

## **Coping Strategies Used by Indian International Students to Overcome Transitional Challenges in the United States**

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### **Abstract**

*Many Indian international students are studying in American colleges and universities. Education abroad in an unfamiliar environment can be challenging for students. Thus, the present study investigated the coping strategies employed by six Indian international students studying in the United States (U.S.), using phenomenological data analysis methodology. Participants expressed invariant constituents, classified into four coping strategy themes: (1) open-mindedness, (2) goal-orientedness, (3) an independent attitude, and (4) showing gratitude. Further, emerging from the data were the ways in which these coping strategies could be acquired. Findings have implications for international student advisors working in the university sector. Universities can play a vital role in promoting such coping strategies to enhance the well-being of international students.*

Keywords: adjustment, Asian international students, challenges, coping strategies, Indian international students

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### **Introduction**

Many international students travel to Western countries to pursue higher studies. According to UNESCO (2019), the international student population increased from 2 million in 2000 to over 5.3 million in 2017. More than 50% of these students are enrolled in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. After China, the second most common international students come

from India (WENR, 2018). The UNESCO data indicated that Indian international student enrollment in higher studies abroad increased from 134,880 in 2004 to 278,383 in 2017 (WENR, 2018). Specifically, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2018), approximately 196,271 Indian international students are currently studying in American colleges and universities.

### **The Transitional Challenges of International Students**

Transiting international students experience various transitional challenges as they progress from familiar to unfamiliar cultures and academic environments (Prescott & Hellsten, 2005; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005). Some of the challenges include experiencing anxiety related to communicating in a second language, studying in a new educational setting, leaving friends and family back home, having to network in a new social environment, and paying high tuition rates (Bista, 2015; Chennamsetti, 2020; James, 2018; Park et al., 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). As the students' stress related to adapting to the host country's culture increases, their difficulties associated with fitting into the host country's social life also increase (Mahmood & Burke, 2018). For example, a qualitative study conducted by Poulakis et al. (2017) found Greek international students to lack knowledge about everyday life in the U.S., leading to difficulties in balancing work and personal lives, communicating in English, and understanding the American accent. Further, the sudden culture shock of becoming a minority in the host country, in contrast to being a majority in their home country, was also challenging (Poulakis et al., 2017). Park et al. (2016) interviewed nine Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese students studying at a university in the U.S. They found that the language barrier was a significant challenge for these students, restricting their social interactions with the local students, leading to fewer friends and fewer social skills. The language barrier also hindered the students' participation in classroom activities and academic performance.

International students transitioning to countries other than the U.S. have also been found to experience similar transitional challenges. For instance, Alhazmi and Nyland (2010) explored two Saudi international students studying at an Australian University. Being a foreigner, using an alien language, encountering an unknown academic system, and mingling with their Australian peers were all challenging for these students. Adisa et al. (2019) investigated the transitional challenges of a hundred and four international students studying in the United Kingdom (U.K.). They found that students from non-English speaking countries struggled to understand the British accent; because of this, they had difficulty interacting with Britishers. This barrier hindered their classroom participation. In addition, they encountered trouble understanding the London transportation system, struggled adjusting to the climatic conditions, and feared criticism and rejection from society. In another study, Seijas (2020) explored international students studying in Japan and found that they struggled to make Japanese friends, communicate in Japanese, and find accommodation. Thus, most international students encounter transitional challenges regardless of the destination country.

### **The Transitional Challenges of Indian International Students**

The transition of Indian international students to the U.S. is complex due to a wide gap between the countries' cultures and academic systems. Kaur (2006) conducted a qualitative study to explore the factors that impacted six Indian international students' academic adjustment in the U.S. The findings indicated that participants encountered challenges related to unfamiliarity with the course selection process and maintaining successful instructor-student relationships. To examine sociological adjustment, Atri et al. (2007) conducted a study using one hundred and eighty-five Indian international students in the U.S. They found that a lack of social support and difficulty assimilating into the host culture resulted in unhappiness and stress. Moreover, Meghani and Harvey (2016) explored the trends of depression, acculturation, and enculturation among one hundred and fourteen Indian graduate students in the U.S. They found that 75% of the students found adjusting to American culture difficult during their first academic year, and subsequently developed depressive symptoms.

Besides the U.S., Indian students were also found to encounter transitional challenges in Australian and Canadian Universities. For instance, Singh and Cabraal (2010) found in their study that the significant challenge of Indian international students studying in Australia was a lack of knowledge about Australia's general lifestyle, resulting in participants being passive and vulnerable to attacks and robbery when traveling alone, late at night with expensive personal gadgets. Pham and Tran (2015) observed a sample of twenty-two Indian international students in Australia and found that they felt disconnected from the local population, encountered communication difficulties, and reported that teachers over international students favored local students. Similar findings were found in a study that explored the experiences of two Indian students studying at a Canadian University (Houshmand et al., 2014). The participants encountered difficulties in terms of feeling excluded on campus, as their personality traits were attributed to racial and cultural stereotypes.

## **Impact of Transitional Stress on Students**

The process of leaving their home country to study overseas makes international students homesick and alienated. They encounter culture shock due to the new academic environment, food, and unfamiliar climatic conditions. This transition process causes transitional stress among international students (Arthur, 2003; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007), negatively impacting their psychological, emotional, sociocultural, and academic well-being (Arthur, 2003). The transitional stress is manifested in various ways, such as anger, anxiety, cognitive impairment, confusion, exhaustion, defensiveness, depression, disorientation, exhaustion, fatigue, fear, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, homesickness, inferiority, insecurity, insomnia, irritability, lack of energy, loneliness, loss of appetite, loss of control, mood swings, muscle tension, overeating, resentment, sadness, sense of loss, unfamiliar body pain, and vague bodily sensations (Arthur, 2003). These findings were recently confirmed by other research studies, for instance, by Ching et al. (2017) and Kornienko et al. (2018).

There has been a concern that international students might have low graduation rates because of the academic difficulties they encounter, such as being weak in the English language (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014), not understanding American teaching style (Ota, 2013; Roy, 2013), difficulty in maneuvering through new campus environment (Ota, 2013), and difficulty in interacting with fellow American peers and faculty (Roy, 2013). Though international students encounter academic challenges, they have been found to succeed academically (Fass-Holmes, 2016). However, their self-esteem decreased because of academic difficulties (Constantine et al., 2004; Lyken-Segosebe, 2017), reducing their work and personal life satisfaction (Shupe, 2007).

## **Coping Strategies**

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is a process where people evaluate their situation and consciously choose an effective coping strategy to solve their problems. Coping strategies are classified into emotion-focused and problem-focused (Lazarus, 2006). An emotion-focused coping strategy is where people try to distract themselves from stressful situations or reduce the negative emotions caused by such situations, for instance, by exercising, meditating, praying, or using relaxation techniques. A problem-focused coping strategy is where people solve stressful situations, for example, by identifying the source of the stress and eliminating it, seeking help to manage the situation, or detaching oneself from it (Folkman, 1997, 2013). In most stressful situations, particularly in transitional stress, using emotion and problem-focused coping strategies are found to have influenced with effective outcomes (Lazarus, 2006).

Prior research has highlighted that international students use diverse emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies to overcome transitional challenges (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Vasileiou et al., 2019). For instance, Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) conducted a qualitative study with eight Middle Eastern students studying at a U.S. university. They found that the participants identified the cause of a problem and understood the consequences that could occur if the problem was not solved. In addition, the participants who considered themselves capable of solving their challenges had superior coping skills. Further, participants coped with loneliness and homesickness by engaging in religious activities, keeping themselves occupied at work, and maintaining good relations with family and friends. Such coping strategies were found to increase the confidence and happiness of the students (Alazzi & Chiodo 2006). Similarly, Poulakis et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study to explore transitional stress among eight Greek international students studying in the U.S. They found that the participants developed strong relations with their families and peers to overcome their homesickness that helped them in gaining emotional support. In another study, engaging in positive self-talk, listening to music, and diverting oneself from thinking about home served as helpful coping strategies and promoted the overall well-being of fifteen international university students studying in the U.K. (Vasileiou et al., 2019). Concurring with this finding, a qualitative study conducted at a Malaysian university found that positive thinking and engaging in extracurricular activities such as exercising, reading, and praying increased students' self-esteem (Saravanan et al., 2019). Additionally, taking the responsibility to understand the academic system of the host country, and honing their English language and social skills, helped five Latin American students overcome academic fears at a U.K. university (James, 2018). Also, focusing on developing communication skills, working hard, and engaging in community activities overcame transitional stress among 413 international students studying at a U.S. university (Mahmood & Burke, 2018).

## **The Goal of the Study**

Literature indicates that transition is a process where regardless of the country international students transit to, they initially encounter transitional stress. Additionally, the more the difference between the home and the host countries in terms

of cultures, attitudes, and academic systems, the more the transitional challenges and stress (Pham & Tran, 2015). Students transiting from India to the U.S. encounter significant transitional challenges because of the vast difference in the cultures and academic systems of India and the U.S. Therefore, to help students from India adjust to the U.S., it is vital to know the coping strategies used by previous Indian international students to overcome their transitional challenges. However, minimal research has focused on the coping strategies employed by Indian international students in the host countries. Thus, this study aims to (1) explore the coping strategies used by students from India to overcome the challenges in the U.S.; (2) promote awareness about various coping strategies; and (3) provide information to international student counselors to enhance the coping of Indian international students.

## **Method**

### **Design**

A qualitative phenomenological methodology was employed to conduct this study. Considering that Creswell (1998) suggested a sample size ranging from five to twenty-five participants, while Morse (1994) recommended a minimum of six participants, a convenience sample of six Indian international students enrolled in a research-intensive public university in the southern United States was selected. The participants for this study were selected using the purposive sampling criterion, wherein participants are chosen based on their ability to provide comprehensive information concerning the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 1990). To conduct purposive sampling, it was imperative to specify parameters for selecting study participants (Merriam, 1998). Accordingly, the following criteria were used: Participants must have been born and studied in India; they must not have visited the U.S. or any other country before enrolling as graduate students in the U.S.; they must have lived in the U.S. for over a year; and they must be graduate students.

### **Participants**

Six international students from India took part in the study. Of these, five were doctoral students, and one was a master's level student. At the time of data collection, the participants had lived in the U.S. for 2-11 years. All the participants were given the following pseudonyms to protect their identities: Krishna, Vishnu, Pragya, Shreya, Rishi, and Arjun.

### **Procedure**

Upon obtaining the ethical clearance for this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were invited for an interview. The interview protocol consisted of seven probes that explored the coping strategies used by the participants to adjust well in the U.S. The duration of the interviews ranged from 1-2 hours. The first author conducted interviews in the university's library, labs, and cafeteria. We informed participants about the confidentiality procedures before the interview. We took permission from them to record and transcribe the interviews. They were also told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were analyzed using the phenomenological methodology.

### **Data Analysis**

Based on Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's method, the data analysis was performed using the following ten steps: (1) Epoche: When applying Epoche, Moustakas emphasized that the researcher must avoid preconceived notions about the phenomenon under study and instead concentrate on the data provided by the participants to understand the phenomenon from a newer perspective. Accordingly, the authors refrained from their thoughts, feelings, and assumptions regarding the coping strategies to obtain a newer understanding of the various coping strategies that can be employed for successful adjustment in the host country; (2) Obtaining an understanding of the data: To understand the data, all six recorded interviews were listened to multiple times to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Also, the transcribed interviews were read multiple times to better understand the participants' viewpoints; (3) Horizontalization: This is a process of identifying verbatim parts of the transcribed interviews that explain the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Accordingly, all interviews were thoroughly analyzed to determine significant verbatim parts describing the phenomenon of coping strategies; (4) Identifying the invariant constituent: Invariant constituents were identified by abstracting and labeling the statements essential in understanding the coping strategies. The statements that did not meet the criteria were repetitive, overlapping, or vague were deleted; (5) Identifying themes: The identified invariant constituents were placed under each heading, forming the fundamental themes of coping strategies; (6) Individual textural descriptions: In this step, descriptive narratives of each participant were developed based on the horizontalized statements, invariant constituents, and the themes identified in the previous step; (7) Individual structural descriptions: Here "Imaginative

Variation” was applied (p. 33) “to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced.” (Moustakas 1994, p. 98); (8) Composite textural description: Inductive reasoning and analysis were used to combine the individual textural descriptions of all the participants formulated in step 6 to present a portrayal of the descriptive narratives of all the participants as a group; (9) Composite structural description: The individual structural descriptions were combined to formulate a composite structural description using imaginative variation, to describe what the participants, as a group, experienced and how they felt after employing those strategies; and (10) Textural-structural synthesis-essence of the phenomenon of coping strategies: This step involved combining textural and structural descriptions to understand the essence of the coping strategies from the participants’ perspective, which is the goal of this study. Lastly, member checking was performed to establish the trustworthiness of the transcribed data. The participants were contacted a second time after the primary interview to peruse their transcribed interviews and make any changes to ensure the accuracy of their responses.

## Findings

The phenomenological data analysis resulted in the following four coping strategy themes: (1) open-mindedness, (2) goal-orientedness, (3) independent attitude, and (4) showing gratitude. The participants utilized these strategies to solve the transitional challenges encountered in their personal and academic lives in the U.S. The findings also indicated specific thoughts and actions that helped the participants acquire the identified four coping strategies, as shown in Figure 1.

### Open-Mindedness

When the participants transited to the U.S., they struggled to form friendships and missed their home country’s culture and atmosphere. For instance, Pragma stated:

If there was a word that could multiply miserable times by thousands, that’s how I felt. I did not like it here at first. I didn’t want to meet anybody. I just wanted to go back home. I feel lonely, not being able to express my true feelings to somebody. Having to suppress my feelings and not being able to talk about certain things certainly makes me feel lonely.

One coping strategy that helped participants form social bonds was being open-minded. According to the participants, open-mindedness is a mindset where students accept diverse people, ideas, and information. They demonstrated open-mindedness in various ways. For example, Shreya became more flexible, discouraged herself from judging people, initiated contact, and learned to be more expressive. Explaining, she commented:

I had to keep an open mind and let things go. You cannot have everything according to the way you want, as you have it in India. Do not judge anyone based on their actions. Keep in contact and good contact with as many professors and administrative people over here in the university. And if problems arise, tell them immediately. Do not wait or think it will not be done. Just ask them.

Arjun gave up generalizing and stereotyping. He expressed:

I learned that many perceptions are out there; they are all different, not right or wrong. They are just different. Also, when you are in India, you have some stereotypes, but when you start interacting with people from different countries, you start realizing that, ‘I need to discard a lot of these stereotypes that I carry.’ I have broadened my thinking and my mindset. In terms of my worldview, I have broadened.

Rishi became more accommodating. He opined:

One needs to learn how to share an apartment and how to share life with others. You have to be really flexible and open to adjusting to the setup here. One can’t be firm and say, ‘No, I like to do this; I won’t do that.’ You must be open and adjust; that’s the only way to survive.

Rishi also invested an effort to understand the host culture:

I understood that if you are in a society, you must understand it. For that, you need help from Americans. You need to open up more with Americans; ask them general questions about their background or education, but avoid personal questions. Once you start approaching, maybe others will also begin approaching from their side. That way, communication develops.

Further, emphasizing on being more versatile, Rishi said:

Most Indian students are very academically oriented. Outside of studies, they don't know anything. But they can change all those perspectives here. For example, they can join a hiking club. They can learn salsa, develop an all-round personality, and not just confine themselves to their department and apartment.

Vishnu learned to be forthright. He explained:

You need to be a lot franker over here. I wouldn't say just Indians, but Asians, in general, have this tremendous respect that comes into the way of expressing what you feel, and you kind of feel that if they tell it to you, then that's what you have to do. You never argue or make a point. That really needs to stop, and it took me a few years to get over that and today if I cannot do something, I just cannot do it. Initially, whatever my advisor threw on me, I used to do it, no matter what, whether I could or could not. Most of them I accomplished, some of them I just could not, and he was like, 'just say no to me!' just say you can't do it and that's fine, but if you say you can do it, I expect a solution or an answer.' So, I don't take anything more than I can handle. I got to a point where I understand what can be detrimental to my progress (smiles). So, I say no to things pretty straightforward.

Vishnu ceased being judgmental and instead mingled with diverse individuals to build his social life. He suggested:

Don't make your judgments based on your first impression. Don't get offended. Develop a social life. Just be free. Talk to everyone and don't be in a closed shell. It's good to have a healthy social life, without getting into issues or problems. Staying aloof, not talking to people, not socializing is not helpful. It's how well you deal with people is what improves your social relationships. It's a very small community, so you don't want to make enemies.

Krishna interestingly became open to receiving the challenges. He stated, "Be open to the problems, but be prepared and don't panic. Make loads of friends and don't restrict to people from the same country." Being open-minded helped participants develop a positive attitude, preventing them from judging people. Their lives were enriched by learning about other cultures, and they became more accepting of diverse cultures and people. Thus, open-mindedness prevented the participants from encountering culture shock. Vishnu emphasized, "when you have an open mind, you are not shocked. It helps one to adjust to the host country successfully."

### **Goal-Orientedness**

Participants got absorbed into the problems they encountered in the U.S. For instance, Shreya felt unhappy and angry when she saw a difference in her professor's treatment of her and her colleagues. She explained:

When you see a difference in the treatment from anybody, you really get very angry and frustrated because you cannot speak up. Because you know that if you speak out, people will not like it and the relationship with them would be affected. You cannot go to your seniors, because for them it's a trivial matter and you think as to what they would think about me if I go every time and complain every time this happens.

To overcome such difficulties, participants emphasized being focused and goal-oriented. Shreya explained, "you have come here to achieve a goal. Keep your goal in mind and keep doing that." Pragya believed that "the incoming students should imagine themselves five years from now. They should have a goal in mind, which could be educational, professional, personal, economical, or social, and try to reach it." Rishi said: "Success rate in graduate school determines the student's career and, accordingly, his/her happiness. Therefore, students should be earnest in setting goals and work diligently to accomplish them." Vishnu's goal was to excel in academics. He explained:

Having a goal in mind is very essential. Enrolling in courses with a 'whatever works' attitude is a serious mistake. Instead, courses should be selected based on interest and passion, so that we continue to excel in them. My goal was also to make my life in U.S. smooth. I had already met people; spoke to people right in India; we had gotten to know each other; we came here as a group; I already knew my roommate, fixed over there; and we had an apartment. I came to know of the India Association at Nurture University, who helped us.

Arjun explained the importance of being goal-oriented and said, “If you are goal-oriented and focused, you can come out with good outcomes in the U.S. You have an opportunity to be recognized and excel if you want to. So, one must focus.”

### **Independent Attitude**

Another challenge that participants had to overcome was being dependent. Pragya stated: “my parents would protect me a lot, as a result of which I was much more dependent on them for decisions. Here, I am on my own, which is difficult.” Similarly, Shruti stated:

In India, you are not working when you are studying. So, when you are studying, you are concentrating a lot on your studies and your parents are very supportive throughout those 3 years. So it’s basically just studying and you are not expected to do much else. But, here it’s very difficult, like when you are just 18, and you have to adjust to cooking, cleaning and living on your own, navigating through classes and making all the decisions on your own. It’s difficult. Back in India, parents take care of a lot of things, which would not be the case here. So, you would have to adjust to many new things after coming here.

Participants emphasized cultivating an independent attitude to overcome this barrier, where they depended on their capabilities to accomplish tasks instead of relying on others. Participants had to completely change their beliefs about becoming self-reliant and independent. Explaining, Vishnu stated:

In the United States, you are not just a student; you need to do everything by yourself in terms of cooking, laundry and so on. In India, you can just sit and study and your mom brings you tea or coffee. Here, if you want coffee, go make your coffee. You have experienced being pampered and living a happy life. Now go out to the real world and do the same things without all that support.

Further, Rishi commented:

Developing independent thinking and taking charge of your own life is very important. Rediff.com has a section for prospective students coming from India to the United States. India Association has a nice FAQ list, things to do, what to expect. Reading this information helps. Reading and talking to students already in the United States helps.

Krishna took the initiative to solve problems on his own:

I believed that I will get over the situation. I asked for help from my friends or relatives. I asked myself as to what makes me happy in U.S., instead of dwelling in negative thinking. And once I did this, I knew what exactly I needed to do.

Re-emphasizing taking one’s responsibility, Shreya stated:

I learned not to keep too many expectations. I prepared mentally that I am alone here, I have to stand on my feet and take care of myself; there is not going to be anybody to take care of you. There will be problems, and it will take time to adjust.

Similarly, Vishnu said, “I feel that you are 23, you are grown up and are responsible. Start living your life. So, I think having at least that confidence level is fair. Don’t expect anyone to pamper you at this point.” On similar lines, Pragya stated:

We must be independent here. Life here is not as rosy as you see on television. It’s shockingly different. Therefore, it’s important to go out and meet different people, but never forget your goal, which is to study and be responsible. Reading, keeping in touch with current affairs of United States, asking as many people as possible for their opinions are all important.

Being independent helped the participants increase their self-confidence and inner strength. They became their own support system. Vishnu commented, “being independent helps you grow emotionally and mentally. That’s how you learn things and solve problems on your own.”

### **Showing Gratitude**

Difficulties in the U.S. made participants delve into negative thinking, making them sad and stressed. For instance, Krishna described his initial days in the U.S. as “hell.” Explaining, he stated:

The daytime was split between loads of academic formalities, facing fierce competition for funding and course enrollment, meeting professors and prospective employers, sorting out living situation

(lease, grocery, account, purchases), and staying in touch with family and friends back in India. In whatever little that was left of nighttime, it was very common to think of the reasons for coming here; occasional crying, self-consoling and wondering if all of it was worth the efforts.

To overcome this challenge, participants began identifying the reasons they were thankful for. Vishnu stated:

I am thankful that this country has accepted me. You came here to study. Do what you have to do and continue with your life. We are in a foreign land, and it is important to express our gratitude to the country that is providing us the opportunity to pursue our academic dreams and aspirations. Yes, if you cannot get into NASA, there is nothing wrong, because they ask for citizenship, and you are not a citizen. Sometimes people would say, 'I am not feeling good,' and I would say 'think of any other international who were in India and think about what they would be going through.' I mean, socially, we may also not be perfect, you know, in terms of treating an outsider in our community. So you need to think of it in that aspect and say, 'ok, this is not something really bad that happened to me, this is something that people sometimes undergo,' not a big deal.

Further, showing gratitude to his professor, Vishnu stated:

My advisor has been great as far as mentoring is concerned. I like his style because he is an advisor and that's all he does, advise. He says, 'I am your advisor, and you are my student. We should always keep arguing and when you start winning more arguments than I do, it's time for you to graduate; that's a very cool concept, and I love that idea.' He's been a very good mentor and a role model that I would like to be like. He sends us out to conferences and says, 'Go talk to the professors; find out what they are doing, what their students are doing and try and see if you can collaborate with them.' So, things like this really help in the long run. I would have to give a lot of credit to my advisor for allowing us to do all this.

Shreya expressed her gratitude by returning favors. Explaining, she commented:

Friends help you a lot in adjusting. If someone helps me, I make sure that I return the favor or at least stay in touch with them. Just making use of a person and going is not good. That starts affecting other people too. House some people in your apartment, because they really need it, and the people who stay there should take care of people living in the house. Just don't be a problem for the person.

In terms of expressing gratitude to the host society, Rishi stated:

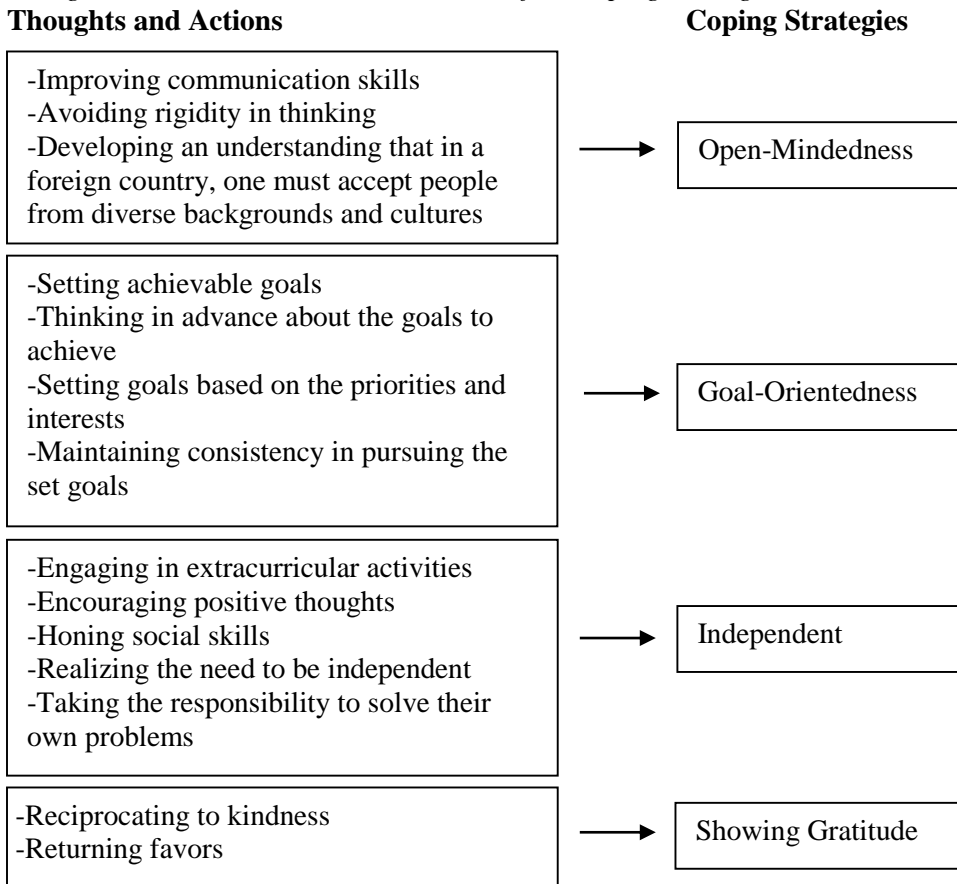
Whenever I go and talk to Americans, I know I am an outsider. I am not a part of this society, be it in terms of language or culture or anything. Usually, I talk with a sense of gratitude. I ask myself this question - suppose the same situation was reversed; let's say, this is India, you are an Indian, and they are Americans; it's like role reversal, will you be so acceptable? Will you be so welcoming to other cultures? Will you be so forthcoming to help others? If you see everything in that light, then what you see is definitely a service to you. So, in that sense I don't have any questions.

Participants expressed that showing gratitude developed a positive frame of mind, which helped them integrate into the academic and social lives of the host country successfully. Thus, showing gratitude served as an effective coping strategy to adjust to life in the host country.



**Figure 1**

*Thoughts and Actions That Led to the Identified Coping Strategies*



### **Discussion**

The present qualitative study examined the coping strategies of Indian international students in U.S. higher education. Four specific coping strategies were identified: open-mindedness, goal-orientedness, an independent attitude, and showing gratitude. The participants reported that being open-minded helped them develop a more positive approach to dealing with challenges in the host country. Establishing clear goals for oneself helped them adjust to their academic and social life. Furthermore, a belief system that one must be independent and not rely on others increased participants' self-esteem and happiness. Finally, developing the trait of having gratitude aided the participants in valuing the opportunities they received. Additionally, this study identified ways in which the above-mentioned four coping strategies can be acquired, as delineated in Figure 1.

The results of this study indicated that the coping strategy of being open-minded aided participants in becoming more flexible in integrating and making friends from diverse cultures instead of limiting themselves to their own culture. This prevented them from experiencing major culture shock and transitional stress in the host country. These findings concur with previous studies wherein open-minded students understood other cultural viewpoints better and adjusted effectively to the host country (Alsaifi & Shin, 2016; Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Participants adopted open-mindedness by improving their communication skills, avoiding rigid thinking, and accepting people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

The second coping strategy is goal-orientedness. Focusing on achieving the set goals increased participants' confidence, they excelled in academics, and consequently, their stress levels were reduced. This finding adds to the previous research, where the results indicated that goal-oriented students are more competent, less focused on problems, and less challenged due to transitional stress (Mahmood & Burke, 2018). Further, the present study's findings are consistent with Park et al. (2016), who emphasized that setting goals related to developing a support system in the host country made

the students feel more accepted by the host community. Participants achieved goal-orientedness by thinking in advance about the goals they wanted to achieve, setting achievable goals related to their academics, health, finances, and social skills, prioritizing their goals, and maintaining consistency in pursuing them.

The third coping mechanism is to develop an independent attitude, which helped the students grow emotionally and psychologically, aiding them in solving problems. Independent thinking increased participants' self-esteem. Vasileiou et al. (2019) viewed an independent attitude as a self-reliant coping strategy where the students recognized and accepted the problems and made a conscious effort to comfort themselves. According to Alshafi and Shin (2016), independent students are responsible for improving their lives by developing healthy habits, such as avoiding substance abuse, encouraging more positive thoughts, honing their social skills, listening to music, and engaging in writing. Concurring with this finding, participants in this study took the responsibility to overcome their transitional challenges by becoming more independent. Participants achieved an independent attitude by realizing the need to be independent, taking the lead to better their lives, engaging in extracurricular activities, encouraging positive thoughts, honing their social skills, and taking the responsibility to solve their problems. The final coping strategy is showing gratitude. Being thankful helped the participants see the positive aspects of life and value the opportunities they received. This increased their satisfaction with the university, social interactions, academic system, and life, in general, in the host country. These findings were consistent with the previous literature that indicated a high correlation between expressing gratitude and contentment with the university experiences (Froh et al., 2008), developing healthy, long-lasting relationships (Emmons & McCullough, 2004), and enhancing student participation in the classroom (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012). Participants showed gratitude by returning favors and reciprocating to the kindness of others.

### **Implications**

The participants in the present study employed four coping strategies that helped them successfully transit to the U.S. The most common resource materials provided by international student support services include online reading materials on their website, newsletter articles, and brochures (Madden-Dent et al., 2019). Therefore, the coping strategies identified in this study can be valuable to include in such resource materials to encourage coping skills needed for successful cross-cultural transition and adjustment.

### **Limitations and Future Direction**

Although the sample in the present study met the requirements of saturation and phenomenological qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), future studies should select larger samples. India is a large population where people differ based on their socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. A larger sample of international students from India may allow students from different backgrounds to express their experiences. This information may be more beneficial for the diverse Indians who study overseas.

### **Conclusion**

This study has highlighted the positive coping strategies that Indian international students use to combat transitional challenges encountered in the U.S. The findings indicate that the students can cope with such challenges by changing their thought processes and behaviors. Further, the findings add to the literature by discovering the role of open-mindedness, goal-orientedness and showing gratitude for the first time in the international student population. The findings have implications for the stakeholders. The suggested coping strategies can be considered by higher education and could be recommended to the students during international student orientation and counseling sessions to help them manage their cross-cultural transitional challenges.

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