

The Driving Force of Self-Initiated Expatriation: A Case of Teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Purpose: In the study of expatriation, there has been less emphasis on the study of self-initiated expatriation as compared to organizational expatriation. Since people in the academia profession are amongst the most mobile and have greater opportunity to choose their employment destination, this paper explores the motivations and experiences of a group of British and American self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) that chose to work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Design/methodology/approach: Guided by a case study approach, purposive sampling was used to gather information from the participants through semi-structured, exploratory questions in order to understand SIEs decisions to expatriate to the Kingdom.

Findings: Findings suggest that financial rewards and personal beliefs played significant roles in the participating SIEs decisions to expatriate to the Kingdom. Particularly, this location provides them with job opportunities that offer attractive monetary rewards which fulfills their financial needs, as well as avenues to enrich their personal needs.

Research limitations/implications: This study focused on SIEs in a specific location, prior to the outbreak of the global pandemic. The appeal of self-initiated expatriation in the post-pandemic era should be explored further.

Practical implications: Data regarding the motivations and experiences of SIEs is beneficial for organizations' managing talent on an international scale because many organizations rely on SIEs as a source of labor. Understanding what motivates individuals to choose expatriation can assist organizations in formulating strategic human resource management decisions.

Originality/value: This study focused on the driving factors of academic SIEs in choosing a specific location and found that their decision to expatriate to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was based on the distinctive value of the location itself.

Keywords: Self-initiated expatriates; Expatriation; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; International human resource management

Introduction

Advances in transportation and telecommunications technology over the years have created opportunities for people to look beyond their home countries for travel and career opportunities. Global mobility would mean, for the most part, that the availability of human talent is no longer restricted by physical boundaries. Globalization has considerably steered the world into a large market and resource pool for businesses everywhere. The term globalization can refer to the elimination of barriers to international movements of goods, services, capital, technology, and people that influence the integration of world economies (Hill, Wee, & Udayasankar, 2016). From an international business perspective, the opportunity to source labor from an international pool of human resource provides both opportunities and risks.

At its most basic level, an organization can be viewed as a collection of jobs. Undeniably, it can be surmised that the success of an organization greatly rests on how effective the people involved are interacting and performing those jobs. As such, among the challenges faced by organizations relates to recruiting and training the right people and positioning them in the right jobs. Nevertheless, searching for the right employee, as well as the right job, can be a complicated task. Working conditions, level of economic development, cost of living and culture may vary dramatically from country to country.

With globalization and the rise of a knowledge economy, the challenge for many organizations is the recruitment and retaining of skilled labor, in particular employees with international experience, that can enhance its competitive advantage (e.g. Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou, 1987; Hill, Wee, & Udayasankar, 2016). For many current and future employees, gaining the opportunity to work abroad can provide valuable international experience and skills needed for one's personal and professional development (Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002; Mendenhall, 2001). In essence, increased international mobility has provided greater opportunity for more people, from teachers to managers, to be expatriates. An expatriate can generally be defined as an individual who is sent temporarily to work in a country of which he or she is not a citizen of that country (Daniels, Radebaugh, & Sullivan, 2015; Hill, Wee, & Udayasankar, 2016).

However, expatriation also comes in various forms from those dubbed as the 'organizational expatriate', referring to employees that are sent abroad on international assignments by the parent company (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2017; Selmer & Luring, 2012; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) and to those known as the 'self-initiated expatriate'. These 'self-initiated expatriates' (SIEs), also sometimes referred to as 'self-directed expatriates', can be defined as people who decided to migrate to a foreign country for work or were hired on a contractual basis, funding their own relocation as part of their personal agendas (Przytuła, & Strzelec, 2017; Selmer & Luring, 2012; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2010; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Richardson & McKenna, 2006; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

Literature coverage on the experiences and motivations of self-initiated expatriates has been sparse in comparison to research analyses on the experiences of organizational expatriates in the area of international human resource management. Greater collection of data and analyses revolving around self-initiated expatriates is equally important because many organizations around the world use self-initiated expatriates as a source of labor. Therefore, it would be beneficial for firms recruiting, managing and retaining talent on an international scale to understand what motivates expatriates, particularly self-initiated expatriates, and what cultural adjustment issues may lead to their decision to leave a job. In the long run, learning from the experiences of self-initiated expatriates may have constructive effects on managing and formulating human resource strategy for firms.

This paper explores the cases of cultural adaptations and motivations of self-initiated expatriates working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study was guided based on the proposition that self-initiated expatriates, in particular Western foreigners, looking for work in Saudi Arabia are motivated by either money or personal beliefs (religious reasons). This proposition is based on the idea that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is known for having a special hold on the hearts of Muslims around the world, as being the home of the *Ka'abah* or the Holy Mosque located in Makkah. And for centuries, Saudi Arabia is known for its strong identity that adheres to the teachings of Islam, while honoring its Arab heritage and traditions, as seen in the governance of the country and the welfare of its people. As such, living and working conditions in Saudi Arabia tend to be viewed as restrictive compared to Western standards. These conditions and the inability for foreigners to perform effectively or adapt to the culture, have reportedly contributed to the high rate of expatriate turnover in the country (Zawawi & Al-Rashed, 2020; Bhuian, Al-Shammari, & Jefri, 2001; Bhuian & Al-Jabri, 1996; Atiyyah, 1996). Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia, along with most other countries in the Gulf, continues to attract a large number of foreign workers, and jobs for expatriates in the professional sector have been known to offer a hefty paycheck as compared to other regions (Bhuian, et al., 2001; Bozionelos, 2009; Sharif, Upadhyay, & Ahmed, 2016). Moreover, studies have shown that an expatriate's transition and adjustment in a new environment can be influenced by the expatriate's expectations about the new culture and degree of familiarity with his/her own culture (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011; Goby, et al., 2002; Selmer, 2006; Selmer & Shiu, 1999). Therefore, we believe that the distinctive conditions of the Kingdom warrant the study of self-initiated expatriation of American and British nationals to this region.

This paper aims to explore the motivations and cultural experiences of a group of British and American self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) that chose to work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In particular, the objectives of this study are two-fold: (i) to understand the motivations of SIEs, and (ii) to explore what do Western SIEs identify as unique cultural experiences of living and working in Saudi Arabia. It is hoped that our findings can expand the study of self-initiated expatriation from a contextual perspective as we explore the relationship between individual motivation and work environment on SIEs experiences. Past studies have indicated the need to further explore the expatriation motives of self-initiated expatriates, and as well as organizational and contextual perspectives, in order to increase our understanding of how it may affect SIEs' job performance (Przytuła, & Strzelec, 2017; Selmer & Lauring, 2012; Al-Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Richardson & McKenna, 2002). We further propose that the cultural novelty of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia provides unique cultural experiences that can have implications on cross-cultural adjustment experiences of expatriates.

Understanding what motivates individuals to choose expatriation is important to human resource management because SIEs make up a diverse group of human resource with a wealth of experience (Przytuła & Strzelec, 2017) which can influence strategic decisions of the firm, as well as having links to job performance (Bozionelos, 2009; Chen, et al, 2010; Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019). In expatriate studies, the motives of accepting international assignments among organizational expatriates (OEs) have included personal interest and career progression as being common themes (e.g. Chen, et al. 2010; Tahir & Ismail, 2007; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Naumann, 1993). For example, in a study by Stahl, Miller and Tung (2002) of 435 expatriates found that the majority of respondents ranked 'personal challenge' as the main motivator for managers to accept international assignments. However, what motivates OEs may have little relevance in the managing of SIEs (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Selmer & Lauring, 2010). Hence, our study aims to expand this idea and add on to studies that have been undertaken to understand SIEs' motivation to expatriate. And since SIEs cannot be regarded as

a homogenous group, exploratory research of the different sub-groups could greatly contribute to the area of study.

Expatriation Outside of the Organization

As stated earlier, globalization has allowed for greater workforce mobility and rise of expatriation opportunities over the years (Daniels, Radebaugh & Sullivan, 2015; Hill, Wee & Udayasankar, 2016). Although there is an abundance of literature on expatriate management, there has been less emphasis on the study of self-initiated expatriation as compared to organizational or corporate expatriation. Organizational expatriates (OEs) refer to individuals assigned by their respective employer to work in a foreign country (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2017; Selmer & Luring, 2010; Richardson & McKenna, 2006; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Since the decision to move and seek employment in another country is an individual choice, self-initiated expatriates are seen as operating outside of the standard framework of organization-initiated expatriation.

In this study, we refer to self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) as people who seek work in a foreign country on their own initiative. The origin of the concept of self-initiated expatriation was introduced by Inkson, Author, Pringle, and Barry (1997) through a study on a group of individuals from New Zealand who made the decision to leave their home country temporarily to seek employment overseas (otherwise referred to as abroad). Since then, studies on non-corporate or self-initiated expatriation began to gain more attention. Past studies have also conceptualized SIEs as self-directed expatriates (Richardson & Mallon, 2005) and self-initiated foreign work experience (Suutari & Brewster, 2000), as well as free-agents who cross organizational and international borders (Al-Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Bozionelos; 2009) looking for work outside of their own country on a temporary (Doherty, Richardson & Thorn, 2013) or long-term basis (Thorn, 2009). As stated by Selmer and Luring (2012) “SIEs are gainfully employed abroad and have acquired their job of their own volition without being assigned to the host location by an organization. Accordingly, SIEs are [...] foreign national employees living ex-patria” (p.667). In addition to this, Przytula and Strzelec (2017) stated that because of the independent nature of SIEs, “they are responsible for every stage of their international work” (p.24), thus requiring them to be responsible for their own decisions on where to go and the length of stay, as well as on repatriation.

Although there is a general consensus among scholars in defining SIEs, past studies have found that sub-groups do exist within SIEs based on factors such as age, gender, type of job, and reasons to expatriate. For example, in a study by Thorn (2009), distinctions among SIEs were made based on the different stages of their lives as well as on the length of time spent working in a foreign country. Working in a foreign locale can be a means of self-development and a career enhancing experience for an expat, as well as an opportunity to develop work-related and personal skills through inter-cultural interaction (Al-Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Lee, 2005). Therefore, it can be said that decisions to self-expatriate can also help contribute to a person’s overall career development.

Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) determined that SIEs could generally be divided into two distinct groups. The first group identified SIEs as those people relocating to a different country because of a job offer, whereas the second group of SIEs are composed of those leaving their own country for another based on personal reasons and does not necessarily have a job awaiting their arrival (ibid.). Hence, it can be said that among SIEs, the decision to expatriate can be driven by the attractiveness of the locale and not specifically the job offer available. Nevertheless, Al-Ariss & Özbilgin (2010) found that the mobility and integration of skilled self-initiated employees from developing countries is more difficult than SIEs from developed nations.

A number of studies on SIEs have focused on identifying motivating factors of self-initiated expatriation. One such landmark study was undertaken by Suutari and Brewster (2000) which was developed on the groundbreaking work by Inkson et al. (1997) that presented data on self-initiated foreign work experience in comparison to traditional expatriate assignments. Suutari and Brewster's (2000) exploratory research of over 400 Finnish expatriates working abroad found that the characteristics and motivation behind self-initiated foreign work experience can be divided into six distinct subgroups, labeled as (i) the young opportunists, (ii) job seekers, (iii) officials, (iv) localized professionals, (v) international professionals, and (vi) dual career couples.

Looking at research that focused specifically on careers of academics, Richardson and McKenna (2002) identified "motivation to go" factors among academic SIEs that took part in their study. In their paper, they focused on four metaphors relating to "motivations to go" – i.e. to become an expatriate and to experience expatriation. These four metaphors are: the expatriate as an (i) explorer, (ii) refugee, (iii) mercenary, and (iv) architect. What they found among this group of academic SIEs was that, for the majority, expatriation was driven by the desire to explore more of the world; thus referred to as "the explorer" expatriate academic. For many of these academics, expatriation was "an opportunity to add another dimension to their lives by experiencing other cultures and countries for an extended period of time" (p.70). Interestingly, out of the 30 British expatriate academics that participated in the study, only three participants openly identified financial reasons as their motivation to go abroad. It was implied that financial or "mercenary" motivations were common for those seeking employment in the Middle East countries, as stated, "for those academics who were interested in high pay, there was some willingness to put up with discomfort, for example, the severe restrictions on the way of life in Saudi Arabia" (Ibid., p.71).

These metaphors – *explorer*, *refugee*, *mercenary*, and *architect* – identified by Richardson and McKenna (2002) were also used as a basis for a study conducted by Jan Selmer and Jakob Lauring (2012) that focused on expatriate academics, intended to extend the understanding of SIEs within the university sector. Selmer & Lauring (2012) found that the respondents in their study generally agreed that a desire for adventure (*explorer* reasons), financial gains (*mercenary* reasons) and to advance their careers (*architect* reasons) were among the main factors that had influenced the SIEs decision to expatriate. Interestingly, it was found that reasons related to the *refugee* theme, such as the desire to escape, were not mentioned as major motivating factors for academics choosing to expatriate (Ibid.). According to Richardson and McKenna (2002), those that use expatriation as a reason or as a means to escape or leave an unfavorable situation at home for a better personal and/or professional life abroad, fall under the *refugee* theme of motivations to expatriate.

In an earlier study, Selmer and Lauring (2010) also referred to the conceptualization of 'reasons to expatriate' developed by Richardson and Mallon (2005) that was based on the study of British SIE academics. Expanding categorization of SIEs further, Richardson and Mallon (2005) found five themes or categories as identified by their study's respondents to be their decision to expatriate. These themes are identified as: (i) to experience adventure/travel; (ii) for life change; (iii) for family reasons; (iv) to enhance career opportunities; and, (v) for financial reasons. Among these five categories of reasons to expatriate, the desire to travel and experience adventure were cited the most common reasons behind self-initiated expatriation, whereas expatriation as a way to enhance career opportunities was the least (ibid.). It should also be noted that of all the self-directed expatriates that participated in Richardson & Mallon's (2005) study, only six out of 30 participants stated that financial reasons or the ability to make a relatively large amount of money were a dominant incentive for them to expatriate; and four out of these six participants were working in the United Arab Emirates at the time.

Using these themes, Selmer and Lauring's (2010) study examined the reasons for expatriation based on the inherent demographics of SIEs and found that younger academic SIEs were more motivated by the possibility of adventure, enhancement of career opportunities, and greater financial rewards, as compared to older academic SIEs studied. Similarly, Thorn (2009) also found that career-related motives, such as professional development and opportunities for career advancement, played greater importance to men as compared to women SIEs studied. It was also found that more importance was placed on cultural and travel opportunities for both younger men and women (Ibid.). What these studies suggest is that SIEs are not a homogeneous group and thus, different types of motivational patterns exist and warrants further exploration.

Host-country Persuasions on Expatriation

Living and working in a new and unfamiliar environment can be exciting and challenging for most expatriates. Being surrounded by a foreign culture would require changes to a person's lifestyle, at home and at work. Although literature has identified common factors that can affect expatriates' smooth transition into the new work environments, the ability for expatriates to adjust and perform successfully also depends highly on their ability to respond to location-specific challenges and cross-cultural factors which are unique to each foreign assignment (see Cura, 2019; Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011; Bozionelos, 2009; Tahir & Ismail, 2007; Selmer, 2006; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005).

In relation to location-specific factors, Richardson and McKenna's (2006) study on SIEs relationships to their home- and host-country deduced that factors such as the person's official status in the host-country and the depth and dimensions of a person's relationships towards friends and family can influence an expatriates' desire to remain in the host-country and/or intention to return to their home-country. For instance, Sharif, et al (2016) found in their study of teachers' intention to teach in a foreign setting, that most expatriate teachers' decisions were related to salary and social status. Whereas in a case study by Cura (2019), the benefits offered by the specific organization and the uniqueness of the local culture were also found to influence SIEs' choices of employment, as it provided them the opportunity to explore and be part of the local culture. In comparison to studies on OEs, scholars have noted that an expatriate's knowledge of the host country's culture and physical environment also plays an important role (Goby, et al., 2002; Selmer, 2006) to ensuring the success of an expatriate's foreign assignment, alongside possessing personal traits such as cultural flexibility, open-mindedness and sociability with local communities (Black & Gregersen, 1999).

The ability to adapt to host-country conditions can be a significant factor in the study of British and American SIEs that chose to expatriate to Saudi Arabia. For example, in comparison to the United States of America (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia scores high on the cultural dimensions of power distance, low on individualism, and moderate in masculinity (Hofstede, 2019). This can be summarized to indicate that working in Saudi Arabia, Western expatriates may find stark differences in the level of adherence and acceptance to hierarchical order and assertive, patriarchal decision-making styles within and without the organization. The Kingdom is also known for its strong religious identity and Arab traditions, which some foreigners may perceive as more restrictive in nature as compared to their home-country environment. For instance, Zawawi and Al-Rashed (2020) found in their study of foreign doctors working in Saudi Arabia that cultural barriers, social restrictions and similar living-related challenges have had the most impact on the expats' decision to continue working in the country, despite the motivation of high pay.

Among the factors that should also be considered when studying expatriation includes cultural distance, which can affect one's decision to expatriate as well as success in the foreign assignment. Cultural distance was also found by Froese and Peltokorpi (2011), along with employer nationality, to affect the degree of difficulty experienced by expatriates' interactions

in the host-country, and ultimately on expatriate job satisfaction. Similarly, in a study by Bozionelos (2009) in the backdrop of Saudi Arabia, cultural distance and development of interpersonal relationships along with peer-support can play a role in non-corporate sponsored expatriates' job performance and retention decisions. It was also found that non-Gulf expatriates or those coming from countries with significant cultural differences or the largest gap between their home-country and Arab cultures were more likely to suffer the greatest difficulties in adapting to local values and norms (Bozionelos, 2009; Atiyyah, 1996; Bhuian & Al-Jabri, 1996). In this regard, Saudi Arabia could be remarked as being a challenging environment for expatriates coming from opposite cultural backgrounds, such as from the US and the UK. Based on these highlighted differences, it warrants investigating why SIEs from the US and the UK decided to find work in Saudi Arabia.

Research Approach

This study explored the personal motivations of British and American SIEs working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia using a qualitative method. Purposive sampling was used in this study because we are deriving samples from a specific case where the research question can only be answered by SIEs that have worked or is currently working in the Kingdom. Hence, by focusing on a particular sub-group, respondents were chosen based on having similar characteristics; particularly, US and UK citizens who have voluntarily chosen to seek employment in Saudi Arabia. Taking into account the cultural distance of our expatriates' home-country environment to that of the host-country, we identified Western expatriates (represented by US- and UK-nationals) as being best suited to our research objectives. A total of 18 participants working for a company in Saudi Arabia, living in the cities of Taif, Mecca, and Jeddah, took part in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted online, between the years 2018 and 2019, via email communications and social media platforms such as *Whatsapp*, *Facebook*, and *IMO*.

This research was guided by a case study approach as it was more suitable for describing, explaining, and exploring a specific phenomenon or new behaviors; in particular, to analyze real-life cases of SIEs working in Saudi Arabia (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2014). As a part of the case study protocol, semi-structured interview questions were used which revolved around the main research objectives of the study. Information was collected from the participants in two phases. First, a set of questions revolving around our main topic assessment was sent via email correspondence to the participants. In this first phase, participants provided basic demographic information about themselves and answered questions that relates to their decision to expatriate. These questions included: Do you consider yourself as an expat? Why did you decide to seek jobs abroad/overseas? Have you had any experience working abroad (in other countries)? What attracted you to seek employment in KSA? In the second phase of our data collection, interviews were conducted via social communication applications (audio calls and video calls) that allowed the interviewer to have a little more freedom to explore certain topics in more detail. The semi-structured question format allowed for a natural conversational flow to note opinions and experiences of the participants' decision-making criteria for coming to the KSA. These questions included: How did you come to know about teaching jobs in KSA? What attracted to choosing this particular location? Can you share some personal experiences you had teaching in KSA? Hence, questions into SIEs decision to expatriate was guided by open-ended, exploratory questions, which allowed for flexibility because we had anticipated that new questions would arise during the interviews to allow participants to comfortably share their personal experiences (Myers, 2019). Through this approach, the experiences of the study participants were analyzed based on previous categorization and conceptualizations of motivating factors for SIEs. Therefore, our study focused on understanding the motivations and conditions that steered the SIEs studied to choose working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Discussion of Findings

Data presented in this research revolves around the main inquiry into the SIEs reasons for expatriation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the experiences of living and working in the Kingdom. It must be noted that pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Participation in the study was voluntary and consent was obtained, allowing for the participants to feel more at ease to share their experiences freely.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Name	Nationality	Age	Marital Status	Years in KSA	Languages spoken
Damon	UK	25-35	Married	>5	English; Arabic.
Orlando	UK	25-35	Married	>5	English; Arabic.
Ronald	UK	36-45	Married	>5	English; basic Arabic.
Jeff	UK	36-45	Married	>5	English; Arabic.
Marko	UK	46-55	Married	>5	English; Arabic.
Hugh	USA	>56	Married	3-5	English; Arabic.
Warren	USA	>56	Single (Divorced)	>5	English; basic Arabic.
Mitch	USA	>56	Single (Divorced)	>5	English; basic Arabic.
Mathew	USA	25-35	Married	1-3	English; Russian; Ukrainian; basic Arabic
Archie	USA	25-35	Married	3-5	English; Spanish; basic Arabic
John	USA	46-55	Married	3-5	English; Spanish
Allen	USA	46-55	Married	>5	English; Thai; Korean; Arabic
Carl	USA	>56	Married	>5	English; Thai
Richard	USA	46-55	Single	1-3	English; Japanese
Ross	USA	46-55	Single	>5	English; basic Arabic
Max	USA	36-45	Single	1-3	English; Thai
Bob	USA	46-55	Single	3-5	English; basic Korean; basic Spanish
Damon	USA	36-45	Single (Divorced)	>5	English; Arabic; Spanish

Participants Profiles

All participants in this study fitted the definition of self-initiated expatriates in that they were not Saudi nationals and had voluntarily and independently obtained their work position in Saudi Arabia. As shown in Table-1, all the participants were male, as such employment requirements were set by the respective company. Out of the 18 participants interviewed, five are UK citizens and thirteen are from the USA. All of the British nationals were married during the time of data collection, whilst out of the 13 Americans, only six were stated as married. All of the participants had been living in Saudi Arabia for at least one year, where a majority of them had spent more than five years living in the host-country. Although the official language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is Modern-Standard Arabic (MSA), there are many variations of spoken Arabic used as a medium of communication in the Kingdom. Nevertheless, a small number (five) of the SIEs studied did not identify Arabic as one of the languages that they are comfortable using as a spoken language.

There is relatively little work focusing on teachers from the perspective of self-initiated expatriation. Nevertheless, people in the academia profession are amongst the most mobile, and globalization has created a context in which those in this line of work have the ability to

choose not only the organizations but also the countries that they wish to work in. For all the SIEs involved in this case study, they all chose to seek employment in Saudi Arabia. We explored the reasons behind this decision.

Understanding Motivations of SIEs: Driven by Money

It is important to note that it was individual proactivity on the part of all SIEs taking part in this study to seek employment opportunities in this region of the world. This point is significant because for most of the participants, it relates directly to their explanations on how they made their decision to choose to work in Saudi Arabia. Among the responses given by all participants, two main drivers emerged when asked the reasons behind their choice to come to Saudi Arabia.

Out of the 18 SIEs interviewed, 15 participants explicitly identified money or high salary as the main motivator for their decision. On the whole, participants used terms such as “for the money”, “good salary”, and “financially beneficial” to explain the reasons behind their expatriation. The following excerpts emphasize this motivating factor.

One American participant, Mathew, who has worked in some parts in Asia, mentioned:

This place offers higher salaries than other countries for my profession. (Mathew)

Similarly, Max, who had prior experience working in Southeast Asia stated that the main reason for him to come to Saudi Arabia, instead of going back to the US, was financially motivated.

My choice [to come here] was to make a good salary in order to pay off my student loan debt. It's challenging. I think the restrictions due to Muslim culture in Saudi were the most challenging. Having to be so careful with any women or music or other frowned upon elements in videos or listening [materials] we would do in class. Not being able to use song to teach English [...] might offend some [people]. (Max)

Another participant, Mitch also said that jobs in Saudi Arabia offered better pay (salary) compared to other places. Mitch further explained:

We (English teachers) keep coming back here because of the money. It's our “Hotel California” – you can check-out anytime you want but you can never leave. (Mitch)

As the conversation continued, the importance of financial benefits as a motivator became more apparent. While talking about his experiences working in the country, Mitch continued:

I am an expat. I'll adjust to the new culture if I'm getting paid enough. If I'm happy where I am at, I'll adjust; if I'm not happy, I better be getting paid if you want me to adjust to your culture. (Mitch)

But not everyone felt that working in the Kingdom was difficult. For example, Allen, who identified money as his main reason for coming here, stated:

I don't think living and working in Saudi is very challenging at all. (Allen)

He also offered advice for others wanting to work in the Kingdom:

Demeanor, intention and appearances matters. Wear nice clothes. Like it or not, you will be treated based on that often. (Allen)

All the SIEs participating in this study had prior knowledge of the traditional nature and strong religious influence on living conditions in Saudi Arabia. But for those SIEs that were interested in high pay or greater financial gains, they were willing to overlook the presumed discomfort or restrictiveness that they may face. This was highlighted by one of the participants, Warren, who expressed that money was the only motivating factor for his decision to accept work in Saudi Arabia. As he explained:

Money. That is the only reason to come to Saudi Arabia as a non-Muslim. But, when you feel like you are buying that money with your life, it's time to go. (Warren)

Understanding Motivations of SIEs: Driven by Beliefs

Along with financial reasons as being a major driving force for self-initiated expatriation to the Kingdom, the other distinct motivating factor identified was “personal reasons”. Further exploration found that “personal reasons” among the SIEs studied here pertained in particular to personal religious beliefs. Highlighting the importance of location and significance of the country’s history, in particular for the Muslim community, as a sub-theme under “personal reasons”, some SIEs gave evidence of the appeal of Saudi Arabia in relation to their personal reasons. Among the participants, five SIEs explained how both financial and personal reasons drove them to accept work in Saudi Arabia.

Damon, an American, who has had working experience in the region for over five years, with most of those years spent living and working in Saudi Arabia, explained:

I decided to work here [Saudi] because of good pay & [the] country agrees mostly with my religious beliefs. I’m able to accomplish my [personal] goals at a faster velocity. (Damon)

Even though his personal beliefs were in line with the culture of the country, Damon did express facing some challenges and how his beliefs helped in adapting to the lifestyle.

Not being able to leave or enter the country without permission from a sponsor was challenging. The level of personal freedoms, things that are allowed and not allowed. But, [...] have clear and concise goals. There will be good and bad times, and what will make you content in both situations are how strong and clear your personal goals are. Otherwise you will be looking outward for contentment. When an expats goals are very clear, then any situation can be overcome in a productive and positive manner or fashion. (Damon)

Two other participants, Jeff and Marko, expressed similar views in relation to their motivation to come to Saudi Arabia, which was both driven by “money and personal religious reasons”. Along with another participant, Orlando, a British national, explained the importance of personal beliefs:

I came here for religious reasons - to live in a Muslim land that contains many people of Islamic knowledge (scholars). I grew up in England, Brunei, KSA and the UAE, so I was trained from a young age to quickly adapt. It is advisable to have realistic expectations and learn about the difficulties to expect before arriving [here]. Also establishing clear goals during my stay here helps. (Orlando)

Similar to Orlando, one other participant, Hugh, clearly stated his religious beliefs as being the driving factor for his expatriation choice. He explained:

I am here because of religious reasons. I am a Muslim and love the holy city of Mecca, and the beautiful cultural aspects of Saudi Arabia. (Hugh)

As we progressed in the interview, Hugh explained how his “love” for the location did not necessarily mean that he was similarly pleased in his choice of work or company.

It is difficult and challenging working here. Dealing with lazy, disrespectful students who have influential connections to officers and superiors that have authority over us. But, it would have helped if we were given vivid explanations of characteristics of difficult students and [sometimes] unsupportive administrators. (Hugh)

Interestingly, what was mentioned by Hugh corresponds with explanations made by other participants who identified high pay or financial gains as being their main motivator which helped them overcome the challenges and discomfort of working in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, in this case study, demographics had little influence on the expression of money as a motivating factor for self-initiated expatriation. For example, the participants’ marital status, religious beliefs, or age did not make much difference, as the majority identified money as a dominant reason in their decision to work in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

As expressed by past studies, reasons related to money or financial gains were acknowledged as important motivating factors for SIEs to seek work abroad (see Thorn, 2009; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Selmer & Luring, 2010 & 2012). Akin to this, our study also suggests that money and finance play a dominant role in Western SIEs decision to expatriate to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Our findings are consistent with studies conducted by Richardson and McKenna (2002) along with Richardson and Mallon (2005) on SIEs that chose to work in Middle Eastern countries, in which it was found that for those academic expatriates that worked in Middle Eastern countries were motivated more by money or a high-paying salary. Unlike other studies of SIEs, our study focused on the experiences of academic expatriates in a single location. Hence, it offered a stark difference in findings as compared to previous studies in that the idea of travel or the desire to explore and seek adventure was never mentioned by any of the American and British SIEs that participated in this research. We believe that this may be due to the country's unique environment and appeal.

Therefore, what we can ascertain from the SIEs that participated in this study is that they centered their decision to expatriate to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia based on the distinctive value of the location itself. In particular, it focuses on the fact that this location provides them with job opportunities that offer better financial rewards. This also corresponds to the idea that a person's location choice ties to his or her motivation and priorities, as found by Thorn's (2009) study that different destinations can be attractive to SIEs due to factors such as its socio-economic environment or tax policies. Our findings also found that for one-third of the participants, the Kingdom fulfills their financial needs as well as their personal needs, as this location is revered for religious reasons. In relation to the appeal of the location and local culture's relationship with expatriates' personal background, similar findings were also reported by Cura (2019) on studying the motivations of academic SIEs coming to Iraq. The significance of location also concurs with the discoveries made by Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010) that most SIEs based their decision to expatriate on the choice of country rather than position.

One distinct finding from our study of the driving factors of expatriation for SIEs to a specific location is the motivating factor of "personal religious beliefs". This driving motivational factor – particularly for those SIEs seeking to work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – was not found to be documented as a theme or sub-theme in previous studies. Looking back at the motivating factors identified by previous studies, such as those by Suutari and Brewster (2000), Richardson and McKenna (2002), Richardson and Mallon (2005), Selmer and Luring (2010; 2012), expatriates that did identify personal preference or personal interest in the chosen location did not associate it to their personal religious beliefs. Based on our review, we assert that the motivating factor of "personal religious beliefs" does not fully coincide with the *refugee* motivating factor because our participants were not "running away or escaping" from anything unpleasant in their home-country or previous employment. Neither were our participants coming to work in the Kingdom for the purpose of enhancing their career needs as proposed by the *architect* motivating factor. We feel that for this particular case study, the country itself (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) plays a big role in shaping the SIEs' motivation to relocate, as it fulfills a personal need. Hence, we conclude that an SIE's "personal beliefs" can be added to the driving factors of motivation for expatriation.

Limitations and Implications of the Study

Given the highly personal nature of self-initiated expatriation, coupled with the dynamic nature of the global economy and labor relations, it is clear that there may be many plausible motivating factors that have yet to be explored in regards to a person's decision to expatriate.

Although globalization has created opportunities for more people to work abroad, the year 2020 proved to have changed the global landscape of travel, trade, and livelihood forever. Boundary-less careers now are not only defined by expatriation but also by remote offices. The ability to gain international work experience may not necessarily entail physical relocation, and thus may change the concept of being an expatriate altogether. Since our research was based on data collected in the year 2019, the severity of the pandemic was never mentioned by our participants. Therefore, the appeal of self-initiated expatriation in the post-pandemic era can be explored further as health concerns and changing country regulations may have direct effects on motivations of SIEs to seek work abroad.

Although the main objective of this study was to explore the motivations of self-initiated expatriates, its focus was, nonetheless, on their decision to work in a specific location. We acknowledge this limitation to the study as its focus is on Saudi Arabia as the host-country for our participants' work placement. Therefore, the findings presented based on this case study may not apply to other SIEs seeking employment in other countries. Albeit, it does open an avenue of investigation for studying the appeals of a particular location for SIEs.

Interestingly, what we discovered from our interviews with the participants, is that the findings also suggest that more exploration is needed to understand the relationship between past international experience on the choice of country for expatriation. Preliminary observations indicated that the element of escape or *refugee* motivations may be related to reasons to expatriate for SIEs that are returning to a particular region or country. Hence, we feel that this study can be helpful for researchers seeking to expand the comprehension and construct of expatriate studies.

Having knowledge of the motivations of self-initiated expatriates can be valuable to human resource management because it can assist in the strategic decisions of firms employing SIEs. For example, learning institutions could benefit from understanding the incentives to expatriate, as found in studies such as this, to adopt hiring practices and compensation packages that may appeal more to self-initiated expatriates. Finally, we believe that added knowledge on the motivations and international experiences of SIEs, on top of OEs, can help provide value to a firm's cross-cultural training programs.

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