Article

Reverse Acculturation among Returnees Saudi Male Students: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the lived experiences of Saudi male students returning from higher education in Western contexts, primarily the United States, and the challenges encountered during social and cultural reintegration. Guided by hermeneutic phenomenology via van Manen's interpretative approach, this study examines how reverse acculturation shapes identity, masculinity, and family relationships within the context of Saudi Arabia's ongoing transformation under Vision 2030. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten Saudi male returnees and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework. Five themes emerged: identity conflict and reverse acculturation stress, renegotiation of masculinity, family disruption and generational tension, barriers to social reintegration, and the navigation of Vision 2030 expectations. The participants reported emotional dissonance, cultural liminality, and tension between traditional norms and egalitarian values acquired abroad. Despite these challenges, many expressed cautious optimism about their ability to contribute to national modernization. The findings indicate that reverse acculturation is a complex, interpretive process involving continuous negotiation between global exposure and local belonging.*

INTRODUCTION

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, international education has become a powerful transformative experience for students, exposing them to alternative cultural norms, ideologies, and worldviews. For Saudi male students who travel to study abroad in Western contexts, particularly the United States, such experiences can be deeply influential. They encounter contrasting perspectives on gender, independence, and social identity that may challenge their established cultural assumptions. In this study, the term international student refers specifically to Saudi nationals who pursue higher education abroad, primarily in the United States, for a minimum of one academic year before returning to Saudi Arabia. Although much research has been conducted on how international students adapt to foreign cultures, considerably fewer studies address what happens after they return home—a process known as reverse acculturation or reverse culture shock, referring to the difficulties of readjusting to one's native culture after being transformed abroad (Chen, 2019; Alhazmi, 2020). Reverse acculturation involves the renegotiation of self-identity and social belonging, often marked by confusion, frustration, and value conflict.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and other national initiatives, has enabled thousands of students to study overseas. A large proportion of them—especially men—spent formative years in the United States, where they were immersed in new modes of thought regarding gender equity, self-expression, and individual autonomy. Upon returning home, these returnees often re-enter a social and cultural environment that can feel unfamiliar, rigid, or unaccommodating to their newly acquired worldviews (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2017). Returning to a society grounded in collectivism and family-centered traditions after exposure to Western ideals of individualism frequently leads to emotional dissonance, mental strain, and difficulties in communicating with family members or peers (Alshahrani & Storch, 2019). These experiences situate reverse acculturation not only as a personal transition but also as a profound social and psychological challenge.

The concept of reverse acculturation is central to understanding this phenomenon. It refers to the process through which individuals attempt to reconcile the values internalized abroad with the cultural expectations of their home society. For Saudi males, this experience is layered with additional complexity because masculinity has deep cultural and religious significance. Traditional Saudi masculinity has historically emphasized authority, self-control, and decision-making dominance within the household and public spheres (Al Lily, 2021). However, during their time abroad, many Saudi men encounter models of masculinity that highlight emotional openness, partnership, and shared responsibility (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Khalaf & Alkhalaf, 2022). The coexistence of these competing models often creates internal conflict and tension

upon return, as men attempt to adapt to family expectations while maintaining a sense of authenticity shaped by their experiences overseas.

Family structures serve as the immediate and most sensitive context in which reverse acculturation unfolds. Saudi society is traditionally organized around extended families, emphasizing collective identity, respect for elders, and conformity to established social roles. Returnees who display autonomy or egalitarian attitudes may inadvertently challenge those norms, leading to misunderstanding or conflict. Some families interpret these changes as signs of disloyalty or "Westernization," whereas others slowly accept them (Alsulami, 2023). These dynamics illustrate that reintegration is not an isolated individual task but rather a relational process shaped by intergenerational negotiation, emotional attachment, and shifting cultural boundaries.

This tension between individual transformation and societal expectations becomes even more pronounced in the era of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's comprehensive plan for economic diversification and social reform. Vision 2030 seeks to empower women, increase youth participation, and promote openness to other cultures (Saudi Vision 2030, 2023). Many of these reforms align closely with the values that returnees acquire abroad, yet implementation on the ground often lags official rhetoric. As a result, returnees may find themselves caught between supporting national modernization efforts and confronting everyday conservatism that persists within family and community settings. This duality highlights their unique position as both beneficiaries and agents of transformation in contemporary Saudi society.

Moreover, the experiences of Saudi male returnees have broader implications for the Kingdom's social sustainability. As Saudi Arabia strives to balance tradition with modernization, understanding how globally educated citizens reintegrate into their families and communities becomes crucial. Their success or failure in reconciling these experiences influences not only their personal well-being but also the nation's progress toward inclusive and cohesive development. Reintegration is therefore not just an individual matter but a reflection of broader social resilience and adaptability.

This study explores how Saudi male returnees negotiate reverse acculturation and its impact on family and identity within the framework of Vision 2030. It addresses an underexplored area by examining how personal transformation interacts with family relations and cultural expectations, contributing to a nuanced understanding of social change and sustainability in modern Saudi Arabia.

Objective

To explore how Saudi male returnees experience and interpret reverse acculturation after studying abroad in Western countries, and to understand how this process shapes their masculine identities, family relationships, and reintegration into Saudi society within the context of Vision 2030.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International student mobility has significantly influenced personal identity, cultural orientation, and social attitudes, particularly among students returning to conservative societies such as Saudi Arabia. While numerous studies have examined the experiences of Saudi students abroad, fewer have addressed the complexities of their reintegration upon returning home—a process known as reverse acculturation. This literature review supports the present study by outlining the reverse acculturation process, the shifting meanings of masculinity, evolving family relations, and the role of national reform under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative. The emphasis on social sustainability underscores the societal importance of successful re-entry and the negotiation of new forms of gender identity within rapidly changing cultural structures. The review adopts a funnel approach, beginning with international perspectives before narrowing to the Saudi and Gulf contexts, thereby establishing the conceptual and empirical foundation for this study.

Reverse Acculturation in International Returnees

International student mobility has long shaped personal identity and social orientation. Returning to one's home country after extended exposure abroad often provokes dissonance—a process known as reverse acculturation or reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000). This experience involves re-encountering familiar norms that now feel foreign, generating stress, confusion, and identity negotiation. Alkhalaf, Al-Krenawi, and Elbedour (2024) reported that Saudi students returning from the United States frequently experienced cultural dislocation and emotional distress, and that they had difficulty reconciling self-transformation with domestic expectations. Similar findings have emerged globally, with Kartoshkina et al. (2024) showing that returnees across collectivist societies often experience value collision between personal autonomy acquired abroad and the conformity demanded at home.

Recent regional evidence has deepened this understanding. Al-Saadi et al. (2024) examined Gulf returnees and described a pattern of "re-entry fatigue"—a sense of frustration upon encountering rigid gender hierarchies that contrast with liberal host country experiences. Al-Rashid (2025) reported that social withdrawal and muted self-expression were common coping responses among Saudi and Bahraini graduates. Together, these findings underscore that reverse acculturation is not merely a psychological process but also a cultural negotiation deeply embedded in social and familial systems.

While the Western literature often emphasizes individual coping strategies and psychological resilience (Gaw, 2020), studies from Saudi Arabia highlight the communal dimension of readjustment, where family reputation and conformity play decisive roles (Alhazmi, 2020; Al-Saadi et al., 2024). This cultural lens distinguishes the Saudi returnee experience, suggesting that successful reintegration requires balancing personal growth with collective expectations—a tension that forms the core of the present study.

Psychological Dimensions of Reverse Acculturation

In addition to cultural dissonance, the psychological strain accompanying reverse acculturation can be profound. Returnees report anxiety, loss of identity, and emotional detachment when confronted with environments that no longer accommodate their transformed perspectives (Kartoshkina et al., 2024). Ersoy and Öztürk Akçaoğlu (2025) demonstrated that acculturative stress and diminished social support are strong predictors of anxiety among international students—mechanisms likely mirrored during reverse transitions. Similarly, Al-Nasser et al. (2025) reported that family support and perceived inclusion are protective factors for Saudi returnees' mental well-being. These findings support the idea that reintegration is a psychosocial process mediated by belonging, acceptance, and identity coherence.

Furthermore, recent research has examined reintegration and career adaptation among internationally educated PhD holders, highlighting similar psychosocial negotiation processes that returnees face when reentering professional and cultural environments after extended stays abroad (Kuzhabekova, 2024).

Masculinity Negotiation among Returnees

For Saudi men, reverse acculturation intersects sharply with masculinity. Traditional Saudi masculinity, rooted in patriarchal leadership and social authority, prescribes restraint and dominance in decision-making (Al Lily, 2021). Exposure to egalitarian gender relations abroad challenges these norms, prompting an internal redefinition of what it means to be a man. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe such shifts as movements from hegemonic to hybrid masculinities that incorporate empathy and cooperation. Alnufaie and Grenfell (2020) reported that Saudi PhD returnees from the UK often compartmentalized these new identities—publicly adhering to local customs while privately retaining more liberal attitudes.

Recent evidence reinforces this pattern. Buhaymid (2023) reported that Saudi men who embraced relational masculinity—characterized by shared domestic roles and emotional openness—faced social ridicule but gradually influenced peers through quiet modeling. Similarly, Al-Harbi (2024) reported that returnees' narratives reflected hybridized masculinity balancing global and local ideals. Beyond the Gulf, Kuzhabekova (2024) documented similar tensions among Kazakh returnees struggling to reassert authority within traditional hierarchies. These parallels suggest that masculinity negotiation is a universal component of reverse acculturation, although its expression is culturally specific.

Collectively, this body of work implies that Saudi returnees' redefinition of masculinity is not rebellion but adaptation. It is a dialectical process of integrating global gender sensibilities within enduring cultural scripts—a balance that this study seeks to interpret phenomenologically.

Family Dynamics: Conflict, Negotiation, and Adaptation

The family remains the primary arena where reverse acculturation is negotiated. Saudi households, anchored in collectivist values and a generational

hierarchy, emphasize obedience, respect, and male authority. Returnees who adopt independent thinking or egalitarian attitudes can disrupt these hierarchies. Alsulami (2023) referred to such clashes as "cultural mismatch," where familial loyalty collides with individual change. Al Lily (2021) reported that men labeled "Westernized" risked marginalization or diminished authority at home.

Recent findings have shown both resistance and flexibility. Al-Shammari and Khan (2023) reported that open family dialogue mitigated generational conflict, whereas Al-Nasser et al. (2025) reported that emotional literacy training improved empathy between parents and returnees. These studies suggest that intergenerational negotiation—rather than confrontation—is central to reintegration success.

Conflict, however, is not purely negative; it can signal evolving relational structures. Families that gradually accommodate new behaviors demonstrate the dynamic capacity to adapt to Saudi social institutions. This aligns with broader sociological arguments that microlevel adaptation within families foreshadows macrolevel social change (Lorenzetti et al., 2023).

Vision 2030 and the Pursuit of Social Sustainability

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms have introduced unprecedented cultural shifts, including increased women's workforce participation and openness to global ideas (Saudi Vision 2030, 2023). Allam (2025) and Artemis-BC (2024) highlighted how such initiatives redefine gender expectations and civic participation. Al-Mutairi and Reis (2025) added that policy success depends on grassroots acceptance—specifically, the environment in which returnees re-establish themselves.

Vision 2030 thus provides both opportunity and pressure. It legitimizes values learned abroad—such as equity and innovation—but returnees often encounter lagging social attitudes at home. Al-Saadi et al. (2024) noted that while Gulf reforms signal modernization, many families remain conservative in everyday practice, creating dissonance between the state narrative and lived experience. This divergence underscores that national transformation requires microlevel cultural acceptance, not only policy mandates.

In this sense, returnees are not passive observers but active mediators of change. Their ability to embody Vision 2030 ideals within domestic life becomes a measure of social sustainability—a concept defined by inclusion, cohesion, and adaptability (Einolf, 2022).

Intersectionality and Multilevel Influences

The intersection of reverse acculturation, masculinity, family, and national reform reveals how multiple layers of identity shape reintegration. Alnufaie and Grenfell (2020) used a Bourdieusian framework to explain how returnees negotiate between global and local habitus. Buhaymid (2023) emphasized that gender role adaptation occurs within intersecting pressures of religion, class, and reform. Alkhalaf et al. (2024) demonstrated that the absence of peer networks amplifies cultural dissonance, whereas Al-Rashid (2025) reported that mentoring and alumni communities help normalize hybrid identities.

These findings reinforce the need for an intersectional lens that captures overlapping experiences of privilege and marginalization. For Saudi returnees, privilege as educated males coexists with vulnerability as cultural intermediaries. A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, as employed in this study, enables the exploration of these nuanced intersections through lived narratives rather than through abstract measurement.

Identified gaps in the literature

Despite this growing scholarship, notable gaps persist:

1. Predominance of quantitative designs. Most Saudi and Gulf studies rely on surveys, leaving the meaning-making dimension of reintegration underexplored (Al-Saadi et al., 2024; Al-Rashid, 2025).
2. Limited theorization of masculinity within family contexts. Research rarely integrates gender identity negotiation with familial power dynamics, although both are central to reintegration (Buhaymid, 2023; Al-Shammari & Khan, 2023).
3. Insufficient microlevel evaluation of Vision 2030. While policy studies discuss reform outcomes, few examine how returnees and families internalize these reforms in everyday life (Al-Mutairi & Reis, 2025).
4. Lack of intersectional and phenomenological perspectives. Research tends to isolate psychological, cultural, or policy variables rather than explore how these layers interact in lived experience.

This study addresses these gaps by employing van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach to interpret the lived experiences of Saudi male returnees. It provides rich, contextual insight into how reverse acculturation unfolds through masculinity, family negotiation, and national reform—contributing both theoretical depth and practical relevance to the discourse on Saudi social transformation and sustainability.

Building upon the reviewed literature, this section presents the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide the interpretation of the study's findings. These frameworks provide the philosophical and analytical foundation for understanding how Saudi male returnees negotiate identity, family expectations, and cultural reintegration within the evolving sociocultural landscape shaped by Vision 2030.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on several interconnected theories to examine the lived experiences of Saudi male returnees who face sociocultural tensions following study abroad. The primary framework is reverse acculturation theory, which explores the psychological, cultural, and social effects of returning to one's home culture after extended exposure to another. Gaw (2000) emphasized that returnees often experience reverse culture shock—not from adapting to a new culture but from re-engaging with their own culture after adopting new values, beliefs, and behaviors abroad. Kartoshkina et al. (2024) applied this theory to repatriated students, highlighting emotional distress, disrupted family ties, and feelings of dislocation, particularly in collectivist societies such as Saudi Arabia.

The Journal of International Students has published foundational work on the experiences of Saudi returnees. For example, Alkhalaf, Al-Krenawi, and Elbedour (2024) surveyed 96 Saudi students who returned after studying in the United States and reported evidence of reverse culture shock. They identified value conflicts between host and home cultures as predictors of lower life satisfaction and psychological adjustment. Their findings suggest that reentry is not simply a return to "normal" but rather a new phase of cultural negotiation.

Similarly, Ersoy and Öztürk Akçaoğlu (2025) examined how graduate students' social support, acculturative stress, and perceived stress influence generalized anxiety. Although their sample consisted of international students rather than returnees, their results shed light on psychological mechanisms—stress, support, and adaptation—relevant to reversing acculturation.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that (1) returnees experience distinct cultural and psychological challenges shaped by the value gap between host and home cultures and that (2) social support and stress-coping processes are central to successful reentry. Hence, it is vital to explore how Saudi male returnees experience these dynamics of family and identity reintegration phenomenologically.

The study also incorporates hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) to understand how gender expectations evolve among male returnees. Hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity associated with authority, control, and patriarchy—traits deeply rooted in Saudi religious and cultural traditions. Male returnees exposed to more egalitarian gender roles abroad may adopt alternative masculinities that value emotional openness, shared domestic responsibilities, and flexibility in gender roles. These new values often clash with traditional norms, creating internal tension and familial conflict.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides a third interpretive lens, which explains how individuals form self-concepts through group affiliations. Saudi returnees, having developed hybrid identities shaped by global experiences, may struggle to reintegrate when their transformed beliefs do not align with dominant social narratives. This tension between their global self and local self leads to dissonance, particularly within family and community contexts.

Finally, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) helps examine how overlapping social categories—such as gender, religion, education, and class—create complex experiences of privilege and marginalization. While male returnees enjoy traditional privilege in a patriarchal society, they may simultaneously face social exclusion because of perceived "Westernized" attitudes. This dual positionality is further complicated by ongoing national reforms, such as Vision 2030, which seeks to reshape gender roles and expand youth participation. Intersectionality thus enables the study to explore how these reforms intersect with identity transformation and social reintegration.

Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive interpretive foundation for understanding how Saudi returnees negotiate identity, family expectations, and broader societal change.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1) illustrates the interaction between key constructs shaping the reintegration of Saudi male returnees. The central construct, reverse acculturation, represents the mental and cultural adjustments that occur after studying abroad. It functions as an independent variable influencing two key constructs: masculinity negotiation and family communication style.

1. Masculinity Negotiation refers to how returnees reconcile traditional gender expectations with egalitarian values acquired overseas, including shifts in emotional expression, domestic participation, and family authority.
2. The family communication style captures the degree of openness, rigidity, or emotional support within the family system as the returnee navigates changes.

The dependent outcome is reintegration success or conflict, which is defined as the extent to which returnees achieve social and familial adjustment versus experiences of rejection or psychological strain.

Two moderating factors shape this process:

1. The Vision 2030 Policy Environment, encompassing national reforms in gender inclusion, education, and cultural modernization.
2. Social support, including peer networks and returnee communities, buffers against the challenges of reentry.

These constructs collectively represent the pathways through which reverse acculturation, gender identity, and family dynamics influence reintegration outcomes.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Reverse Acculturation and Reintegration Dynamics among Saudi Male Returnees
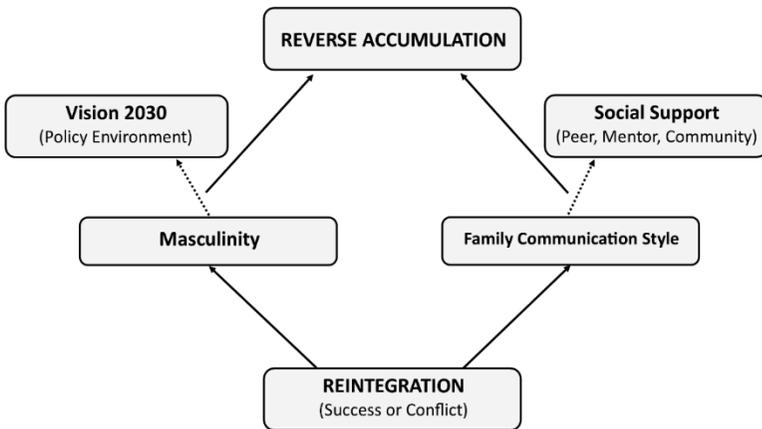
The framework shows how reverse acculturation influences reintegration, which is mediated by masculinity negotiation and family communication and moderated by Vision 2030 reforms and social support.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design grounded in the interpretive tradition of van Manen (1990), which focuses on exploring and interpreting the lived meanings of participants' experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology aims not to describe events as they appear but to interpret how individuals construct meaning through their interactions with the world (Gill, 2014). This approach is particularly suitable for understanding how Saudi male returnees experience and make sense of reverse acculturation, family reintegration, and identity negotiation within the reform context of Vision 2030.

Phenomenology emphasizes subjective understanding and shared meaning rather than measurement or generalization, making it ideal for capturing the complexities of emotional, cultural, and familial adaptation following return from study abroad. The researcher's role was to interpret and illuminate these experiences through careful reflection and thematic analysis, remaining faithful to participants' voices while engaging in reflexive analysis.

Population and Sampling

The study included ten Saudi male returnees who had completed at least one academic year of higher education in a Western country—primarily the United States—and returned to Saudi Arabia within the past five years. This timeframe ensured that participants' recollections of reintegration were both recent and reflective. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling, which identifies individuals who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

Recruitment occurred through university alumni networks, professional groups, and snowball referrals. Selection was guided by criteria such as (1) completion of a degree abroad, (2) duration of stay between 3–10 years, and (3) return within the last five years. While most participants had studied in the United States, one each had studied in Australia and Canada. Marital status and academic field were noted but not used as exclusion criteria; rather, they contributed to contextual diversity.

This purposive approach aligns with phenomenological inquiry, where the goal is depth of insight rather than representativeness. Table 1 (below) presents participant pseudonyms and demographic profiles to preserve confidentiality while providing contextual detail.

Research instrument

A semistructured interview guide, based on the literature on acculturation, masculinity, family systems, and social change in Saudi Arabia, was the primary data collection tool. The questions were open-ended to elicit rich narratives and allowed for follow-up probes. The main areas of inquiry concerned the participants' emotional and cultural experiences upon reentry, potential cognitive conflicts with family or social expectations, shifting notions of masculinity and gender roles, and participants' understanding of how Vision 2030 might shape social norms. The interview questions were piloted with two returnees and reworded to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and flow.

Data collection procedure

Data were collected over a six-week period via semistructured, in-depth interviews that allowed participants to narrate their experiences in their own words. The interviews were conducted either in person or via secure videoconferencing (Zoom or Microsoft Teams), according to participants' preference. Each session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in Arabic or English depending on the comfort level.

Open-ended guiding questions explored topics such as emotional and cultural readjustment, family relations, perceptions of masculinity, and awareness of Vision 2030 reforms. The flexibility of the interview format allowed for probing, clarification, and follow-up reflection. All interviews were recorded—with consent—and transcribed verbatim. For the Arabic interviews, bilingual translation and back-translation ensured linguistic accuracy and preservation of cultural nuances.

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis followed van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic method of thematic interpretation, supported by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This dual approach enabled both philosophical depth and systematic rigor.

The analytical process involved:

1. Immersion and familiarization – reading and rereading transcripts to grasp participants' lived worlds.
2. Initial coding – identifying meaningful phrases that reflected lived experiences.
3. Clustering and theme formation – Grouping codes into patterns that capture essential meanings.
4. Interpretation and reflection – engaging hermeneutically with the text to uncover underlying meanings.
5. Theme refinement and naming – articulating thematic essences such as "identity tension," "masculinity negotiation," and "reconciliation through reform."
6. Textual integration—composing a coherent narrative linking participant experiences with theoretical insights.

Unlike grounded theory, which pursues data saturation, phenomenology aims for thematic depth and interpretative sufficiency. Thus, the analysis continued until the researcher achieved thematic saturation, at which point no new meanings significantly altered the understanding of the phenomenon. NVivo software supported data management and coding, ensuring transparency and traceability of interpretations.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- Credibility was strengthened through member checking, where participants reviewed transcriptions and preliminary interpretations for accuracy.

- Transferability was supported by a thick description of the participants' demographic and cultural context.
- Dependability was achieved through an audit trail documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, and reflexive notes.
- Confirmability was reinforced through researcher reflexivity, where the author maintained a journal reflecting on positionality, assumptions, and power dynamics during male–female interactions in interviews.

As a Saudi female researcher interviewing male participants, the author noted the presence of occasional reservations or guarded responses. In some instances, participants invited their spouses to be present during interviews. These dynamics were documented and critically reflected upon to ensure transparency, ethical sensitivity, and interpretive accuracy throughout the research process.

Limitations

As with all qualitative designs, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization. The goal was depth of understanding rather than representativeness. The small, purposefully selected sample provided rich insights into Saudi male returnees' experiences but cannot capture the full spectrum of returnee realities.

Additionally, the sensitive nature of discussing masculinity and family roles may have elicited socially desirable responses despite the use of confidentiality measures. Finally, translation between Arabic and English may have led to minor nuances being lost, although back-translation minimized this effect. Future research could expand the sample diversity and include longitudinal or comparative designs to further explore the reintegration process across different demographic groups.

RESULTS

This section presents the lived meanings and interpretive themes that emerged from the narratives of Saudi male returnees who studied abroad. Through hermeneutic analysis following van Manen's framework, five essential themes were identified, reflecting the participants' collective experiences of reverse acculturation and reintegration. Each theme represents an interpretive synthesis of participants' voices, illustrating how they made sense of their transformation within cultural, familial, and national contexts.

Theme 1: Identity Conflict and Reverse Acculturation Stress

This theme captures participants' experiences of dissonance and self-alienation upon returning home. The essence of reverse acculturation was expressed as "feeling foreign in one's own country." Returnees described emotional tension between their new worldviews and the cultural norms they had once accepted uncritically.

"When I came back, I couldn't recognize myself. I became more expressive, and that was seen as too emotional, or even weak by my family."

"Everything around me looked the same, but I didn't feel the same person who left Saudi Arabia five years ago."

The participants spoke of being caught between two cultural frames—the internalized individualism of their host countries and the collectivist expectations of their home society. This tension created a sense of liminality: belonging to both worlds, yet at times accepted by neither. For many, the process of readjustment involves a gradual reconstruction of self to reconcile internal transformation with external expectations.

Interpretive reflection:

This theme represents the core of the returnees' lifeworld: a space of negotiation between authenticity and conformity. Reverse acculturation was not merely a cultural transition but also an existential challenge to identify continuity.

Theme 2: Masculinity Negotiation and Redefinition

The second theme reflects participants' evolving understanding of masculinity through lived encounters abroad and at home. Exposure to egalitarian models of gender relations abroad reshaped their concepts of strength, respect, and emotional expression.

"Before, I believed a man had to be silent and strong. In the U.S., I saw men who could cry and still be respected."

"I learned that responsibility is not control. It's about caring for others, even emotionally."

Upon reentry, participants faced pressure to readopt patriarchal expectations—to reclaim authority and suppress emotions. Some described ridicule or suspicion from family members, who perceived their new attitudes as unmanly or Westernized. Others internalize guilt to resist dominant norms.

Interpretive reflection:

Masculinity emerged as a site of cultural renegotiation. The participants' narratives suggest that male identity is neither fixed nor binary but fluidly reconstructed through encounters with global and local discourses. This shift aligns with van Manen's view of experience as a continuous dialog between the past and present selves.

Theme 3: Family Disruption and Generational Tension

The family represented both a space of belonging and a site of conflict. When attempting to express new values or behavioral norms, the participants spoke of friction with parents, spouses, and siblings.

"I asked my sister about her dreams and encouraged her to apply abroad. My father was furious. He said I was becoming too American."

"At first, I thought my family would understand that I had changed, but they saw it as betrayal, not growth."

Generational tension was especially visible among participants who had married or started their families before going abroad. Returning with more egalitarian views on gender and parenting often clashes with traditional expectations of male authority. Over time, however, some participants reported a degree of mutual adaptation as their families gradually recognized their sincerity and moral consistency.

Interpretive reflection:

This theme underscores the intergenerational lifeworld where values collide and evolve. Reintegration occurs not only within individuals but also within relational systems, where dialog and empathy can transform resistance into acceptance.

Theme 4: Social reintegration barriers

This theme reveals the broader societal obstacles that returnees encounter when attempting to reestablish themselves professionally and socially. Many described experiencing "cultural limbo," feeling too progressive for conservative settings yet out of place among peers who had not lived abroad.

"I stopped talking about my opinions in gatherings. People saw me as strange, like I had betrayed our culture."

"I learned to hide my thoughts just to belong again."

The participants also expressed disappointment at limited institutional support for returnees, noting that reintegration programs often focus on professional adjustment, neglecting psychosocial adaptation. The fear of judgment led several participants to practice selective silence—suppressing ideas about gender equality, freedom, or individuality to maintain social harmony.

Interpretive reflection:

The experience of liminality extended beyond family life into public interaction. Reintegration thus became an act of strategic conformity — a performative adaptation that balanced authenticity and belonging.

Theme 5: Navigating Vision 2030 Expectations

The final theme encapsulates participants' complex relationships with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms. Returnees viewed the national agenda as both empowering and constraining.

"Vision 2030 gave me hope — I thought society was changing faster. However, when I came back, I realized that change is slower than policies say."

"It made me proud, but I still see contradictions between what we say as a nation and how people live at home."

Some participants identified with Vision's goals of modernization, women's empowerment, and openness but doubted their implementation at the grassroots level. Others interpreted Vision 2030 as validating their transformed identities, thereby providing social legitimacy for their liberal attitudes.

Interpretive reflection:
Vision 2030 operated as both a symbolic horizon and a mirror of participants' struggles—promising transformation—while exposing the distance between reform discourse and lived experience. For returnees, the national project became part of their own narrative of self-reconstruction and belonging.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this discussion is to interpret the five thematic essences in light of the literature and theoretical frameworks. Guided by reverse acculturation theory (Gaw, 2000), hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the findings demonstrate that reverse acculturation among Saudi male returnees is a multifaceted negotiation of identity, gender, and family within the broader reform context of Vision 2030.

Reverse Acculturation as Identity Reorientation

The participants' narratives confirmed earlier findings that reverse acculturation induces psychological and cultural dissonance (Alkhalaf et al., 2024; Kartoshkina et al., 2024). However, this study extends the understanding by revealing that for Saudi returnees, identity reconstruction occurs relationally—within family and social expectations, not in isolation. This aligns with van Manen's hermeneutic view that experience is situated and interpretive, reflecting both personal transformation and collective meaning-making.

While Western studies (e.g., Ersoy & Öztürk Akçaoğlu, 2025) emphasize coping mechanisms, Saudi returnees describe reintegration as moral negotiation—an effort to align global exposure with local faith and values. This difference underscores the importance of contextualizing reverse acculturation within cultural and religious systems.

Masculinity as a Lived Negotiation

The redefinition of masculinity among returnees mirrors findings by Buhaymid (2023) and Al-Harbi (2024), who described similar hybrid masculinities emerging in postreturn Saudi contexts. However, this study's phenomenological perspective deepens those insights by revealing how men experience these tensions internally, as moral dilemmas rather than ideological shifts. Emotional expressiveness, partnership, and empathy were not merely adopted behaviors but also reinterpreted virtues that were consistent with Islamic and familial ethics.

In this sense, the returnees' reconfiguration of masculinity is not a Western import but an indigenous reinterpretation of moral leadership — one that integrates global exposure into local frameworks.

Family as a Negotiating Arena

Consistent with Alsulami (2023) and Al-Shammari & Khan (2023), this study revealed that family systems play a decisive role in shaping reintegration outcomes. These findings highlight that family conflict can serve as a mechanism of adaptation rather than solely as a form of resistance. Through dialog, shared experiences, and gradual understanding, families become spaces of cultural mediation.

This dynamic reinforces Lorenzetti et al.'s (2023) argument that families function as microcosms of societal transformation. Reintegration, therefore, reflects Saudi Arabia's broader negotiation between continuity and change.

Reintegration, Vision 2030, and Social Sustainability.

The participants' ambivalence toward Vision 2030—admiration mixed with skepticism— echoes Al-Mutairi and Reis (2025), who emphasized the gap between policy aspirations and household-level realities. The study reveals that while Vision 2030 provides ideological legitimacy to progressive values, the lived process of reform is uneven.

Nevertheless, returnees act as agents of social sustainability by internalizing and embodying reform principles within their families and communities. Their capacity to bridge global and local perspectives represents a microcosm of Saudi Arabia's evolving identity.

Integrative Implications

Synthesizing across themes, reverse acculturation among Saudi male returnees is best understood as a dialogical process of becoming—oscillating between transformation and tradition. Reintegration is successful not through conformity but through relational negotiation and meaning-making.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the following:
1. Structured psychosocial reintegration programs addressing identity and value negotiation.
2. Community-based masculinity dialog spaces to normalize hybrid gender expressions.
3. Family education workshops that promote generational empathy.
4. Collaborative Vision 2030 initiatives linking returnees' experiences to social reform goals.

These insights collectively align with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) by showing that reintegration is shaped by overlapping social categories—gender, education, religion, and policy—each influencing how individuals reconstruct belonging.

Through hermeneutic interpretation, this study illuminates reverse acculturation as both a deeply personal and socially embedded process. Saudi male returnees' lived experiences reveal a cultural dialog between global exposure and national reform, which is mediated by family, faith, and identity. In

this negotiation, they embody the human face of Vision 2030 — carrying both the promise of modernization and the burden of reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of Saudi male students who returned home after studying in Western countries, focusing on reverse acculturation, negotiations of masculinity, family reintegration, and compatibility with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The qualitative phenomenological study illustrated the multilayered challenges faced by returnees as they negotiated identity shifts, social expectations, and cultural transitions.

Perhaps the most interesting discovery from this study was the intrapersonal conflict resulting from re-entry. Many of the participants articulated feeling emotionally alienated or misunderstood in their home, along with adjustments to their self-concept and worldview from exposure to Western values, skepticism about gender roles, emotional expression, and sense of agency. However, combining their altered discourse with traditional norms created psychological discomfort and social tension. This phenomenon is consistent with prior literature on reverse acculturation, which shows that returning home can paradoxically cause greater identity disruption than leaving one's country of origin.

Masculinity emerged as a particular contested domain. Several participants discussed how their understanding of what it means to be a "man" changed dramatically while they were abroad. Characteristics such as vulnerability, empathy, and cooperative decision-making, which are often stigmatized in reactionary contexts, were viewed by returnees as strengths. Upon returning, however, returnees were challenged by family or peers operationalizing the traits of vulnerability, empathy or cooperative decision-making as indications of weakness or "Westernization." The oppressive tensions between hegemonic masculinity and emerging models of gender identity taking shape on the global stage were very present here.

The family was a crucial site where tension was felt. The participants had conflicts with fathers, siblings and/or spouses about their newfound beliefs or behaviors. Some have challenged traditional expectations regarding male authority, household duties, and women's agency within specific contexts. Some families were resistant and/or hostile to the returnee's initial behaviors, yet some described periods of resistance followed by an understanding or adjustment. These relationships reveal the possibilities of families not only as guardians of tradition but also as sites for change when conversation and respect are prioritized.

A common theme in participants' stories was their experience of social reintegration challenges. Many respondents described their experience of being caught between two worlds, which was too progressive for more conservative circles but also no longer represented the values inspired by exposure to Western culture. The cultural limbo often led to self-censorship, isolation, or calculated conformity. Nonetheless, participants believed that prospective transformations were evident in the direction of the country, particularly because of Vision 2030.

They saw using the national reform agenda as a bridge between the values they learned abroad and the traditions they returned to.

Vision 2030 served two purposes for the returnee experience. On the one hand, Vision 2030 legitimized many of the values the participants internalized during their time abroad, such as value for gender equity, youth empowerment, and social openness. On the other hand, returnees were aware of the discrepancy between policy and practice in everyday life. Although changes in organizations were identified, the cultural changes in their family/community contexts did not match any of the changes represented in the policy reforms. This disparity contributed not only to increasing the complexity of reintegration but also to positioning returnees as significant cultural intermediaries.

In the end, this project emphasizes the importance of understanding reverse acculturation not only as a psychological process but also as part of a relational and sociopolitical process. The returnees in this study did not simply select or reject values. Rather, they were negotiating how to relate their transformation internally and their expectations externally. Their individual stories reveal the rapidly evolving society taking place in Saudi Arabia along with a need for reintegration models that include emotional resonance, cross-cultural dialog, and social sustainability.

The Saudi male returnee reintegration stories likewise reflect progress in understanding the reintegration phenomenon of loss with the transition from a more familiar situation to dislocation followed by a transformation to a new familiar situation by embracing new possibilities. In summary, the reintegration experiences of Saudi men are a glimpse into the broader identity of the nation. Their transitions and difficulties represented not only challenges in their reacclimatization but also the opportunity for cultural revitalization. The returnee representation of the new male, as Vision 2030 is redefining masculine expectations in the country, represents an opportunity for rebuilding a socially sustainable future in Saudi Arabia.

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