



I wish that I could have friends: The Intercultural Friendship Experience of Omani Students at US Universities

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Abstract: The domain of intercultural friendships between international and host national students represents a pivotal aspect of international higher education and intercultural communication. In response to the evident research gap within this realm, we conducted a phenomenological inquiry to explore how eight Omani students establish friendships with US host students and the factors that might either facilitate or impede these intercultural friendships. Through our interviews, we discerned four key themes: Adjustment (involving social integration and seeking part-time jobs), Acceptance (embracing new cultural norms and utilizing social media), English proficiency (being proficient in the language and displaying friendliness), and Similarity (finding common ground in country of origin or shared interests). Our investigation identified participants falling into distinct categories: some anticipated forming friendships with both local and international students, while others realized that a lack of commonality, either in their home country or shared interests, limited their interaction and socialization with host students. Additionally, some expressed that nurturing friendships demands significant time and effort. Our research yields insightful conclusions on methods to enhance intercultural friendships, including the promotion of meaningful interactions between host and international students.

Keywords: Intercultural Friendship, Omani Students, Phenomenology, Intercultural Communication

1. Introduction

Pursuing higher education overseas motivates international students to engage in intercultural and cross-cultural interactions. Among the main destinations for these students, US higher education stands out, with statistics indicating an influx of over one million international students in recent years (Bound, Braga, Khanna, & Turner, 2021). A significant concern among these students pertains to forming intercultural friendships with host national students (Robinson, Somerville, & Walsworth, 2020). The dynamics of intercultural friendship between international and host national students represent a crucial issue across campuses worldwide (Achirri, 2021; Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2017; Colvin, Volet, & Fozdar, 2014; Meng, Li, & Zhu, 2021; Robinson et al., 2020). Diverse university campuses offer an advantageous environment for fostering intercultural contact between international and host students, thereby facilitating intercultural friendships (Robinson et al., 2020). However, there appears to be a lack of literature documenting the international experiences of Omani students in the US. As noted by Achirri (2021) and İlhan and Oruç (2020), international students, including Omanis, often encounter limited intercultural contact and friendships with US students.

Omani students, similar to their international counterparts, anticipate building friendships with host national students. The experiences of Arab Muslim students within Western social and academic contexts have been examined from various perspectives, including religious minority treatment, cultural identity expression, stereotyping, discrimination, and adjustment to new social and academic environments (Alkharusi, 2013; McDermott-Levy, 2011; Piazza, 2020). These studies predominantly explore these issues through cultural and religious lenses (Alkharusi, 2018). Consequently, forming intercultural friendships for Omani students may prove challenging due to cultural differences.

Various circumstances influence the development of intercultural friendships. A critical examination is necessary due to the lack of systematic research highlighting inherent factors that may hinder the formation of intercultural friendships among these students (Alkharusi, 2018; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Sias et al., 2008; Wright & Schartner, 2013). To comprehend this phenomenon better, we explored the social phenomenon of intercultural friendships between Omani and US students and investigated the factors that enable or hinder their formation. This examination is crucial as it presents a new research scope in intergroup contact, not only focusing on cultural differences but also on personal, situational, and social issues that might

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impede intercultural friendships (Achirri, 2021; Alkharusi, 2018; Paolini, Harwood, Hewstone, & Neumann, 2018; Robinson et al., 2020). While international students might share certain common features, such as leaving their home country and desiring to adapt to a new culture, these features shape their interactions and friendships differently with both their international and domestic peers (Achirri, 2021; İlhan & Oruç, 2020).

Limited literature delves into the intercultural friendships of Omani students in the US context. This dearth justifies exploring the factors inhibiting and driving intercultural friendship formation and bridging the social distance between these students to foster such friendships (Robinson et al., 2020; Schartner, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of research on the intercultural friendships of Omani students with both international and domestic students in the US educational context, considering differences in culture, interests, desires, and norms, highlights the importance of this research. It represents a valuable contribution to the field of intercultural communication by focusing on this specific group of Omani students for several reasons. Firstly, the rising number of Omani students studying in the US, reaching around 3000 students in 2017, underscores the importance of understanding their efforts to establish interethnic friendships. Secondly, Omani students hail from an Arab cultural background, potentially influencing their interactions with international peers, particularly amidst increased discrimination and prejudice against Arabs post-9/11 (Alkharusi, 2013; Piazza, 2020).

While numerous studies have explored the intercultural friendships of various international students in different Western countries, understanding the experiences of Omanis in this regard remains underexplored, as well as the choices made by nationals concerning friendship formations (Robinson et al., 2020). Shedding light on this specific group aims to dispel misconceptions about Islam and Arab cultures and bridge the gap between Eastern and Western cultures. Additionally, this study may facilitate smoother interactions and relationships between Omani students and others in the US (Alkharusi, 2018). It also delves deeper into how the multicultural environment nurtures intercultural friendships.

This study commences with a critical review of the literature on intercultural friendships, highlighting the main challenges and issues shaping these friendships. Subsequently, it presents the research methodology, focusing on phenomenological in-depth interviews. The ensuing findings and discussions emphasize the factors hindering the formation of intercultural friendships among Omani students with their US counterparts. Finally, the study concludes by delineating the implications of these findings. The study begins with a critical examination of the literature on intercultural friendships and outlines the main challenges and issues that shape intercultural friendships. Next, the research method focusing on phenomenological in-depth interviews is presented. Then, the findings and discussions highlight the inhibitors of intercultural friendships of Omani students with US students. Finally, the conclusion and implications are elucidated based on the findings of the study.

2. Development of Intercultural Friendships

Intercultural friendship denotes a relationship between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite the need to navigate differences in language, values, communication styles, and stereotypes, research highlights numerous benefits associated with such friendships. These advantages encompass heightened open-mindedness, dispelling stereotypes across cultures, fostering cultural awareness and understanding, facilitating overall adjustment, reducing social and academic stress, aiding academic achievements, enhancing communication competence, and ultimately contributing to greater life satisfaction (Cao, Meng, & Shang, 2018; Robinson et al., 2020).

The rising number of international students on campuses has offered more opportunities for intercultural friendships. However, establishing these friendships remains challenging (Meng et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2020). Robinson et al. (2020) suggest that international students typically tend to form friendships first with co-nationals, followed by those from multiple nationalities, and then with host students.

The literature points to inherent circumstances that challenge intercultural friendships between international and host national students (Achirri, 2021). Oetzel (2009) highlights several cultural dynamics contributing to intercultural friendship formation, including "the opportunity to interact with culturally different people, individual personalities, similarity in characteristics, positive attitudes toward other cultures, and appropriate communication skills" (p.152). Other researchers have emphasized cultural differences, personality, frequency of contact, openness to other cultures and nationals, and communication skill competence as influential factors in shaping intercultural friendships (Achirri, 2021; Robinson et al., 2020).

Studies have delved into the dynamics of intercultural friendships. A phenomenological interview study involving 21 Chinese students across three Belgian universities highlighted cultural differences, discrimination, limited opportunities, English proficiency, personality traits, and low motivation as constraints to their intercultural friendships with domestic students (Meng et al., 2021). Kudo and Simkin (2003), in a small interview-based study examining perceptions of six Japanese students in Australia, identified a unique theme, "receptivity to other nationals" (p. 97), which included interest in other cultures and empathy, as influencing factors in forming friendships. Gareis (2000) investigated five case studies involving German students in the USA and outlined six factors influencing friendship formation among American and foreign students: "culture, personality, homophily, adjustment stage, communicative competence, and proximity" (p. 70). Similarly, a large interview study involving 30 international students studying in the US highlighted the significant role of culture in the development of intercultural friendships (Sias et al., 2008). Reflective analyses of the literature identified four themes that

exemplify intercultural friendship formation: culture, personality, frequent contact (social interaction), and receptivity to other cultures. Subsequent segments elaborate on each of these themes.

2.1 Culture

Each cultural group holds its own beliefs, values, norms, and practices, which can impede the development of intercultural friendships (Achirri, 2021). Oetzel (2009) discusses how cultural differences influence the definition of friendship, resulting in distinct communication styles and perceptions of other cultures. Devere (2007) explores the meaning of friendship across cultures, emphasizing its value, close relationships, affection, support, loyalty, trust, obligation, and companionship, traits highly sought after in friends (Hawke, Emma, Vaccarino, & Hawke, 2011). For instance, the Arabic language utilizes the words "sadiq" and "sadiqt" to refer to male or female friends, encapsulating the notion of truth, while the old English word "freogan" denotes love, favor, and freedom (Devere, 2007).

Both Islamic and Arab cultures define friendship differently from Western societies (Al-Issa, 2003). They perceive friendship as a spiritual and social bond of brotherhood, integral to social obligations (Al-Issa & Sulieman, 2007; Devere, 2007). Consequently, the definitions of friend and friendship are influenced by cultural differences, potentially leading to misunderstandings (Sias et al., 2008; Ahmadian & Ghasemi, 2023).

Cultural disparities also impact intercultural friendship formation. Omani students' daily interactions and relationships are deeply influenced by cultural and religious values (Al-Issa, 2003). In the social context, gendered segregation and limited interaction occur due to Arab men's adherence to concepts like "protection of femininity," family honor, chastity, private body parts, and modesty (Archer, 2002; Boulanouar, 2006). These values extend to academic contexts, with single-sex schools, restricted interaction among students, topic limitations in classrooms, and constraints on educational and social activities (Bahiss, 2008; Baki, 2004; Kniffka, 1992). Cultural disparities limit opportunities to forge intercultural friendships. Studies suggest that these differences prevent meaningful interactions and result in rejection and isolation between international and local students (Achirri, 2021).

2.2 Personality

Differences in cultural backgrounds have the potential to shape the second theme, which focuses on personality. Similarity in personality and shared interests is vital for fostering intercultural friendships (Meng, Li, & Zhu, 2021; Oetzel, 2009). Individuals with comparable likes and interests tend to interact more seamlessly, frequently forming clusters, engaging openly in social dialogues, and demonstrating greater mutual understanding. The influence of personality can manifest both at a global level, as individuals are molded by their identities, and at a more individualized level, given the distinct personal traits of each person (Gareis, 2000). Gareis (2012) contends that identity is closely linked to personality. Those deeply connected to their cultural identity, like Omani students, often fear losing their identities and may, therefore, avoid contact with others (Sarroub, 2010), potentially limiting their chances for friendships (Gareis, 2000, 2012).

Beyond cultural identification, the presence of common interests significantly impacts the formation of intercultural friendships. Shared interests, such as organizing social events with familiar groups, bring together individuals from different groups and aid in establishing meaningful relationships (Oetzel, 2009). Similarities in values, attitudes, interests, expectations, and desires between individuals facilitate connections (Robinson, Somerville, & Walsworth, 2020). The preference for familiar friends can be attributed to "homophilic behavior" (Dunne, 2009: 228), wherein individuals from the same country or culture tend to interact more within their own circles rather than with dissimilar groups (Meng et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2020). In a qualitative study involving 25 Australian students, Colvin, Volet, and Fozdar (2014) found that they exhibited little motivation for interactions with international students.

2.3 Social Interaction

Seeking interaction and communication with individuals from different cultures "may induce more breakdowns than harmony due to significant dissimilarities between the cultures" (Ko, 2008: 28). This can result in social adjustment issues and, in some cases, social dysfunctions where individuals may withdraw from social interactions. An in-depth interview with 30 international students at a Canadian university discovered that cultural boundaries and barriers limited the formation of intercultural friendships between international and host students (Robinson et al., 2020). Another study involving 28 Pakistani graduate students in the US found that while female students adopted a 'keeper' approach by abstaining from activities against their Islamic and cultural values, male students followed an 'explorer' approach by frequenting bars and engaging in social activities involving alcohol in order to socialize and make friends with US students (Ahmad et al., 2023; Haider, 2020). To reconcile this contradiction, Yuan and Xie (2013) introduced the idea of cultural synergy, which implies mutual interaction among culturally different individuals to understand each other without compromising their cultural identity. Robinson et al. (2020) suggest that interethnic friendships can be a means to eradicate interethnic segregation.

Undoubtedly, studying in the West presents a novel experience for Omani students. These students hail from countries where Islam is widely practiced, and certain cultural patterns differ from those followed by non-Muslim students in the West. They are required to study alongside both genders, engage in group work, interact and communicate with their classmates, participate in mixed social events and activities, and receive instruction from teachers who might be of the opposite sex. Like other international students, they may face challenges in adapting

to Western culture and establishing relationships with domestic students (Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Lowes, Peters, & Turner, 2004). Arguably, these cultural differences redefine their daily interactions and relationships with others.

Moreover, diverse cultures construct unique communication styles. Variations in cultural patterns and values may hinder understanding of the new host culture interactions with dominant students and lead to misunderstandings about others' intentions (Faragallah, Schumm, & Webb, 1997; Oetzel, 2009). The lack of similarity in cultural patterns and expectations also impedes effective interaction and relationships between international students and host students (Holmes, 2005; Kamal & Maruyama, 1990; Li, 2005). Different communication styles are often associated with individualism and collectivism, and high-low context communication (Oetzel, 2009), all of which have been identified as influential factors in the development of intercultural friendships (Gareis, 2012). For example, indirectness is a feature of Omani cultural patterns, referring to a speaker's concealment of their expressions during a conversation (Feghali, 1997). The distance of interaction across genders is another characteristic of Omani culture, where Omanis prefer closer interactions within the same gender and maintain relatively large distances when interacting with the opposite sex (Hewitt, 2003). Physical contact with unrelated individuals, such as handshaking and hugging, is not acceptable in Omani culture (McDermott-Levy, 2011).

Frequent contact with other people also facilitates intercultural friendships (Gareis, 2000; Kudo & Simkin, 2003), as regular interaction minimizes intergroup anxiety and enhances intercultural attitudes (Williams & Johnson, 2011). Involvement in group assignments, effective communication, and participation in social events can foster personal relationships that may evolve into intercultural friendships through frequent communication (Awada, 2008; Gresham & Walsh, 2008; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Yuan & Xie, 2013). A study found that Japanese students regarded accommodations and classrooms as places where they could have frequent contact and build intercultural friendships (Kudo & Simkin, 2003). Another study focusing on six newly arrived Chinese students in the US reported that frequent contact, bridging two cultures, and considering cultural synergy during social activities promoted the likelihood of intergroup friendships (Achirri, 2021).

However, sojourners might struggle to find time for frequent contact with host national students due to academic commitments or because domestic students might not prefer to choose the same field of study as international students (Bound, Braga, Khanna, & Turner, 2021). A qualitative study found that international students failed to take advantage of opportunities to form friendships with host students (Robinson et al., 2020). Consequently, the lack of interaction between international students and native students affects the desire and expectation to form local friendships (Anderson, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

2.4 Receptivity to Other Cultures

Receptivity to other cultures is demonstrated in the literature as interwoven with intercultural friendships. The relationship between cultural groups may be shaped by both personal and self-identities, constructed by ascribed and avowed identities. Different identities and viewpoints may lead to cultural misunderstandings and limit intercultural friendships between Omani students and others who represent the majority. Hostility, ethno-relative views, and people's attitudes toward others are crucial contexts that either facilitate or inhibit relationships (Bound et al., 2021; Yuan & Xie, 2013).

Attitudes about international students are linked to seeking and accepting friendships with them (Colvin, Volet, & Fozdar, 2014). Studies have revealed that international students have reported instances of cultural discrimination, racial vilification, attacks, and social exclusion due to their language, cultural, religious, and gender identities (Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2017; Kabir, 2010; Meng, Li, & Zhu, 2021). Unfriendly cultural environments, religious misunderstandings, and discrimination continue to affect the establishment of intercultural friendships (Oetzel, 2009). A friendly and receptive campus culture can enhance mutual interaction and friendship between international students and host students (Robinson et al., 2020). Negative attitudes may disadvantage Omani students in developing intercultural friendships with US students.

3. Research Questions

Various perspectives of Arab-Muslim students' experiences in the West are available in research. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding specific communication challenges and circumstances faced by Arab-Muslim students that might redefine their intercultural friendships and how they manage their identities to foster friendships with others. Although the experiences of Arab-Muslim students in the West have been explored, their intercultural friendships remain an untouched topic. Robinson et al. (2020) emphasize that intergroup contact functions under certain conditions that necessitate an understanding of facilitating aspects and the context of interaction.

Research suggests that the development of intercultural friendships is not guaranteed by simply bringing international and host students together. For example, in a survey involving 454 international students, Gareis (2012) concluded that "home and host regions significantly influence the number of American friends international students make, as well as their satisfaction with these friendships" (p. 309). Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) also found that friendships with hosts are linked with a better sense of satisfaction, reduced homesickness, and improved social connectedness and adjustment. Our interest lies in exploring how the social phenomenon of intercultural friendship unfolds for Omani students studying in US universities.

Despite the increasing research interest in Omani students studying in the US, there is insufficient research-backed information about this student group's experiences. We aim to address gaps in the literature and research practices to enlighten the scientific and research communities about the necessity of such understanding and knowledge production. Our study aims to answer the following questions:

- i. How do Omani students develop friendships with US host students?
- ii. What circumstances support or hinder Omani students in the development of their intercultural friendships with US students?

Thus, this study contributes to the literature by understanding Omani students' intercultural friendship formation in US universities and the interpersonal barriers that may limit these friendships. Additionally, the literature discussion highlights the role of religious and cultural values in guiding Arab-Muslim students in their relationships with others, a dimension insufficiently considered in studies of intercultural friendships. Based on general findings from previous studies investigating challenges and factors of intercultural friendships, this study expects to identify specific factors related to cultural and religious identities among Arab-Muslim students. This will advance theoretical and empirical knowledge on intercultural friendship formation within multicultural contexts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Setting, Participants, and Procedure

This phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experience of Omani students studying at a university in Nebraska City, United States. We adopted a phenomenological lens for our research, as it "helps us to understand the meaning of people's lived experience...it explores what people experienced and focuses on their experience of phenomena" (Duquesne University, 2023). As clarified by Giorgi (2009), the phenomenological method is appropriate for "describing a lived experience to comprehend the meaning of that experience from the experiencing person's perspective" (p. 4). In our research, the "lived experiences" we sought to understand were the meanings of Omani students' experiences of intercultural interaction and friendship while studying overseas. As the study focuses on participants' lived experiences, the phenomenological in-depth interview method is appropriate as it allows us to get closer to the study's subjects. According to Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019), "it is essential for scholars to learn from the experiences of others. In fact, it is a foundational premise of research" (p. 91). With the growing internationalization of higher education, understanding Omani students' lived experiences and how they negotiate their existence and intercultural friendships provides important insights into the issue of intercultural integration and attitudes.

Potential participants were selected based on their nationality (must be Omani), country of study (must be in a US university), and willingness to participate in the research (voluntary participation). They received an invitation link via the president of the Omani students' association at the university to join this study. The invitation link contained the main objective of the research and pertinent information, including the participants' rights to privacy and withdrawal from the study, among others. Eight participants agreed to take part in this study. Ellis (2016) supports this sampling frame by clearly explaining that having 6 to 20 participants is adequate for a phenomenological inquiry.

Our participants were pursuing undergraduate science programs, as all Omani students at this university studied science majors exclusively. They consisted of both males and females between the ages of 20 and 22, enrolled in various science majors, and had resided in Nebraska, USA, for 2-4 years. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants' identities, and their profiles are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of student participants.

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Year in the US
Khalid	Male	21	3
Rahima	Female	21	3
Noor	Female	22	4
Ahmed	Male	22	4
Abdullah	Male	22	4
Fatima	Female	20	2
Saud	Female	20	2
Ishaq	Male	20	2

Source: Calculated by the author

The selection criteria were as follows: (a) being an Omani student under the Omani government scholarship, (b) having studied English in one of the US language institutions, (c) having stayed in the US for at least 2 years, and (d) being willing to participate in the study.

4.2. The Interview Protocol

Due to the lingering threats of COVID-19, the Google Meet platform was used to conduct a semi-structured interview among all participants. These interviews, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, were recorded through the

platform with the participants' consent. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to facilitate rapport with participants, ask questions more effectively, and probe further (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, the quotes were translated into English by one of the researchers.

Interview questions were developed based on literature focusing on intercultural interaction and friendship. These open-ended questions aimed to understand students' experiences in (a) interacting with host friends and the benefits of having US friends, (b) participating in social and academic activities on and off campus, and (c) encountering circumstances or situations that inhibit or facilitate intercultural friendship formation. Prior to conducting interviews, participants were given reminders and were informed of the interview's mechanics. They were also provided a consent form and the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any stage. To capture the "lived experience," interview questions were framed in a phenomenological structure and tone to elicit meanings of the participants' social interactions. Sample questions included: "Tell us about your first social interaction experience with US friends;" "What preparations do you make when you know you would be meeting your US friends?" "What language do you prefer to communicate in when you are in a group of US and Arab-Muslim friends? Share your experience during group social interactions."

4.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed, and the accuracy of transcripts was reviewed by one of the researchers. Transcripts and interview recordings were imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis computer software. Folders were created to manage and store data and organize student participants within case nodes, where data for each participant was stored as an individual case. Each transcript was read several times by one of the researchers to understand participants' overall responses. Thematic analysis was employed using the method of Braun and Clarke (2006). Our approach focused on understanding Omani students' lived experiences of social and cultural interaction while establishing friendships in the US.

Thematic analysis involved identifying frequently mentioned words and sentences, generating codes from these words, grouping codes into categories, reducing overlap among categories, combining them into themes, developing and defining themes and sub-themes, and indicating them with relevant quotations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo was used in all these six steps, and English labels were assigned to all notes, codes, categories, and themes. Quotations considered significant for supporting study findings were translated into English.

5. Results and Discussion

Details of Omani students' intercultural friendship experiences emerged from the responses and data analysis. The analysis revealed four recurring themes from the interview data. The first two themes addressed the first research question, while the last two addressed the second question. Table 2 summarizes these themes and their main points, reflecting the epistemological constitution of the main themes from the participants' perspective.

Table 2: Themes and their epistemology.

No.	Research question	Theme	Epistemology
1	How do Omani students develop friendships with US host students?	Adjustment	Socialising Seeking part-time jobs
2		Acceptance	Accepting new norms Using social media
3	What circumstances support or hinder Omani students in the development	English proficiency	Being proficient Being friendly
4	of their intercultural friendships with US students?	Similarity	Country similarity Interest similarity

Source: Calculated by the author

The themes suggest that participants desired to build friendships with local students, but they encountered some difficulties. Specifically, adjusting to the host culture and accepting the new life facilitated participants' interaction and communication with US students, cultivating the development of intercultural friendships. However, "English proficiency" and "similarity" seem to curtail this development. Shonk (2023) offers suggestions for avoiding intercultural misunderstandings, such as developing rapport and learning about individual uniqueness and cultural differences. As explained by Hellmundt (1998), "facilitating student-centered activities" (Hellmundt, 1998: 342) and "friendship networks" (Dunne, 2009: 229) are strategic approaches that could enhance intercultural communication among students with multicultural backgrounds.

5.1. Adjustment

Findings showed that participants embraced strategies to facilitate their adjustment and interaction with US students, including socializing and seeking part-time jobs. Socialization was a strategy adopted by participants to enable their interaction and communication with their counterparts. They asserted that living in the university's hostel provided the first social experience to integrate and interact with locals. Meeting diverse students in the hostel was described as positive, leading to many activities and opportunities to get to know others. Noor and Ahmed respectively shared:

"Once I arrived, I stayed in the hostel, where I met both international and American students. It was a good chance to know some of them as we met in different places, such as the restaurant or recreation room."

"Living in the university hostel was my first experience getting to know US students from different cities."

Socializing with American students led participants to attend or organize social activities. Satisfactory relationships and comfort encouraged their involvement in both on and off-campus social activities. Living in the university's hostel and studying on campus provided an advantage for participation in these activities and building social interaction and networks. Khalid, Fatima, and Ishaq highlighted these positive experiences:

"I had a good time living in the hostel. I attended many activities and events. Sometimes, we also organized national activities and invited others to participate with us. It is a chance to meet others and create friendships."

"The university arranged many activities, and I attended some of these activities. It was nice to know about other cultures and meet new people."

"I am involved in social sports activities. I have a group of American friends, and we display our sports skills in different places."

Group work was mentioned as a learning tool that promoted intercultural contact. Omani students were encouraged by their professors to work in mixed-gender groups. They viewed this strategy as advantageous for intercultural contact and multicultural learning among diverse students. Rahima, Saud, and Abdullah shared their experiences:

"My university and teachers encouraged us to study and work with different people. It is an opportunity to develop relationships and friendships."

"I don't have any issue studying in mixed groups. Our teachers divided us into groups, so we study and do assignments together."

"I came to know many American students through group assignments. I enjoyed studying and working with them."

Studying and living in university hostels provided opportunities for participants to access part-time work. Participants mentioned that they had been exposed to life-changing experiences during their hostel residence and working part-time on campus. The main reasons for adapting to part-time work were understanding American culture, integrating with locals, and developing communication skills. Interacting with employees or local customers enabled participants to experience constructive socialization, improve their English, and make US friends. Noor, Ahmed, and Saud expressed their experiences:

"I worked part-time at the university hostel. It came to my mind that I needed to try something special here. This job allowed me to interact and mix with US students."

"My co-workers in the hostel's restaurant are very kind and friendly. They helped me a lot to know different kinds of American food. I improved my English and started understanding their dialect."

"My mates at the grocery were so nice and kind to me. They answered all my questions. Once, we decided to go out for coffee after work. This experience allowed me to strengthen my relationships and interact with US students."

Participants employed different approaches to socialize with US students, facilitating their interaction and communication with locals. Undoubtedly, "knowledge of broad cultural differences can help us better understand puzzling negotiating and conflict resolution behavior" (Shonk, 2023). Over time, the desire to adjust to the host culture and interact with locals encouraged participants to accept new norms, elaborated in the next theme.

5.2. Acceptance

The process of acceptance, as surfaced in the analysis, allowed participants to socialize and develop friendships with US students. The participants voiced that they attempted to build friendships without reporting any difficulties due to cultural differences. They started accepting new host social norms while considering their own cultural values. Although participants applied directions to their interactions and friendships with US students, these directives were gradually mitigated over time. These directives included maintaining social distance, socializing with the opposite sex, and refusing attendance at nightclubs. Rahima, Saud, and Ishaq alluded to the ease of socializing off-campus with others:

"I think it's okay to socialize with mixed genders. We have to study together, and there is no way to refuse it. Actually, I worked with them, but I keep a distance from male students when sitting together." (Rahima)

"I have two American colleagues, one male and another female. I agree to go different places if we are all together, but I normally refuse to go anywhere if the female mate was busy and won't be able to come with us." (Saud)

"I like to go around with my US colleagues, but sometimes my cultural values restrict me. For example, I cannot socialize with US students when they go to nightclubs as they drink, but we go together to restaurants." (Ishaq)

Over time, the strategy of acceptance was observed by participants to facilitate their intercultural friendships with US students. This strategy explicitly indicated that Omani students respected diverse values, recognized cultural differences, and developed positive relationships with locals. For example, participants mentioned attending social gatherings, enjoying sports activities, and having meals at restaurants, allowing them to integrate with students and build friendships. The following stories explain these experiences:

"Look, I started mixing with American students. My sports hobby helped me a lot to know many Americans who also play this sport. We played together and sometimes went to different places and did camping to showcase our skills to the community." (Ahmed)

"One time, I went with my girlfriends to have dinner at a restaurant. I enjoyed my time with them, and then we watched a movie. I think it's okay because we study together and have to socialize with them and accept their lives." (Fatima)

Participants' acceptance of new norms extended further as they started using social media without hesitation to facilitate their contact and interaction, even with the opposite sex. They exchanged cellphone numbers and social media accounts, predominantly using Facebook and Instagram. Ahmed mentioned, "When we worked together on an assignment, we exchanged our cell phone numbers with other male and female group mates. So, we started texting each other." Noor added, "I use Facebook to chat with my girlfriend, and sometimes we agree to go and watch a movie." Fatima also noted using Instagram to contact American friends: "I have visited my American friend's home. She invited me, and I met her family. I like the place and her family. We have exchanged Instagram accounts and started chatting with each other."

Attendance at social activities and involvement in different social practices positively shaped the participants' tendency to normalize new host values and norms, adjusting their own values to accept the new social life. Gopalkrishnan (2019) clearly stated that "intercultural interaction presents unique opportunities for positive change in different aspects of human life" (p. 29). The strategy of acceptance indicated that participants respected diverse values and recognized the multicultural society, facilitating their intercultural friendships with local people. Participants reported no objection to accepting the new social norms while keeping in mind their own norms. As participants experienced positive socialization and acceptance, they indicated that English proficiency and similarity were critical in the formation of intercultural friendships.

5.3. English Proficiency

The phenomenological analysis also showed that English proficiency played a substantial role in facilitating Omani students' interaction and communication with US students. Participants asserted that they had improved their English language skills in different ways to move a step further in forming friendships. Noor, Khalid, and Fatima described their social and university experiences of interacting with US students as follows:

"I don't think my English limited or minimized my interaction with US students. I had the opportunity to study at my high school here in America, as my mother had a government scholarship to study for her PhD. So, I speak fluent English and can communicate easily with Americans." (Noor)

"As I said earlier, interaction with US students is easy. Of course, my language has improved, and I didn't find any difficulty understanding the US students' accents, which helped me develop my friendship relationship with them." (Khalid)

"I have a US girlfriend who I mingle within different places, such as drinking coffee, watching movies, visiting the church, and doing different activities. Of course, my language has improved, but it still restricts our ability to build easy friendships with US students." (Fatima)

These participants were confident about their level of English proficiency; however, they could not establish friendships with US students. This proficiency was also linked to the concept of being friendly. Although participants could interact proficiently with US students, they still encountered difficulty in establishing successful friendships. The following quotes from Rahima, Saud, and Abdullah illustrate this:

"I am studying at the university and interacting with US students. You know, I don't have any issue with my English as I can speak fluently. US students are friendly, and they also show kindness, but still, I don't have friends." (Rahima)

"I think, and other Omani students also agree, that US students are friendly towards others; however, I don't have any US friends. You know they have their own friends who they mingle with." (Saud)

"I have been studying here for around four years and have mostly interacted with only three or four US students. They are friendly, but I could not have one friend because our interaction ends at the end of the course." (Abdullah)

Disappointment at not having any friendships with local students made some participants shift the stumbling blocks in making friends with host students from an internal lack of skills to external factors. According to the participants, the host national students showed less similarity in friends and common interests, which either limited or redefined opportunities for interaction. The next theme explicates these experiences.

5.4. Similarity

Participants mentioned converging points of similarity, such as country similarity and shared common interests. From the interviews, it was evident that the participants acknowledged their willingness to interact and develop friendships with US students. However, they observed that the US students tended to associate closely with their own peers and preferred engaging in different activities with them. Consequently, mixing with fellow national students seemed to reduce the participants' interest in interacting with US students. Ahmed, Fatima, and Noor commented on the passive interaction and communication, explaining the desire and preference of US students to associate with their compatriots:

"I was hoping to have an American friend as we do a lot of study activities together, but the issue is that US students normally attach themselves to their own friends. If none of them were here, I might socialize with US students." (Ahmed)

"At the university, it was hard for us to socialize and interact with US students and become friends as they gather together with their own people." (Fatima)

"I had a problem, and so did other Omani students. You know, most classes were full of American students, so we had to do learning activities with other international students only, as American students prefer to group with their own students and do their own activities." (Noor)

Participants also reported that coming from different countries could be a disadvantage in establishing friendships, as people tend to stick with their existing friends from their home countries. Khalid and Rahima noticed less interaction and communication with US university students who already had their own friends:

"I had a US student partner, and I studied with him for the whole semester. I wanted to interact with him and become friends, but he attached himself to his old high school friends. It takes a lot of time to make a friend. It is a long process." (Khalid)

"I don't exactly know why we cannot build friendships with Americans, but maybe it's because these students already have their own friends, old school friends, and so on." (Rahima)

Not sharing the same or common interests was also reported to be restrictive to the participants' engagement with US students and limited opportunities for sports activities and social events. Abdullah and Ishaq mentioned that having similar interests enabled socialization:

"One way to have a good relationship with other students is to share common interests with them, such as liking fishing." (Abdullah)

"If you want to become a friends with US students, you need to mingle with them. I tried, but you know I like to play soccer, and these students like to play baseball." (Ishaq)

The absence of shared interests constrained participants' socialization and friendships with host students, minimizing opportunities for social interactions. Although participants had chances to meet US students in various places like university hostels, classrooms, and social events, these encounters provided them with only a few opportunities to develop close friendships. Relationships with US students might exist, but they couldn't be described as genuine friendships. Ahmed noted that establishing intercultural friendships requires a significant amount of time and effort, while Abdullah highlighted the same issue when explaining the reasons inhibiting the formation of good relationships with US students:

"I think friendship is a long-term process. It needs much time to build. We only interact and communicate with students on campus, so how are we supposed to do it?" (Ahmed)

"Most of my relationships with US students were formed during the semester and were short-term. I couldn't take the next step because to build a friendship, you need a long time." (Abdullah)

Participants expressed that building friendships requires shared country backgrounds and common interests, as well as a significant investment of time and effort, alongside propinquity. Additionally, they understood that proximity might play a decisive role in the frequency, depth, and richness of intercultural friendships. Thus, they made efforts to achieve this friendship by getting involved in socio-cultural activities and enjoying experiences within their social milieu.

6. Implications and Recommendations

This section discusses the implications and presents recommendations regarding the two main questions of the study: the desire to develop intercultural friendships and what hinders intercultural friendship formation. We derived two themes from the participants' expressions of their lived experiences on how to develop intercultural friendships, namely Adjustment and Acceptance. Further probing led us to extract two social phenomena from each of the main themes: socializing and seeking part-time jobs under Adjustment, and accepting new norms and using social media under Acceptance. Additionally, we identified two themes concerning intercultural friendship formation: English Proficiency (being proficient and being friendly) and Similarity (country similarity and interest similarity).

The notion of socialization and the process of seeking part-time employment were viewed by the participants as crucial aspects of adjustment in our study. Our findings suggest that participants anticipated building friendships with local and international students, yet their experiences highlighted that these expectations were not met. Although the study found that participants were motivated to establish close relationships with local students, the latter were perceived as less motivated and showed less interest in forming friendships. Arguably, lower motivation for cross-cultural contact reduces the level of interaction (Brebner, 2008; Chang, 2021). This observation may also imply that passive or infrequent interactions with local students result in stress-prone situations among international students (Ujitani, 2006). Another implication is that the inability to establish friendships and good interaction and communication with host-nation students may weaken participants' efforts to mitigate the challenges of cultural shock, integrate into the new environment, find satisfaction, and succeed (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). Therefore, it is recommended to formulate a comprehensive socialization program exposing international students to local culture, training them to cope with cultural shock, and providing opportunities for and assistance in cultural integration.

Our findings also have implications for existing literature, such as that of Kastner (2021), who explains Asian students' lack of integration in the United States. According to Trice (2007), "In some faculty members' eyes, American students generally had not made an effort to reach out to their international peers and so were in a way responsible for the isolation" (p. 114). Gareis (2012) confirms that "the scenario applies to other host countries as well" (Gareis, 2012: 322). In our study, proficiency in English was not an issue limiting friendships between locals and participants, as the latter were able to communicate effectively, understand the slang and humor of native speakers, and open up (Dunne, 2009; Wadsworth et al., 2008). American students showed no interest in forming friendships with participants and may have seen language as a significant barrier inhibiting their social interaction, relationships, and friendships with these students, minimizing opportunities for sharing jokes and using slang expressions (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Hawke et al., 2011). Thus, a lack of communication skills limited the opportunities for participants to form friendships with US students. It is recommended that to streamline the friendship process between locals and Omani students, US universities should facilitate opportunities that bring cross-cultural students together. As succinctly explained by Liu and Yang (2017):

"Different people will have different ways of expression for the same meaning, while in different contexts, the same person will also have different ways of expression. A person will euphemistically express the ideas or straightforwardly express the sentiment. All of this must be associated with a certain language environment. In other words, the context of language will have a certain impact on communication, and the clever treatment of language communicators on the impact of the context is the specific expression of language skills" (p. 1237)

Another important outcome of our research is that participants found there was no similarity either in the country or in common interests, which restricted their interaction and socialization with host students. The implication is that the absence of social relationships with local students and the difficulty in establishing friendships with them, as the latter students have their own and old friends, motivated participants to associate only with their fellow nationals or with international students to satisfy their social needs (Sawir et al., 2008). Integration with fellow nationals is an observation supported by previous studies that found university students tended to cultivate social networks within their own group because they encountered difficulties in integrating with host students (Bahiss, 2008; McDermott-Levy, 2011). Having contact only with their own student group adversely affected participants' language acquisition, noticeably inhibiting their interaction and friendship with local students (Hawke et al., 2011; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). According to Senior and Howard (2014), "student-to-student friendships produced social contexts which facilitated conceptual understanding through discussion, explanation, and application to real-life contemporary issues" (p. 1031). Social interactions facilitate goodwill and foster intercultural communication, as well as enhance social cohesion. Therefore, it is recommended that cross-cultural development programs be organized periodically to inculcate the need for and importance of socialization in an international setting.

Additionally, our research demonstrated that growing up in the same country made students tend to stay with their own group of friends. Thus, mutual friends were considered critical to the development of friendship and interpersonal communication. This was also declared as an obstacle to building friendships exclusively with US students. The latter students might not have the motivation to establish a friendship with other ethnic groups, as they had their own families, cliques, and existing groups of friends with whom they could communicate easily (Brebner, 2008; Hawke et al., 2011). Thus, another recommendation is that foreign students need to experience the

benefits of multicultural contexts through meaningful mutual interaction between domestic and international students; this can be an advantage in enhancing their intercultural communication skills (Brown, 2009; Ujitani, 2006). For example, facilitating ‘student-centered activities’ (Hellmundt, 1998, p. 342) and ‘friendship networks’ (Dunne, 2009, p. 229) are good strategies that promote intercultural communication among multicultural students.

Our findings also highlight the preference of international students to associate with their fellow national students, which might clarify the difficulty that these participants encounter in integrating and forming friendships with local students (Brown, 2009; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Butcher and McGrath (2004) argued that overseas students prefer close friendships with their own group of students. This preference can be motivated by “homophilic behavior” (Dunne, 2009: 228), in which a large number of participants from one country or one culture constrained participants into interacting with their own people rather than with dissimilar people. Hawke et al. (2011) affirmed that “homophily is a very important and significant factor influencing the formation of friendships across cultures” (p. 183). Martens and Starke (2008) asserted that having too many students—as participants experienced—from one region or country at the same institution affects the number of interactions and relationships between these students and native speakers. Gareis (2012) concludes that proximity to many conational students impacts friendship development with host nationals. Thus, US universities should consider more diversification in managing international students (Smith & Rae, 2006).

Moreover, our findings echo the participants’ voices that sharing similarities and common intercultural understandings can substantially facilitate the development of intercultural friendships. The cultivation of establishing friendships between Omani and US students was undermined by not sharing personalities, lack of common interests and hobbies, and difficulty in being able to relate to and understand each other. These factors restricted cross-cultural contact and imposed the requirement to have friends from their own cultural background (Brebner, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Hawke et al., 2011).

Our research also showed the participants’ lived experience in building friendships. According to the participants, friendship needs much time and effort. They asserted that it is a long process and needs a lot of interaction on and off campus to facilitate the unfolding of friendship. Low levels of intergroup contact restrain intercultural friendships. Thus, the amount and quality of social interaction with host national students influenced friendships and then, language acquisition (Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer, & Lee, 2011). This also aligns with a study that found that both the quality and the quantity of intergroup interaction increase over time (Hubbert, Gudykunst, & Guerrero, 1999).

Finally, our findings demonstrated that similarity in values and norms plays an important role in developing relationships. The sharing of similar cultural norms, such as having common interests, brings intergroup students together and assists them in organizing social events and activities and then building good relationships (Ujitani, 2006). These conditions were not met in this study. The general sense of belonging to another culture and the lack of cultural similarities result in rejection and isolation and in less interaction (Ko, 2008). It is also recommended that further research be conducted to explore the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of US students with Arab-Muslim students at universities and understand the difficulties that the US students might face while interacting and communicating with this particular group of students.

7. Conclusion

Participants desired to establish friendships with US students. However, after experiencing real-world situations, the students found that their preconceptions of host friendships needed to be reassessed and reframed based on the social realities as seen through their own lens. The participants’ expectation to build social friendships was not met, and the experience was disappointing, as revealed during the interviews. Omani students felt disadvantaged in socializing, and establishing intercultural friendships was challenging due to difficulties in having frequent contact, less similarity, and fewer common interests. As explained by Senior and Howard (2014), “friendship groups may develop between students based on some form of mutual attraction, for example, interests and even political values. Students may also form friendships with other students on their course for a variety of reasons, including an interest in the discipline they are studying” (p. 1035). In cross-cultural settings, social groups encourage intercultural understanding and facilitate cohesion among members. In the academic milieu, this may help build a social environment that drives students’ motivation and encourages them to embrace academic excellence.

Enabling meaningful interaction between host and international students can be advantageous in enhancing their intercultural friendships. Strategies such as facilitating “student-centered activities” (Hellmundt, 1998: 342) and “friendship networks” (Dunne, 2009: 229), the “operation friendship” program (Ward & Masgoret, 2004: 61), and “the peer-pairing program” (Beaver & Tuck, 1998: 13) can be constructive in promoting intercultural friendships among students from various groups. Promoting learning activities such as group assignments and collaborative projects may also serve as effective tactics to enable intercultural relationships among university students (Ujitani, 2006).

Given the number of intercultural students at US universities and the participants’ perception of host students tending to isolate themselves from them and preferring to work with students from their own culture, host students should also be prepared and encouraged to accept, interact, and socialize with students from other countries and cultures (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). This preparation must assist the dominant culture students in accepting

working with international students in group assignments or presentations and encourage interaction and communication between these cultural groups.

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