

A Qualitative Approach: The Experiences of GCC Students in Ireland with Homesickness

By

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of students from countries in the GCC with homesickness studying in Ireland and explores the experiences of these students with homesickness that are unique to students with these cultural backgrounds. Participants in this study (N=12) were recruited via snowball sampling, and included participants from all GCC countries with the exception of Kuwait and Qatar. A thematic analysis of the Semi-structured interviews informs the discussion of this paper.

Experiences of participants with homesickness, such as symptoms, triggers, and developments it lead to, supports previous findings on homesickness in student populations. This study did however find increased feelings of cultural identity to persist following their experience with homesickness. Experiences of homesickness and living abroad unique to students from GCC countries were also found. These experiences included higher levels of responsibility stemming from the ease of life in their home countries, increased feelings of isolation due to the collectivist structure of their home societies, and religious factors that hindered opportunities to socialize with their western peers. This study helps to fill the gap in homesickness research on this particular cohort of the population and may better inform students and their governments on the importance of this issue.

Keywords: homesickness, university students, GCC, cultural influences

Dedication

I would firstly like to dedicate this thesis to my old man, whom has provided me every possible opportunity for success in life. I am infinitely grateful for the many lessons that you have taught me and for your undying devotion to your children. You are responsible for making me into the man I am today and saying that you are my role model would be a colossal understatement. I strive to follow the example you have set for me until my dying day and will try my very best to uphold the values you have so deeply instilled in me.

Secondly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family members. To my beloved mother who raised me and has been there for me every step of the way and to the many sacrifices you have made for us that have not gone unnoticed. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my younger sister and older brother, who constantly inspire me to work harder and to be a better person; I have no doubt that the two of you are destined for success in all your future endeavours. It is my sincerest hope that I can continue to make you all proud.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate my thesis to the country that I owe everything to my country, Kuwait. Aside from being an inseparable part of who I am, missing you served as inspiration for writing this research. You sponsored my education and I dedicate all my future success to you.

-Ibrahim Abdulrhaman Khalid AlOthman

-ابراهيم عبدالرحمان خالد العثمان

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Introduction

Many students around the world choose to study abroad as it offers many new opportunities and experiences (Hackney, Boggs, Kathawala, & Hayes, 2014; Wintre & Kandasmy, 2015). According to an article published in 2017 by The Independent (Donnelly, 2017), 10.6% of students studying in third level academic institutions in Ireland are international students with the number of international students increasing. While the experience of studying abroad can be exciting, students can sometimes face difficulties adjusting to their new environments and as a result may experience homesickness.

Homesickness is defined as the commonly experienced impairment or distress that is caused by the actual or perceived separation from ones' home (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Homesickness often is experienced in the form of the longing for aspects of life back home, such as missing friends, family, food, traditions and routines (Scharp, Paxman, & Thomas, 2015). While many people will have experienced homesickness at some point in their lives, university students are particularly prone to experiencing these feelings, which can widely vary in the degree of intensity and in the way they effect an individual (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Triggers of homesickness in students include missing close ones from home, difficulties with making new friends, wanting to go back home, academic difficulties and experiencing emotional struggles (Duven, 2018).

Homesickness can be difficult to deal with for some, as symptoms associated with it include feelings of loneliness, separation, loss, displeasure, and induce headaches, the lack of sleep and depression (Shahmohammadi, 2014; Lerner, Baker, & Lerner, 1985; Fischer, 1989; Stroebe, Schut, & Nauta, 2015; Duven, 2018; Brunwasser, 2012). Hardships may further add to students feeling homesick during their time abroad, and can include discrimination, isolation, financial difficulties, and other adjustment problems (Khawaja & Stallman, 2016; Lee & Charles , 2007; Matt, 2007).

Feelings associated with homesickness have been found to be correlated with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), and the symptoms of both, such as the ones previously outlined, can be similar to one another (Shahmohammadi, 2014). The previously cited study found the prevalence of homesickness amongst Iranian students studying in Malaysia to be 43.3% and of those, 33.8% were depressed. The experience of homesickness has also been described as having similar feelings to those that are felt when dealing with bereavement, as described in a study by Fischer in 1989.

These feelings can lead to a decline in academic performance for students, as they can cause them to skip their lectures, study less or even drop out of university altogether (Sun, Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2016). This same study found that in a sample of students (n=13,440), 35% of the variance in GPA scores could be attributed to homesickness, which was further supported by a more recent study (n=220), that found the figure to be 36% (Darrin, 2018).

Awareness of homesickness and its effects amongst students is also very low, as the majority of students are not informed about homesickness or ways to cope with homesickness at any point prior to or during their university experience (Duven, 2018). This lack of awareness can lead to an increase in feelings of isolation and the prolongment of the negative feelings associated with homesickness, as it may take time to develop effective coping strategies on their own.

Research conducted by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), focused on stress and coping, and while their research did not explicitly focus on homesickness, can be applied to the subject. They identified that people who have feelings of stress cope with it by using one of two main strategies, problem focused and emotion focused. A problem focused coping strategy can be described as adaptive and is aimed at focusing on fixing the root problem that may be causing stress, or in this case, feelings of homesickness. Implementation of this strategy may include investigating homesickness or seeking professional help, which is described as being the most effective coping method.

Emotion focused coping strategies involve dealing the emotional aspects associated with a problem, which in the case of homesickness includes distracting the feeling of homesickness with working, receiving emotional support from friends, or simply ignoring the problem. Lazarus wrote that a universally appropriate or inappropriate coping strategy is non-existent, but that some strategies work better than others. Lazarus also identified that negative strategies can emerge, such as turning to substance abuse or ignoring the problem completely.

Positive coping strategies for dealing with homesickness, such as keeping in touch with friends and family back home (via phone call, text messages, or regular visits), is associated with higher rates for alleviating feelings of homesickness (Hack-Polay, 2012). These strategies were used in an effort to alleviate feelings of homesickness successfully, but only worked temporally. It was found that negative coping strategies for dealing with homesickness were less prevalent than positive coping strategies, but that they were still implemented by some. Outcomes of these negative coping strategies sometimes included substance abuse which led to the reduction in perceptions of personal control and self-esteem.

Understanding homesickness in terms of it being a developmental process in which people work through and thus ultimately redefine who they are can be useful. Those who had previously experienced homesickness often attribute personal development and growth as a result of the experience (Duvan, 2018). A theoretical framework was put forth by Duvan that refers to homesickness as a developmental process, consisting of 5 stages that can be cyclical in nature depending on if a person moves to a new environment.

Duvan (2018) proposes that the first and second stages occur prior to leaving ones home enviroment and are characterised by mentally and physically preparing for moving away from home. The third step in this process is the acclimation to one's new environment, which begins upon their arrival to the new environment. This may involve making new friends, adjusting to the culture or beginning to understand the dynamics associated with being a university student in a new institution. The fourth step involves refining one's self, which may involve identification with a friend/friend group, the management of emotions associated with being in a new environment and with their autonomy and independence. The fifth and final stage in this cycle is the stage of belonging, which occurs when a student feels a sense of belonging in their new environment.

Using this framework is useful in that it focuses on personal development that arises as a result of experiencing homesickness rather than focusing on negative factors that emerge as a result of the experience itself. Also, using this framework can help to normalize feelings of homesickness rather than treating it as a deviation from normalcy. This study does not however account for personal growth that may arise independently of homesickness, as personal growth and development is normal part of adolescence (Cummings, 1996).

Cultural factors, such as negative social stigmas that surround the importance of mental health in certain cultures, such as those in the Arabian Gulf, may affect aspects of this framework in certain ways (Dalky, 2012). Such stigmas, can lead to the reluctance of people in Arab societies to seek help for their mental health or to consider it as a problem in the first place (Hickey, Prymachuk, & Waterman, 2016; Scull, Kuhallar, & Al-Awahdi, 2014). Given this, it's likely that this stigma may hinder or delay the likelihood of students from this region of the world, that experience a higher level of homesickness to seek help which may delay the development of successful coping strategies. It should be noted that there is a clear gap in research pertinent to homesickness on this specific cohort of the population.

Cultural differences that exist between a student and the environment they study in has been found to have an effect on the likelihood and severity of feeling homesick (Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000). This was demonstrated in a study on students attending

American universities, where it was found that international students from countries with vastly different cultures experience homesickness the most (in both frequency and severity). Students from European countries experienced it to a lesser degree, but had higher levels of it than students from The United States (Poyrazili & Lopez, 2007). A similar study on expatriates living in the UK (n=45) found that the integration of expatriates with communities or groups, containing people from similar backgrounds to theirs, was very beneficial to their acclimation to new environments (Hack-Polay, 2012).

To better understand the relationship between homesickness and one's cultural background, a better understanding of culture in general is imperative. One framework that attempts to break down the depth of impact culture has on an individual was put forth by Schein (1992). Schein describes culture as having 3 levels. The first level outlined is "Artefacts", which refers to aspects of a given culture that are easily identifiable yet difficult to understand, such as the way that people dress. The second level "values" involves conscious values, goals and justifications that a culture may have, such as religion. The third level involves unconsciously held beliefs, feelings and perceptions held by those in a given culture.

Schein's theory can explain certain aspects of culture, but not culture in its entirety. It demonstrates just how much people from certain countries differ and just how deeply this can affect experiences of people who move to new countries actually are. While the values of people from different countries may change over time, Schein's theory shows the degree to which aspects of a student's identity and understanding of the world has to change in order for them to fit in to their new environment, an identity and understanding that students may strongly cling to. It is likely that the reluctance to change one's ideals and values and the longing for living amongst people who share those values may result in the manifestation of symptoms of homesickness and have an effect its severity.

Cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, 1980) is another useful theory that is important in understanding the role that culture plays in homesickness. In this theory, Hofstede included "Collectivism Vs Individualism" as a dimension of culture, this refers to the degree in which people in a given society are integrated into a group and the degree to which people remain loyal to these groups (Hofstede, 1980). In collectivist cultures, people belong to larger groups, whereas in individualistic cultures, people are mostly concerned with themselves and those close to them. Middle Eastern countries have prevalent collectivist cultures, as people often live with their extended families and interact with their friends in large social circles (Darwish & Huber, 2003).

The GCC, or Gulf Cooperation Council, is an alliance made up of 6 countries located in the Arabian Gulf, which includes the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Oman; these countries share many cultural, political, religious, and economic similarities to one another (Hickey et al., 2016). This dimension that exists in GCC countries, as it does in other countries in the Middle East, is very different to that of western cultures such as in Ireland, which is considered individualistic in nature. It is likely that this cultural distinction, amongst others, may lead to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness in students from GCC countries studying in Western societies.

It's also likely that students from these countries that study in institutions in western societies may face some unique hardships during their time abroad that can stem from the fact that Islam is the predominant faith in those societies whereas western countries are typically Christian in faith (Hannigan, 2007).

Also, countries in this alliance are fairly affluent, as all Six countries are in the top 25 in the world in terms of GDP per capita, with 3 of them being in the top 10 (International Monetary Fund, 2019). Citizens of said countries are subsequently accustomed to living in such environments, for example, citizens from these countries often employ maids, chefs and drivers, with one survey finding that 93% of Emirati families had an average of 3 maids per family (Leon, 2014). It is likely that students who are accustomed to such a life may have a harder time adjusting to the responsibilities that come with living abroad, as they may have to learn how to perform simple household tasks for the first time.

Also, the vast majority of international students from GCC countries studying abroad are sponsored by their home governments. Such is exemplified in the case of Kuwait, which sponsors the education over 700 students in Ireland and over 20,000 students worldwide (as of 2019). Along with offering them scholarships, a monthly salary is given and any medical expenses the students may have are payed for in full (Kuwait Ministry Of Higher Education, 2020) .

Given the effect that homesickness can have on academic success, rates of failure among the sponsored students may be decreased if said governmental institutions are better equipping these students with the tools they need to successfully cope with said feelings. Helping to reduce the rates of academic difficulties that may arise as a result of homesickness would in turn help GCC government institutions to save money that is spent on repeat classes or lost on students that drop out. This study may also present an opportunity to better inform students from this region of the world on homesickness, which may in part help to change the

negative social stigma on mental health in the region and help to improve the general health and well being of the students.

It is for these reasons that this study seeks to explore the experiences of students from GCC countries with homesickness who are living abroad and studying in Dublin and to explore the strategies they have used to cope with feelings associated with homesickness. Given the unique cultures of countries in this region, a qualitative approach to understanding the experiences of students that study in western countries, like Ireland, would provide rich insight into this area of study and help to fill the existing gap in the literature on homesickness in this cohort of the population.

-RQ1: What are the experiences of GCC students with homesickness, in what ways did it affect them, and what are the strategies that have been used to deal with it?

-RQ2: Are there any experiences with living in western societies that are specific to students from countries in the GCC?

Method

Participants

A total of 12 students participated in this study (7 males, 5 females). This is in line with the number of participants deemed to be sufficient when conducting interviews for qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. This method was selected due to the low number of GCC students in Ireland, and ensured that participants in this study were outside the researcher's own friend group. The average time the participants spent studying abroad ranged from 2 to 6 years ($M=3.6$, $SD= 1.23$). Participants were pursuing various degrees, including medicine ($n=6$), Engineering ($n=3$), Law ($n=1$), Economics ($n=1$), and Sociology ($n=1$). Please refer to *Table 1* in the appendix for further participant information.

The inclusion criteria included proficiency in the English language, a minimum of 18 years of age, experience living in Ireland for at least one year and they had to have had experienced homesickness at some point during their time studying abroad. Students had to be from a country in the GCC, with the exception of Kuwait. Kuwaiti students were not allowed to participate in the study as to avoid any ethical concerns that may have arisen as a result of the involvement of the researcher's father in Kuwaiti Foreign Diplomacy (Diplomatic List DFA, 2017).

Materials

The interview questions were generated and derived from relevant research and theoretical frameworks in the areas of homesickness, cultural dynamics and coping strategies. A copy of the interview questions used in this study and where each question was derived from can be found in *Document 3* in the appendix section. The participant information sheet and consent form have also been included in the appendix section of this paper. The interview sessions were recorded via the use of a voice recording app called "Voice Memos" on the researcher's password protected iPhone 11 Pro.

Design

The design of the study was qualitative in nature and the data was generated by way of cross-sectional semi-structured in person interviews. Data generated from the interviews was analysed via Thematic Analysis. Semantic themes were identified following the step by

step guide outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, which began by transcribing the data, and then generating codes. Each code was written on a notecard with the relevant extract from the interview. Similar codes were then grouped together into a subtheme, which made up a theme that encapsulated the previous information under a broader meaning than the codes that make it up. Interview sessions were transcribed verbatim, and sample of a transcript that was used can be found under *Document 4* in the appendix section of this paper. Further transcripts have will be provided upon request.

Procedure

Following approval from the University ethics committee, news of the study was initially spread by the friends and acquaintances of the researcher, followed by other participants spreading news of the study via word of mouth, and those who were interested in taking part were told to contact the researcher via Text message or email. After the researcher was contacted by students that were interested in the study, they were sent a copy of the participation information sheet and any questions that the participants may have had were answered. After ensuring that the participant had met the inclusion criteria, a time, date and place was agreed upon by both parties. The interviews took place in various locations, but all were carried out in a quiet place convenient to the participants, so that the interview session could be accurately recorded and so that the dialogue would not be heard by others.

Upon meeting in person, participants were made to feel comfortable by a short and pleasant conversation which was followed by going through the information sheet once more as to ensure that the participant was fully informed. Following this, the participants signed the consent form. The interview sessions ranged from 5 minutes to 27 minutes (M=16:25). Following the interview, the participants were thanked and asked to spread word of the study amongst their peers.

To protect the anonymity, participants' transcripts were de-identified (See appendix). To protect their identities, participants are referred to by a number, which was arrived upon in the order that the interviews took place. Refer to *document 1* in the appendix for the participant information sheet and the Consent form.

Results

Themes

A total of 240 quotes were extracted from the interview recordings and a total of five themes were identified, each of which fell under of the two research questions put forth.

Five themes were identified that fell under the research questions. Theme 1: “What is Homesickness?”, refers to data pertaining to personal definitions of what homesickness is and its symptoms. Theme 2: “Dealing with Homesickness”, refers to the triggers of homesickness and the strategies that were developed to cope with it. Theme 3: “Personal Development”, includes data on how the experiences of homesickness and studying abroad have had a personal impact on the participants, and personal advice derived from their own experiences to better prepare others on how to deal with the above experiences. Theme 4: “Personal experience with living abroad”, which includes information on the difficulties associated with living abroad and the degree of immersion in Irish culture. Theme 5: “Cultural Differences”, which includes data on how Irish life and culture differs to that of the life and culture in the home countries of the participants.

What is Homesickness?

Definitions. Participants gave definitions as to what they believe homesickness is in their own words (n=11). The definitions of homesickness that were given included, “missing home” (n=8), missing their friends and family (n=6), missing routines (n=4), missing the weather (n=3), missing the culture (n=3) and missing the food (n=2). One participant said “*When you miss your home and that you are not comfortable. You miss your family, friends, food, culture, and your routine days*” (P11), which encapsulates much of what was included in the definitions of others.

Some participants defined homesickness as the feeling of not belonging (n=2) “*Homesickness is being in a Place where you feel like an alien, the lifestyle is different and not what you are used to, (neither are) the people and the weather*” (P10). Feeling like part of oneself is missing was also mentioned (n=2), “*This might sound extreme, but I guess homesickness is when you can barely function, when you feel like your soul is missing and part of you is missing*”. (P7)

The explicit inclusion of negative feelings in the definitions was also an occurrence (n=2), with one saying “*homesickness is like feeling very sad...you are upset that you are away from home*” (P9), and another saying “*Homesickness is when a person feels absolute*

loneliness. Not doing the things they are normally accustomed to or engaging in the same things. Yeah, just loneliness and lack of belonging.” (P1). The participant that did not provide a definition (P4) was unable to put homesickness into words, and a definition of it was given by the researcher.

Symptoms. This section of the data encompasses the symptoms that are associated with homesickness and the effect of those feelings on the day-to-day lives of the participants. Three subcategories of this section emerged, which are loneliness, sadness, and physical symptoms, which had a varying impact on the life of each participant.

Loneliness was commonly reported by participants as being a part of the experience of homesickness, with participants saying that homesickness lead to some degree of them feeling this emotion (n=9). Most that reported feeling lonely reported to strongly feel this emotion (n=8) while one felt it to a lesser degree, saying *“I just feel like I don’t make as many plans as I normally do”*. (P2)

One of the participants that felt a higher degree of loneliness said *“I was living alone and not communicating with a lot of people, you start to get a real sense of desolation and isolation”* (P1). Another participant outlined his daily routine to demonstrate the lack of socializing that he engaged in *“I felt very lonely and like I had no friends, I’d go to school, then go back home, that was my whole day. The rest of my day I would spend sleeping or texting my friends back home”* (P11). A similar account to this was also reported *“I used to go home (after university) and want to sleep...you just feel so alone, all I wanted to do was sleep so that the holidays would come sooner”* (P10)

Some explicitly reported conscious social withdrawal in addition to the feelings of loneliness (n=4). One such participant spoke on this in the context of when he feels homesick *“I didn’t interact with other people because I just felt like I didn’t belong...I didn’t interact with people; I didn’t go out with friends...”* (P7).

Varying degrees of feelings of sadness (n=8) were also reported in conjunction with feeling homesick, ranging from more moderate accounts *“I just feel a bit down”* (P2) to more severe levels *“When I’m get very homesick I’m start to get depression. I feel very depressed at times when I feel very hard to go home, then I go to the doctor for help”* (P11). Not all participants reported to be on either end of the spectrum, with most mentioning feeling depressed to some degree (n=5) *“I’m not gonna say I was depressed, I just felt really really down”* (P10).

Physical symptoms of homesickness were also reported (n=2), *“At its worst I’d get migraines, like really bad ones and just want to lay in bed all day”* (P9). Another participant recalled *“One day I called my father in the middle of the semester and told him I wanted to come back, he told me to wait until the holidays. I actually passed out because of how much I feel homesick...I went to the hospital and they said it’s because of stress”* (P12).

Participants also reported homesickness to have a negative impact on their academic performance (n=4) *“when I feel homesick I go to less classes and don’t study”* (P6). One participant said *“Homesickness effects my mental health, which in turn effects my social life, which in turn effects my educational attainment. They are absolutely all linked”* (P1). One participant did however report homesickness to have a positive effect on academic performance, saying *“Homesickness would make we want to study harder and work better, so that I could go home and make my family and friends proud”* (P3).

Dealing with Homesickness

Homesickness Triggers. The triggers of homesickness, as reported by the participants, were grouped into three categories and fell under, time of year, family and friends, and cultural triggers. The biggest trigger of homesickness was reported to be when they first arrived to Ireland (n=7), *“my first year here was probably the worst year in my life”* (P7), *“I started to feel homesick the most during the first couple of months”* (P6).

Stress and final exams were reported to elicit feelings of homesickness (n=6) *“Definitely stress, like especially during exam time”* (P2). *“Mostly during exams and rough times”* (P5). The winter time was also reported to induce these feeling (n=4) *“The hours of daylight here had a big effect on me. It gets dark so early. It just makes me want to go back to Oman because its sunny there”* (P2).

Culture related triggers include food, were also reported (n=2) *“food is a big one. Back home its filled with rich spices, here I find the food to be kind of bland”* (P10) and celebrations (n=3) *“When Bahrain won the Gulf Cup I couldn’t be there to celebrate with my people which was made worse by me having nothing to symbolize my Bahraininess, not even a flag.”* (P1).

Participants found that family/friend related triggers played a role in inducing feelings of homesickness (n=5). Some missed home when seeing pictures of their loved ones together (n=4) *“When you are on Instagram and you see pictures of family members and the kids,*

especially the kids like my nieces and nephews, I miss them a lot” (P6). One reported feeling left out *“When missing out on family occasions like birthdays and weddings”*. (P1)

Coping Strategies. The coping strategies used to alleviate feelings of homesickness fell under one of four categories, traveling home, relationship based coping, the use of entertainment, and negative coping strategies. One participant said *“I feel like the ways I cope are subconscious, I do them without thinking”* (P6).

All of the participants reported traveling back to their home country at least once a year, with the majority traveling back twice a year (n=10) and some traveling back once a year (n=2). One participant did report that in his first year, he traveled home more frequently” *My first year here I went home four times, I didn’t feel that comfort here I didn’t have any friends, so I just went home*” (P12). Another participant reported to book his flight home on the same day as his last exam (P10) with another saying *“The feeling (homesickness) gets better right when I got on the plane to go home”* (P11). One participant, reflecting on a benefit of coming from a more privileged background, stated *“we are lucky, you know, to have the chance to go back whenever we want”* (P6).

Most participants mentioned the importance that calling people from back home had on coping (n=11) *“I tend to call my family and friends to make me feel better...keeping in touch with them and feeling as if I’m there”* (P3). One participant said *“I stay at home and wait for my mom to get home from work and I’ll call her”* (P11).

Making new friends was also a commonly used coping strategy (n=8), with one participant saying *“try to find good friends. Friends will always make your suffering feel easier”* (P9). One participant impressed upon the importance of making friends from similar backgrounds, *“My second year here, I met my Omani and Saudi and Kuwaiti friends and that made me feel better”* (P12).

Some participants referred to the importance that romantic relationships had on their acclimation to life abroad (n=2), *“I’d say the biggest reason why I enjoy my days here more...is when you meet someone you like...you stop thinking about home and start thinking about them.”* (P10).

The implementation of entertainment as a coping strategy was also mentioned (N=4). *“When I feel homesick I try to distract myself with anything, like TV shows”* (P8) and another said *“Maybe like start watching TV shows or playing video games”* (P5). One participant used traveling to other countries as a way to cope with homesickness and said, *“When I start*

to feel homesick, I call one of my close friends in Saudi, and we travel Europe together, to some place we haven't been yet" (P12). Emotional release by way of crying, although deemed by himself to be negative, and seeking help from a medical professional was reported by one participant (P11).

Negative coping strategies were reported by some (n=4), with negative eating habits being reported (n=2) "*sometimes I'd just want to stuff my face and others I didn't want to eat at all*" (P9). The use of substances was also a strategy that was used by (n=2) with one reporting to smoke more cigarettes and another saying "*Drinking more and smoking marijuana increases in periods of depression*" (P1).

Personal Development

Growth as a Result of Experiences. Participants reported personal growth and development in some way (n=10) as a result of their experiences with homesickness and with living abroad. One participant spoke on this and said, "*As a person you tend to grow way more when you are out of your comfort zone*" (P3), and one participant reported no personal benefit of his experience with homesickness, "*Nothing positive came from feeling homesick, it was all going south*" (P8).

Of those that attributed personal growth as a product of their experiences with living abroad, several mentioned an increase in feelings of independence and maturity (n=7). "*I think I've become much more mature, way more independent*" (P7), and "*I know how to hold myself as a man now, versus before when I was trying to find myself*" (P1) encapsulate much of what was said that pertains to this section.

An increase in feeling of cultural identity attributed to feeling homesick was reported by some (n=4), in that they felt it brought them closer to their culture, two such participants said that it had brought them closer to their native language, "*I learned more Arabic here than I would have in Bahrain*" (P1), "*I changed what I listen to...all in Arabic*" (P2). The other participants focused on feeling closer to their culture in general, with one focusing on feeling closer to people from similar backgrounds.

Improved social skills that emerged during their experiences abroad were also brought up by some (n=4), "*like, now I kinda put myself out there, whereas before...I wouldn't initiate friend groups*" (P7). Improved emotional regulation was reported on (n=2), "*sometimes when I'm have homesick, its improving your skills for how to control your feelings*" (P11). One participant attributed his experiences with homesickness to normalizing

his perception of mental health, “*you realize that you are normal, and that it is normal to feel homesick*” (P6).

Participants also reported that during their time here, they familiarized themselves with the layout of the city and how to get around (n=3) and some even mentioned that when they are away from Dublin, they find themselves missing it (n=3), “*Over the years, Dublin has become my home*” (P10) and another saying “*Dublin was the best thing to happen to me*” (P12).

Advice. Advice given by participants was directed towards students from the GCC who plan on studying abroad and to students who currently experience homesickness. All extracts of advice given can be found in the Document 5 in the appendix section of this paper so that it can each be read fully and be expressed to the fullest degree without alteration.

Personal experience with living abroad

Degree of Immersion in Irish Culture. When asked about the degree to which they have immersed themselves in Irish culture, the majority of the participants reported that they had not immersed themselves to a high degree (n=9), with one saying “*In my university we have our own groups with the Khaleejis (People from the GCC) and the Irish are separate. We only have interaction(s) with (the) Irish in Uni*” (P4). The majority of participants said that their friend groups almost completely consisted of people from the same region as they were from (n=9), with all participants in the study being in at least friend group with people from the GCC (n=12).

Of the participants that had immersed themselves in the culture, one gave his Irish friend a tour of Dubai and hosted him in his home (P10), another said “*I even went to church on Easter, even though I’m Muslim... I also voted in the last referendum here too*” (P1).

Difficulties of Living Abroad. Participants mentioned initial difficulties with making friends and “finding their friend groups” (n=4), one participant said “*when I first came here I felt a lack of confidence, I felt it would be hard to make friends, but now it’s completely different*” (P6).

When asked about the difficulties of life in Ireland, participants said that the weather was one (n=4), “*The first major thing that really got to me was the daylight in winter, it just vanishes at like 4 or 5, also its really windy and it rains hard and sideways*” (P10). The difficulties mentioned included accommodation prices (n=7), transportation (n=5), the lack of

parking availability (n=2), increased responsibility (n=3) and the general cost of living (n=7). *“rent, housing, living expense, transportation is bad, owning a car here is bad...when I first came here and had my salary I wanted to buy everything, I learned later to be responsible”* (P8) and *“I had to learn the basics of being a fully functioning adult”* (P7) encapsulates these difficulties the most comprehensively.

When asked about their experience with racism, participants said that they had not faced any during their stay in Ireland (n=12), *“I don’t feel unsafe wearing my hijab here at all, everyone is always so nice.”* (P7). Some however report feeling discomfort towards inaccurate perceptions that people have about the countries that they are from (n=3), *“I haven’t dealt with racism, but I do find that people are quite uneducated about the region. They think we are like from a war torn country, unless you say Dubai, then they just think that you are some rich oil prince or something”* (P10)

Cultural Differences

Traditions. When asked to compare the two cultures, participants noted several differences between the cultural traditions of the two countries. Differences in the pastimes that locals engage in were of the cultural differences that were reported. Participants (n=6) reported that a big difference between the cultures is that alcohol consumption often plays a role in activities that are done for fun amongst people in Ireland, while in their own cultures people abstain from alcohol. One participant said *“we have different ideas of fun. Back home we hang out in the desert a lot, and they don’t have that here. Here a lot of my Irish classmates go out to a club or bar every weekend, which is fine. Just not what I find enjoyable”* (P8). Some of the participants that reported this said that this was a barrier to them socializing with their Irish friends (n=3), with one participant stating, *“I feel that it’s a big barrier for me participating in stuff”* (P2). Also, participants said that camping out in the desert in the winter was something they often did with friends and family in their countries, while no such terrain exists in Ireland (n=2).

Participants also found that another difference in pastimes was due to the fact that establishments other than bars, close early in Ireland (n=2), *“literally everything here closes at like 6 and I feel like I have nothing to do”* (P10) whereas in their home country shops are usually open until midnight.

Participants also reported differences in celebrations (n=3), with two participants mentioning their countries’ national days and one mentioning religious celebrations *“back home we have Eid and Ramadan...which is basically our Christmas”* (P5). Differences in the

local food were also reported (n=4), as was the cultural importance that is placed upon the role of food in the region (n=1) *“they don’t care about food as much as we do, back home...it’s a big part of how we socialize”* (P7).

Family and Friends. The role that friends and family play in society was also reported on (n=4), with one stating, *“I think Ireland may be one of the closest family oriented western countries I can think of, but back home, like, family is the heart of everything we do”* (P10). Another said, *“In Saudi Arabia I used to have a lot of friends in my dewaniya, like 18 of them on some days. It was always open, never closed, even if I wasn’t there”*. (P12)

Artefacts and other values. Cultural artefacts were also mentioned as a difference between cultures, with one participant saying that the clothing that people wear differs (thowb/Dishdasha back home) and another mentioning the difference in languages spoken (n=2). Participants mentioned religious aspects that differ (n=2), with one focusing on hearing the call to prayer throughout the day (P7) and another mentioning the Islamic structure of society in their home country (P8). It should be noted that all participants (n=12) reported to be Muslim in faith.

Domestic employees. Participants reported that a big societal difference was that in their home countries housemaids and personal drivers are a big part of their everyday life (n=7) with one participant saying *“Back home you are kinda engulfed in this sphere of comfort, we have our drivers, our maids, and chefs, where here people do everything themselves or use public transport and walking to get around. A lot of us take for granted our maids, our cars and having food cooked for us”* (P1), and another stating, *“When I first came here, I didn’t know how to boil an egg, because I had people cook for me, it took me like 3 tries”* (P10). Some participants that mentioned this cultural difference also noted the prevalence of the use of public transportation in Ireland to get around compared the infrequency of its use in their home countries (n=3).

Discussion

The results outline several components that are related to the experiences of GCC students that study in Ireland pertinent to the research questions initially put forth. The first question sought to explore the experiences of GCC students with homesickness, the ways in which it affected them, and the strategies they had developed to cope with it.

To answer this question, it is important to first understand the personal definitions of homesickness given by the participants. Participants explicitly mentioned missing some aspect of life in their home countries in the definitions they gave such as “missing home” (n=8), missing their friends and family (n=6), missing routines (n=4), missing the weather (n=3), missing the culture (n=3) and missing the food (n=2). These findings are in accordance with previous studies on what is most commonly missed by those who experience homesickness (Scharp, Paxman, & Thomas, 2015). The other participants instead defined homesickness by referencing the symptoms that they associated with homesickness, such as not belonging and isolation (n=4).

Symptoms of homesickness that were reported by participants included Loneliness (n=9), with most reporting to strongly feel this emotion (n=8), some degree of Depression or sadness (n=8) and migraines (n=1). These symptoms, with the exception of loss of sleep, were reported by the participants fall in line with symptoms of homesickness identified by prior studies, (Shahmohammadi, 2014; Lerner, Baker, & Lerner, 1985; Fischer, 1989; Stroebe, Schut, & Nauta, 2015; Duven, 2018; Brunwasser, 2012). One participant exhibited symptoms that were not outlined in the studies cited, as he was reported to have “passed out” as a result of stress brought on by feeling homesick. It should be noted that similar levels of depressive symptoms were reported in the sample of participants that took part in this study to those reported on in a prior study on homesickness in a sample of Iranian students studying in Malaysia (Shahmohammadi, 2014).

Participants also reported homesickness to have a negative impact on their academic performance (n=4), an effect which has been outlined in previous studies (Sun, Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2016; Darrin, 2018). Contrary to this finding, one participant did report homesickness to have a positive effect on academic performance, suggesting that it served as a motivative factor in that it strengthened her will to make her family and friends proud.

Triggers of homesickness that were reported by participants in this study are similar to those found in prior research (Duven, 2018). The triggers reported on by the participants in this study include stress (n=6) and triggers related to friends and family (n=5). The weather

(n=4) and food (n=2) triggered feelings of homesickness, as did missing out on celebrations and experiences (n=4).

To cope with these symptoms, participants implemented several different strategies, which varied in the nature and in the level of success they had. No participant reported using only one, as they implemented a mixture of emotion focused, problem focused and negative coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). All participants reported to travel home at least once a year with the majority going back twice a year (n=10). Contacting friends and family from back home (n=11) was the most common coping strategy, a strategy which has been identified in prior studies (Hack-Polay, 2012). This strategy is identified as being an “emotion focused” approach according to research conducted by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Another emotion focused approach to coping was by using distractions, such as watching TV shows, playing video games, and traveling to other countries (n=4).

Making new friends was identified by many as being an important step in alleviated feelings of homesickness (n=8), which was outlined in by Duven (2018) as being part of the fourth stage, “redefining oneself” of homesickness. One participant reported to seek professional help to aid him in alleviating the negative feelings associated with homesickness, other problem focused strategies were outlined by other participants, however were not included in the data as they were implied and not overtly discussed. Negative strategies were less common approaches to coping (n=4), and included substance misuse (n=2), and negative eating habits (n=2).

Personal growth was attributed as being a byproduct of experiences had whilst abroad by most of the participants (n=10), which supports the framework put forth by Duven (2018) that describes homesickness as a developmental process. An increase in responsibility and maturity (n=7), improved emotional regulation (n=2), and improved social skills (n=4) were reported by the participants and show the extent to which personal development can occur. One finding in this study that was not reported on by Duven, is that closer attachment to one’s cultural background can emerge as a byproduct of the experience of homesickness (n=4). It should be noted that the data pertaining to personal growth includes accounts of personal growth from both the experience of homesickness and the experience of life abroad in general. This was done due to the fact that attributing personal growth to one or the other can be difficult to discern, as the experiences occurred during the same period of time; also, personal growth has been found to occur naturally in adolescents which further blurs the lines as to what specifically led to said growth (Cummings, 1996).

To further understand the nature of their acclimation to life in Ireland, participants were asked about the degree to which they had immersed themselves in the local culture. Interestingly, post participants reported that they had not felt that they had immersed themselves greatly (n=9) in that their friend groups were almost exclusively made up of people who came from similar backgrounds and cultures as them, and only socialized with Irish people in university settings. While all participants in this study reported to have at least one friend group made up of people from GCC countries, some reported to have close relationships with Irish people (n=3), and one participant even reported partaking in local politics one occasion and going to church with his Irish friends on another.

When asked about the difficulties of life in Ireland participants reported difficulties with accommodation prices (n=7), the general cost of living (n=7), transportation (n=5), weather (n=4), difficulty making friends (n=4), increased responsibility (n=3) and parking availability (n=2). These difficulties are commonly referred to as hardships faced by international students, and have been found to trigger or exacerbate feelings of homesickness in international students (Khawaja & Stallman, 2016; Lee & Charles, 2007; Matt, 2007). It should be noted that none of the participants experienced racism or discrimination during the time they had spent in Ireland, however several did note feeling discomfort towards inaccurate perceptions of their home countries that some people held (n=3).

The second research question put forth aimed to understand the experiences with living in western societies that are specific to students from GCC countries. These experiences pertain to both homesickness and life abroad more generally. To better understand these unique experiences, it is important to first cover differences between GCC cultures and Irish culture as expressed by the Participants. This is also important to note, as cultural differences have demonstrated an effect on the degree of severity and prevalence of homesickness in people from different cultural backgrounds (Hack-Polay, 2012; Poyrazili & Lopez, 2007).

Differences in pastimes were reported, such as differences in attitudes towards alcohol consumption. Half of the participants (n=6) reported alcohol consumption to play a major role in leisurely activities engaged in amongst their Irish peers. This in stark contrast to the culture of the participants, a culture that promotes practice of abstinence from alcohol as it is seen as sinful in Islamic religious scripture; it is important to note that all participants reported to be Muslim in faith (n=12). This cultural norm that exists amongst their Irish peers is even seen as a barrier to friendship by some (n=3), which may have in turn impacted levels of acclimation and social isolation. Further, the leisurely consumption of alcohol amongst

Irish students may help to explain the general lack of close friendships with Irish people that were reported by the majority of participants (n=9).

One participant did report that eating meals with friends and family was seen as a means to socialize and that this aspect of GCC culture did not exist amongst her Irish peers and others reported on differences between the differing times that establishments operate between in both societies (n=2) noting that restaurants and cafes in Ireland close earlier than they do in countries in the GCC. This led some participants to feel as if they “had no options” and felt that it limited the options of places they could go to past 7pm. It is likely that this may impede opportunities of socializing that students from this region of the world may have, especially given the role that food has on socializing in their cultures, as previously outlined. This in turn may increase feeling of isolation due to the limited availability of establishments other than bars that GCC students can go to in the evening.

Another difference that was reported on, was that camping in the desert with friends was a pastime engaged in in their home countries, whereas this did not exist in Ireland due to the terrain (n=2). The weather in Ireland was identified as a difference and some even reported it to be a difficulty (n=4), as they reported Irish weather to be windy and rainy and that sunlight “vanishes” in the winter time. This is very different to the sunny weather throughout the year in GCC countries. This difference may lead them to miss home more and miss their usual attire (summertime clothes). The absence of light in the winter, according to one participant, made the day feel as if it had ended following his classes for the day.

Differences between artefacts (Schein, 1992) in Ireland and GCC countries, such as dress, food and language were reported (n=6). The local food in Ireland was reported to either induce or exacerbate feelings of homesickness (n=2). Celebrations unique to the participants’ home countries were also discussed (n=3), and being in a foreign country that does not celebrate them was said to induce feeling of “missing out” by participants.

Differences between the values (Schein, 1992) of the cultures were also outlined (n=6), such as differences in religion and in the role of family and friends. The participants reported that friend groups in their home countries were larger and that the role of family was more important, which is typical of collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Darwish & Huber, 2003). The separation from one’s friends and family has been found to trigger homesickness (Scharp, Paxman, & Thomas, 2015), but the big role that they play in GCC societies may further increase its effect, as specifically missing being with a large group of friends was explicitly mentioned (n=1). This difference is important to note, however it is not unique to countries in this region alone, as collectivism is prevalent in many other cultures in the world.

Differences outlined by participants between the two cultures also include that domestic employees in GCC countries are seen as the norm (Leon, 2014), whereas it is not in Ireland (n=7). The prior reliance of participants on domestic workers was also reported, and skills that are otherwise seen as common, such as boiling an egg (according to one participant), had to be learned for the first time. Difficulty with transportation (n=5) was reported, may have been exacerbated as a result of the reliance of participants on personal drivers as the means to get around, whereas in Ireland the use of public transportation is common. The fact that people from the GCC widely rely on domestic workers in their day to day lives is something that is unique to this region of the world, which is of interest due to the adjustments to life that have to be made by people when living without them. While not all of what was discussed can be applied to only cultures in this region, the combination of all of them illustrates their uniqueness.

The experiences with homesickness outlined by the participants capture the vast variability of effects that it may have on a person and is demonstrative of the seriousness of the phenomenon, in that it can have a profoundly negative impact on the mental health of some individuals. These results also help to explain how certain aspects of life abroad and homesickness uniquely affect students from GCC countries. This study also helps to address the gap in research on homesickness amongst students from countries in this unique region of the world. Limitations of this study include inexperience of the researcher with conducting interviews, the fact that interviews were held in various locations. Limitations also arose as a result of the sampling technique, which is demonstrated in the disproportionate number of students that study Medicine. Also, biases from the researcher may have been introduced as a result of personal experiences with a high degree of homesickness whilst studying abroad.

This study examined the experiences of students from GCC countries (with the exception of Kuwait) with homesickness. This is the first study, as of the time this has been written, that focused on this cohort of the population in relation to homesickness that could be found. These results can help to shed light on the importance of this issue and the extent to which it can have an effect on students which may better inform the governmental institutions that so heavily invest in the education of their nationals. The findings can also help to better equip students that are currently or that plan on studying in western universities, with information that can improve their overall quality of life. It can do this by giving them an idea of what to expect during their time studying abroad and how best to deal with homesickness and the feelings that may arise as a result of it. Future research should

focus on the experiences of Kuwaiti students studying abroad, also exploring the experiences of students from GCC countries in non-western societies would prove insightful.

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Appendices

Table 1

Interview schedule:

Participant number	Gender	Country of origin	Years abroad	Interview duration	Interview date	Interview location
1	Male	Bahrain	4	18:28	21/12/2019	Apartment
2	Female	Oman	4	16:30	10/01/2020	Room on campus
3	Female	Bahrain	2	14:46	15/01/2020	Conference room
4	Female	UAE	2	05:18	15/01/2020	Room on campus
5	Male	Oman	4	07:53	20/01/2020	Room on campus
6	Male	Oman	4	09:42	20/01/2020	Room on campus
7	Female	KSA	3	10:33	20/01/2020	Room on campus
8	Male	UAE	4	25:08	21/01/2020	Conference room
9	Female	UAE	2	17:15	22/01/2020	Conference room
10	Male	UAE	4	26:59	22/01/2020	Quiet café
11	Male	KSA	5	16:58	22/01/2020	Quiet café
12	Male	KSA	6	27:46	28/01/2020	Room on campus

Document 1

Consent Form:

A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences GCC Students in Dublin with Homesickness

The participant should complete the whole of this sheet himself/herself. Please circle as necessary.

Have you read and understood the participant information sheet?

YES/NO

Have you had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study?

YES/NO

Have all the questions been answered satisfactorily?

YES/NO

Have you received enough information about the study?

YES/NO

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

YES/NO

Do you agree to take part in the study?

YES/NO

This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time. With this, I give my consent to take part in this Study.

Signature of the Participant:

Name (in block capitals):

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

Document 2

Information Sheet:

Participant Information sheet

“A Qualitative Analysis: Experiences of GCC Students in Dublin with Homesickness”

What is the project’s purpose?

This research project aims to explore the experiences of GCC students with their time living and studying in Dublin and their experiences with homesickness. The study also aims to

explore what strategies they used to cope with any hardships they may have faced while living abroad.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a GCC Student studying in Dublin who may be able to give valuable insight into the hardships you may have faced while living abroad. The strategies that you have used to deal with homesickness may be extremely helpful to future students that are thinking about studying abroad in dealing with these same problems. Also, there haven't been any previous studies that have looked at this issue in a population of students from the Arabian Gulf, so you will be the one of the first if you choose to take part in this study. Participants must be proficient in the English language, be at least 18 years of age and have at least 1 year of experience with studying in Ireland. **Students from all GCC countries, with the exception of Kuwait, are eligible to take part in this study, given that they meet all the other requirements due to ethical concerns.**

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to complete an in-person interview that will take between 15-30 minutes to complete.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The subject matter of the questions may cause some distress and discomfort. The subject matter includes discussing homesickness and the hardships of studying in Dublin. The interview will include questions about cultural differences between living in your home country and Ireland. Also, the interview will include questions on your mental state and explore things that you may have faced such as psychological stress and isolation during your time away from home.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Any and all information that could lead to the potential identification of your identity will be taken out of the transcript. This includes your name, the university that you attend, and any other topics that will be discussed during the interview that could lead to the potential identification of who you are.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

Results of the research will potentially be published in a scientific journal. You will not be identified in any report or publication. Your institution will not be identified in any report or publication. The results of this paper also may be given in presentations and will be submitted as a final year project to NCI.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the ethics review of the National College of Ireland (NCI).

Contact Info:

Name: Ibrahim AlOthman

Email: x17150710@student.ncirl.ie

Phone number: 0857816329

Document 3

Interview questions:

Personal information:

- What degree are you currently studying towards?
- How long have you been studying in Dublin for?
- Where are you from and how often do you go back?

Culture:

- Can you compare and contrast Irish culture and life with life and culture back home? (Schein, 1992; Hofstede, 1980)
- To what degree have you immersed yourself in the local culture? (friends /politics /pastimes/ values/lifestyle) (Hack-Polay, 2012)
- Do you feel that your cultural background had an influence on your adjustment to life here? (Hofstede, 1980; Schein, 1992; Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000; Poyrazili & Lopez, 2007)

Homesickness:

- Could you please outline some of the difficulties of life here (increased responsibility/academic/racism/transport/financial) (Khawaja & Stallman, 2016; Lee & Charles, 2007; Matt, 2007)
- Could you please define homesickness in your own words?
- Describe feeling of homesickness at its worst vs now (severity/mental state/physical feeling)

- What are some of the biggest triggers of feeling homesick? (friends /family /food /weather/ routine/ belongings) (Duven, 2018)
- What are some aspects of your life that were most effected by feeling homesick? (mental health/academic performance/social life). (Darrin, 2018; Lee & Charles , 2007; Sun, Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2016)

Coping Strategies:

- What did you do to help cope with these feelings that was successful? (eg. call home/travel back/make new friends/join different societies in university) (Hack-Polay, 2012)
- Did any of the coping strategies you used have a negative impact on your life? (social isolation/ignore feelings altogether/turning to vices) (Hack-Polay, 2012; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Reflection:

- Can you please reflect on the time you have spent in Dublin? (now vs. when you first arrived/positive vs negative) (Duven, 2018)
- Can you recall when you first started to feel homesick? (Duven, 2018)
- Can you recall any positive outcomes of going through this experience? (new outlooks/change in personal identity to culture of home country/new or improved relationships/priorities and motivation) (Duven, 2018)

Advice + Conclusion:

- Do you have any advice to prepare students from your country who are thinking about studying in Ireland?
- Do you have any advice for students from your country who are currently experiencing homesickness while abroad?
- Do you have anything else you would like to add to the discussion that we have not covered?

Document 4

Interview Transcript:

A Qualitative Approach: The Experiences of GCC Students in Ireland with Homesickness

Participant 9/UAE Female 2

[00:00:00.990]

IN: Hi how are you today?

[00:00:01.880]

P9: I'm good. How are you?

[00:00:03.150]

IN: I'm not bad at all thanks.

[00:00:14.790]

IN: Now, you read the participant information sheet or it was read out to you?

[00:00:18.160]

P9: yes.

[00:00:18.280]

IN: And you gave consent to take part?

[00:00:20.130]

P9: yes.

[00:00:20.190]

IN: I'm not holding you against your will or anything.

[00:00:21.890]

P9: [Laughter] no.

[00:00:22.590]

IN: Perfect. And what degree are you currently studying towards?

[00:00:26.000]

P9: I'm studying _____.

[00:00:30.030]

IN: Really? That sounds so tough. How are you finding it?

[00:00:33.750]

P9: Not bad, like the mathematical stuff is Kind of like, hard-ish. But overall It's nice. I like the philosophy of it.

[00:00:43.440]

IN: So would that be the _____?

[00:00:44.560]

P9: yeah.

[00:00:44.670]

IN: that's just based on my very limited knowledge of _____.

[00:00:50.250]

P9: [Laughter]

[00:00:50.280]

IN: Now, how long have you been in Dublin for?

[00:00:52.300]

P9: I've been. It's my second year in Dublin.

[00:00:54.440]

IN: Ok, so you say you've had a good bit of experience living here and all that?

[00:00:57.750]

P9: Yes, I have.

[00:00:59.300]

IN: And I don't think we mentioned it in the interview. But where are you from?

[00:01:04.530]

P9: I'm from United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi to be more exact.

[00:01:08.820]

IN: Sure. And how often you go back?

[00:01:11.430]

P9: Twice a month. Wait, no, twice a year.

[00:01:14.100]

IN: Twice a year. Like Christmas time, an-

[00:01:16.980]

P9: Christmas and summer.

[00:01:17.900]

IN: Okay. So you're never far away for too long?

[00:01:19.300]

P9: No.

[00:01:20.570]

IN: Sure. And having lived in Ireland for two years now, and the UAE, have you lived there your whole life before Prior to coming here?

[00:01:54.110]

P9: UAE, no. I've lived in the US for a while.

[00:01:54.110]

IN: Oh okay, that's pretty cool. Really interesting actually. Where in the US?

[00:01:54.120]

P9: _____REMOVED FROM TRANSCRIPT_____

[00:01:54.870]

IN: That's awesome actually, could you compare life in Ireland to life back home in the UAE?

[00:02:01.030]

P9: Umm, life back home is kind of the easy life, I think, like, whatever you want is there for you.

[00:02:04.910]

IN: What do you mean?

[00:02:06.390]

P9: So one of the big big, like, changes that was the transportation.

[00:02:10.830]

IN: Okay.

[00:02:12.360]

P9: So the transportation here. I had to use the bus, the public transportation. I never used, um, public transportation back home. Like maybe twice my whole life.

[00:02:27.880]

IN: How did you get around then?

[00:02:28.660]

P9: In personal car or like driver, my sister.

[00:02:33.100]

IN: Yeah.

[00:02:34.870]

P9: Also like the living there is kind of cheaper than here.

[00:02:38.660]

IN: Ok.

[00:02:39.150]

P9: Yeah, so here here is very expensive to there.

[00:02:43.150]

IN: Yeah.

[00:02:43.290]

P9: So... There it's kind of like, just cheap, everything's cheap.

[00:02:48.350]

IN: Yeah.

[00:02:49.570]

P9: It's kind of expensive, the food for a bottle of water. And for a bottle of water 2 or 3 euros sometimes, like ten times more than what you pay back home.

[00:02:59.870]

IN: I Got you. yeah, and in terms of the culture, I mean, do you feel like you've immersed yourself in Irish culture, made Irish friends, figured out their pastimes and values or.

[00:03:10.020]

P9: Yeah, I live with an Irish family.

[00:03:10.260]

IN: Oh Really?

[00:03:13.600]

P9: Yeah. So the culture is different, very different, but I kind of like, got used to it very quick. Because I like lived in the US and US culture is similar.

[00:03:23.510]

IN: Yeah

[00:03:23.580]

P9: And here is kind of, like nice. the people are really nice here and the culture is not that bad, like, beside the drinking.

[00:03:38.280]

IN: Yeah, and you mentioned that you live with an Irish family. What are some things that stick out between a typical Irish family and a family back home?

[00:03:48.940]

P9: Back home, is like very homey? like If I'm sick, they will help, you know, because they're my family. Here the Irish family, because I'm just staying with them, they don't care as much. So like, that's something, I guess is usual, because like if she's not your daughter you shouldn't care about her too much.

[00:04:10.530]

IN: I understand, yeah. Do you feel that her background has had an influence on how well you adjusted to life here or how quickly?

[00:04:18.520]

P9: Yes. My family's kind of very open minded. I've lived in the US for a while and got used to it there and then I come from a mixed family too. So I know how, like, to get around with cultures and traditions.

[00:04:34.630]

IN: Perfect. That's great, actually that seems like it benefited you.

[00:04:36.640]

P9: Yes.

[00:04:41.200]

IN: And yeah, could you please define homesickness in your own words?

[00:04:50.340]

P9: Oh, umm...

[00:04:50.340]

IN: Just, it does it have to be a textbook definition? just something so we both know we're talking about.

[00:04:55.600]

P9: Homesickness is like feeling very sad and like you want to go back home. And you're very, like, upset that you are away from home. You miss the people from home, you miss your family, you miss your friends and food...the weather. Anything.

[00:05:20.110]

IN: Great. Can you describe your feeling of homesickness at its worst and at its best?

[00:05:25.690]

P9: At its worst. I have migraines. I get very bad migraines. I feel, I feel very depressed. I just don't want to do anything. Just want to stay in bed all day, do nothing. Eat nothing, sometimes.

[00:05:43.060]

IN: And it's at its best?

[00:05:45.820]

P9: At its best I go out. I change my mood. like...when it comes to homesickness, there's no best for it to be honest like it's just the feeling, the bad feeling of it.

[00:06:00.080]

IN: It all always lingers?

[00:06:01.410]

P9: Yeah.

[00:06:02.460]

IN: Sure. Could you outline some of the difficulties of life here in general? Like you mentioned, transportation and the god awful weather.

[00:06:10.530]

P9: [laughter]Yeah. And the weather is a big, big change. It's just the change of Weather. Yeah. Every second there is a different weather so, yeah...

[00:06:23.740]

IN: It's always, miserable.

[00:06:27.960]

P9: Exactly.

[00:06:28.650]

IN: Yeah. Okay. And what do you think were some of the biggest triggers of you feeling homesick?

[00:06:36.900] - P9

P9: Um...seeing kids because I'm very connected to my nephew and my niece. So seeing kids, seeing parents, will trigger me. The taste of food.

[00:06:49.280]

IN: Umhm.

[00:06:52.650]

P9: The dull taste of food here. wherever you go It's the same flavour. Nothing changes.

[00:06:58.960]

IN: I think I even talked to one guy who never tried Indian food in his life. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, the guy was about 25.

[00:07:05.330]

P9: Oh, wow.

[00:07:08.790]

IN: And you mentioned you stick in one place, you don't feel like going out. I mean, do you feel like your academic performance is at all altered by it?

[00:07:17.370]

P9: Yes. It depends on how depressed I am, I don't want to study. Sometimes I just want to stuff my face and sometimes I just want to do nothing. And that affects my academic life. I can't study.

[00:07:37.790]

IN: Umhm...I think we already covered this, but what are some aspects of life most affected by homesickness? Like you already outlined mental health and that it makes you feel more depressed. But social life, I mean, in terms of that. Does it make you want to go out as much with friends or connect with friends?

[00:07:55.180]

P9: No. I just want to stay in bed, sometimes I want to talk to my family. Sometimes, I like, im pushed for to book a ticket and go back home. It doesn't matter in my classes. It doesn't matter anything.

[00:08:08.240]

IN: Mid-semester, Just go back?

[00:08:09.770]

P9: Exactly yeah.

[00:08:10.160]

IN: Have you done it so far?

[00:08:11.030]

P9: No. Thankfully, because like my mom wouldn't allow me, like, she wouldn't accept it. Whatever. She would come here but she wouldn't allow me to go back.

[00:08:22.040]

IN: Of course. And what are some things that you did to cope with homesickness that you feel were successful?

[00:08:28.760]

P9: Till now nothing.

[00:08:30.110]

IN: Really! Aww.

[00:08:32.140]

P9: It's been a hard time, to be honest. But yeah, the friends. Friends are a big big thing. Talking to them, talking to friends makes it better.

[00:08:42.200]

IN: From back home or from...?

[00:08:43.350]

P9: From here. And back home.

[00:08:45.000]

IN: Sure. Definitely. Yeah. And to have you joined any societies here.

[00:08:50.840]

P9: Yes. The Arab society.

[00:08:54.410]

IN: Really? That's great. Have you managed to make any friends there?

[00:08:58.960]

P9: Yeah. _____ is one of my friends from our society. A couple of other ones. Like just college friends, I guess.

[00:09:07.200]

IN: Yeah. And were any of the coping strategies you used negative for had a negative effect. You think?

[00:09:14.240]

P9: Not so far.

[00:09:16.610]

IN: Sure and so far, can you please reflect on the time you spent in Dublin? Like hasn't been positive, negative?

[00:09:33.180]

P9: Um...in the middle. Like, not so great not so bad...like, just. I lived [Inaudible] the life in Dublin and just go back home?

[00:09:41.770]

IN: Yeah. You want to get the years done and uh, go back?

[00:09:44.140]

P9: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:09:45.240]

IN: And yeah. how have you changed as a person since you've been here? now verses are back When you first came to Dublin?

[00:09:54.950]

P9: Now I'm very independent. like because back home. I used to like depend on my mom to do for me, everything. Talk to like all my teachers bla bla bla do everything for me. Now, I don't. Like now, I do like everything by myself. Do the sheets to everything.

[00:10:14.460]

IN: Which is something you had to learn to do?

[00:10:17.580]

P9: No. I just knew how to do it. Like clean through everything from that. My mom never showed me. Because we have like maids and everything in the house.

[00:10:30.660]

IN: And is that something you miss?

[00:10:33.330]

P9: Sometimes yeah. sometimes when I need something I can't find it I need someone to look for it. And when I don't have, like, the strength to wake up and change my bed or like, clean the room.

[00:10:47.610]

IN: Yeah.

[00:10:48.030]

P9: Cause like, I'm a clean freak [laughter]. So yeah. I wish for someone to do that for me.

[00:10:55.480]

IN: Okay and is it something like when you go back that you realize right away?

[00:11:00.930]

P9: Yeah.

[00:11:01.350]

IN: Like I mean others likened it to feeling like royalty or something like that compared to college life in dorms and all that.

[00:11:12.070]

P9: Yeah. To be honest, I I could never live on dorms here in college. Never ever. Just the thought of it makes me like cringe. like i can't.

[00:11:21.420]

IN: Yeah.

[00:11:21.700]

P9: Because like I can't share a room or like I can't share a flat with people I don't know.

[00:11:32.850]

IN: Yeah, sure. And...can you recall when you first started to feel homesick, maybe when you were packing your bags, when you hopped on a plane? Or was it a few weeks in to university?

[00:11:43.200]

P9: I think mostly this year. So the second year away from home i felt homesick really bad. the first year, I just, I was happy to be free.

[00:11:53.840]

IN: Yeah. Everything was new?

[00:11:55.490]

P9: Exactly. I was happy to be free I was happy like look around discover myself. And now, the second year, I discovered everything. Now I want to go.

[00:12:05.730]

IN: Dublin is a pretty small place.

[00:12:07.220]

P9: Very small. You can't do nothing here.

[00:12:09.380]

IN: Yeah, completely. And can you recall any possible positive outcomes of going through this experience?

[00:12:16.730]

P9: Like I said, I developed myself like very like Strongly. And...I think that's that. It's just about self-development, that's it.

[00:12:26.710]

IN: That's a sure. You feel like you know yourself more?

[00:12:29.910]

P9: Yeah.

[00:12:31.600]

IN: That's great, actually. And I'm sorry I lost my place...Perfect, Yeah. Do you have any advice for students from your country to prepare them for coming to Ireland?

[00:12:49.620]

P9: I would say, first of all, come with your parents if you can. Come with your brother or sister or something like come with a family member to Dublin and go around with them to let them like, see the atmosphere that you're going to live with.

[00:13:05.330]

IN: Yeah.

[00:13:06.510]

P9: And then try to find good friends. That's the one major thing. Friends will always make what you are suffering is easier. And...I guess that's it like family, always talk to your family if you're feeling homesick. Try to contact with them every day if you can, like that's what I do. I contact my mom twice a day...And I would say that's it.

[00:13:36.020]

P9: Oh, bring whatever you love from back home, because sometimes you won't find us here

[00:13:39.440]

IN: With us, it's chocolate milk,

[00:13:41.740]

P9: [Laughter]Yeah exactly! chocolate milk and sweets, Arabian food Arabian coffee...Turkish coffee or whatever.

[00:13:47.800]

IN: And just out of curiosity, because this is a bit more of a novel thing...You lived in the US for how many years prior to-

[00:13:56.030]

P9: We went back and forth in Texas. I lived there for a year. I studied in Texas in high school there.

[00:14:03.820]

IN: Yeah, that's pretty cool. Did you think that helped you or?

[00:14:07.550]

P9: No. It helped me a lot.

[00:14:08.810]

IN: Because you already knew what to expect?

[00:14:11.000]

P9: Yes. Yes.

[00:14:12.660]

Perfect. Exactly. I know in terms of the friends you've made here, have you socialized much with the Irish people?

[00:14:18.070]

P9: Uh...yeah. Yeah. Not really, but not like, I've not been keeping to myself. Like whoever comes to talk to me, I just talk to them. I, I would, I take the step forward, depends on the personality. Depends on umm...

[00:14:33.310]

IN: If they seem friendly?

[00:14:36.890]

P9: Exactly, yeah. I wouldn't go to them because their culture is very different. So I respect everyone's culture but their culture is drinking, I don't drink.

[00:14:44.300]

IN: Sure

[00:14:45.710]

P9: Every Thursday they go clubbing. I don't. So whenever they're out either drinking or clubbing. Yeah. So I would restrict myself from going.

[00:14:55.190]

IN: So tell them, see you next time or something?

[00:14:56.750]

P9: Exactly. See you next time. Or like we could go to a cafe or something.

[00:15:06.350]

P9: Yeah. Especially when he tells me, you don't drink. They think, think its joke, but that's like, yeah I don't.

[00:15:15.020]

IN: And do you have any advice for students who are currently experiencing homesickness from the GCC countries?

[00:15:23.710]

P9: Try to, like lighten up because, like Homesick will not do you good. Especially it will affect your academic life. So especially when you're there. Try to do the best. The thing you could think while you're homesick, so I think if you think that going go taking the walk is good for you. Do that. Don't let the negative side of your thoughts control you.

[00:15:52.720]

IN: And yeah, in terms of homesickness, because this is particular to GCC students and all that, do you think there are any differences between the culture in Arab countries and the UAE.

[00:16:09.720]

P9: Umm...Not really, depends on who you're comparing between. If you're comparing to Kuwait and the Emirates, then I think it's basically the Same.

[00:16:17.790]

IN: Very similar, yeah.

[00:16:18.540]

P9: If you're comparing between Egyptians and like, Emiratis, maybe there's a little bit of difference. It depends on even if they like Egyptian, but they're living their whole life. So basically they don't feel homesick because maybe they...they barely go back to Egypt or something. Yeah. It seems like the UAE is their home or something like that.

[00:16:41.160]

IN: And would you have anything else you'd like to add to the discussion that we haven't covered so far? Any ideas that may have popped up or...epiphanies, if you will?

[00:16:50.910]

P9: I would say like discover Dublin. If you're feeling homesick, just hop on the bus, go anywhere. Hop on a train. Go to like, Limerick, whatever it doesn't matter. like Go somewhere. Do you think you'd never discover it if you're not feeling it?

[00:17:08.630]

IN: Absolutely, yeah.

[00:17:08.630]

P9: Yeah.

[00:17:09.390]

IN: Well, thank you very much. I really do appreciate it.

[00:17:13.650]

P9: No worries, no worries.

Document 5

Advice from participants:

Advice for students who plan on studying abroad:

- *“I would implore for them to not forgo their morals and their values while also opening themselves to the diverse culture that Ireland offers. There’s a lot of things that Ireland has to offer but people shun because of social norms that people refuse to let go of, they need to make a distinction between home and here. That is something I would implore them to do.”* (P1)
- *“If you have a problem try to fix it. Don’t just, like, cry and go like I have this problem, just fix it.”* (P2)
- *“It’s an adventure, you should embrace it with open arms. Don’t let the idea that it’s so different stop you from perusing what you want. Never take the easy way out, there are so many easier options that you could pursue but then studying something abroad just opens your eyes to different cultures. Even if you have someone studying the exact same major and they study back home, and you have someone studying it abroad, your perception would be colored by, just, different experiences. And I feel like as a person you tend to grow way more when you are out of your comfort zone.”* (P3)
- *“Just believe in yourself.”* (P4)
- *“Just be yourself, just be as normal as possible around like everyone.”* (P6)
- *“I guess like, look up everything in advance and learn the basics before you come here ‘cause you might feel screwed the first semester but it definitely gets better.”* (P7)
- *“If you want to get a degree and study come to Europe, if you want to have fun and get a degree go to the U.S. or Australia.”* (P8)
- *“I would say, first of all, come with your parents if you can. Come with your brother or sister or something like come with a family member to Dublin and go around with them to let them like, see the atmosphere that you're going to live with.”* (P9)

- *“Don’t be afraid to, you know, push yourself. I’m not gonna say like go out and do stuff you can’t do there, because you know, there’s a lot of shit that you can do here that’s pretty bad back home. Live a little weather it’s through meeting a person, if you drink then drink. Just enjoy it while you can.” (P10)*
- *“My advice is for that student to be more understandable of where they are going to, they must have a good plan for how to live outside. You have to respect the rules of the country, you have to respect the people, you have to try to understand their culture, to be part of it. It will make your life easier because if you come with same mind, same thinking, this is not going to be helpful because your mind will be blocked. You have to be socializing to improve your skills.” (P11)*
- *“Studying in Ireland in my opinion and in my point of view is the best place to study on earth. It’s pretty safe compared to other countries like U.K. and America. Secondly, there is no racism. The third thing is its very quiet, there is nothing to do but studying.” (P12)*

Advice for students dealing with homesickness:

- *“I’d say take food, food is something that a lot of people don’t regard as important but it definitely has affected me. Know the essentials of cooking and know comfort cooking because those are things that whenever you feel down in the dumps, you know, you could always make something that your grandma used to make you on Friday or Eid” (P1)*
- *“I think the number one thing is to go home as much as you can, but like, that’s not always feasible for everyone. So maybe have a friend group that is from your own country and have meetings so that you can feel like you are at home. Stay in touch with your family, that helps.” (P2)*
- *“It does get better, and it gets easier. As long as you involve yourself with, like, different people and get yourself involved with your hobbies. There is so much to do here.” (P3)*
- *“Just don’t think much about homesick, think about yourself and how you are going to go better and how you would control your life towards your aim and your future.” (P5)*

- *“When you come here It’s ok to feel homesick, honestly, it’s not bad. It doesn’t mean that you are weak or anything [inaudible], it’s alright to be homesick. And if you do so just try to get help, you know, it can be a hard feeling. And we are lucky to have the chance to go back whenever we want to and its only like 8 hours by plane.” (P6)*
- *“I guess like, to have some faith in themselves and know that, you know, you’ve made it this far so don’t let something that’s quite insignificant in the long run to ruin your chances. Don’t feel like you are alone because other people are going through the same thing and there’s always friends or someone who cares about you.” (P7)*
- *“I won’t tell them to not keep checking their phones and keep like, stalking your family and see what they are doing on the holidays, you can’t stop that. Distract yourself doing anything, you don’t only need to study to distract yourself, you can go out with your friends. Usually when I hang out with my friends I’m focusing on them, so like, I feel home, we talk the same language and we experience the same things and have fun like we would at home.” (P8)*
- *“Try to find good friends. That’s the one major thing. Friends will always make what you are suffering is easier. And, I guess that’s it like family, always talk to your family if you’re feeling homesick. Try to contact with them every day if you can. Try to, like lighten up because, like Homesick will not do you good. Especially it will affect your academic life. So especially when you’re there. Try to do the best. The thing you could think while you’re homesick, so I think if you think that going go taking the walk is good for you. Do that. Don’t let the negative side of your thoughts control you.” (P9)*
- *“I would say make you apartment as if it was you home away from home, bukhoor is a big thing, definitely bring that. Try making your living space a place where you come back and you feel home, weather you need pictures, you need Iranian carpets, whatever it is and find your groups.” (P10)*
- *“They have to call their family, diary, they have to write in their diary every week and they must make themself busy instead of staying at alone. They can go to coffee shop, studying in coffee shop with people to enjoy the life and not to overthinking about home and you miss*

your family because in this stage you will make your life much harder. If you are feel homesick and feel like you need to talk to someone talk to someone around you, people are here to help and to give you motivation.” (P11)

- *“Make a lot of friends that’s the most important things. Go out, don’t stay at home because if you stayed at home, homesickness will come more and more and you will feel so bad and you will regret it when you go back to your country. Search about places, theres a lot of places for Kuwaiti students, for Saudi students, Omani students, theres a lot of groups going on. Join a group, chat with people, go out, see what such of activities they do. Go to the national days all the gulf countries do, so go, don’t stay at home” (P12)*