Social issues confronting Saudi students undertaking international study: An exploratory investigation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the difficulties encountered by Saudi students in adjusting to living and studying in another country. It focuses on the process of 'acculturation': how the students modify their own cultural beliefs and behaviours in response to contact with one or more other cultures. Currently, more than 130,000 Saudi students are studying at universities outside the country. An exploratory study was undertaken with Saudi students studying in the United kingdom. The methodology involved a focus group session, a questionnaire, interviews and a validation session. Ten major issues were identified that suggest that Saudi students studying outside their own country experience significant acculturation difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

The economy of Saudi Arabia is primarily based on oil production and petroleum products; indeed, the country currently supplies 60% of the world's oil, and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The Saudi government and its people, however, are acutely aware that most countries are now strongly focussing on research and development activities aimed at decreasing the world's dependence on oil for the supply of energy. As a consequence, strategies and processes for identifying and developing alternative economic pillars for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have become of immense relevance and interest to Saudi businesses, industries, academics and students, all of whom are now operating in a rapidly changing and increasingly global business world.

It is generally accepted that the capacity and creativity of a country's workforce, and in turn its economic performance, will be significantly enhanced by exposure to world 'best practice', and the associated transference of higher-order knowledge and skills across geographical borders. In this context, it is not surprising that the Saudi Government, strongly supported by Saudi businesses and by the Saudi community generally, has introduced an extremely generous scholarship scheme aimed at increasing the attendance of Saudi students at quality international universities as a way of ensuring that the knowledge, skills, capacity and creativity of the Saudi workforce achieve international benchmarks.

This paper explores some of the difficulties Saudi students have in adjusting to study in another country. The focus primarily is on social rather than educational issues; that is, the emphasis of this paper is on the 'acculturation' of Saudi students, and the difficulties they experience in coping with the differences and inconsistencies between their own culture and that of the host country. The paper begins with a discussion of the concept of 'acculturation', with a particular

emphasis on international students. It then provides a brief overview of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its higher education system and its international student scholarship schemes. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to an exploratory study into the issues confronted by a group of Saudi students as they attempted to adjust to studying in the United Kingdom.

ACCULTURATION

Acculturation refers to the process of modifying one's own cultural beliefs and behaviours in response to contact with one or more different cultures (Fan, 2004; Abouammoh, 2012). Acculturation not only can affect an individual's daily behaviour (such as eating and dress habits, and use of language) but also their physical and psychological well-being. The process of acculturation is different for each individual; not all individuals will experience the same changes and not all individuals will experience the same degree of change. Padilla and Perez (2003) posit that these experiential differences are related to differences in social cognitions, particularly the goals and motivations that underpin behaviour.

Acculturation usually involves three sequential phases (Martin and Nakayama, 2000):

1. The *eagerness or excitement stage* which occurs in the home country immediately before the move to the host country. Individuals start to anticipate "what it will be like to be in a new country", and start anticipating and preparing for the differences they believe they will experience and the changes in behaviour and thinking they believe they will have to make;

2. The *culture shock stage* which occurs when individuals first arrive in the host country and experience a genuine identity crisis as they discover just how different the new country and its customs really are; and

3. The *adaptation stage* which occurs over time as individuals confront the realities of their new environment and attempt to make the necessary adjustments to ensure that their stay is as comfortable and productive as possible. Adaptation can take a very long time because individuals essentially must lose part of their 'old' culture in order to adjust to the 'new' culture they are currently experiencing (Kim, 1988).

A review of the literature suggests that the major concerns of students studying in a foreign country are: admission and selection procedures to foreign universities; orientation to their new institution; the credibility of their previous academic record; establishing social support networks; living and dining conditions; health services; religious issues; English language proficiency; involvement in 'student life'; financial matters; and job placement opportunities and services (Deardorff, 2006; Denman and Hilal, 2011; Fan, 2004; Gonzales, 2006; Kashima and Loh, 2006; Wilton and Constantine, 2003).

There is a dearth of research and academic discussion regarding the acculturation experiences of Saudi students studying in international universities. Most of the studies that are publicly available were conducted two or more decades ago, when there was little government support, financial or otherwise, for international study, and when the global business environment was significantly different from the present. Recent studies (Al-Dakheel, 2007; Al-Sheikhly, 2012; Denman and Hilal, 2011; Jaidev, 2011) have almost all been situated in the United States, but have identified the major acculturation issues as: admission and selection to their university of choice, and in particular, concerns about whether their previous academic record will be accepted, given that it was accumulated in Saudi universities; identifying and accessing social support networks, particularly involving other Saudi or Muslim students; the nature of their living conditions; diet; access to health services; respect by host students and staff for their religious needs and beliefs; and English language proficiency, both written and oral. The study

reported in this paper appears to be the first methodologically rigorous attempt to investigate acculturation issues for Saudi students conducted outside the USA.

It is important to note the difference between the terms 'acculturation' and 'enculturation'. Enculturation refers to the process by which the values and norms of a society are acquired by its members. It can be thought of as first-culture learning. Acculturation refers to the integration of the culture of a foreign country, and can thus be thought of as second-culture learning.

THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle East, and occupies the major proportion of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by Jordan and Iraq to the north, Kuwait to the north-east, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to the east, Oman to the south-east, and Yemen to the south. The Red Sea lies to the west with the Arabian (Persian) Gulf to the east. The country has no permanent rivers, and is mostly sand deserts or arid shrublands.

Saudi Arabia is one of the most thinly populated countries in the world, with an estimated population of around 25 million. More than 20% of the population are foreign nationals – primarily from India, Pakistan, and Egypt – working in Saudi Arabia. Constitutionally, Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the Al Saud family. The King (currently King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud) combines legislative, executive and judicial functions, and is also Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques at Mecca and Medina. There is no formal Constitution, although the Basic Law of Government, issued by King Faud in 1992, is a Constitution-like charter that indicates how the government is to be run, along with the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

Saudi Arabia operates according to Islamic Law (the Shariah) which is primarily derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah – the teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad. The Shariah provides rules, regulations and general principles that guide all aspects of Muslim life, including

daily routines, family behaviour, religious obligations, and financial practices (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013a).

Saudi Arabia is the largest exporter of petroleum in the world, and its economy is dominated by petroleum and its related industries. The policy of 'Saudi-ization', introduced in 1990, seeks to replace the large numbers of ex-patriate workers employed in Saudi businesses with Saudi workers. It particularly targets the large number of young Saudis who will be entering the job market in the near future. The major challenge confronting the 'Saudi-ization policy' is the lack of appropriately skilled Saudis in the job market, and as previously indicated, the Government is looking to the higher education sector to address this concern.

Dress and behavior standards in Saudi Arabia are enforced by the religious police or 'mutaween' (the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vices). In particular, traditional cultural and religious norms significantly restrict the rights and behavior of Saudi women.

THE SAUDI HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education in Saudi Arabia has four defining characteristics: a focus on the teaching of Islam; a centralized system of control and educational support; state funding of education at all levels; and a general policy of gender segregation (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013a).

In 2009-10, there were 757,770 students enrolled in Saudi universities (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013a). Most students are enrolled at the Bachelor and Associate Degree levels – only 1.80% of enrolments are at Master's and Doctoral levels. There are 24 public and 9 private universities in Saudi Arabia. All of the private universities and 16 of the public universities have been established in the last decade, reflecting a massive injection of public funding into the sector in

recent times. The private university sector represents approximately 4% of all Saudi university enrolments.

Saudi education policy stipulates the separation of male and female students at all levels of education, with four exceptions: kindergarten, nursery school, some privately-run elementary schools, and some medical schools in universities. The curriculum for male and female students is essentially the same (except for physical education and home economics), although there is strong evidence to suggest that educational resources for male education generally is superior to that available for females (Jamjoom and Kelly, 2013). With two exceptions, all Saudi universities now have both male and female students, although the sexes are segregated on campus, including in most lecture rooms.

Traditional Saudi culture and religious teachings are based on adherence to standards and norms, centralised systems of governance, structured lifestyles and work environments, rote learning of key information, and a reluctance to engage strongly in open collaboration and exchange of ideas with the 'outside world'. It is not surprising, then, that rote learning and didactic teaching dominates at all levels of the education system, including in universities.

In February 2007, the Saudi Cabinet approved the King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education, which involves the expenditure of $US 3.1 billion over a five-year period for a major overhaul of the Saudi education system. Funds are specifically targeted for a range of related initiatives, including teacher training and professional development, curriculum and textbook review, the provision of contemporary information technology for both teaching and learning (including internet services for teachers and students), and programs for developing innovative practice. The component of the King Abdullah Project that specifically addresses the future of higher education in the Kingdom is known as "AAFAQ" or "Horizon". It defines the

mission and outcomes for the higher education system as a whole, and proposes a mechanism though which methods of strategic planning are to be adopted by all public universities in the country.

Smith and Abouammoh (2013a) identify five overriding issues for the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia: the tension between academic vision and cultural norms; the lack of an appropriate governance model for Saudi universities; developing and sustaining international credibility; maximising opportunities and achievements for women in higher education; and the tension between traditional Saudi approaches to teaching, learning and student assessment and the needs of a global knowledge economy.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SAUDI STUDENTS

As previously discussed, study at leading international universities is deemed essential for developing an international standard workforce capable of driving the future economic development of Saudi Arabia. In 2012, there were 132,510 Saudi students studying at universities outside the country (Abouammoh, 2012). Approximately one-fifth of Saudi students studying abroad are female. The most popular destinations for Saudi international students are, in order, the USA, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Egypt and Jordan. Around 85% of Saudi students studying at international universities are supported by government funding, primarily through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP).

Introduced in 2005, KASP is the largest fully-endowed government scholarship program ever supported by a nation-state (Bukhari and Denman, 2013). It covers all travel, tuition and living expenses for recipients, their spouses and their children. Being accompanied by one's immediate family is deemed to be extremely important by the Saudi Government for reasons of personal safety and general well-being, as well as for cultural and religious reasons. Scholarship funding

for each recipient is adjusted according to the number of dependents living with them while they are overseas. If the scholarship holder is female and not married, an accompanying father, uncle, or brother may be classified a scholarship recipient, even if they are not formally enrolled in an overseas institution.

Bukhari and Denman (2013) note that historically, the offering of overseas scholarships by the Saudi government focused on the capacity for the recipient to subsequently contribute to the 'public good' of the country. Now, however, there is much more focus on the identified professional and personal needs of individual students. In this context, research currently being undertaken by Hilal (2013) reveals that many Saudi families are anxious about their sons and daughters studying too far away from the Saudi homeland, and that familiarity with religion and customs is critically important to parents and spouses in particular when choosing an international university and country for study.

Bukhari and Denman (2013) conclude that available evidence suggests that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has been successful in both achieving its stated aims and in improving the capacity of the students involved to engage internationally. They also note, however, that the quality of instruction being received by students in the program is raising concerns about the quality of instruction in many Saudi universities and is making it more difficult for 'home educated' graduates to compete in the Saudi job market.

EXPLORATORY STUDY: METHODOLOGY

As discussed earlier in this paper, an exploratory study was undertaken in order to gain insights regarding the behavioural and attitudinal changes that Saudi students make, or need to make, in order to successfully undertake university study in the United Kingdom.

The qualitative research design was chosen for the exploratory study, involving four sequential phases:

1. A focus group session, the purpose of which was to identify the key issues and perceptions held by Saudi international students;

2. A questionnaire, the purpose of which was to ascertain the level of agreement among Saudi students with each of the issues and perceptions ;

3. Semi-structured interviews with a small number of students, the purpose of which was to obtain a richer, more detailed understanding of key issues; and

4. A validation session, the purpose of which was to confirm that the conclusions reached by the researcher seemed reasonable to a sample of Saudi international students.

Focus group:

Focus groups are a semi-structured qualitative research technique in which a group setting is used to interview people and to engage them in focused conversation. Focus groups generally generate information that spans a range of fully-integrated contexts (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013b). Focus groups provide 'natural settings' in which participants feel that they can express their ideas and opinions freely and openly in a way that helps them to feel empowered (Neuman, 2006). They provide participants with the opportunity to explain their position and to query the views of others. Fern (2001), however, argues that the openness of debate in a focus group heavily depends on the personality and skills of the session facilitator.

Exploratory focus groups are about "creating, collecting, identifying, discovering, explaining, and generating thoughts" (Fern 2001:5). A major strength of exploratory focus group research is that it "uncovers all the different thoughts that people have, not just those that they have in common … Therefore, much of the information generated in exploratory [focus group] research is

unique" (Fern 2001,p.5). Rea and Parker (2005) recommend that, in order to maximise the quality of debate, a focus group should ideally have 6 to 10 members. The exploratory focus group employed for the current study comprised 7 Saudi students studying at universities in the United Kingdom.

Participants in the focus group were asked to respond to the following two stimulus questions: "What have been your major experiences and concerns in adjusting to living and studying in the United kingdom?"; "In what ways do you believe you have had to adapt your attitudes and behaviours in order to 'fit in' with the social and educational environment here in the United kingdom?". Responses were interrogated by a thematic analysis (Howitt and Cramer, 2007) in which common themes are determined from an holistic analysis of all available data.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used for the exploratory study was comprised of two parts. Part One sought general biographic information from each respondent regarding: gender; age; place of residency in Saudi Arabia; course or discipline area being studied in the UK; level of course (Bachelors, Masters by coursework; Masters by coursework and dissertation; Masters by research only; PhD); host university; previous work experience, if any; previous travel to the United Kingdom, if any; and intended future career. Part Two comprised 16 open-ended statements to which participants were asked to provide their experiences and perceptions. The 16 statements were derived from the key issues identified from the focus group session.

Questionnaires were distributed to 21 Saudi students studying on scholarships at universities in London, Manchester and Sheffield. Nine questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher. Of these nine: 7 respondents were female and 2 male; 1 student was aged 21-25, 7 students were aged 25-30, and 1 student was over 30 years of age; 3 students were from the

Saudi Capital of Riyadh, 3 from Makkah, 2 from Madinah, and 1 from Al-Hasa; 1 respondent was studying for a Bachelor's degree, 1 for a Masters, and 7 for a PhD; and 6 students had been in the United Kingdom prior to commencing their current studies. This distribution is not proportionally representative of Saudi students studying in the United Kingdom, but it was believed by the researcher that the range of student characteristics was likely to identify the major issues of relevance and concern.

Information collected through the questionnaire was again analysed using a thematic approach (Howitt and Cramer, 2007).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with three students attending university in Sheffield. The reason for only interviewing Sheffield students was primarily related to the time and travel constraints of the researcher. Interviewees were asked to provide open-ended responses to a number of questions constructed by the researcher following the focus group and questionnaire analysis. The purpose of the interview questions was to provide explanations and clarifications for issues and perspectives previously derived from the analysis of data from the focus group and questionnaires. Typical questions included: "A number of Saudi students have stated that they have had difficulty adjusting to the length of the day in the United Kingdom during Summer and Winter. Why do you think they made that statement, and why do you think it is such a major problem for them?"; and "Several students have stated that they have found it difficult coping in a country that not just tolerates but actively supports a wide range of religious beliefs and practices. Why do you think that is such a problem for those students, and how do you think they can learn to cope with that situation?".

Validation session

The validation session was designed to obtain confirmation from a group of Saudi scholarship recipients that the issues identified and the conclusions drawn by the researcher were sustainable. The process involved the researcher doing a presentation of findings and conclusions for a small group of Saudi students, and then asking them to state honestly and openly whether they thought that the issues were valid and the conclusions reasonable. Where any concerns were raised, the issue was thrown open to the full group to debate, with the researcher taking careful note of the comments made.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The major themes concerning changes in attitudes and behaviours raised and discussed by Saudi scholarship holders during this exploratory investigation address the following 10 issues:

1. *The need to demonstrate a greater respect for, and understanding of, the views and opinions of others.* Respondents were generally of the view that having a strong respect for others opinions was not a defining characteristic of Saudi society. One student summarised the situation as: "*[In Saudi Arabia] people tend to follow the saying of 'it is my way or no way' ".* Another student posited the view that the reason why Saudis generally did not demonstrate a strong respect for the views of others is that, as an homogenous community, Saudi people are not used to being asked about their culture, beliefs, habits or decisions of Government. Nevertheless, most of the students felt that attitudes are changing in Saudi Arabia, albeit slowly, largely as a result of increased multicultural communication facilitated by the internet and social networking. Further, most of the students were very positive about being pressured by their new environment in the United Kingdom to be more sensitive to the opinions of others because they believed it broadened their knowledge and outlook, and improved their communication skills and general capacity to contribute in a productive way to their society.

2. *The importance of punctuality.* Most of the students indicated that punctuality was not generally a high priority in Saudi Arabia, either in people's social lives or with respect to their work commitments. One student noted: "*for social life and family, time is not that important [in KSA]*", while another stated that in her workplace in Saudi Arabia, "*people are not punctual and do not respect time, which makes my job much more difficult*". Nevertheless, all of the students indicated that they had come to understand the importance of being punctual during their stay in the United Kingdom, and would try to maintain the habit when they returned home. They had come to realise the importance, both in terms of productivity and 'professional perception', of: arriving on time for lectures, tutorials and meetings; of being on time for public transport and social engagements; and paying their bills on time.

3. *The importance of using 'courtesy words and phrases' such as please, thank you and excuse me.* Most of the respondents stated that the use of 'courtesy words and phrases' was not a consistent practice in Saudi Arabia. As one student stated: "*we miss these words in our communication life in KSA since not everyone uses them*", while another commented that "*for some unknown reason employees are not always friendly in KSA (especially in the morning) and they can be a little short-tempered as well*". Most of the students, however, stated that personally they had "*always tried to be nice and polite*" and were "*used to practicing the use of courtesy words*". The students all agreed that the use of courtesy words and phrases was an important way of showing respect and of opening communication channels, and that they would continue the habit when they returned to Saudi Arabia.

4. *The difficulties of adapting to a different life style, particularly with respect to food, climate and transportation.* Several students had significant difficulties adjusting to British food, and had resorted to doing a lot of their own cooking. Interestingly, these students generally found that they were able to progressively enjoy the offerings of fast food outlets, although this obviously has implications in terms of nutrition. Many students had major difficulties

learning how to use public transport, because in Saudi Arabia, public transport is extremely limited and private vehicles are the main means of commuting. As one student commented: "*I was suffering from this because as you know we don't have to use them [train/ bus/ taxi] before in KSA but now I like them*". Some of the students had also had significant difficulties adjusting to the British climate, both in terms of the cool temperatures and the marked difference in the length of the day between Summer and Winter. Saudi Arabia is generally a very hot, dry country with no great differences between the length of the day in Summer and Winter.

5. *The difficulties in adapting to a multicultural community.* Saudi Arabia is a remarkably homogenous society in terms of culture, language, religion, politics and social norms. In comparison, the United Kingdom is a multicultural community, consisting of people from a wide range of countries, religions, political beliefs and social behaviours. In this context, the Saudi students in this study indicated that it was generally very difficult to make the transition from their own country to their host country. The appropriate use of English language posed a particular problem, for as one student stated: "*I feel shy due to my poor use of English language*". Another student commented that she had a wide range of adjustment issues related to culture: "*I do not understand their culture or understand their jokes or even share hobbies with them*". Interestingly, those students who came from Makkah – arguably Saudi Arabia's most multicultural city – found the transition to UK culture much easier than those from more traditional cities such as the Saudi capital of Riyadh. Those students who had previously been to the UK also found the transition much easier. What all the students did stress was that the British people with whom they interacted were generally "*very friendly, nice and helpful*". As one student commented: "*Living in the UK as a Muslim lady is not difficult because people accept my beliefs and way of dressing*".

6. *The problem of communicating with people in a multi-religious environment.* All Saudi residents adhere to the Muslim religion. Indeed, publicly practising any other religion is illegal inside the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Alternatively, a wide range of religions are practised in the United Kingdom, and people of non-religious belief are also significantly represented in the population. Communicating with people in the multi-religion environment of the United Kingdom, therefore, presents a major problem for Saudi students. Nevertheless, all of the students indicated that learning to cope with this difficulty had been a major growth experience for them: "*I learned to respect the other religions. I even learned more about them*".

7. *Exploratory learning and learning in groups.* Saudi education at all levels, including university, is characterised by a significant and pervasive focus on rote learning, didactic teaching approaches and summative norm-referenced assessment (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013c). University education in the United Kingdom, however, reflects a significant focus on learning that is based on an exploration of issues and group discussion and practical work. This transition reportedly has been a very difficult experience for many of the students: "*It is difficult to understand others' opinions or to communicate with different cultures [in a group]*". Another student commented that group work is generally "*frustrating, depending on the nature of the people you are working with*". Some students, however, felt that group work and exploratory learning was very beneficial, giving them new skills and knowledge, and encouraging them to engage in creative thinking.

8. *Adjustment to co-education.* As discussed earlier in this paper, gender segregation is a defining characteristic of Saudi education at all levels. In the United Kingdom, the genders mix in most forums with essentially no restrictions. Adjusting to this very different environment represents a significant challenge for most Saudi students. As one student commented: "*The vast majority in KSA consider communication with the opposite gender in work or study as being a bad relationship – it is controlled by traditional laws*". All of the Saudi respondents for this study made the effort to communicate effectively with the opposite gender when required, and indicated that things became easier the longer they stayed in the UK. Nevertheless, most of the

respondents stated that they are "*struggling when working with peers of a different gender*" and try "*to avoid unnecessary communication*". The majority stressed that they still prefer to communicate with peers of the same gender.

9. *The difficulty of being self-dependent, particularly with respect to budget.* The students all commented that in Saudi Arabia, their parents – not them – looked after their day-to-day budgets and basic needs. This is particularly the case for females: "*Back in Saudi, we rely on males in the family for even the smallest issues*". Another student commented: "*In the KSA, our budget is only for our own luxury*". Consequently, having to organise daily, weekly and monthly expenses for food, clothing, travel and social networking presents a major challenge for Saudi students.

10. *Developing self-confidence.* All of the respondents in this study stated that self-confidence is much more important for success in the United Kingdom than it is in Saudi Arabia, both socially and educationally. Developing self-confidence, therefore, is both a necessity and a major challenge for Saudi students studying in the UK. Self-confidence improves the capacity of Saudi students to adapt successfully to all social, cultural and educational aspects of student life. "*Self-confidence is needed here for success*".

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored some of the difficulties Saudi students have in adjusting to study in another country. It is based on an exploratory study of nine Saudi scholarship holders undertaking university study in the United Kingdom. The paper has sought to provide insights and to raise issues: no claims are made about the ability to generalise the findings to Saudi students attending university in other countries, or even other parts of the United Kingdom.

 The findings of the study suggest that most Saudi students studying outside their own country experience significant difficulties in adapting their existing cultural beliefs and behaviours in

response to contact with the different environment and culture of their host country. Eating and dress habits, use of language, social communication processes, and physical and psychological well-being all appear to be affected. Not all Saudi students appear to experience the same changes or the same degree of change, with the differences primarily linked to gender, educational level and background, and place of residency in KSA.

It is reasonable to assert as a primary conclusion to this paper that if Saudi students are to live and study successfully in the United Kingdom, and arguably in any foreign country, they need to be able to adapt their behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, feelings and ways of thinking so as to allow them to communicate and interact effectively with their peers in the host country. Rathje (2007) calls this developing 'intercultural competence'. It starts, we argue, with a positive attitude, and then develops through the self-confidence gained by each and every successful interaction and achievement, both socially and educationally.

Coming together is a beginning.

Keeping together is progress.

Working together is success.

(Henry Ford)

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