. Further, it will highlight how the two methods are linked and how the second method could expand on the understanding of transition, international students' transitions, and international students and social media. This section will be divided based on the main characteristics of transition which were identified and discussed in the last main section of the first findings.

### 5.6.1 Multiple and multidimensional experience

The first method found that the transition of international students is a multidimensional experience where students usually face various transitions, social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transitions, associated with their movement to the UK. These transitions can occur simultaneously and each of them can contain different changes. The second method supports this in three ways:

First, Twitter analysis has found that different transitions exist on Twitter in addition to the investigated digital transition. Symptoms or signs of the social, academic, language and everyday life arrangements transitions were noticed on Twitter during the students' transition time. For example, Section 5.2.2 discussed how some students exhibited increases in their language and academic tweets around and after arrival. This shows that the academic and language transitions exist and are reflected on Twitter. Another example is the increase in everyday life arrangements tweets as presented in section 5.2.1. This can also be seen as evidence of the everyday life arrangements transition that international students face on Twitter. Therefore, the idea that a single transition (which is international students' transition in this study) consists of multiple transitions has also been confirmed on Twitter.

Second, Twitter analysis has also revealed that the digital transition can be divided into sub-types. This is seen from the main divisions of the second method's findings (transitions in content, frequency, language and sentiment). This can be used to support the concept emerged from the first method that, in addition to the multiple transitions that international students face, some of them may also have sub-types.

Third, findings of the second method have also revealed that students can go through some or all of these types of transitions and the strength of each type can vary from a student to another. This can be noticed from the whole chapter where some students faced transition in one type but not in the others. For example, students such as F4 transitioned to the academic posts after their arrival. However, this student was not found to be changing in here frequency of tweeting. The strength of each transition in the second method was also found to vary between students. F4 was experienced a very strong academic transition comparing to other students who were going through this transition. This supports the previous finding in the first method which argues that it is not necessary for students go through all transition types.

### 5.6.2 Unpredictable experience

The first method found that the transition of international students is an unpredictable experience, meaning that there is a mismatch between the expectations and reality in the students' transition experience. However, the second method contradicts this concept and argues that it is not always the case that transitions are uncertain. This was noticed when some sub-types of the digital transition on Twitter showed general patterns. For example, the second method has shown that students usually start tweeting in English after their arrival to the UK. This was noticed amongst all students in this study, making it a probable pattern. The second method also found that most students usually made transitions in their posted content when they physically moved to the host country. The transition in content varied from one student to another, however, a change can always be expected. Furthermore, transition in tweeting frequency was also noticed on Twitter with most students displaying a change in frequency during their transition (either an increase or a decrease). Therefore, from these three examples it can be illustrated that some form of the international student's transition could be predicted particularly in the digital transition.

### 5.6.3 More than individual experience

The first method's findings revealed that the transition of international students is not an individual experience. Other actors, in addition to the student themselves, can also be involved in shaping the students' transition experiences. These actors could be the family members of the students (e.g. partners, children, or parents), their peers, host families or the host universities. The students' family members seem to be highly involved actors in this experience.

Another way in which the second method contributes to this concept is in the manner some of its codes are affected when other external actors become involved. The second method showed that actors mentioned in the students' timelines during the transition period could be involved in the transition experience. However, family members do not seem to be the most important actors in respect to this, the main group of actors mentioned are academics and peers in the UK. This is due to the types of communication seen in the emergent codes.

In regard to what has been reported in the second method's findings, the shift in content was always noticed to be in the academic, UK and international news and trends and everyday life arrangements codes. According to these codes, academics, and peers, either co-nationals or none co-nationals in the UK are the type of users who usually get mentioned. This is because of what the students reported in the first method; that academics and peers are important sources of information while transitioning.

#### 5.6.4 A dynamic start and length

The first method revealed that all students are different in regards when their transitions start and how long this lasts. This usually depends on student experience and the type(s) of transition(s) that they go through. For some transitional types, social, academic, language and digital, students can start to encounter them even before they leave for the host country. This can be up to one year before the students' departure. In contrast, other types of transitions, cultural and everyday life arrangements, were noticed to start when the student arrived in the host country. The absence of a standard starting point was also noticed on Twitter. This concept is supported in the second method in two ways:

First, the digital transition on Twitter can start before the student arrives in the UK. This can be seen from the transition in content, frequency, and language of the tweeting that some students evidenced before they left for the UK. Sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3 have shown how some students started to change (either with an increase or decrease) in their frequency of tweeting before arriving in the UK, indicating that the digital transition can start prior to their arrival. However, this does not occur for all students, which supports the main concept that different students have different starting points.

Second, signs of the academic and language transitions were found before the students arrived in the host country. This can be noticed in Section 5.2.2 where students like M2 and M4 increased their academic and language tweets before arriving in the UK. This further supports the previously identified concept which states that it is not always the case that transitions start when the students arrive to the UK. However, similar to the previous point, this was not noticed for all students' timelines.

Regarding the transition length, it is also the case that there is no standard rule that can be applied to when the transition ends. According to the first method's findings, there are some types of transitions (social, cultural, and digital) that can be seen to end during the students' first year. On the other hand, other types of transition (academic, language and everyday life arrangements) can be categorised as continuous transitions because changes and differences associated with these types may keep appearing throughout the students' life in the UK. Although the analysis of the students' timelines was limited to one year after their arrival, the academic transition was noticed to appear on Twitter until the end of tweets collection. This can be seen from the visual presentations in Section 5.2.2 where the number of tweets increased until the end of tweets collection. A point of contradiction between the two methods on this was noticed. The first method reported that the digital transition usually ends during the first year of the student's life in the UK. However, the findings from the second method contradicted this and showed that the digital transition on Twitter seems to be a continuous transition. This was noticed from the shifts and changes that were continuously occurring on students' timelines. For example, the frequency of tweets was steadily increasing until the end of the tweet collection, they may also continue to increase after the one-year period.

#### 5.6.5 Multi-emotional experience

The first method's findings summarised that there is no one answer that can be given to whether the students see the overall transition as a troublesome negative or optimistic and positive experience. Different factors can play a role in this, such as students' motivations, the daily challenges that they face and the role of significant others involved in the student experience.

The second method is in agreement with this, arguing that there are no general patterns to be identified regarding student sentiment transition on Twitter. It is more related to the individuals' experiences and their content transition. Furthermore, when a comparison was conducted in the second method between the students' timelines and models that they draw

in the first method, it was found that students' timelines were different and there was no one sentiment pattern that could be generalised for all students. Therefore, the first and second methods are in agreement in that students differ in their emotional experience during their transition.

A point that can be added from the second method to this concept is the contradiction in sentiment between the students' models and their Twitter timelines. The second method showed that there was no correlation between the students' emotions and their timelines on Twitter. However, it should be acknowledged here that the second method only focused on Twitter, including other social media platforms may have change the story.<sup>16</sup>

#### 5.6.6 Unequal experience

The first method showed that the transition experience is a unequal experience, meaning that students have different experiences and stories about their transitions. Having unequal experience of international students' transition means that opportunities and advantages faced by the students are different based on gender, age, marital status, and cultural background. It also means that conflicts or issues may arise due to these considerations. Different examples of how these factors impact on the student's experience have been presented.

The second method supports this characteristics, particularly the gender inequality aspect. Findings from the second method show differences in transitions between male and female participants. For example, female students were noticed to post more emotional and maxims tweets than the male students. They were also noticed to have made a greater number of English emotional and language tweets after their arrival to the UK. On the other hand, this was not clearly shown on the male Twitter timelines.

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<sup>16</sup> Different reasons were behind limiting the second method on Twitter, this has been also acknowledged in the limitation section.

### 5.6.7 Non-linear experience

The first method's findings revealed that different students had different experiences, and these experiences varied in terms of which transition(s) they were going through and the strength of each transition varied from one student to another. This implies that there is no standard pathway that international students go through, and a singular linear story about the international students' transition cannot be told. Various reasons from the first method to support this point have been presented such as the multidimensional nature of transition, the dynamic start and length and the multiple emotions involved.

A clear point of supporting from the second method is related to the view that there are various types of changes and shifts, in content, frequency, language, and sentiment. These sub-transitions can be proof of the non-linearity of transition because different students vary in the transitions they go through, with the strength of each one varying from one student to another. Therefore, this idea supports the main perspective of non-linearity in transition.

### 5.7 Summary

This chapter revealed that the digital transition for international students seemed to be a complicated experience. This means that there is no real universal pattern found for every case, it is a complicated phenomenon with different stories seen in the various students' timelines. Four types of shifts were identified in this study in an attempt to find whether there is a digital transition on Twitter during the student's transition to the UK. These types are the shift in content, frequency of posting, language of tweets and sentiment of tweets. The following sections will provide a summary for each of these types:

First, this study found that most of its participants experienced a shift in the content that they posted on Twitter as a result of their transition to the UK. Three general patterns were noticed in this: shifting to the UK and international context, shifting to the academic and language topics, and having unnoticeable shifts on posted content. The shift in context usually occur when the student starts tweeting about international or UK related topics. This shift were

been noticed by the decrease in the 'Saudi news and trends' code and an increase in the 'UK news and trends' and 'international news and trends' codes. Shifting to the academic and language topics was also noticed for many students in this study. This shift was seen to occur before the students' arrival in the host country. Only one student in this study was found to have an unnoticeable shift in content after arrival. This student had the same dominant codes for both periods, before and after arrival.

Second, this study revealed that students tended to be classified into three types in relation to their frequency of tweeting during their transition to the UK. First, most students decreased their number of tweets after arrival. This decrease was most dramatic around the time of arrival showing the association between the physical transition and the digital one. Second, some students were found to have increased the number of tweets after arrival. The increase in tweets seems to be associated with the shift in content where increases in some codes motivated increases in the overall number of tweets. Third, other students were found to have unnoticeable changes in tweets frequency. Those students are usually the students who have no shift in their content.

Third, the findings in this chapter highlighted that most of the students usually increased their English language tweets as part of their digital transition. This increase seems to be motivated by a number of different factors. First, the increase in UK and international topic discussions saw these tweets being usually typed in English because of their context. Second, due to changes in the academic environment in Twitter, some students were found to change the language of their academic tweets. Third, posting tweets about the country of Saudi Arabia was also another motivator to increase the English tweets. Tweets about Saudi Arabia after the students' arrival in the UK are usually posted in English. Fourth, few students were noticed to increase their English language tweets in the 'emotional expressions' or 'maxims' codes after arrival. This increase was more noticeable for female students, who also seemed to tweet more in these two codes.



Fourth, findings of this study demonstrate that a high volume of the students' tweets tend to be non-emotional tweets. This is shown by the dominance of the neutral code when compared with other sentiment codes. The findings also suggest that the students' sentiment shift on Twitter is strongly associated with their shift in content. The 'academic related' and the 'everyday life arrangements matters' codes were found to be linked with the non-emotional tweets, the neutral code. The 'religious expressions', 'maxims' and 'emotional expressions' codes were more associated with the emotional content where positive and negative emotions are highly noticeable. This study also found that the students' mood during their time of transition does not seem to be reflected in their twitter activities. This means that there is no correlation between diagrams that the students drew in the first method and the sentiment of their timelines on Twitter.

## Chapter 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Chapter overview

This thesis aimed to investigate the experience of Saudi students' transition to studying in the UK and the role played by social media. It began with its first method where different students were recruited, interviewed and then their data analysed. This was followed by the second method where students' timelines on Twitter were retrieved and analysed.

The first stage of this research was crucial in gaining details and providing a deep understanding of how international students' transition can be defined. The findings from this stage showed that there is a relationship between what motives international students to study abroad and their choice of host country and their transition experience. It also illustrated that there is no one short definition that can be given to the international students' transition, instead, it is a complicated experience. However, this method suggests seven fundamental characteristics that can enrich researchers' understanding about the whole concept of study transitions in general and more particularly international students' transition. This method also showed that the transition can be seen as a multiple and a multidimension experience where different transitions may occur concurrently in different ways. These transitions are social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transition.

The second stage of this research was needed to enrich the understanding of the digital transition (a concept emerging from the first method). It was also helpful in adding value to the other transition types. Therefore, the whole concept of transition has expanded after applying the second method, even enriching some transition characteristics. It also provided some practical examples of how the digital and other transitions can take place during the student journey.

This chapter will synthesise ideas from different sources (first method, second method and literature) into a more unified understanding. It will compare findings from the two methods

with the previous existing literature. While numerous studies have explored the transition concept over the last decade or so, few of them have focused on the international students' transition. However, since the transition, although often in different contexts still has some common features, comparisons with other transition studies related or unrelated to international students. Furthermore, because there is a lack of literature focusing on the Saudi international students' transition, and no models or theories about this, the discussion in this study relates to the wider literature on transition.

## 6.2 Motives to study abroad and choose the UK

Through comparisons with other relevant literature, this section will discuss the factors pushing students to study abroad and pulling them to choose the UK. It will show how particular motives are linked to the Saudi student experience and how these factors affect the student experience of transition as a whole. Before presenting these motives, it is important to acknowledge that various factors have been reported in this study's findings with students reporting different factor(s) as the most important in their decisions. This notion could be added to the MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) that it is not only the transition process that is multiple, but also the motives leading to this process, which increases the multi-faceted nature of the whole transition procedure.

### 6.2.1 Push factors

This study's findings supports previous literature asserting that the push factors influencing international students to study abroad are not only restricted to their academic and professional development, but also to their personal and cultural improvement (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Irwin & Hatch, 1960; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This study also aligns with previous studies that show personal motivation is an often-cited reason why students decide to study abroad (Bokareva, 2014; Krzaklewska, 2008). According to this study's findings, various dimensions can be seen among these personal motivational factors, including a desire to: (1) increase cultural awareness, (2) develop oneself (3) make a self-assessment and new start, (4) develop academic skills and (5) increase employability.

Moreover, this study found that students' decision to study abroad can be influenced or driven by their home sponsor or employer. As previously stated, employers push their employees to pursue higher education abroad for two reasons. The first is because of the absence of suitable study programmes in Saudi Arabia. Students in this study and other researchers noted that Saudi Arabia, like other developing countries, has a shortage of some higher education programmes (Binsahl et al., 2019; Maringe & Carter, 2007). In Saudi Arabia, very few universities provide PhD programmes particularly in natural science, medicine and engineering. There is also a very high competition on masters programmes in all subjects. A well-known tool to tackle this shortage is to transfer knowledge from other countries by sending students to study abroad. Those students are expected to return back to their home country and transfer what they have learned (Kim, 1998). This can justify the 'obligation return' rule that the Saudi, and some other countries, scholarship programmes has (Perna et al., 2014). However, being pushed to study and being obliged to return can impact on the students' experience of transition, more details about the effects of this rule on the students' cultural transition is provided in Section 6.3.2.

Second, employers may push their staff to study abroad because they believe that they want them to be educated in higher quality international institutions. The prioritisation of quality for the Saudi sponsors can also be seen in the list of overseas universities that Saudi sponsorship programmes and employers allow for their staff. Students who are sponsored by the King's programme can only study at a restricted list of the global top 100 universities (Ministry of Education, 2021). Furthermore, the majority of other institutions also provide their own lists of approved universities. For example, in the medium-sized Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, staff are only allowed to study at one of the top global 100 universities as listed in the Shanghai Ranking of universities (ARWU, 2021; PSAU, 2021).

Students who were influenced by their home sponsor or employer to study abroad had two perspectives. Some students noted this as a key factor behind their decision to leave their country. These students were usually less motivated to take the experience, and this can have an impact on their whole experience of transition. Section 4.10.5 shows how being 'forced'

to study abroad can bring negativity to the process of transition. Other students considered being pushed by their home sponsor or employer as a supporting factor. Those students usually had more positive experience because their decision came from them. Students with personal motivations are always more excited and enthusiastic towards their experience (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010; J. J. Lee, 2008).

Students can also be motivated to study abroad for linguistic reasons, to improve their English language. This explains why English speaking countries are always the top options for students in this study. According to the Ministry of Education, (2021), very few students go to non-English speaking countries such as Germany, France, China or Japan. Students usually prefer to choose English speaking country because their desire to develop their English language can also be underpinned by their desire to develop their future career. However, it needs to be acknowledged that for students in this study this factor was usually a supporting factor with other motives being more important (Krzaklewska, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007).

In light of the above, it can be illustrated that other influencer, such as the employer, can be involved in the students' decision to study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Binsahl et al. (2019) stated that conditions in the home country, such as the political, economic, social and academic status, are important and play a key role in the students' decision to go abroad. Therefore, this study highlighted how some factors such as the lack of academic programmes can be dominant due to the importance of academic status in Saudi Arabia. In contrast, other factors reported by other students such as political motives (Maringe & Carter, 2007) were absent in this study due to the lesser importance of political issues for the students.

#### 6.2.2 Pull factors

As for the pull factors, the present study concurs with previous findings related to (1) the importance of having good perceptions about the potential academic environment and (2) the ease of application procedures (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Phang, 2013). The positive reputation of the UK higher education system that some students in this study hold has

supported their decision to choose the UK. The students usually presume the quality of the educational institutions by two ways. First, they look at the international ranking of the university, which is considered as a popular way to measure its quality (Yakaboski et al., 2017). Second, the reputation of the institution can be influenced by the opinion of friends and relatives who already have an overseas qualification. It is been argued that word of mouth recommendations, usually by former alumni, have a strong impact on the students' decision (Engelke, 2008; C. K. C. Lee & Morrish, 2012; Phang, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). The ease of application procedures was also a pull factor for students in this study. The more admission requirements that universities in other countries (e.g. the US, Canada) have (e.g. Graduate Record Examination [GRE] exam, English exams, deadlines for applications), the more the UK is a more convenient option for students. This was also reported by African students in the UK as stated by (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

A more particular explanation of the factors that pull Saudi students to choose the UK was also presented. This involves the geographic proximity of the UK, the length of study and the lessened fear of Islamophobia. Geographic proximity was noted as one of the most frequently mentioned factors by students in this study acknowledging how the relatively close distance between the home and host country can make them feel safer and more comfortable. This contrasts with another study focusing on students from other nationalities (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, the importance of this factor for Saudi students was not only because of the difficulties with long journeys, but there were also social and cultural considerations. This was particularly noticeable for female students. For some families in Saudi Arabia, it is culturally unacceptable that the female lives alone in another city or country (Arafah, 2017). Therefore, although these females will be living alone in the UK, they believe that it was much easier to convince their families about studying abroad if the destination is relatively short. Another example reported by female students is related to the cultural condition of Mahram (AL-Remaih, 2016; Arafah, 2017). These females believe that the geographic proximity of the UK compared with other countries (e.g. the US and Australia) make it easier for their Mahram to travel between the UK and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, these examples show that geographic proximity can play a key role in the students' decision of where to study abroad. Moreover, the present study also reinforces the notion that there are influences beyond individual

factors of studying abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), other cultural and social entities can be involved in the decision.

The length of study was also another factor mentioned by students in this study. This factor was reported by students regardless of whether they are sponsored or not and by whom. As previously stated in this chapter, students sponsored by employer are most likely to be obliged to return to their home country when they finish their study (Perna et al., 2014). This obligation to return can have an impact where students see their future career in their home country, and they know that they are returning there. On the other hand, students who are self-funded or sent by a sponsorship programme with no obligation return do not want the long period because they want to start their career earlier. This can be related to the promising job opportunities in the home country which seems to be the case for students in the present study, and this contrasts findings for students from other nationalities (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

Student beliefs on how people from the host country treat Muslims, particularly women who can be easily recognised because of their appearance, were important. Many students in this study reported their experiences of choosing the UK and discarding other countries as alternatives because of the positive feedback they heard about how Muslims and Arab ethnicities are treated. This finding is consistent with another study focusing on the Saudi female students in Australia (Binsahl et al., 2019), where students presented a strong perception that Australia has less Islamophobia and this pulled them to it. Although Binsahl et al. (2019) study argued that their students showed fears of Islamophobia in the UK, the point here is more concerned with what the students believe than what the actual situation is. Therefore, students beliefs about the strength of Islamophobia in the UK can play a key role in their decision.

### 6.2.3 Summary

Reviewing the literature in this area has shown that there is a lack of studies focusing on the Saudi students abroad in general and the students' motives to study abroad and choose their host country in particular. It was noticeable that most of these few studies are focusing on the students' social and cultural adjustment (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Alshafi & Shin, 2017; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Razek & Coyner, Sandra, 2013). According to Yakaboski et al. (2017), there is 'an incomplete understanding of current Saudi students' institutional choice and study abroad decision-making' (p. 97). Therefore, this study adds knowledge to literature in this area by focusing on the Saudi students' experience. Particular factors relating to the Saudi student experience have been reported. When deciding to study abroad, it was interesting how the employers in Saudi Arabia acted as a key or supporting factor for the students' decision to undertake the experience. As for choosing the host country, the geographical proximity of the UK, the length of study and the lessened fears of Islamophobia were reported as factors behind choosing the UK as a destination of study. Students are different in the motivation(s) they have, and the strength of each motivation can vary from one student to another. All the above reported factors can impact on how the student perceive their life in the host country. Further discussion is presented below.

### 6.3 Multiple and multidimensional experience

This study found that international students face multiple transitions simultaneously during their transition experience. These are the six types identified in chapter 4, social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital. Many previous studies focusing on the transition and international students in this context failed to address its complex and multidimensional nature. Whereas the study of transition has recognised its complexity, in studies focusing on international students, this has not often been acknowledged. Researchers in this field usually limit their focus to specific domains, such as the academic, social, cultural or language (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2008a; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Rienties et al., 2012; Zhai, 2002). Therefore, the strength of this study is that it spotlights the non-linearity and complexity of the international students' transition. This study considered the whole experience of transition which resulted in identifying transition's types. Because of the



aforementioned lack of studies focusing on Saudi international students' transition, the discussion here is in relation to the wider literature on transition.

Each of the identified transition types is discussed separately in the next sections. The section ends by providing an overview of any consistent patterns and how these relate and interact, and a discussion of the multiple and multidimensional nature of transition will be presented.

### 6.3.1 Social transitions

The social transition has been defined in this study as the changes and challenges associated with leaving family and friends and starting a new social life in the host country. It also involves changes related to having new social settings. (e.g. starting to live alone or with a host family). Findings of this study revealed that the social transition experience for students can be very varied. Similar to the cultural transition, the student's home country and life experience can play key roles in how smoothly this experience proceeds (Dalglish & Chan, 2005). This study's finding pointed towards social challenges and issues being important factors as demonstrated by being frequently mentioned by students during their transition. This can be attributed to the importance of social life for Saudis and the high level of connectedness between the family members in the students' home country. This transition was reported by most students regardless their study level and gender. It usually begins when the student leaves their family and friends back home and start interacting with the new people, in the host country. It can also involve living alone or with host families. The cultural nature of the home society plays a role in how strong this transition is. Students coming from a collectivist culture such as Saudi Arabia are more likely to face a harsher social transition (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). This can explain the dominance of this transition for students in this study. The high impact of this transition on other transitions was a motivator behind this dominance. The co-national peers and community in the host country was reported to be very helpful for the students' adjustments. This is consistent with the Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) argument that when students arrive as a group they tend to face lower adjustment issues. This thesis also found that students usually form their new social networks with co-national students. This is usually motivated by language issues and the

cultural contrast and different social nature of home students. Jindal-Snape (2016) and Rienties, Johan, and Jindal-Snape, (2014) (2015) also mentioned that home students usually have their own 'pre-existing networks', preferring to concentrate on their course than creating new connections. This study also supports previous arguments that international students find it easier making relationships with other international students from different countries than host nationals (Rienties, Héliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013). Alsaafi and Shin (2017) attributed this to the fact that these students usually share the same ultimate goal, to learn English and graduate. Furthermore, students may feel less embarrassed conversing in English with other English as a second language speakers than with host nationals. This can also show that many of the social transition signs are motivated by the language transition and vice versa. This supports the previously mentioned result in the first method's findings about the interaction between the social and cultural transitions. It also supports a main aspect in the MMT theory that different transitions are motivated by each other (Jindal-Snape, 2016). This is also similar to what Gordon et al. (2017) found in the context of trainee to trained doctor transition that workplace transitions trigger and overlap with home-lives transitions.

### 6.3.2 Cultural transitions

The cultural transition in this study is defined as the set of changes in social norms, values and lifestyle that international students face when they move to the host country. According to this study, the cultural contrasts that students faced were a barrier not just for the students' cultural adoption but also for their engagement with the new society. These contrasts or differences were particularly noticeable in this study sample which concurs with previous findings by Alsaafi and Shin (2017) that Saudi students studying in the west are more likely to face cultural challenges than other nationalities. This is due to the large cultural gap faced by Saudi's when moving from a conservative Muslim society to the West. This thesis supports other study findings that there is always a link between the students' cultural experience and students home country (Dalglis & Chan, 2005), and the more differences students encounter in the host country, the more stresses and challenges they have to confront in their whole transition experience (Rienties et al., 2012; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

As a result of the increased gap between the students' home and host culture, this study found that students usually deal with the new culture on the bases of how to behave towards it not how to adopt it. The key reasons behind this are: (1) the students' existing religion and set of values can be in contradiction with the new culture, and (2) the time limit and the obligation to return rule that most students have in their scholarship contract. Therefore, these two reasons show that some students were looking at the cultural transition as temporary transition. This result further complicates the underlying idea of transition where not all transitions are one way, adoptions, some, such as the cultural transition, are temporary accommodations.

### 6.3.3 Academic transitions

This study defined the academic transition as the set of academic changes that international students face when they move or plan to move to study in the host country. This transition is a multidimensional experience by itself. It usually involves two dimensions: starting (1) in a new academic system and (2) a new academic stage. When students move to the host country they start interacting within a new academic atmosphere involving a different learning style (more dependent style in the UK). They also usually start a new academic level (e.g. Master's, PhD) which reflects differences in teaching style and expectations (e.g. more independent for doctoral and Master's students). This transition can start before the student leaves for the host country, for instance, doctoral students usually start working on their doctoral proposal while they are in their home country.

The academic transition is a complicated experience by itself, meaning that different students report different experiences and challenges, this is usually specified by the students' academic level, English language level and previous experience of study abroad. Like the social transition, this study also found that the academic transition usually takes a more prominent position than other transitions. This is because education is usually a main reason for students to travel to the UK and there is a big difference between the Saudi and UK academic systems. This would seem to support an argument by Gordon et al. (2020) that for the whole transition experience, one transition is key whilst others can be in flux. Burns (1991) highlighted the

educational changes and challenges that international students usually face when they study abroad, calling this 'study shock'. According to Burns (1991), this shock usually happens to students moving from an Asian to a Western education system. For instance, students are required to focus more on synthesising and critiquing in their academic writing. The prominence of the academic transition has led many researchers to focus their transitions studies on academic changes and adoption (Menzies & Baron, 2014; Rienties et al., 2012). However, this is not the aim of this study which seeks to examine the holistic experience of transition.

#### 6.3.4 Language transitions

In this study, language transition involved all language changes, issues and difficulties that international students face when they move to the host country. This included English issues at university, daily life difficulties with English and difficulties with local accents. The language transition was noticed to exist in the educational and daily life context. Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) in their ELT model included language difficulties as a dimension in the educational transition. However, data in this study revealed that language transition is also a type of daily life transition. This is because language difficulties are not only restricted to university and academic matters but also appear off campus.

The language transition usually overlaps and triggers other transition types, for example, students with weak English language will find it more difficult to create relationships with host nationals. This also support previous findings on the cultural connections and the ease in creating new relationships by Zhou et al. (2008). This transition was found to be overlapped by the academic, social and digital transitions. It was noticed that this transition brings negativity to the academic and social transitions. Having communication difficulties in and out the university will hinder the student's academic progress (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Brown, 2008a; Robertson et al., 2000) and involvement with society (Chen, 1999; Zhai, 2002). This also relates to the previously mentioned argument by Jindal-Snape, (2016) and Jindal-Snape & Rienties (2016) that one transition can trigger the other(s).

### 6.3.5 Everyday life arrangements transitions

The everyday life arrangements transitions in this study are all changes related to the mundane everyday tasks that students face after their move to the new country. These include: differences in accommodation, healthcare, banking and transportation systems. The changes in accommodation was noticed to be the most commonly mentioned. This is because renting or buying a new accommodation is a complicated process, as stated by students, and this process usually depends on other process to be completed. Students moving with their families also reported more changes related to their family members (e.g. new rules in children's schools). The transition in everyday life arrangements were always seen as something that places additional stresses or challenges on students. Jindal-Snape (2016) and Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) claimed that in different transitional contexts, individuals are expected to face transitions in daily routines such as in housings and transportation. This thesis's findings were in agreement with Jindal-Snape (2016) that symptoms of this transition always increases the negativity of the whole transition experience. Furthermore, Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) revealed that learning new rules in the host country is a part of the students' learning journey.

Changes in this transition may not be a key type of transition expected by students, however, having trouble in this transition can lead to problems in others, such as academic and social transitions. This supports a core idea of the ELT model that negativity in life transitions could trigger negativity in academic transitions and vice versa (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). According to its context, this thesis disagrees with Al-Hazmi and Nyland (2010) findings that Saudi students have less concerns about accommodation because most of them are sponsored by their government. Findings of this study revealed that money is not the issue with accommodation, stresses in this context are usually triggered by the complication of the procedure.

### 6.3.6 Digital transitions

The term digital transition in this study refers to the set of changes in social media use that students reported in association with their study abroad experience. These changes include

engaging with new communities or platforms, change in context, frequency and language of posts and creating new accounts on social media. The inclusion of social media into the investigation of the student' transition was based on a recent systematic review which suggests that social media are a key factor in the international students' transition experience (Sleeman et al., 2016). This was also supported by many students in the first method that social media play a critical role in their transition experience. This also leads back to what Haimson et al., (2019) reported; 'many life transitions involve both physical and digital movements' (p. 3). This would suggest why this transition's signs were noticed to be mentioned frequently by students in this study.

Although this study only includes changes in social media use when talking about digital transition, other forms of digital transitions also need to be acknowledged. Students in the first method admitted some other type of transition in digital forms. For example, a student reported a shift towards local news websites while another reported a move to watching host country TV channels. These forms of transitions are usually motivated by the information and language needs of students. Therefore, digital transition cover a wide range of changes and other dimensions of digital transitions on different digital channels that are not included here.

This study seems to be the first one to explore this type of transition, and by applying content and sentiment analysis on students' generated content. Some studies have focused on international students' use of social media (Yu et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020), however, none of these considered the transition as a perspective in the investigation. In other contexts of transition, relationships between social media and life transitions were discussed. For example, Haimson et al. (2018) investigated transitions in relationships breakups and social media and DeAndrea et al. (2012) focused on social media and students transitioning from high school to university. In the context of international students, most of studies focused on the pros and cons of social media during this time and not on how the digital transition occurred.

This study found that students usually make a digital transition on social media prior to and after their physical move to the host country. Different forms of transitions were either reported in the students' interviews or noticed in the students' Twitter timelines. Chapter 5 showed different transitional patterns that might be expected to be observed on the international students' digital practice during their transition. Most students were noticed to show a change in the content posted on Twitter as a result of transitioning to the UK. This change involved shifts to the UK and international context and to the academic and language topics. Ali and Ahmad (2018) argued that online engagement with a new academic and host country's content is noticeable for international students and plays a positive role in their cultural and academic engagement. The frequency of tweets is another area where the digital transition also occurred. Most students decreased the number of posted tweets after their arrival, with only a few showing increases. The second method's findings also revealed that most of the students increased their English language tweets as part of their digital transition, this is important because, the tweeting language is another potential transition form.

Use of social media during the students' transitions can positively impact on their experience. This study has shown that the majority of students were looking at social media as essential tools for seeking information related to their transition before and after their arrival to the host country. This idea is supported in previous studies by Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) and Shao and Crook (2015). Students also shared positive views about social media and social connections. Many students stated that social media allowed them to build bridges with new people and communities in the UK, including co-national and host national people and communities. This is supported by studies focusing on social media use after arrival (Park et al., 2014; Qiu, 2011; Rahman, 2014; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). Another positive point from the students' perspective is that social media were a key tool allowed them to stay connected with their home family and friends. This finding supports a similar argument made by Sleeman et al. (2016). Building new online social bridges and keeping in touch with family and friends back home is an important emotional support for students. Another positive role played by social media is that of helping students with their English language acquisition. Engaging with English communities in social media, attending online English classes and watching English videos were examples of how social media helped

in this. Thus, social media helped to facilitate the 'language adjustment' of international students in the host country (Alshehab, 2017).

Despite the positive role of social media, there are downsides that need to be acknowledged. This study revealed that social media can have a negative effects on students social and cultural adjustment to the host country. Having social media communities and friends from the students' home country after arrival limits their cultural and social engagement with the host country. For example, one student in this study reported that the high use of social media with home content has given her the feeling that she did not physically move. Transition literature has shown that lack of interaction and communication between the sojourners and other people in the host country can lead to social isolation and difficulties with their inter-cultural adaption (Bethel, Szabo, & Ward, 2016; Rienties, Héliot, et al., 2013; Rienties, Nanclares, et al., 2013). Having separate social and digital societies, where the social is related to the host country and the digital is linked to the home country was termed by Martin and Rizvi (2014) as 'translocal'. They argued that immigrants inhabit different online societies to the society that they physically live in. This can lead to the previously mentioned issues with the cultural adaption and social isolation.

In light of the above, it is debatable whether the use of social media can assist students in their transition (Guo et al., 2014). However, this thesis' findings suggest that the positive effects of social media outweigh the negative aspects. This is because social media satisfy the informational (Sandel, 2014; Zhao, 2016) and emotional (Hossain & Veenstra, 2013; Sandel, 2014) needs for international students. These are classified as high needs, because transition is an information rich experience (Jindal-Snape, 2016) as well as a strongly emotional one (Brown, 2008b; Jindal-Snape, 2016). As previously discussed, social media are an essential information seeking tools during different phases of students' transition. they also help students to create new social connections and keep in touch with family and friends back home. Such connections and ties can provide the student with sufficient social and emotional supports.



### 6.3.7 Summary

This research suggests that international students' transition is a multiple and multidimensional experience supporting what has been theorised in the MMT and ELT theories (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). This concept means that individuals face multiple changes when they go through any life transition. This study has found that the international students' transition experience is a comprehensive experience including different domains not just the academic related one. This supports previous studies on transitions in within many settings, not just the higher education or international students context (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Rienties et al., 2012; Rienties, Nanclares, et al., 2013). The transitions identified within this study are the social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transitions. Based on the first and second methods, this study also revealed that each dimension by itself can be multi-dimensional. This clearly appeared in the second method where the digital transition was divided into different shifts and changes.

The multiple nature of transitions also implies that different transitional types are interrelated and overlapping and one type can bring about changes to another. It was also noticed that negativity or positivity in one type can lead to negativity or positivity in others. Having overlapped transitions within the investigated transition follows the multifaced nature of transitions stated in the MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016). This also supports a previous study by Gordon et al. (2017) who claimed that home-lives transitions are motivated by the workplace transitions for individuals facing the trainee to trained doctor transition. In this study, an example of how the transitions motivate each other was shown when a student starts an academic course in a new academic climate. This new change can have an impact on the student's social settings and social media practice. They usually start interacting with new peers and academics and posting tweets related to their education. This means that the academic transition can be a trigger for the social and digital transitions. Further examples of this were provided when each transition was discussed individually.

This study also added to the existing literature that among the multiple transitions that individuals face when they go through a life transition, amongst these are certain transition(s) that can be classified as key one(s). Although findings of this study showed that at different stages certain transition(s) can take a more prominent position than others, this study revealed that the social, academic and digital transitions are the most frequently mentioned by students. The reasons behind the dominance of these transition are various and were presented in Section 4.10.1.4. It also needs to be acknowledged that the type of transition considered as key can vary if another transitional context was considered (e.g. transition to employability, transition to primary school), or if other students (e.g. with different cultural background) were recruited. For example, one of the factors behind the dominance of the social transition in this study is the importance of social life for Saudis and the collectivist nature of this community (Hofstede et al., 2010). However, having participants with different social and cultural background can have an impact on this giving different results.

This study also found that there are some consistent patterns within these transitions. These patterns are common in and extracted from these six transition types and shape the overall transition experience. This is, certainly, in addition to the characteristic mentioned in this section, a multiple and multidimensional experience. The following sections will discuss each of these patterns in more detail.

#### 6.4 Unpredictable experience

This study's findings revealed that there is a mismatch between the expectations and reality in the students' transition experience, meaning that moving to the new country brings unexpected or unpredictable experiences. This can be for the whole transition when students face different and unexpected transitions, or it can be for the transition types themselves, where students face different unpredictable experiences within each type. The whole idea of having differences between the expectation and reality for individuals facing a transition in their lives was reported by (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Keup, 2011; Oxenbridge & Evesson, 2012; Rienties et al., 2012; Rienties, Nanclares, et al., 2013). Similar to what has been found in this study, Zhou, Todman, Topping, and Jindal-Snape, (2010) reported that international

students' expectations before leaving for the host country and the reality after arrival can affect their adaptation and adjustment, including educational and daily life expectations. A factor that increase the mismatch level for international students is that they are facing a set of transitions at once, as stated by (Zhang & Zhou, 2011).

The set of expectations held by students about their imminent transition is usually shaped by their previous experience, people and environment in their home country. This supports a previous finding indicating that Indian, Italian and Thai international students had different perspectives in regards their expectations about their study abroad experience (Dalglish & Chan, 2005). A factor that could help the students to match the reality and expectations is the orientation programme. This thesis' research found that the main value of the orientation programme is that it helps students quickly adjust and reduce the mismatch between the students expectations and reality. Similar to this but in a different context, Oxenbridge and Evesson (2012) stressed on the importance of the induction process for new employees who experience transitions to work.

Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) reported a link between how easy students find their transition experience and their readiness to face new changes. The findings of this study revealed that going through unexpected changes is one of the characteristics that shapes the transition experience. For example, some students thought that the new challenges they were about to face would mainly be related to their new academic experience, but when they arrived they found that changes in social settings and interaction with new rules and regulations were more challenging.

Facing a reality different than expectations can have either a positive or a negative effect on the student. Findings of this study support the main believe that experiencing a different reality from that expected can increase stress and negativity in students' experiences. For example, many Master's students reported that the high academic load was unexpected and affected them negatively. In an academic context, Durkin (2008) argued that the mismatch

between academic expectations and reality is the biggest stress factor for international students. However, it was noticed that experiencing a different reality from that expected can also play a positive role in the whole experience. For example, some students (as reported in Section 4.4.3) admitted having negative expectations about UK society, motivated by negative stereotypes they held about people in the UK. However, these students stated that these expectations turned out to be wrong and things in reality were different. Having a positive effect from unexpected experiences supports an argument by Keup (2011) that 'unmet expectations' do not necessarily play a negative role.

In regards the digital transition and expectations, the second method's findings revealed that some changes in the digital transition could be predicted for researchers observing international students' transition. This was noticed from the general patterns that emerged from observing the students' tweets during transition (e.g. the shift in content, change in frequency and increase in English tweets). However, for the students themselves, changes were noted to be unexpected and this was acknowledged by the students in the interviews when they discussed their use of social media during their transition.

This section has shown that the international students' transition experience can be seen as an unpredictable experience. This means that students may face unexpected changes or predict changes that do not necessarily happen. The students' expectations about new places are usually shaped by their experience and the people and environment in their home and host country. Their emotions towards the unexpected activities can be either a positive or a negative depends on the activity itself. For other researchers observing the students' digital transition, potential activities can be predicted based on the results of this study. Finally, the findings presented in this section contradict the linear and standard nature of the model presented by (Menzies & Baron, 2014). This is because different students were noticed to have different expectations and priorities towards the new changes that they faced. Therefore, a one linear story about the international students' transition cannot be told.

## 6.5 More than individual experience

One of the main dimensions to be included in the transition's conceptualisation is that other actors are involved in addition to the main individual who face the transition. This means that the transition of one individual can affect other relevant actors, or be affected by the transition of other individuals. For example, in the context of this study, it has been found that the students' transition experience can have an impact on their parents, partners and children who may or may not be traveling with them. When students were asked about the changes and challenges faced when they moved to the host country, it was noticed that these actors are always mentioned as a part of the experience. For example, when social challenges were discussed by students, some of them expressed feelings of distress for the challenges faced by their partners, for instance, living away for the first time and having an Islamic appearance (for female partners). Other students discussed the academic transition their children were facing in regards their move to UK schools, where children had to study in a new academic system in a second language.

The findings of this study have also revealed that the transitional experience of international students' peers had an impact on the study group. This was shown from what has been mentioned about the role other peers' transition in the students' experience of transition. Some students discussed the role of others, particularly those who had been through the transition in their preparation prior to traveling. Others discussed how their social transition experience had become less stressful due to interacting with other transitioning international students. Findings of this study also showed the effects of the study group transition on other professionals in the host country. For example, one student who was studying a foundation year highlighted that they noticed lecturers adjusting their way of teaching to suit a class of international students. This need of adjustment for teachers in international classes was acknowledged by Zhou, Topping, and Jindal-Snape (2011).

This study also found that host families faced transitions when accommodating students. Although the student interviewees discussed this experience from their own perspective, there was evidence that the host families' daily routine changed as a result of the students

joining them. One student reported how his host 'mother' took on extra responsibilities (e.g. waking him, making his meals) while he lived with her. This is clear evidence of the change in routine that she made as a result of accommodating this student. This was also supported by a previous study focusing on the homestay experience for international students (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). This study argued that host families usually make changes when students arrive, they spend time chatting with them, having meals together and helping them with their assignments. This results in the host families making new transitions.

Having an effects on others or being affected by the transition of others is a key aspect in the MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). The multidimensional nature of MMT presumes that there is a link between the transition of an individual and the transition of other '*significant others*' (Jindal-Snape, 2016). This can also be seen in the Rubik's cube presentation of the MMT model, where changes in circumstance in one individual can bring about change to others, and changes occurring to others can cause changes on the investigated individual (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). The idea that an individual's transition can have an impact on others was also reported in different contexts. Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) reported that international doctoral students who moved abroad with family were experienced not only their own transition, but the transition of their children and partners. Their children join new schools, usually as second language speakers, and their spouses may start new jobs. Similarly, Jindal-Snape et al. (2019) suggested that the transition of young adults with life-limiting health conditions was causing transitions to their family members. For example, some parents had to retired early in order to take care of their child. Keup (2011) claimed that the transition experience for students moving to university was having an impact on their families and high school friends. In Keup's study, students reported that as a result of their moving away from home, their relationship and interactions with their families decreased. This will impact on the daily and social life of their families in particular, their parents.

On regards the digital transition and the transition of other actors, this study found that students' families, professionals and peers experience this transition type as a result of their

relative's digital transition. Although this study did not analyse timelines of the other significant others, the student interviewees showed how changes in their social media use impacted on others' use. For example, some students mentioned appointing a day of the week to contact family while others called family on a daily basis. This will affect the family's use of social media, for instance, by becoming more frequent users of social media, whether as a whole or at certain times. The use of social media by students' home families to maintain contact is a commonly reported by a number of studies (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012; Sandel, 2014). Student participants in this study reported how they used social media when engaging with peers in the UK, either before or after their move. Social media were found to be a preferred tool linking the students with other individuals facing the same transition. Students are usually in need of this contact when seeking information and for communication (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Park et al., 2014; Rahman, 2014; Raymond & Wang, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). This shows that the digital transition of peers triggers or can be triggered by the transition of the investigated students. According to data collected in the course of this research, it was revealed that this can happen on different social media platforms. For instance, students started following new accounts on Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat and joined new WhatsApp groups.

In summary, the discussion above revealed that significant others can have transitions as a result of the students' transition and vice versa. Different examples were provided on how these transitions are related and how one can trigger the other and is supported by previous arguments (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Jindal-Snape et al., 2019; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Keup, 2011). The significant others were successfully identified within this study being, students family (including their parents, partners and children), other peers, other professionals and host families. This study also revealed that the digital transition of students can affect the way others engage with social media. Different examples were provided about how the student digital transition was reflected on families and peers in the host country.

## 6.6 A dynamic start and length

Findings of this study revealed that transition is dynamic and there is no one standard point of when the international students' transition starts and how long it lasts. As previously discussed, the transition is a complicated experience with individuals differing in their starting and ending points. Conceptualising the commencement and end of transition is complex because: (1) transitions within the whole experience of international student's transition are different regarding when they start and end, and (2) students are different in which transition type they experience and how harsh each type is for them, depending on the type of transition that students face, the start and end of transition can vary. As previously acknowledged in this study, students may not face all the identified transitions and the strength of each type varies between students. Yet, far too little attention has been paid to this dimension of transition. The following two sections will attempt to address this literature gap and discuss the start and end of transitions.

### 6.6.1 Start of transition

This study's results suggest that students' starting points varying from a couple of days to one year before their physical move. This variation in periods was identified when the student interviewees were asked when they felt they had entered their transition. They provided different answers. It can also be seen from the variation in starting points on the students' drawings presented the first method findings.

Findings of this study reveal that different factors can play a role in the variation of transition start. These factors include the transition's prerequisites where different study levels have a different set of requirements which implies different periods of preparation. For example, it was noticed that doctoral students are more likely to start their transition at an early stage and before their physical move. This is because they have to search for a potential supervisor and write their proposal (Huang, 2007). The time of notice was also a factor, since most of students in this study are sponsored, the time of when the students receive the scholarship approval is critical to when the students get into of transition. A student reported that she entered the transition just a few days before her departure and this was due to the late notice



received from her sponsor. Having a short scholarship notice can lead students to prepare poorly, negatively affecting their experience of transition (Cieri et al., 1991). The students' previous experience of study and traveling abroad and their English proficiency is also another factor in starting the transition earlier. Students with less experience and weaker English are more likely to experience anxiety before traveling, leading them to begin their preparation earlier.

On regards of the transition types identified in this study and the point at which they begin, it was found that some types (academic, social and digital) usually started before the student's physical move to the host country, while others (language, cultural and everyday life arrangements) started after arrival. The early start of the academic transition is usually triggered by the academic preparation that students typically make before they move abroad (e.g. writing research proposals for doctoral students and searching and applying for a course for Master's students). This was highlighted by Jones, Farrell and Goldsmith (2009) who claimed that the pre-departure preparation for doctoral students is helpful and can increase their confidence after arrival. A trigger for the early start of the social transition is the psychological preparation that students make before leaving their home family and friends. Different students and particularly female students mentioned having a feeling of anxiety (in their pre-arrival phases) caused by leaving their home families and communities, as also stated by (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). The digital transition was also noticed to start before the students' arrival, this was reported by students who argued that joining social media communities in the UK helped them in their preparation and planning. The usefulness of social media in the preparation phase also was stated by (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Shao & Crook, 2015). The second method also support this by showing that students usually started to make a digital transition in their content, frequency and tweeting language before they left for the host country.

However, other transition types, cultural and everyday life arrangements where noticed to start after the student's arrival in the host country. For the cultural transition, this can be attributed to the fact that students do not face the same cultural challenges or culture shocks

while they are in their home country. This agrees with the theory of culture shock where individuals face cultural differences after arrival (Oberg, 1960; Zhou et al., 2008). This is also applies for the everyday life arrangements transitions where students may hear about how systems are different between their home and host country, however, they usually face rules and polices challenges when they arrive (Gordon et al., 2020).

To summarise, this section has shown that students can have different starting points for their transition depending on their degree, the time of receiving scholarship notice, their experience of study and travel abroad and the students' English language proficiency. This section also showed how academic, social and digital transitions usually start before the students' physical move due mainly to the preparation that students make prior arrival. However, other transition types (language, cultural and everyday life arrangements) where noticed to started after the students' arrival in the host country. This section has added value to the previously mentioned model presented by Menzies and Baron (2014), which presumes that students go through a pre-departure phase before arrival without giving further details of what is included in this phase and when it starts. Therefore, this section helped to address this knowledge gap.

#### 6.6.2 Length of transition

The question of how long transitions last is not an easily answered one. As with the problem of when transitions start, different transitions also have different ending points and the length of each of the transitions can vary from to another and from student to student. It is important to mention that according to this study, the transition type ends when the student has adapted to the new changes associated with it and no more challenges appear. For example, for some students in this study the social transition ends when they create new social networks in their new environment and get used to the new social changes (e.g. living alone, being away from family).

The cultural transition ends when the student learns to behave towards the new cultural changes. Having no single time-frame of when individuals adapt to a new set of conditions is supported by a previous study (Jindal-Snape and Cantali 2019). In their study on children transitioning to secondary school, they found that there is no fixed time-frame is given regarding when the students adapt to the new changes. Some were reported to adjust after just two months, others took until the end of the first term and few by the end of the second term (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019).

This perception regarding the end of transition is also supported by the previously mentioned definition by Jindal-Snape (2016) which conceptualise transition as an 'ongoing process'. This idea implies that the transition consists of a set of events along a vertical timeline and there is no known time of when these events stop appearing. The MMT theory also supports this implying that the transition is a dynamic process and individuals are different regarding when they adapt to new changes (Jindal-Snape, 2016). The findings of this study and Jindal-Snape (2016) contradicts other literature which were more static about the end of students transition. Prescott and Hellsten (2005) and McLachlan and Justice (2009) argued that the period of transition lasted for a year after the student's arrival to the host country. However, this thesis found that the transition could last more than a year and some transitions were found to be continuous transitions.

The term continuous transition was identified in this study and is meant when signs and cues of a transition continue to appear while the student is in the host country. The academic, language and rules and polices are the type of transitions which are usually seen as continuous. An example of continuity in the academic transition was seen in what a student reported that he was facing the academic challenge as serial challenges. The student reported that he was faced with challenges associated with academic writing when enrolled on an English language course. When the student then moved to the foundation year, he reported further challenges caused by unfamiliarity with assessments types (lab exams). The student was also expecting new academic challenges to emerge when he move on to university. The academic transition is particularly complicated because it involves multiple dimensions such

as moving to a new academic system and new academic stage, if one dimension becomes easier, the other may become harder and vice versa. Bastien Seifen-Adkins and Johnson (2018) focused on the adjustment of international students and found that the academic adjustment is complicated and can last for long time. This is because the student's academic adjustment is affected by the adjustment in other domains such as the social and language domains. The everyday life arrangements is another transition example that can be classified as continuous. When the student lives in the host country they face new regulations and systems, for example, changes in the accommodation and banking systems and challenges with the health care systems. Students who arrive with their children may also face new changes related to registering their children in schools. Having a continuously changing set of circumstances is one of the fundamental concepts forming the nature of transition, i.e., transition is a learning journey (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016).

Overall, as with the problem of when transitions start, different transitions also have different ending points and the length of each of the transitions can vary from to another and from student to student. This study found that the transition type ends when the student has adapted to their new circumstances and when no more new challenges appear. However, some transition types were also found to be continues where associated signs continue appearing throughout the students' time in the host country.

## 6.7 Multi-emotional experience

The transition as a whole concept was theorised by many previous studies as a multiple feelings experience. It was classified by some individuals as a troublesome negative experience, while others see it as an optimistic and positive experience. It can also be both, where the same individual reports positive and negative feelings throughout their transition (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Lucey & Reay, 2000). The transition context always plays a vital role in determining whether the transition is a positive, negative or a mixed feeling experience (Jindal-Snape, 2016). For example, the health transition context is usually classified as a negative transition due to the physical, mental, social and psychological challenges faced (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). In the case of international students, and based on the findings of

this study, the transition was classified as a multiple emotions experience, positive, negative or mixed feelings experience, meaning students had a range of emotional experiences. Furthermore, this suggests that the students' feelings were dynamic and their mood fluctuates during their time in the host country.

Whether the student sees their whole transition as a positive or negative experience depends on a number of factors. The students' motivation of studying abroad is a major trigger for their emotional state of mind, positive or negative, in the host country. Students who are personally motivated to study abroad are usually found to be more enthusiastic towards their experience. Although they may face difficulties and challenges, they usually have a more overall exciting, and positive experience. On the other hand, students who are pushed by their employer to study abroad are usually less ambitious and more likely to have a negative experience. The absence of certain programmes and qualifications in countries such as Saudi Arabia (especially for Master's and PhD programmes) has led some employers to send their employees overseas to pursue degrees (Yakoboski et al., 2017). Therefore, this leaves some students no choice but to go and study abroad to complete their study.

This study found a strong connection between the students' academic transition and their emotional state in the host country. Stress and negativity caused by the academic transition can bring negativity to other transitions, the overall experience of transition and vice versa. This leads back to the ELT model (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013), which posits that the educational and life transitions impact on each other and the whole emotional experience is shaped by the impact by these transitions. For example, this study suggests that the students' academic adjustment is a challenge affecting the students' whole adjustment to a new place. Postgraduate students usually face difficulties and challenges triggered by differences between the host and home academic environments. These differences can contribute to a negative student experience either prior or after their arrival to the host country. Students in this study claim that being in the UK involves studying in a more research-based environment requiring more criticality and creativity. They also reported that they needed to be independent learners who actively self-monitored their own learning. The stresses

experienced for students moving from an eastern to western academic system have been acknowledged by previous studies. Durkin (2008) and Zhou and Todman (2008) reported this as a challenge for Chinese students and claimed that the change of academic environment can bring dissatisfaction and discomfort to the students in and out the classroom. Another study focusing on the female Saudi students in the US also reported that students moving from a passive role in the classroom to being more active and engaged is a significant challenge (Sendi, 2019).

Other external factors such as significant others are also involved in the students' emotional experience. As previously mentioned, the student's transition is not a solo experience since other actors are also involved in either positively or negatively. Whether the student moves alone or with family also plays a role in the students' emotional experience. As previously stated in Section 4.4.5, the student's experience of moving to the UK with a companion can bring some challenges. It is the male participants who usually report this as a challenging experience and this is related to some gender differences for the students in this study. The Saudi culture assumes that males always take more responsibilities than females in things related to day-to-day activities (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; Arafeh, 2017; Elamin & Omair, 2010), therefore, males are required to do more work in sorting out things in the new place after arrival where this challenge is always located. Another external factor involved in the students' emotional experience is the host family with different students in this study reporting their positive feedback of living with host families and how this has eased their social transition and increased their cultural awareness. This is usually more helpful in the students' initial and early stages in the host country where host families help with the orientation process (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). The host university can also have an impact emotionally. Universities that increase their staff awareness of the cultural and academic gap between international and home students are considered to be more supportive and playing a positive role in the student experience of transition.

The findings in this section contradict some studies that conceptualised the international student transition as a positive experience (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Zhang, 2016).

Although these acknowledged the difficulties and challenges that international students face, they claimed that the international student transition is a positive experience. These studies made this assumption on the basis that students are personally motivated towards this experience and see their study abroad experience as a life opportunity that leads to a sense of pride. Students can also be able to study in a highly ranked university with experts in their field which increases their positivity and enthusiasm. However, findings of this study suggests that students may not always have this self-motivation. Different students reported that their decision to study abroad was a result of the lack of some degrees in their home country. Therefore, these students did not choose to take this experience, instead, it was a necessity.

This study also contrasts the previously mentioned model by Menzies and Baron (2014), which conceptualises the students' emotional experience as a linear experience (as shown in Figure 2.3). The main point of contradiction with this model is related to the standardisation of students' emotions presuming that international students go through a static emotional experience. However, as previously presented in this section, there is no one single narrative describing students' emotions during their transition given that the experience usually varies from one student to another and over time. Figures 4.10, 4.11 and 4.12 show the different emotional patterns during the same timeframe. Considering the students' mood at the pre-arrival phase, the Menzies and Baron (2014) model presumes that students are in normal mode prior to their arrival to the host country. This is the case for a few students especially if they have gone through the study abroad experience before. However, different emotions, both positive and negative, were reported by many students in this study. This was revealed in the drawings of F4, F8 and M2. Focusing on the post-arrival phase, this model presumes that students start with a positive mood in the honeymoon phase. The student's mood goes down after this phase in the party's over phase before moving to a normal mood in the healthy adjustment phase. However, not all these phases are reflected in the students' models. Some phases might be shown such as the honeymoon for M2, however, this cannot be standardised for all students.

Focusing on the digital transition and students' emotions, Twitter analysis revealed an unexpected result about the reflection of students' mood on social media. After a comparison between the students' drawings and the sentiment analysis of their timelines on Twitter, no correlation was found. This suggests that it is difficult to predict students' emotional status from their Twitter accounts. This can be attributed to two reasons: (1) either social media are not used as an emotional platform for students or (2) the students' emotions are not reflected on Twitter but on other platforms considering that all participants acknowledged their use of more than one platform of social media.

To conclude, the emotional experience of students during their transition is multi-dimensional. It varies through time from being positive to negative or neutral and different students can have different emotional experiences at the same stage. Different factors play a role in the fluctuations in students' moods. The student push factors for undertaking a study abroad experience is a key one since students who are personally motivated are more likely to have positive experiences. The student's familiarisation with the new academic system and the study stage are other factors. Other external factors can also play a role here such as host families and universities and whether the student moved alone or with a companion. Findings of this study have contradicted some previous studies which classified the transition as a positive experience. It also questioned the previously mentioned model by Menzies and Baron (2014) which presumes that students go through a linear emotional experience during their transition. Regarding the digital transition, this study found that students' mood presented in their drawings was not reflected on Twitter which highlights the lack of consistency between the students' actual mood and their Twitter timelines.

## 6.8 Unequal experience

This study found some inequality between individuals who face the same transition. For some students, the transition was understood as a difficult process, shaped by inequality and conflict. Previous transition research has not devoted much attention to the conflict of inequality in transition. However, such conflicts caused by the inequality in transition may play a vital role in the process where it adds extra challenges to the individuals' experiences.



This attributes why this research recognise the inequality as a characteristic of transition. In this study, the students' perspectives highlighted various patterns of inequality which will be discussed below.

### **Gender differences**

Findings of this study revealed that gender plays a role in the transition experience. Female participants reported additional conflicts in their social, cultural and language transitions. First, the visible differences for female students can isolate them from new society (Poyrazli & Damian Lopez, 2007). One student in this study reported her experience of not socialising with her colleagues in pubs or bars due to her hijab. Another talked about choosing a female-only host family. In their sophisticated study on female students in the US, AL-Remaih (2016) highlighted the feelings of disconnection for females wearing hijab. AL-Remaih (2016) also stated that some of their female participants needed to change the way they wear the hijab to feel more socially accepted. This conflict may not only impact on the social transition, but also the language transition where social activities and events with home nationals can develop the student's English language (Rose-Redwood, 2010). AL-Remaih (2016) mentioned that female Saudi international students are usually less willing to engage with some social activities that are inconsistent with their cultural beliefs, and not participating may impact on their English language development. This example also relates to another point about the potential pre-arrival fears of Islamophobia. Findings in this study also highlighted that choosing the UK for some students was due to their belief that it will have less islamophobia. This may not be a factor for students having different culture and nationality.

Another example is related to the Saudi cultural Mahram tradition. Although the views of most female participants who travelled with a Mahram tends to be positive, the impact of this cultural rule needs to be acknowledged. One participant stated that the Mahram is a key motivator to choose the UK. The geographic proximity of the UK comparing with other alternative countries (e.g. the US and Australia) can make it easier for her father (Mahram) to travel between the UK and Saudi Arabia. Another challenge caused by the Mahram tradition is reported by AL-Remaih (2016) noting that there may be some issues related to the visa and

immigration rules for the Mahram while they are in the host country. Thus, having a Mahram makes a difference during the study abroad experience.

On the other hand, male participants noted other additional conflicts particularly related to the transition in their everyday life arrangements. It is culturally known in Saudi Arabia that males take more responsibilities than females in things related to day-to-day activities (Elamin & Omair, 2010) with males usually required to do more work organising in the new place and out the household (Arafah, 2017). This was noticeable for the male students in this study, and this can be a new challenge for them.

In light of the above, conflict in transition can be created as a result of gender inequality. Different examples were provided of how the experience of transition can vary between the male and female participants in this study. Other forms of conflicts causing inequality are reported in the next sections.

### **Cultural background differences**

Findings of this study have also revealed that an individual's cultural background can play a role in shaping their transition experience. According to Gale and Parker (2014), students from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' face more challenges triggered by the significant culture shock when they transition to university. In their study on Saudi students in the US, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) stated that different social and cultural factors such as the nature of society (collectivist and individualist), the differences in gender rules and the relationship between country and religion increased the gap between the Saudi international students and the host culture. For students transitioning to university, Tafarodi and Smith (2001) compared Malaysian and British students at a British university. This study considered the individualism-collectivism as a main dimension of the cultural transition. More pressure and symptoms of depression were reported by Malaysian students than their British peers. In this study and due to the cultural background of its participants, Saudi students were seen to be dealing with the new culture on the bases of how to behave towards it not how to adopt

it. This, as has been reported in the cultural transition section, is due to students' set of values and beliefs which may contrast with the new culture, the temporary feelings of students caused by their time limit in the host country and their obligation return rule. However, students from different backgrounds may report different experiences. The variety of experiences for students from different nationalities was also acknowledged by Dalglish and Chan (2005).

Furthermore, social norms in an individual's society also play a role in the experience. It is crucial to consider the social rules and principles regulating the individual's behaviours towards the new society. According to Gale and Parker (2014), the individuals' experience of transition is seen as shaped by a wider social structure where public concerns cause private issues. This can highlight a conflict of inequality for individuals facing transition.

#### 6.9 Non-linear experience

This study revealed that different students have different experiences, and they vary in which transition(s) they go through and the strength of each transition can vary from student to student. Therefore, there is not a single linear international student transition narrative. Gale and Parker (2014) claimed that expressing life as a whole as a linear sequence experience (e.g. high school, university, employment) is inaccurate. Instead, individuals experience life as a series of on-going life changes and back-and-forward movements. Furthermore, Cohen and Ainley (2010) stated that university students 'do not view work and study in the linear sequential way implied by the conventional career paradigm and by the policy formulations based upon it. Images about pathways and linear transitions from school via further study and then into the world of work and an independent adult way of life do not reflect the actual experience.' (p. 83). In the transition context, although this concept has not been fully recognised, Sotirin (2005) stated that appreciating the dynamic compositions of individuals heterogeneous singularities is a key concept. This research found that building a static framework for the transition experience is not applicable because different characteristics are involved and individuals are different in how they go through these characteristics.

The depth investigation of the Twitter analysis has also supported the non-linearity of digital transition . Through an analysis of students' Twitter feeds various changes occur in students' social media practice while they transition. Students were different in which change(s) they go through and the strength of each one. Such different changes occurring in the social media practice during life transitions in different context were reported in different studies (DeAndrea et al., 2012; Haimson et al., 2018).

This non-linear feature of transition challenges some of the previously mentioned theories in the literature, such as the MMT theory, Figure 2.1, and the international student adjustment model, Figure 2.3 (Jindal-Snape, 2012; Menzies & Baron, 2014). Although the MMT theory acknowledged the multiplicity of the individual's transition, there is no clear recognition of its non-linearity. This model considers individuals as one object and treats them equally, thus ignoring the complexity in transition caused by the complexity of individual's experiences. The international student adjustment model created by Menzies and Baron (2014) assumes that students go through a linear sequence of transitional phases. However, this assumption is contradicted by the non-linear characteristic, the students' models provided throughout this research have shown that different students has different pathways.

#### 6.10 Summary

The overarching aim for this thesis is to investigate the experience of Saudi students' transition to studying in the UK and the role played by social media.

This study highlights that Saudi students are highly motivated to study abroad by personal factors, which supports previous studies investigating students from other countries (Bokareva, 2014; Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Irwin & Hatch, 1960; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Various dimensions can be seen among these personal motivational factors, including a desire to: (1) increase cultural awareness, (2) develop oneself (3) make a self-assessment and new start, (4) develop academic skills and (5) increase employability. However, this study also identified some particular factors potentially unique to Saudi students. These include being

pushed by the employers to go abroad and pursue the higher education. Employers usually do this either because of the absence of some higher education programmes in Saudi Arabia (Binsahl et al., 2019), or because of the belief that there are higher quality institutions abroad. As for choosing the host country, the positive reputation of the UK higher education system, and the ease of the application procedure (Phang, 2013) were two common factors. However, similar to the push factors, a particularism in the Saudi students' experience of what pulls them to choose the UK was also presented. This involves: (1) the geographic proximity of the UK (2) the length of study and (3) the lessened fear of Islamophobia. It was interesting that the geographic proximity was one of the frequently mentioned factors by students in this study. However, the importance of the location for Saudi students was not only because of the difficulties with long journeys, but also social and cultural considerations (AL-Remaih, 2016; Arafeh, 2017). Therefore, answering the question of what motivated the students to study abroad and choose the host country before investigating their transition experience is crucial. This is because there is a relationship between the students' motivations and how the students perceive their life in the host country. This also revealed that individual influences in studying abroad and choosing the host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) are also complemented with other cultural, social and institutional entities.

A principal finding of this research is linked to the types of transitions that international students face. They are: (1) the social, (2) cultural, (3) academic, (4) language, (5) everyday life arrangements, and (6) digital transitions. Similar to the characteristics of transition, these types can overlap and affect and be affected by each other. They also can contain sub-transitions and one or certain type(s) can become a key type(s). Previous studies (Al-sharideh & Goe, 2014; Bethel et al., 2016; Brown, 2008a; Gbadamosi, 2018; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Menzies & Baron, 2014) specifically focused either on the social, cultural or academic transition. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this study's explicit and comprehensive identification of the types of transition was missing from the previous research. Although the transition types identified in this study were illustrated from the international students' experience, they can also be applied to other similar types of transition.

Another main finding suggests that there are seven fundamental characteristics of transition in general and the international students' transition in particular. These characteristics are that transition is (1) multiple and multidimensional (2) unpredictable (3) more than an individual experience, (4) characterised by a dynamic start and length (5) multi-emotional (6) an unequal experience and (7) non-linear in nature. These different characteristics were found to be interlinked and affected by each other meaning that having challenges in one aspect can lead to issues in other aspect(s). Although the pre-existing literature discusses theories of the transition concept both generally and for international students (Beech, 2011; Gordon et al., 2020; Jindal-Snape, 2012; Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2014; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Menzies & Baron, 2014), the complexity and of transition required further exploration. This study's in-depth investigation has resulted in the above seven characteristics which had little or no attention in the previous literature.

In terms of the social media and international students' transition, this study, through its two methods, found that students make changes in their use of social media during their transition. These changes include engaging with new communities or platforms, change in context, frequency and language of posts and creating new accounts on social media. This aligns with Haimson et al.'s (2019) argument that life transitions involve digital ones. There is an ongoing debate about the role of social media in the students' transition experience (Guo et al., 2014). However, this thesis' findings suggest that the positive effects of social media outweigh the negative aspects. Positive effects include using social media as information seeking tool during different phases of transition. They also involve creating new social connections in the new country and keeping in touch with family and friends back home. Such connections and ties can provide the student with sufficient social and emotional supports. This suggests that social media satisfy the informational (Sandel, 2014; Zhao, 2016) and emotional (Hossain & Veenstra, 2013; Sandel, 2014) needs for international students. Social media were also found to play a positive role in helping students with their English language acquisition. Various positive practices were reported on this, supporting a previously mentioned positive relationship between international students' language adjustment and social media (Alshehab, 2017). On the other hand, negative aspects include having home content and connections on social media, which can decrease the student's engagement with

the new society. It has been acknowledged by various researchers (Bethel et al., 2016; Rienties, Héliot, et al., 2013; Rienties, Nanclares, et al., 2013) that lack of interaction and communication between the sojourners and other people in the host country can lead to social isolation and difficulties with their inter-cultural adaption.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Chapter overview

The work within this thesis aimed to investigate Saudi students' experiences of the transitions to study in the UK and the role played by social media. This topic is important because not only does it relate to the body of knowledge regarding international students' transition but also to the transition concept as a whole. Furthermore, although the present study has focused on the experience of Saudi students in the UK, through the discussion of the wider literature, this study aims to develop a theory that applies to all international students. In terms of its empirical and methodological contributions, this study investigated a less researched population of students namely Saudi students and undertook a novel approach analysing Twitter data in this specific context. In this chapter, the research questions are revisited and a summary of the answers to them provided alongside the theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions. At the end, recommendations for practice, policy and international students, the limitations of this research and suggestions for future work are also covered.

### 7.2 Revisiting the research questions

The present study by considering a sample of Saudi students in the UK set out to answer the overarching questions: what are Saudi students' experiences of the transitions to study in the UK and what is the role played by social media?

In order to answer the questions, the following sub-questions were posed:

#### **Q1: What motivates Saudi students to study abroad and why do they choose the UK?**

The personal motivation factor was frequently mentioned by students in this study as a factor leading them to decide to study abroad. Various dimensions can be seen among these personal motivational factors, including a desire to: (1) increase cultural awareness, (2) develop oneself (3) make a self-assessment and new start, (4) develop academic skills and (5) increase employability. This study also identified particular factors relating to the Saudi student experience. When deciding to study abroad, it was interesting how the employers in Saudi Arabia acted as a key or supporting factor for the students' decision to undertake the



experience. This usually happens for two reasons: first, because of the absence of suitable study programmes in Saudi Arabia. Second, employers believe that their staff can be educated in higher quality international institutions when they go abroad. Students who reported this factor had different perspectives about it. Some students felt this was a key factor behind their decision to leave their country, while other students considered this as a supporting factor. Thus, the decision to study abroad is not only made by the students, but also influenced by other institutional entities.

As for choosing the host country, the positive reputation of the UK higher education system that some students in this study hold supported their decision to choose the UK. The students usually presume the quality of the educational institutions by looking at the international rankings of the university and word of mouth recommendations from friends and relatives, usually former alumni. The ease of the application procedure was also a pull factor for students in this study. The more admission requirements (e.g. GRE exam, English exams, deadlines for applications) that universities in other countries (e.g. US, Canada) have, the more the UK is a convenient option for students. Similar to the push factors, a particularism in the Saudi students' experience of what pulls them to choose the UK was also presented. This involves: (1) the geographic proximity of the UK (2) the length of study and (3) the lessened fear of Islamophobia. It was interesting that the geographic proximity was one of the frequently mentioned factors by students in this study. However, the importance of the location for Saudi students was not only because of the difficulties with long journeys, but there were also social and cultural considerations. This was particularly noticed for female students, where they believed that it was much easier to convince their families about studying abroad if the destination is relatively short. Another example is also reported by female students which is related to the cultural condition of Mahram. These females believe that the geographic proximity of the UK compared with other alternative countries (e.g. the US and Australia) can make it easier for their Mahram to travel between the UK and Saudi Arabia. Thus, these examples reinforce the impact of cultural and social entities beyond the individual factors influencing studying abroad decisions. The length of the study was also another factor mentioned by students in this study regardless of whether they are sponsored or not and by whom. Students sponsored by their employers are most likely to be obliged to

return to their home country when they finish their study. This obligation return rule can have an impact when students see their future career in their home country, and they know that they are returning there. On the other hand, students who are self-funded or sent by a sponsorship programme with no obligation to return do not want the long period because they want to start their career earlier. This can be related to the job opportunities in the home country which seem to be promising for students in the present study. Finally, the students' beliefs about how the host country and people treat Muslims, particularly women whose appearance can be easily recognised, were important. Many students in this study reported their experiences of choosing the UK, and discounting other countries because of the positive feedback that they heard about how the Muslims and the Arab ethnicities are treated. Students' beliefs about the less Islamophobia in the UK played a key role in their decision.

Therefore, the question of what influenced the students to study abroad and choose the host country before investigating their transition experience is crucial because of the relationship between the students' motivations and their perceptions of life in the host country. For example, students who are personally motivated to study abroad either to increase their knowledge about other cultures or to learn to be independent will have a more positive experience of transition than those who are obliged by their employer. Furthermore, students who come to the UK with the perception that there is less Islamophobia had a smoother social and cultural transition. The findings also showed that there can be influences beyond the individual factors of studying abroad and choose the host country, where other cultural, social and institutional entities can be involved in the process.

**Q2: What types of transitions do international students go through during their experience of studying abroad?**

This study has identified six types of transitions that international students go through when studying abroad, student can face all or some of these transitions depending on their experience. First, the social transition, which includes changes and challenges associated with leaving family and friends and starting a new social life in the host country. It also involves changes related to having new social settings (e.g., starting to live alone or with a host family).

Second, the cultural transition, which refers to the set of changes in social norms, values and lifestyle that international students face when they move to the host country. Third, the academic transition, which revolves around the process of applying to the university, the methods of assessment, the teaching style and the transition to a new academic stage. Fourth, the language transition, which includes difficulties with the host country's language, both inside and outside the campus. Fifth, the everyday life arrangements transition, which is defined as changes related to the mundane everyday tasks that students face after their move to the new country. These include: differences in accommodation, healthcare, banking and transportation systems. Sixth, the digital transition, which refers to the set of changes in social media use that students reported in association with their study abroad experience. These changes include engaging with new communities or platforms, change in context, frequency and language of posts and creating new accounts on social media.

Based on the two sets of data, this study also revealed that each dimension by itself can be multi-dimensional. This was clearly evident in the second method during the in-depth investigation of the digital transition which was divided into different shifts and changes (in content, frequency, language and sentiment). This study also revealed that different transition types are interrelated and overlapping, and one type can bring changes to other type(s). This also means that experiencing negativity/positivity in one type can also bring negativity/positivity to the other type(s). Different examples were provided on how, for instance, issues in the everyday life arrangements can trigger issues in the academic and social transitions. Among the multiple transitions or dimensions that students face when they go through their international transition, certain dimension(s) can be classified as key. In the context of this study, although findings showed that at different stages certain transition(s) can become the key one(s) and students differ in how they perceive each transition type, it was noticed that the social, academic and digital transitions are those that are frequently mentioned by the students. Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that the key type of transition can vary if another context of transition was to be considered (e.g. transition to primary school or to employment) or if other students (e.g., with a different cultural background) were recruited.

**Q3: What are the characteristics of the transitions that international students experience when studying abroad?**

This study identified seven characteristics that shape the student experience in the host country. These characteristics were found to be interlinked and affected by each other with challenges in one aspect potentially leading to issues in other aspect(s). These characteristics are: (1) Transition is a multiple and multidimensional experience, which implies that students' transition includes multiple types of transitions. These transitions can occur simultaneously and each of them can contain different changes. (2) Transition is an unpredictable experience, meaning that there is no one standard journey or planned phases that students usually go through during their transition. This also implies that there can be a mismatch between the expectations and reality in the students' transition experience. (3) Transition is more than an individual experience, which means that other actors (in addition to the students themselves) are also involved in shaping the students' transition experience. Those actors can affect or be affected by the student's transition experience. They can be the student's family members (e.g. partners, children or parents), peers, the host families or the host universities. (4) Transition has a dynamic start and length with no fixed rules for when the transition starts and how long it lasts. This is usually based on the student experience and the type of transition(s) that they go through. For some transition types (social, academic, language and digital transition), students may start to encounter them before they leave for the host country. In contrast, it was seen that other types of transitions (cultural and everyday life arrangements transitions) started when the student arrived in the host country. (5) Transition is a multi-emotional experience in which there are no clear answers to whether the students see the overall transition as a troublesome negative or optimistic positive experience. Various factors play a role in this, such as the students' push and pull factors, their social status and the academic and cultural changes. This also suggests that the students' feelings are dynamic with fluctuating moods during their time in the host country. (6) Transition is an unequal experience, which means that opportunities and advantages experienced by the students are different based on other personal, social and cultural factors such as the student's gender, age, marital status and cultural background. Moreover, these factors may cause a conflict to the individual. (7) Transition has a non-linear pattern, meaning that a single linear story about

the international student transition cannot be told due to the various reasons provided in this study.

Therefore, being a complicated experience, there is no one short definition that can be given to the international students' transition. However, this study suggests that these seven fundamental characteristics can enrich researchers' understanding about the whole concept of transition in general and the international students' transition in particular. One key note to mention here is that although these characteristics were taken from the international students' transition experience, they can be transferable to other transition contexts. The exploration of different transition literature shows, to some extent, the similarities between various transitions in various contexts, which makes the outcome of this research beneficial in other contexts.

**Q4: Do international students make a digital transition in their social media use during their transition experience and do social media play a positive or negative role in their experience?**

Social media are highly involved in students' study abroad experience. Changes in social media use associated with the physical move to the host country were shown in this study. These changes are referred to by the term 'digital transition' which, in this study, includes all types of changes in social media use related to the student study abroad experience. The interviews showed that students usually engaged with new people or communities on social media before and after their physical move to the UK. Some students also created new social media accounts during their transition which was usually motivated by the student's desire to create a space between them and their home country. The amount of time spent by students on social media is also another form of change with interviews showing that the majority of students reported a decrease in time spent on social media after their physical move to the UK.

Data analysis from the Twitter study has confirmed the relationship between the physical and digital transitions and suggests the following points in regards of the students' digital

transition on Twitter. First, students made a shift in the content that they posted on Twitter as a result of their transition to the UK. This was motivated either by the shift to the UK and international context, or by the shift to the academic and language topics. Second, the frequency of tweeting can also vary as a result of the student's move abroad. Most students in this study had a decrease in their posted tweets after their arrival. This decrease can be dramatic around the arrival day which can show the association between the physical and digital move. Other students were found to increase the number of tweets after their arrival. This increase seems to be associated with the shift in content where the increase of some codes motivated the increase in the overall number of tweets. Third, students also had a shift in the language of tweeting. Twitter findings showed that most of the students usually have an increase in their English language tweets as part of their digital transition. This increase seems to be motivated by different factors. First, there was an increase in the discussion of UK and international topics with these tweets usually typed in English because of their context. Second, due to the change in the students' academic environment on Twitter, some students were found to change the language of academic tweets. Third, posting tweets about Saudi Arabia was also another motivator to increase the English tweets. Tweets about Saudi Arabia after the students' arrival in the UK were usually posted in English. Finally, findings of the second method suggest that a high volume of student tweets in this study tends to be non-emotional tweets. It was also found that the students' sentiment shift on Twitter was strongly associated with their content shift. The second method's findings also revealed that the students' mood during their time of transition did not seem to be reflected in their twitter activities. This was illustrated from the comparison between the students' drawings in the first method and the sentiment analysis of their Twitter timelines in the second method.

Students in this study acknowledged the positive roles of social media in their life in the UK. Different roles included using social media as an information-seeking tool, to create new connections and to keep connected with family and friends back home. Social media were also found to play a positive role in helping students with their English language acquisition. However, a downside was also noticed about the isolation from the outside society when students highly engage with their online home community which hinder their sociocultural

adjustment to the new place. Nevertheless, for many students in this study, the positive effects of social media outweighed the negative.

### 7.3 Contributions to knowledge

This research can be of use to scholars interested in the internationalisation of higher education and more precisely researchers in the fields of transition, the transition of international and Saudi students and the role of social media in the international student transition experience. The methodology of this study, its implementation and findings, may be of interest to other social scientists with the contributions divided into empirical, theoretical and methodological.

#### 7.3.1 Empirical

This research has contributed empirically to the study of Saudi students' transition when they study abroad both in general and in the UK, filling a gap in the literature. It captures Saudi international students voices about their whole experience of transition (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015). It also fills the gap of the incomplete understanding of Saudi international students' decision making (Yakaboski et al., 2017) regarding their motivations behind studying abroad and choose the host country. Various empirical findings were reported in this study starting with the push and pull factors where certain motivations, triggered by cultural, social and institutional factors, were reported. Such motivations included being pushed by employers to study abroad and preferring the UK because of its location and its reputation of having less islamophobia. These findings contribute knowledge to the literature regarding both international (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Phang, 2013) and Saudi students' motivations (Binsahl et al., 2019; Yakaboski et al., 2017).

Other findings include the specific social and cultural changes and challenges that participants in this study faced while transitioning. For Saudi students, their social and cultural settings can be crucial aspects when moving to study abroad. This research presented several cultural

differences which had an impact on the students' social experience including the shift from a collectivist to individualist society. Other differences are categorised under contrasts in 'lifestyle' and 'way of thinking', as defined by the students themselves. The academic changes and challenges were also the subject of some empirical findings. This study identified the specific academic challenges that Saudi students face when moving to the UK academic system. Such challenges include having a new language of learning, moving to a more research-based system and being an independent learner. Various findings in this study contribute to the debate about the conflict of gender differences in the Saudi culture (Al-Hazmi & Nyland, 2010; AL-Remaih, 2016; Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015; Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). It was evident in the unequal experience characteristic how the cultural background and gender play a role in the students' experience. The empirical findings in this study clearly show how the experience can be more challenging either for females or males due to some of their cultural assumptions.

### 7.3.2 Theoretical

This study provides a theoretical contribution to the literature and knowledge of international student transition, the international students and social media and the transition field as a whole. This study adds theoretical concepts to the debate in each of these fields of literature.

Various researchers have examined international students' transition (Brown, 2008b, 2008a; Gbadamosi, 2018; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Zhou et al., 2008). However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the students' study abroad experience. It is comprehensive in that the study makes no assumption about the time period over which a transition happens and attempts to include all the dimensions of transition not those solely academic, social or cultural, as is typical of most research. This study has identified the types of transitions that international students go through during their transition, the social, cultural, academic, language, everyday life arrangements and digital transitions. Findings of this study also identified when and how these types start and end. It was also found that different transition types can overlap and motivate each other. The fact that there are key types was also



acknowledged, and these types were identified. It was also shown how these types consisted of sub-transitions and how this can happen.

By conducting this comprehensive investigation, this study also contributed to the identification of seven characteristics shaping the experience of international students' transitions providing a new theorisation to add to the academic debate surrounding international students' transitions. These characteristics are that transition is (1) multiple and multidimensional (2) unpredictable (3) more than an individual experience, (4) characterised by a dynamic start and length (5) multi-emotional (6) an unequal experience and (7) non-linear in nature. This study contributes the ELT model suggested by Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) by providing new characteristics and types of international students' transition in addition to the potential daily life and academic transitions presented by this model. This study also goes beyond the international students' adjustment model by Menzies and Baron (2014) where this thesis found that there is no standard model that can describe the emotional timeline for international students. Similar to the types of international student transition, these aspects were found to be interlinked and they affect and are affected by each other. Together, they build up a shape for the international students' transition. This new theorisation is visualised in Figure 4.15.

This research also takes part in the debate of how social media are involved in the students' study abroad experience. Various researchers have conducted studies in this area (Alghizzawi, Habes, Khalaf, Salloum, & Ghani, 2018; Bethel et al., 2016; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Shao & Crook, 2015; Sleeman et al., 2016). However, this research is distinctive in investigating the relationship between the students' physical move abroad and their use of social media. This research has investigated whether international students make a digital transition in their social media use during their transition experience and do social media play a positive or negative role in this experience. This digital move, or as it was called 'digital transition', was noticed and reported in the two methods. The second method conducted a more in-depth investigation of this transition by looking at the students' timelines on Twitter. This study successfully identified three types of changes in students' practice on Twitter

associated with their physical move to the host country. These types are the shift in content, language and frequency making a novel contribution by answering the question of whether there is a digital transition associated with the students' physical move. This research was also involved in the ongoing argument concerning whether social media play positive or negative roles in the students' study abroad experience. Based on its two methods, this study found that social media play both a negative and positive role in the students' transition experience. However, it was acknowledged that the positive roles may outweigh the negative ones. Various examples of these positive and negative practices are reported in chapter 4 and 5. Therefore, investigating the role of social media in the students' study abroad experience was a further contribution to the literature on international students and social media.

Through its theoretical and empirical engagement, this research has contributed to the academic debate by expanding on the transition concept as a whole. This research went beyond the opposing theories of understanding the multi-faceted nature of transition (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). Rather, it attempted to understand the complexity of transition by identifying its characteristics and adding details to the complicated story of transition. A new conceptualisation of the transition was drawn in Figure 4.15. Although this study focused on the international students' transition context, due to the similarities between different transition contexts the findings of this study can add value to the knowledge in the transition concept as a whole. As previously shown throughout this research, it has successfully identified seven characteristics that usually shape the individuals' experience of transition. Few of them such as the multidimensional one has received some discussions by previous literature (Gordon et al., 2017; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016), while most of them are identified as novel ones. Each of these characteristics was also further discussed in this study, where its shape was built up. The relationship between these characteristics was also identified and discussed. The types of transition identified in this study have also contributed to the knowledge of the transition concept. Although the identified types were based on the international student experience, they give some insights and ideas for other researchers in other transition contexts. This is particularly the case for more similar contexts such as the transition to university and the transition of immigrants.

As in much of the literature of transition, the focus was on the main individuals' experience. This research listened to the students' voices and included their perspectives about their experience of transition. This was achieved by conducting interviews with the students themselves and collecting their Twitter timelines. As shown throughout this research, various insights and thoughts were reported based on the students' experiences. This has also allowed the researcher to provide a set of policy and practice recommendations to the students themselves, the Saudi and UK organisations involved in the students' study abroad experience, see Section 7.4. Considering the students as the main source of data can be seen as a contribution to not only to the international students' literature but also to the international students and social media and the transition literature.

### 7.3.3 Methodological

This research has drawn its conclusion from a large volume of data through combining two data collection approaches with interviews as a first method and social media data as a second. This combination has provided different angles of investigation which added more depth to the understanding of the research questions. Furthermore, it provided a triangulation of the data sources in this research thus enhancing its validity. The interviews were helpful to explore the area and achieve a deeper understanding based on the students' perspectives regarding their transition experiences. The second method was very useful in expanding the overall results from the interviews and focusing on of how the digital transition can occur.

Using a method based on social media data in the context of the international students' transition can also be recognised as a methodological contribution. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the digital transition on Twitter for international students by analysing their Twitter timelines. The investigation of the transition was not restricted to the tweet content, what students post, but also extended to the frequency and language of tweeting and the sentiment of their posts. This investigation has provided an answer to the question of whether and how the students' transition on

Twitter can occur. This method also suggests that the digital transition on Twitter can be seen for individuals facing transition in their lives. This could be considered as an interesting outcome for further researchers planning to look at the relationship between any life transition and the use of social media.

This study also adds to the existing literature by applying social science studies with social media data. Collecting social media data using Python and Twitter API and analysing it using content and sentiment analysis can add knowledge to the methodological literature in social science. This research has provided a detailed description of how students' timelines on Twitter were retrieved, how the researcher connected to the Twitter API and what data collection options are there in the field. It also provided a description of sampling social media data including how and why the dataset in this research was sampled. A rich description of how the data was analysed based on its content and sentiment was also provided. Another contribution of this study is related to the ethics of researching social media. The ethical considerations for social media research is in flux, meaning that it is impossible to provide certain rules regarding how social media data can be used ethically (The University of Sheffield, 2020). A popular and recent update for ethical considerations in collecting social media data was a result of the new update of GDPR in May 2018 (GDPR, 2020). Different methodological aspects were considered and presented in this study such as ensuring the anonymisation of participants and paraphrasing the tweet content to avoid identifying its creator using search engines. These considerations can contribute to field of collecting social media data.

Another methodological contribution is related to the use of drawing during the interviews. Using drawing in qualitative interviews can add value by facilitating the participants' sharing of experiences, feelings and emotions (Brailas, 2020). Students in this study were asked to draw their transition timeline, identify the stages which they had gone through, their difficulties and emotions during their whole experience. They also discussed what they drew with the interviewer and made further clarifications of it. In this research, the drawings were helpful not just in what they contain in terms of information but also in motivating the

students to speak and provoking their thoughts. This is consistent with Kearney and Hyle (2004) who stated that 'the drawing process itself seemed to cause the related feelings and emotions to be internally accessed, and therefore more readily available to verbal sharing, even if the feelings or emotions were not clearly a part of the drawing itself' (p. 367). Therefore, applying the drawing technique in interviews adds to the current methodological literature by confirming its effectiveness in the context of this study.

#### 7.4 Recommendations for practical and policy

This study was able to identify some characteristics of transition and presents potential types of international students' transitions. In this research, students were able to voice their experiences giving insights into the students' perspectives. These insights provide various implications for practice and policy and could be of direct interest to people and institutions dealing with international students in the home and host countries and international and Saudi students themselves.

##### 7.4.1 Home country people and institutions

Whilst the findings of this study suggest that the transition is an unpredictable experience, other findings show that preparing the students before they leave can play a positive role in their experience. One recommendation is that study abroad organisations in the home countries organise and run training sessions, preparation activities and meetings with former international students to share their experience. These activities could raise awareness of the potential types of changes students may face which could result in fewer issues during their transition. Students can be educated about the potential cultural differences and possible ways of reacting towards the new culture. They can also be advised on how to deal with social changes such as leaving the family, living alone and interacting with the new host society. Furthermore, it was seen that some students held negative stereotypes about people in the UK which created some fears during the pre-arrival and early stages. Home country organisations can also make an effort to present a clear image for potential students about their potential host society in the host country. This can be further improved if the education organisations in the home and host countries collaborate to provide this information.

Findings in this study have shown that the transition is an emotionally complicated experience. Many students in this study presented negative feelings prior to leaving the home country, clearly shown in the models that they were asked to do. The transition has been characterised as more than an individual experience where significant others can also affect the transition of the main individual. In the preparation phase, those others can be the students' family, friends and sponsor. It is important that those actors understand how complicated and stressful this experience can be for the students. They are also recommended, particularly the close ones, to provide the students with emotional support and stand with them.

This study has shown the importance of co-national peers for international students before and after their physical arrival in the host country. Many students reported that co-national peers were a good source of information and social support. The common language, cultural background and maybe religion are motivators behind the students clustering with other co-national peers. Organisations supporting students abroad (e.g. sponsors, cultural bureaus) can play a role in linking these students. For Saudi international students in most UK cities, the Saudi cultural bureaus run Saudi societies where students can gather, socialise and celebrate their national and religious festivals. However, more activities are needed particularly those that are academic related. Collaboration with host universities would also be helpful in providing students with necessary academic information.

#### 7.4.2 Host country people and institutions

This study shows that the transition is a complicated experience covering a wide range of changes and challenges in different domains, not only the academic sphere. It is also not always the case that the academic transition is the key change for international students. In many cases the social changes, language differences or the new rules and policies in the new country cause most of the students' issues in the host country. For university leadership and academic departments in the host country, this shows that students are in need of social, academic and language support. University departments can run pre-arrival programmes providing students with support sessions on ways of making social adjustments, overcoming

culture shock, and dealing with new systems such as banking, healthcare, transportation and accommodation. Given that, these transitions start before the students' departure, students need support before they leave to the host country.

As shown in the previous section, international students prefer to seek information and social support from other co-national peers. The host university's leadership can support this by initiating and regulating the international student societies (e.g., Saudi society) which can act as a support group and interactive hub for socialising and give students a sense of empowerment. In addition to these benefits, these societies would also allow students to present their cultures and traditions to other students and professionals in the university.

As previously highlighted, the transition experience can be stressful particularly during the early stages of the students' arrival in the host country. Findings are inconsistent with Menzies and Baron (2014) model which assumes that students have a honeymoon period as soon as they arrive in the host country. In contrast, this period is associated with challenges and issues related to the academic, social and cultural adjustment. It also includes issues associated with the settlement and adjustment to the new rules and systems. These can make this period very stressful. All significant others (e.g., university teachers, home students and host families) that students interact with after their arrival need to be aware of the students' sensitivity at this early stage period.

According to the findings of this study, language transition can start before the students leave for the host country, but it is also a continuous transition where students struggle with language issues even if they have been in the country for long time. The impact of the language transition can be heightened because of its potential impact on other aspects of the students' life in the host country (e.g. social, academic). It is recommended that university teachers, in class or as personal tutors, are aware of this challenge and the language differences. More patience is recommended with international students particularly during spoken interactions as some students in this study reported issues with understanding host

accents and dialect. In conversations, they need to expect international students to ask them for repetition.

Social media are shown to be effective in the transition process. Students in this study acknowledged the positive roles of social media in seeking information about various aspects in their experience. This study has shown a high reliance on social media by international students as a source of information during their experience. This study strongly recommends host countries organisations who deal with international students such as universities, immigration offices, city councils and accommodation providers to use social media to provide the necessary information and communicate with international students.

#### 7.4.3 International and Saudi students

The present study illuminated the transition experience of Saudi students to the UK. The outcomes of this study can benefit future prospective Saudi and international students who want to study abroad in terms of their transition experience and their use of social media. A key interesting outcome of this research is that transition is a multiple experience. Given that the international student transition is not solely restricted to the academic experience but also includes various domains, international students should expect to face various concurrent transitions during their studies abroad. Being aware of the potential changes mentioned in this study can minimise the issues and challenges faced.

Social media are a helpful tool for international students, it has shown its usefulness for international students as a tool to seek information and create new connections and keep connected with family and friends back home. While international students can benefit from social media, they should also be aware of its downsides as reported by the participants in this study, notably the isolation from the outside society when they highly engage with their online home community. This can hinder their social and cultural adjustment to the new place.



The language barrier has been found to be one of the key challenges facing international students. The negative impact of English language issues can extend to students' academic and daily lives. These issues are particularly noticeable after arrival in the host country but also can continue throughout the experience. Therefore, pre-arrival preparations such as attending English language classes, especially for low level students, is recommended. This can smoothen the early post-arrival stages and reduce the negative impact of most transitions. Students should also be aware that their learning language journey is continuous and achieving a score in an English exam should not prevent the student from improving their language. Instead, learning the language should be a continuous practice because its challenges will keep appearing.

For Saudi students in particular, moving to study in the UK or in a western country in general involves moving from a collectivistic Muslim society to an individualistic multi-religion society. This also includes moving to a new society with different gender roles. Students are recommended to be ready for such differences by reading about the potential culture and communicating with former students. This can be helpful in reducing the shock after arrival.

#### 7.5 Limitations and future research

Although this study has expanded the current understanding of the transition of Saudi students, the transition of international students, and the use of social media during transition and the transition concept as a whole, the researcher recognises that this research has a number of limitations. These, alongside recommendations for future work, are presented as follows.

This study is restricted to Saudi students living their transition experience in the UK. Although this study has provided answers to questions about which characteristics shape the international student transition, what types are included and how social media are involved, these answers were based on the experience of one group of Saudi students. Involving participants from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds or those studying in

different host countries would bring new insights to the investigated phenomena. Future research could focus on students from another nationality group or various nationalities to see how, for example, the cultural and social setting of participants can impact on the told story. Saudi students studying in another host country could also be considered where the role of host country in the transition experience can be examined.

In terms of the participants, another limitation relates to the students' study level. Because the sponsorship programmes in Saudi Arabia usually send students to study Master's and PhD programmes, most participants in this study were doing/planning to undertake postgraduate study. Only one participant was an undergraduate student. Therefore, including younger undergraduate students is likely to add more perspectives about the phenomena. Future researchers, who may consider other or various nationalities, could also include more undergraduate students to compare the findings.

Another limitation of this study is related to the inclusion of students from various study levels. These groups can have different experiences caused by the length of their study, the different opportunities they offer for socialising and the different academic changes and challenges. Future researchers can make a focus on a specific level of study (e.g. undergraduate level) to be more precise about the changes and challenges faced at this specific stage and to compare their findings with the findings of this study. Future researchers are also recommended to make a focus on investigating the differences in the transition experience caused by the different study levels.

This study has found that international students made a digital transition in their social media use as a result of their physical move. Various patterns of changes on social media were noted and reported in chapter 5. Further research could look at other contexts of transitions to investigate whether and how a digital transition on social media can occur in these contexts.

The second method of this research considered Twitter as a data source because Twitter provides free data access through Twitter API and the popularity of this platform for the targeted sample (Statista, 2021c). Having free access through the platform's API is not applicable to other social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp, but Twitter data can be freely collected if Twitter API is used. However, as previously mentioned, the rules and policies for collecting social media data are in flux and may change in the future. Furthermore, the popularity of platforms can change and one can replace another. There is also the likelihood that new social media platforms can emerge and dominate and their data can also be collected. Future researchers may consider other social media platforms, if applicable, which can also give new insights to the investigated phenomena. Another limitation from the second method is related to the inclusion of tweets only from the first method participants. Future researchers are recommended to expand the analysis of Twitter feeds to a wider sample to confirm if the patterns from this study are applied to a wider population, and also to see if new patterns can emerge.

Although one of the strengths of this study is that it incorporated the voice of international students, it also stated that transition is more than an individual experience. An important extension of this research would be to include the voice of other significant others such as family members, host university professionals, host families in order to give a more holistic view about the transition. This may also reveal new directions for future work where significant others can be included.

Given the limited time of this doctoral study, the interview data was collected during one period of time with participants arriving or planning to arrive in the UK at different periods of time. This gave the researcher different perspectives at different timelines about the phenomena. However, conducting a longitudinal study interviewing the same participants at two different time points of their transition journey would give more insights and new perspectives. This would be a fruitful consideration for further work.

In early 2020, the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic impacted and continues to impact people's life globally. However, as both datasets in this research were collected before the pandemic, it was not possible to investigate the effects of covid-19 on students in this research. Therefore, future researchers can look at the impact of global pandemics (e.g., covid-19) on various aspects such as the mobility of international students, the international students' transition and the transition of studying from home and the impact of social media during the pandemic.

Taken together, this study serves as a good foundation for further research in the fields of Saudi students' transition, international student's transition, international students and social media and the transition concept as a whole. It opens up many opportunities for additional research in these areas, many presented in this section.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Interviews guide

#### After Arriving Interview

##### Participant background

Before we start the interview, can you please fill the following background survey:

Gender	
Age	
Current marital status	
Do you have children? How many?	
Did you come alone the UK or with family?	
Where do you live in the UK (which city)?	
Which city in Saudi Arabia you are from?	
What do you study in the UK (degree and major)?	
When did you arrive to the UK (month and year)?	
Are you self-funded or sponsored student?	
What is your English language level when you arrived to the UK (i.e. beginner, elementary, intermediate, advanced)?	
If you are doing a university course, did you do any English language course before starting your university course?	
How do you consider your English language level now (i.e. beginner, elementary, intermediate, advanced)?	
Is it your first time to study abroad?	
What is your plan after completing your study (e.g. go back to work in Saudi Arabia, find a job in the UK)?	



## **Open question**

- **Thank you for participating in this interview, Can you please talk about what motivated you to study abroad in general and in the UK in particular?**

## **Transition questions**

- **What are the challenges/difficulties you faced prior, during and after your moving from Saudi Arabia to the UK?**
  - Prior difficulties may include applying for the UK visa, getting offer, etc.
  - Difficulties after transition may include finding accommodation, adapting to the new weather, academic challenges, etc.
  - How did you deal/cope with these challenges?
  - Can you tell me what kind of support do you receive? and who usually supports you?
- **Can you talk about your own experience of transition and how can you divide it into phases?**
  - What is your transition been like to the UK?
  - What factors do you think have affected your transition (e.g. English level, moving with a family)?
  - Does the life in the UK meet your expectations?
- **On the timeline of your transition, can you draw the fluctuation of your mood during your experience of transition and identify why?**
- **This is a model of international students' transition presented by Menzies and Baron, do you think that you have gone through these phases? Or any of them?**
  - If yes, where do you position yourself now?
  - If no, can you create your own model of transition based on your experience?

## **Information behaviour and social media questions**

- **During your transition, what types of information do you usually need?**

- What information you needed at each transition phase (e.g. accommodation information, culture and norms, legal information, health and wellness, academic information, etc.)?
- Please provide examples.
- **What information sources do you usually use to satisfy your needs of information (e.g. social media, search engines, web-pages, friends, family)**
  - Which source of information was dominated at each transition phase? and why?
  - Have you started to consider new sources because of your transition?
- **Can you tell me about your use of social media during your transition?**
  - How many hours/minutes do you spend on social media per day now?
  - What social media platform(s) do you use?
  - Currently, how do you use social media (e.g. for information seeking, for social communications, for entertainment, etc.)?
  - Are there any difference between social media platforms in regards of your use?
  - At this stage of transition, do you think that your engagement with social media increased? How? Why?
  - Do you trust the information provided by social media?
- **Have you noticed any changes in regards of your use and platform types during the time of your transition?**
  - Have you started to use new platforms since you came to the UK?
  - What are these platforms?
  - Why you started to use them?
  - Have you started to follow/become a friend of new people online?
  - Who are they (e.g. colleges, co-national friends, international friends)?
  - Have you joined new online groups?
  - What are these groups? and why did you join them?
  - Do you think that social media is isolating you form the UK community?

- **During your time of transition, can you tell me about your engagement with social media?**
  - When it increases and when it decreases.
  - Which platform was dominated at each time of your transition?
  
- **Do you use Twitter (this includes do you explore tweets, post tweet or reply)? If yes, how frequently?**
  - Why do you use Twitter?
  - What type of content (if any) do you usually post?
  - What type of content is more interesting for you on Twitter? Why?
  - How can you compare your use of Twitter before and after your study abroad?
  
- **What impact do you think that involvement in social media has had on your transition (either positive or negative)?**
  - Do you think that social media support or hinder your transition?
  - Why it is important and why it is not?
  - Can you give examples of this?

## **Close**

- **Is there anything else you want to add?**

## Before Arriving Interview

### Participant background

Before we start the interview, can you please fill the following background survey:

Gender	
Age	
Current marital status	
Do you have children? How many?	
Are you planning to go to the UK alone or with family?	
Where are you planning to study in the UK (which city and university)?	
Which city in Saudi Arabia you are from?	
What will you study in the UK (degree and major)?	
When are you planning to leave to the UK (month and year)?	
Will you be self-funded or sponsored student?	
How do you consider your English language level now (i.e. beginner, elementary, intermediate, advanced)?	
Will you do an English course before starting your university course?	
Is it your first time to study abroad?	
What is your plan after completing your study?	

## Open question

- Can you tell me about yourself, and what motivated you to decide to study at the UK?

## Transition questions

- **How do you feel in regards of your coming experience to study abroad?**
  - What is your feeling (e.g. excited, nervous, etc.)
  - How are you preparing for your journey to study abroad?
  - When do you think you started to prepare?
- **What are the challenges/obstacles you are facing now (before leaving to the UK)?**

### **Please give examples.**

- This may include applying for the UK visa, getting offer, looking for accommodation, etc.
  - How did you deal/cope with these challenges?
  - Are there any source of support?
  - Can you tell me what kind of support do you receive? And who supported you?
- **This is a model of international students' transition presented by Menzies and Baron. It assumes that you are in the pre-departure phase (more details about this phase will be given during the interview). Do you agree with assumptions in this phase?**
    - If yes, How?
    - If no, can you draw your own phase(s).

## Social media practise questions

- **Can you tell me about your current use of social media?**
  - How many hours/minutes do you spend on social media per day?

- What social media platform(s) do you use?
- How do you use social media (e.g. for information seeking, for social communications, for entertainment, etc.)?
- Are there any difference between social media platforms in regards of your use?
- At this stage of transition, do you think that your engagement with social media increased? How? Why?
- **Have you noticed any changes in regards of platform types and your use since you decided to study abroad?**
  - Have you started to use new platforms since you decide to study in the UK?
  - What are these platforms?
  - Why you started to use them?
  - Have you started to follow/become a friend of new people online?
  - Who are they?
  - Have you joined new online groups?
  - What are these groups? And why did you join them?
- **Do you use Twitter (this include do you explore tweets, post tweet or reply)? If yes, how frequently?**
  - Why do you use Twitter?
  - How can you compare your use of Twitter before and after you decided to study abroad?
- **What impact do you think that involvement in social media has had on you at this stage of transition (either positive or negative)?**
  - Do you think that social media support or hinder?
  - Why it is important and why it is not?
  - Can you give examples of this?

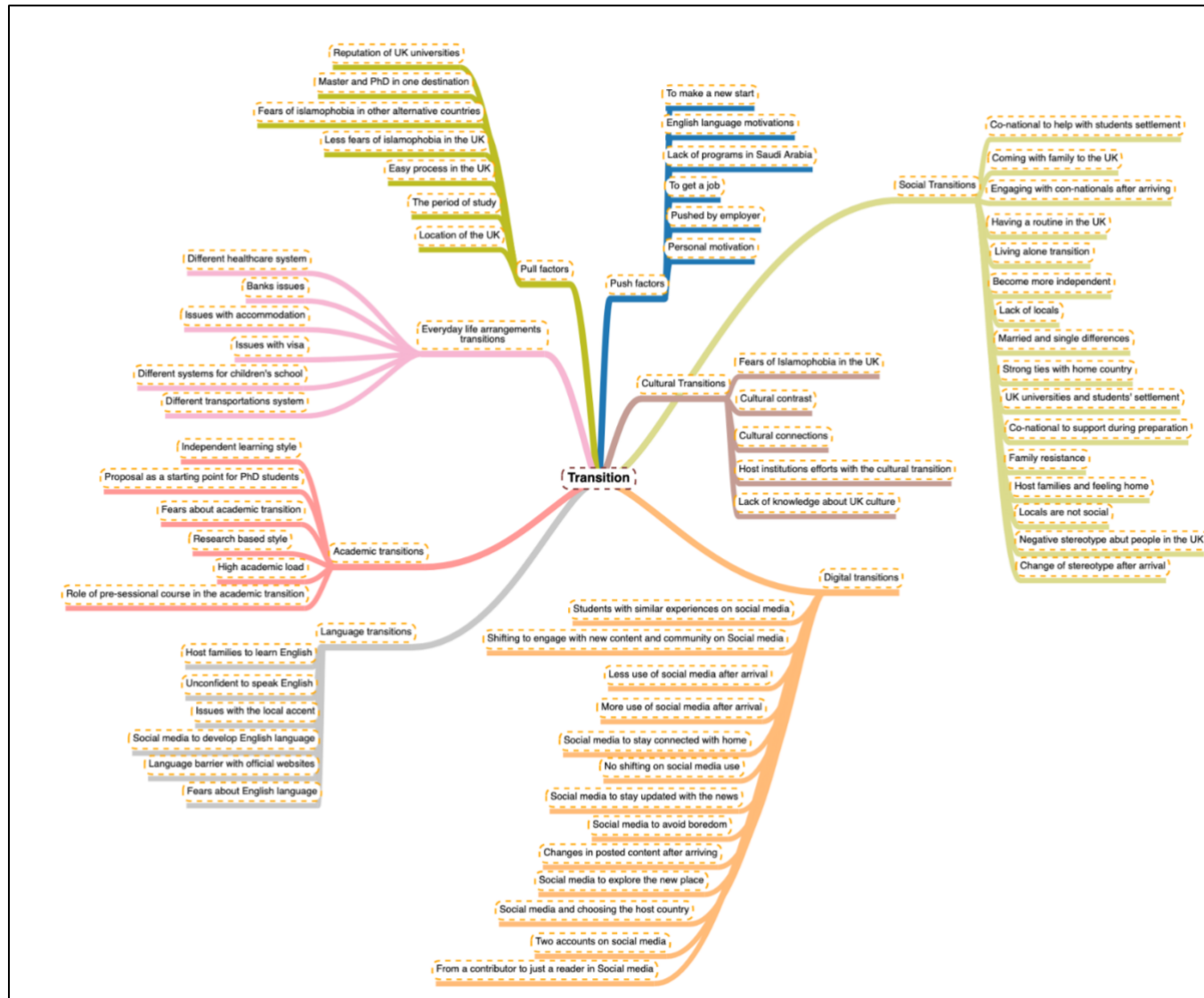
## Information behaviour questions

- **During this stage of transition, what type of information do you usually need?**
  - Please provide examples.
- **What information sources do you usually use to satisfy your needs of information (e.g. social media, search engines, web-pages, friends, family)**
  - Which source was dominated at each transition phase? And why?
  - Have you started to consider new sources since you decided to study abroad?
- **Why do you use social media as a source of information at this stage of transition?**
  - Please provide examples.
  - How does use of social media compare to other information sources?
- **What types of information do you usually seek/share on social media at this stage?**
  - Please provide examples.
  - With whom do you seek/share information on social media?
- **At this stage of transition, do you think that information on social media is helpful?**
  - Why and why not?
  - Can you provide examples?

## Close

- **Is there anything else you want to add?**

Appendix 2 Codebook for first method





### Appendix 3 Algorithm for collecting tweets

```
def get_all_tweets(screen_name):
    #Twitter only allows access to a users most recent 3240 tweets with this method
    print("getting %s tweets" % (screen_name))
    #authorize twitter, initialize tweepy
    auth = tweepy.OAuthHandler(consumer_key, consumer_secret)
    auth.set_access_token(access_key, access_secret)
    api = tweepy.API(auth)

    #initialize a list to hold all the tweepy Tweets
    alltweets = []

    #make initial request for most recent tweets (200 is the maximum allowed count)
    new_tweets = api.user_timeline(screen_name = screen_name, count=200,
tweet_mode="extended")

    #make initial request for latest favorites (do not forget to uncomment to use)

    #save most recent tweets
    alltweets.extend(new_tweets)

    #save the id of the oldest tweet less one
    oldest = alltweets[-1].id - 1

    #keep grabbing tweets until there are no tweets left to grab
    while len(new_tweets) > 0:
        print ("getting tweets before %s" % (oldest))

        #all subsequent requests use the max_id param to prevent duplicates
        new_tweets = api.user_timeline(screen_name = screen_name, count=200,
tweet_mode="extended", max_id=oldest)

        #save most recent tweets
```

```

alltweets.extend(new_tweets)

#update the id of the oldest tweet less one
oldest = alltweets[-1].id - 1

print ("...%s tweets downloaded so far" % (len(alltweets)))

#transform the tweepy tweets into a 2D array that will populate the csv
outtweets = [[tweet.id_str, tweet.created_at, tweet.source,
tweet.in_reply_to_user_id, tweet.in_reply_to_user_id_str,
tweet.in_reply_to_screen_name, tweet.geo, tweet.favorited, tweet.retweeted,
tweet.lang, tweet.retweet_count, tweet.favorite_count] for tweet in alltweets]

tweets_df = pd.DataFrame(vars(alltweets[i]) for i in range(len(alltweets)))
tweets_df_dict = tweets_df.to_dict('index')
for i in range(len(outtweets)):
    outtweets[i].append(tweets_df_dict[i]["full_text"])

# # # use pandas to save dataframe to csv

#write the csv
with open('%s_tweets.csv' % screen_name, 'w', encoding='utf-8') as f:
    writer = csv.writer(f)
    # write row for timeline
writer.writerow(["id","created_at","source","in_reply_to_user_id","in_reply_to_user
_id_str","in_reply_to_screen_name","geo","favorited","retweeted","lang","retweet_co
unt","favorite_count","text"])

    writer.writerows(outtweets)

pass

```

## Appendix 4 Ethical approval for first method



Downloaded: 23/05/2019  
Approved: 23/05/2019

Anas Alsuhaibani  
Registration number: 170276016  
Information School  
Programme: PhD in Information studies

Dear Anas

**PROJECT TITLE:** An Investigation of the role of social media in Saudi students transition to study in the UK.  
**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 026503

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 23/05/2019 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 026503 (dated 17/05/2019).
- Participant information sheet 1060494 version 1 (25/04/2019).
- Participant consent form 1060495 version 5 (17/05/2019).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

Email Ischool Ethics  
Ethics Administrator  
Information School

## Appendix 5 Ethical approval for second method



Downloaded: 13/06/2020  
Approved: 13/06/2020

Anas Alsuhaibani  
Registration number: 170276016  
Information School  
Programme: PhD in Information studies

Dear Anas

**PROJECT TITLE:** An Investigation of the role of social media in Saudi students transition to study in the UK  
**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 034631

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 13/06/2020 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 034631 (form submission date: 12/06/2020); (expected project end date: 31/03/2022).
- Participant consent form 1079200 version 4 (12/06/2020).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Paul Reilly  
Ethics Administrator  
Information School

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure>
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf)
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

## Appendix 6 Informed consent for first method

<b>The University of Sheffield Information School</b>	An Investigation of the Role of Social Media on the Saudi Students' Transition to Study in the UK
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### Researchers

The lead researcher of this study is Anas Alsuhaibani (ahalsuhaibani1@sheffield.ac.uk), who is a second-year PhD student in the Digital Societies Research Group, Information School, University of Sheffield. The study is supervised by Dr. Andrew Cox (a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk), Dr. Frank Hopfgartner (f.hopfgartner@sheffield.ac.uk) and Dr. Xin Zhao (Skye) (Xin.Zhao@sheffield.ac.uk) who are lecturers in the Information School, University of Sheffield.

Further information about the researchers can be found:

Anas Alsuhaibani: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/pgpr/students/aalsuhaibani>

Andrew Cox: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff/cox>

Frank Hopfgartner: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff/hopfgartner>

Xin Zhao (Skye): <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff/zhao>

### Purpose of the research

This research investigates the role of social media in Saudi students' transition to study in the UK. By transition, we mean the experience of students' movement from Saudi Arabia to the UK. The transition experience usually starts three months before the students travel to the host country and last for one year. This research will explore how do Saudi students perceive that social media is used during their transition and what are its possible effects on them.

### Who will be participating?

We are inviting adults over 18 who are studying or planning to study in the UK and have the following conditions:

- Student is from Saudi Arabia.
- Student is an active user of any social media platform.
- Student is studying or planning to study in the UK on a long-term course (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate or English language course leading to higher education study).
- Student is in their first year in the UK, or they are planning to depart to study in the UK within the next three months.
- Arabic is their first language.

### What will you be asked to do?

If you are interested in taking part in the study, I would like to talk with you about your experience in using social media during your transition from Saudi Arabia to the UK. We expect that most interviews will last between 40 to 60 minutes but this is flexible. Interviews can be either in person, via Skype, or by phone; whichever you prefer. The lead researcher, who will carry out the interviews, is based in Sheffield and is willing to travel to interview you if you want.

You have the right to refuse to participate in the study as well as to refuse to answer any of the questions. You also have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without having to give a reason. These rights, however, cannot be extended after the data has been anonymised, analysed or published.

#### **What are the potential risks of participating?**

Your participation in this study does not imply any identifiable risks or disadvantages. All your comments will be made anonymous in order to protect your identity and the confidential documents will be stored in a secured hard drive and protected by passwords. Questions were designed not to cause harm, anguish or discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, feel free to express your concerns. You are, of course, free to decline to answer such questions. You may withdraw from the study at any time. You are moreover encouraged to refrain from disclosing any information that you may consider defamatory, incriminating or otherwise sensitive.

#### **What data will I collect?**

I am audio recording the interviews, and taking notes on paper to help me when analysing the interviews. Questions in the interviews are about your experience of transition to the UK and your use of social media during this period.

#### **What will I do with the data?**

In accordance to the university policies, the data will be stored in a password-protected system. It will be stored in a secure networked drive and in the researcher's University of Sheffield Google Drive account. The participants will be anonymised and data will be also encrypted and it will be accessed only by the researcher and his supervisors. The interviews will be transcribed by the lead researcher and the data will be thematically analysed by him as well. The use of paper copies will be avoided unless essential and will be kept in a locked storage in the Information School. The papers will be destroyed as soon as they are no longer needed.

If you give us permission, we would like to retain the transcriptions for one year after the lead researcher degree has been awarded. The anonymised data will be passed to the supervisors to either keep it stored in the same secured networked drive or transfer it to another secure drive (within the university policies) so it can be used for future research.

Your completed consent form, together with the research data will be held in securely locked storage in the Information School and will be confidentially destroyed after a year of being awarded the PhD for the lead researcher.

#### **Will your participation be confidential?**

All information you give us will be carefully anonymised when the interviews are transcribed, and names and any details that could identify you or other people will be changed. In the write-up of findings in this study, you will be assigned codes and names that you have mentioned (e.g., universities' names, organisations names, places names, etc.) will be anonymised if the research team think that you will be identified by these details.

#### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The anonymised data will be used in the researcher's PhD thesis, which will be publicly available, and in future research publications. It is also possible that the anonymised findings will be presented

at conferences. The Ph.D. thesis will be published in the White Rose System [<http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk>].

#### **What is the legal basis for processing your personal data?**

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. In order to collect and use your personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is ‘a task in the public interest’.

#### **Declaration of consent**

- I confirm that I have read and understand the description of the research project, and that I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.
- I understand that if I withdraw I can request for the data I have already provided to be deleted, however this might not be possible if the data has already been anonymised or findings published.
- I understand that I may decline to answer any particular question or questions, or to do any of the activities.
- I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential, that my name or identity will not be linked to any research materials, and that I will not be identified or identifiable in any report or reports that result from the research, unless I have agreed otherwise.
- I give permission for all the research team members to have access to my responses.
- I give permission for the research team to re-use my data for future research within one year after the lead researcher being awarded his PhD as specified above.
- I agree to take part in the research project as described above.

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Participant Name (Please print)

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Participant Signature

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Researcher Name (Please print)

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Researcher Signature

Date

**Note:** Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, please contact Dr Paul Reilly, Research Ethics Coordinator, Information School, The University of Sheffield ([ischool\\_ethics@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:ischool_ethics@sheffield.ac.uk)).



## Appendix 7 Informed consent for second method

<b>The University of Sheffield Information School</b>	<b>An Investigation of the Role of Social Media on the Saudi Students' Transition to Study in the UK</b>
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### Researchers

The lead researcher of this study is Anas Alsuhaibani (ahalsuhaibani1@sheffield.ac.uk), who is a third- year PhD student in the Digital Societies Research Group, Information School, University of Sheffield. The study is supervised by Dr. Andrew Cox (a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk), Dr. Frank Hopfgartner (f.hopfgartner@sheffield.ac.uk) and Dr. Xin Zhao (Skye) (Xin.Zhao@sheffield.ac.uk) who are lecturers in the Information School, University of Sheffield.

Further information about the researchers can be found:

Anas Alsuhaibani: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/pgr/students/aalsuhaibani>

Andrew Cox: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff/cox>

Frank Hopfgartner: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff/hopfgartner>

Xin Zhao (Skye): <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff/zhao>

### Purpose of the research

The main aim of this research is to investigate the transition of Saudi students to study in the UK and their use of social media. This research starts by conceptualizing how the students define their transition to the UK, then it will investigate how social media and particularly Twitter is involved in this experience. This activity is associated with investigating the students' behavior and content on Twitter during their time of transition.

### Who will be participating?

We are inviting adults over 18 who are studying in the UK and have the following conditions:

- Student is from Saudi Arabia.
- Student use Twitter.
- Student is studying on a long-term course (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate or English language course leading to higher education study).

### What will you be asked to do?

If you are interested in taking part in the study, we will just need you to send us your Twitter handle (user name). By providing your Twitter handle, you are contributing to a part of this research where the Saudi students use of Twitter during their transition to the UK will be investigated. This means that students' behavior and content on Twitter will be investigated to see how they change over the transition time by observing their Twitter timeline. This investigation includes the followings: (1) observing the students change of their language of tweeting during their transition, (2) observing their change of profile details during their transition, (3) classifying the types of accounts that they mention and (4) investigating the type of tweets that they like over the time of transition. Again, your task here is just to send us your Twitter handle and we will do the investigation.

#### **What are the potential risks of participating?**

Your participation in this study does not imply any identifiable risks or disadvantages. All your usernames will be made anonymous in order to protect your identity and the confidential documents will be stored in a secured hard drive and protected by passwords. You can withdraw from this research at any time and you can request the data we have collected to be deleted, however this might not be possible if the data has already been anonymized or findings published.

#### **What data will I collect?**

We are collecting your Twitter timeline. We will be using Twitter API to collect your tweets and other metadata (information about each tweet). The set of information that we will retrieve with each tweet are: (1) the text of the tweet, (2) the date of creating the tweet, (3) the language of it, (4) the source of it (e.g. web app, iPhone), (5) whether it is a tweet or retweet, (6) number of times the tweet was liked or retweeted and (7) whether there are other accounts mentioned in the tweet or not. Other information about your account will be also retrieved, which are (1) your profile description, (2) your location and (3) number of your followers and followings.

#### **What will I do with the data?**

In accordance to the university policies, the data will be stored in a password-protected system. It will be stored in a secure server and in the researcher's University of Sheffield Google Drive account. The participants' user names will be anonymised and data will be also encrypted, and it will be accessed only by the researcher and his supervisors. The use of paper copies will be avoided unless essential and will be kept in a locked storage in the Information School. The papers will be destroyed as soon as they are no longer needed.

Your completed consent form, together with the research data will be held in securely locked storage in the Information School and will be confidentially destroyed after a year of being awarded the PhD for the lead researcher.

#### **Will your participation be confidential?**

Your Twitter user names will be anonymised immediately after retrieving the tweets. Other information contained in the tweets such as your location and university names will be kept in the dataset for analysis purposes but not reported in findings. Third party accounts (e.g., @mentions,

replies to tweets, retweets) will be fully anonymised. If there is a need to quote any of your tweet, then your original tweet will be paraphrased to prevent unauthorized people from identifying your identity through the use of search engines. In the write-up of findings in this study, you will be assigned codes and any other information that might lead to your identity (e.g., university name, location) will not be reported.

#### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The anonymised data will be used in the researcher's PhD thesis, which will be publicly available, and in future research publications. It is also possible that the anonymised findings will be presented at conferences. The Ph.D. thesis will be published in the White Rose System [<http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk>].

#### **What is the legal basis for processing your personal data?**

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. In order to collect and use your personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is 'a task in the public interest'.

#### **Declaration of consent**

- I confirm that I have read and understand the description of the research project, and that I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.
- I understand that if I withdraw I can request for the data I have already provided to be deleted, however this might not be possible if the data has already been anonymised or findings published.
- I understand that I may decline to answer any particular question or questions, or to do any of the activities.
- I give permission for all the research team members to have access to my responses.
- I agree to take part in the research project as described above.

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Participant Name (Please print)

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Participant Signature

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Researcher Name (Please print)

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Researcher Signature

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Date

**Note:** Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.  
If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, please contact Dr Paul Reilly, Research Ethics Coordinator, Information School, The University of Sheffield ([ischool\\_ethics@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:ischool_ethics@sheffield.ac.uk)).