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## **Examining Barriers and Facilitators of Graduate International Students in the U.S.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As international student enrollments surge in U.S. higher education, understanding their experiences is crucial for fostering an inclusive and successful environment. This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the challenges and coping strategies of international students during acculturation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight international graduate students from diverse backgrounds at a large U.S. public research-based university. An inductive, hermeneutic approach revealed six main challenges: 1) cultural differences and adjustment, 2) practical and daily living, 3) academic and educational, 4) mental health and well-being, 5) linguistics and communication barriers, and 6) lack of resources. Students reported resilience strategies and four main coping mechanisms and needs for better adjustment: 1) building connections and social support, 2) cultivating resilience and personal development, and 3) leveraging technology and media. The findings of this research highlight the importance of social support and self-resilience for international students.*

**Keywords:** acculturation barriers, cultural adjustment, graduate international students, mentoring international students, resilience, USA adjustment.

## INTRODUCTION

International students play a significant role in contributing to the U.S. economy, cultural diversity, and innovation within higher education (Hegarty, 2014). Furthermore, a substantial portion of international students elect to remain in the United States as permanent residents or join the domestic workforce after graduation. In 2023, 344,686 individuals were authorized for optional practical training (OPT) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024). With the rise in international student enrollments in U.S. higher education (Kim, 2007) and in the workforce, it has become increasingly important that we understand their experiences to create an inclusive and supportive environment to support their success (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023).update with 2024 IIE data

Alongside this growing enrollment, international students often encounter unique challenges that can impede their ability to thrive, with mental health being one of the most pressing concerns. Mental health challenges significantly hinder personal development and academic achievement, particularly among individuals facing acculturative stress, which is the psychological strain resulting from the acculturation process itself (Berry et al., 1998). Such stressors often manifest as anxiety and depression, which can be further exacerbated by the absence of a strong social support network (Hovey & Magana, 2002; Krämer et al., 2004).

This study is grounded in Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, which can take four forms: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. The results of this novel study contribute to the understanding of the intersections of psychological stressors, systemic constraints, and challenges facing international students on the basis of Berry's model. This is especially relevant for culturally plural societies where the process of acculturation may have increasing mediating factors for international students acclimating to a new culture. The literature often focuses on issues in isolation without exploring how they collectively impact international students' experiences (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Lee et al., 2023; Reynoso, 2008). This study comprehensively examines the lived experiences of international students and provides their perspectives via a hermeneutic methodological approach. Despite international students' diverse cultural backgrounds, international students often face similar experiences before and upon arrival in the host country. Therefore, it is essential to understand the commonality of their experiences, challenges, and recommendations for institutions. This study offers a unique perspective by examining the experiences of students from both the Global East (Asia, Middle East) and the Global West (Europe, Americas), addressing a gap in the literature where most studies tend to focus on specific groups, such as African or Asian students in isolation. By including a more diverse and varied range of international students, this research provides a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of their lived experiences.

Therefore, this study addresses the research gap in the literature by answering the following questions:

1. What are the most significant challenges international students face in navigating U.S. culture and the American educational system?
2. What strategies and support systems do international students employ to overcome these challenges?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The number of international students has been increasing in the U.S., witnessing a surge beyond prepandemic levels to nearly record highs (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2023). During the 2022–2023 academic year, the United States hosted an unprecedented 1,057,188 international students, reflecting a 12% increase compared with the previous year—the fastest development rate in over four decades (IIE, 2023). While both undergraduate and graduate international student enrollment has increased, the number of international students enrolled in graduate programs, including master's, doctoral, and professional degree programs, has experienced the most significant increase, with 467,027 students, a 21% increase. International students, while diverse groups with varying backgrounds, cultural identities, and individual differences, share commonalities and experiences that present similar challenges in navigating the U.S. and its educational system.

Berry's (1997) acculturation theory provides a framework for understanding how international students adapt to their new environment. The theory suggests four primary strategies individuals use when adjusting to a new culture:

- **Assimilation:** When individuals adopt the host culture while abandoning their original cultural identity.
- **Integration:** When individuals maintain aspects of their original culture while adopting aspects of the host culture.
- **Separation:** When individuals reject the host culture and maintain their original cultural identity.
- **Marginalization:** When individuals neither maintain their original culture nor adopt the host culture, this leads to isolation.

Research suggests that integration is associated with the best psychological and academic outcomes, whereas marginalization leads to the most distress (Berry, 2005). Given these findings, this study examines how graduate international students experience these acculturation strategies and how they impact their adaptation to U.S. higher education.

The process of acculturation, which involves adapting to a new culture while maintaining one's own cultural identity, can be a complex and stressful experience

for international students (Berry, 2005). Berry et al. (1987) noted that immersion in a new cultural environment can engender acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is a significant issue faced by many international students as they navigate the process of adapting to a new cultural environment. Not having English as a first language often presents significant language and communication barriers, which can increase stress and anxiety for international students (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). In addition to language difficulties, cultural differences further contribute to the stress experienced by these students (Lee et al., 2023). These challenges are compounded by the need to adapt to unfamiliar educational systems, teaching styles, and assessment methods, which can be particularly demanding (Lee et al., 2023).

As a result of these cumulative stressors, international students are more vulnerable to psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, and diminished academic performance (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Hovey & Magana, 2002; Lee et al., 2023). Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) identified three broad dimensions of challenges international students face: adjusting to unfamiliar academic practices, developing the skills necessary to manage daily life in a different cultural context, and recognizing the importance of seeking professional help for mental health issues.

To cope with these challenges, international students employ different coping mechanisms. Poyrazli et al. (2004) reported that seeking social support, higher English proficiency and socializing with both Americans and non-Americans are associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. Reynoso (2008) investigated the academic resilience of Dominican English-language learners at Bronx Community College. The authors found that their success was attributed to personal qualities such as self-resourcefulness and the ability to develop enhanced coping strategies as a result of the difficulties they encountered. This research highlights the importance of personal characteristics. In addition to personal characteristics, research has focused on the importance of social connections in mitigating stress. For example, a study on international students' sociocultural adaptation revealed that the most commonly used coping strategy was seeking social support from close friends and family, both to manage stressful situations and to alleviate their impact (Pinarbasi, 2023). In another study, international students highlighted the importance of technology in easing their adjustment process. They recommended using the internet to gather information both before departure and after arrival (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

A quantitative study that examined the coping strategies of 220 Asian international students residing in the U.S. revealed that those students who engaged in avoidance-oriented coping strategies, such as "visiting a friend", produced lower levels of acculturative stress (Ra & Trusty, 2015). This was also true for students who utilized task-oriented coping strategies, which may include strategies such as "use my time better", which resulted in the minimization of their acculturation stress. Conversely, those students who utilized strategies related to emotion-oriented strategies experienced greater levels of acculturative stress (Ra & Trusty, 2015).

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of international students acclimating to U.S. culture. Using a qualitative research approach allowed for further exploration of experiences, meaning and perspectives, mainly from participants' views (Hammarberg et al., 2016). A phenomenological design was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the shared, lived realities and meaning-making processes of participants regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the participants experienced the same central phenomenon: relocating from their home countries to undertake all or part of their tertiary education in the U.S.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as opposed to transcendental phenomenology, allows for using theories and personal experiences to interpret and make sense of data (Peoples, 2021). This approach is particularly appropriate given the researcher's identity as an international student and the use of Berry's acculturation theory to guide the study, providing an emic perspective on the phenomenon under investigation.

Before data collection, the researchers received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of their respective institute to ensure the ethical treatment of the human participants. The researchers adhered to IRB guidelines throughout the study. The participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits via email invitations. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced.

### **Participants**

We utilized purposive sampling to recruit 8 graduate students from diverse national backgrounds and academic disciplines, ensuring that various perspectives and experiences are represented in the data to improve the quality of this research. According to Etikan et al. (2016), purposive sampling is a technique in which participants are selected based on the study's purpose, with the expectation that each individual will provide unique and valuable information to the research. To investigate the lived experiences of international students in the United States, this study employed stringent criteria for participant eligibility. The participants had to be born outside the U.S. and have lived in the U.S. for a minimum of two years while self-identifying as international students.

Additionally, they needed to be enrolled at either the undergraduate or graduate level in an American 2-year or 4-year higher education institution. However, this study focused only on graduate students since only those who were graduate students were willing to participate in this research. Moreover, all the participants were required to be fluent in English to fully convey the nuances of their acculturation journeys during in-depth interviews. In addition to purposive

sampling, snowball sampling further expanded the reach, with the enrolled participants referring to other participants meeting eligibility standards.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of Study Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Ethnic Background</b>	<b>Country of Birth</b>	<b>Student Status</b>
1	Female	Hispanic	Mexico	Graduate
2	Male	White/Caucasian	Iran	Graduate
3	Female	Asian Indian	India	Graduate
4	Other	White/Causasian	Germany	Graduate
5	Female	Asian Eastern	China	Graduate
6	Female	Hispanic	Pure	Graduate
7	Male	White/Caucasian	Brazil	Graduate
8	Female	White/Caucasian	Germany	Graduate

**Data collection**

Upon receiving consent from the participants, semistructured one-on-one interviews were conducted with 8 international graduate students to collect rich, in-depth data, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives in depth (Peoples, 2021). The interviews took approximately 30–45 minutes with each participant. The demographic information of the participants is outlined in Table 1. Upon completion of the interviews and transcription of the interviews, data analysis begins with iteratively reading and interpreting the data.

**Data analysis**

The data analysis for this study was conducted via a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore and interpret the lived experiences of international graduate students transitioning to the U.S. The researchers implemented a “hermeneutic circle” to analyze the data. The hermeneutic circle involves iteratively reading and interpreting the data as a whole and as part to gain a deeper understanding of the whole and its parts (Peoples, 2021). The analysis relied on the hermeneutic circle, which involves moving between the parts (individual excerpts) and the whole (complete transcripts) to comprehensively understand the phenomenon.

The relevant statements were identified upon ongoing movement between parts and the whole. Through the hermeneutic circle process, significant points were synthesized into themes that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences. Emerging themes reflected the complexities of international students' transitions, including their cultural, academic, and personal challenges,

as well as the strategies they used to navigate these experiences. By employing the hermeneutic phenomenological approach and the hermeneutic circle process, this study provided a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of international students transitioning to the U.S.

### ***Trustworthiness***

To address trustworthiness, including credibility and transferability, several strategies were employed to enrich the trustworthiness of this qualitative research on the basis of a constructivist paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To promote credibility, investigator triangulation was utilized, whereby two researchers independently analyzed the data and compared interpretations to establish consensus (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to these credibility measures, steps were taken to enhance transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of providing "sufficient descriptive data" to facilitate transferability, stating, "The investigator needs to provide 'sufficient descriptive data' to make transferability possible" (p. 298). In alignment with this recommendation, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlighted the importance of using rich and thick descriptions to enable readers to determine the applicability of the research findings to other contexts. Consequently, the researchers in this study provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and processes, allowing readers to assess the potential transferability of the findings to their own situations or settings.

### ***Positionality***

As a Persian woman pursuing a PhD in the United States, my personal experiences have significantly shaped my research interests and motivated me to explore the challenges faced by international students. Growing up in Iran, I was exposed to a culture and educational system that differed greatly from what I encountered upon arriving in the U.S. While I was provided with different and valuable experiences and education in the U.S., I have also grappled with the complexities of cultural identity and belonging. It has been a transformative experience that has deepened my understanding of international students' unique struggles, despite being provided with new and valuable experiences, resources, and environments. These personal experiences have fueled my passion for understanding the needs of international students and promoting cultural understanding within university communities.

## **RESULTS**

Using Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, ten salient themes emerged from this study, particularly in relation to how international students navigate cultural integration. The themes identified in this study align with Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, particularly in relation to how international students navigate cultural integration and what challenges they face. Most of the participants

demonstrated an integration strategy while maintaining connections with their home culture while adapting to the U.S. environment. Others expressed experiences of separation, preferring to engage primarily with conational peers. Table 2 outlines the main themes alongside their respective codes and illustrative quotes from participants' narratives.

### **Cultural Differences & Adjustment Challenges**

Cultural differences and adjustment challenges emerged as pervasive themes across participant narratives. All the participants reported experiencing cultural differences at different levels and under different scenarios, particularly during their initial transition to the United States. Common codes encapsulating these cultural adjustment difficulties and differences included a lack of familiarity with American cultural norms and traditions, challenges relating to shared cultural contexts among domestic students, policy differences in food regulation and differences in communication styles.

For example, Participant 6 (P6) illuminated how seemingly cultural traditions such as greeting could precipitate a sense of alienation, recounting:

We do not celebrate Thanksgiving in Peru. It does not exist. How you know how big of a deal it is for people here and how much they you know talk about it and you know it becomes a topic for conversations. Therefore, the beginning I was like, you know. It is just like hard to you know understand that or let us understand it but like to be part of those conversations because I had not had any previous experiences with that and then you know eventually, I started you know creating my own experiences. Or with my family or close friends too, you know, to kind of adapt and adjust to the culture here.

Similarly, Participant 1 (P1) shared the cultural differences between greeting and communication in the U.S. and her own hometown country, confiding "It is like Mexican, we also always say like hi with a hug and a kiss." Participant 3 (P3) shared that she had prior experience living in another country. However, even with prior experience living and studying abroad, she still feels the following cultural adjustment difficulties:

I have had international experience before I studied in the UK at the University of Edinburgh for one year for my masters. Therefore, I have that experience. And I thought if this won't be very different being in the US won't be very different. But it was. Cultures are very different compared to India compared to British culture, the American culture is very different.

These salient examples underscore that even for participants with prior experiences living abroad, the cultural divergences they confronted upon arriving

in the U.S. Cultural adaptation difficulty emerges as an immense undertaking requiring institutions to prioritize comprehensive support structures.

### **Practical and Daily Living Challenges**

Practical and daily living challenges emerged as highly prevalent barriers among the participants' lived experiences. All the participants divulged immense difficulties navigating the pragmatic aspects of daily life upon their arrival in the U.S.—tasks and responsibilities that domestic students may take for granted. Prominent codes encapsulating these practical hurdles included housing, financial strains, transportation obstacles and a lack of familiarity with law. For example, Participant 2 (P2) recounted "So I had some, sometimes struggling with like finding places and roommates. As I was moving to the United States." His experience underscores housing precarity and accompanying anxieties that many international students grapple with upon arrival.

Participant 6 (P6) shared that:

So every time I had to, you know, submit something in terms of processes such as paperwork, you know, applying to something or, you know, a destine my status or something in relation to more like, as I said, paperwork rather than courses. I had to like read a lot, you know, inform myself and then communicate all of that to the people I was working with.

This illuminates the immense complex bureaucracy of administrative protocols that international students must navigate on their own, often without adequate guidance. These testimonies plus navigating transportation systems and other everyday challenges highlight how pragmatic challenges impact international student experiences. Such practical barriers inherently exacerbate distress and might detract from the capacity to thrive academically and socially.

### **Academic and Educational Challenges**

The theme of Academic and Educational Challenges emerged as less prevalent than Cultural Adjustment and Daily living challenges did, although it was still featured across participants' accounts. Key codes encapsulating these academic difficulties included campus employment barriers, visa restrictions and limited access to funding and fellowships for international students.

For example, Participant 6 (P6) lamented how visa policy restrictions for international students impeded her from applying for scholarships and learning opportunities:

I had to decline them (scholarships) even though you know they were like really great learning opportunities or some of them were actually, you know, job opportunities to start connecting with you know people to

continue working after the program so I had to pass on those opportunities because you know, the limitations.

In a different matter, participant 4 (P4) mentioned, “And the amount of class work that has to be done here in the US. It is not even close to what we have to do in Germany at all.” In a similar vein, Participant 7 (P7) noted that “I was not used to have the much amount of homework assignments, side things they're gonna do to the to the classes itself.”

Institutes and universities should provide comprehensive guidance for international students to learn about the educational system, teaching styles, and communication norms between teachers and students in the U.S. Thorough orientation programs can help international students understand the expectations, culture, and dynamics of American classrooms.

### **Mental health and well-being**

Mental health and well-being emerged as another salient theme from the participant interviews, though they manifested in diverse ways across the lived experiences. While some participants disclosed specific mental health concerns such as anxiety, others reported more general wellness concerns related to food regulation in the U.S. Two participants from European countries, for example, voiced apprehensions about food regulations, noting that certain products banned in their home nations remained accessible in the U.S., exacerbating health concerns.

As participant 4 shared, “...So it is been a little bit of a shock. Yeah, I lost a little bit of trust in the products here in food products and water products and general products to use on the body.”

Codes illustrating the breadth of mental health and well-being issues included stress and anxiety, depression, loneliness, homesickness, isolation, discrimination, fear of speaking up, immense pressure, health anxieties, sexual harassment, and diminished self-confidence. The constellation of psychological stressors varies considerably on the basis of gender, race, habits, personality, and country of origin.

For example, P (7), a male from Brazil, shared the differences between his habits and the cultural differences back in his hometown county and currently in the U.S. and how it impacts his mental health by sharing that, “The weekend there's always something to do and someone willing to do something. And here it is kind of work comes first and then social later.”

In a different scenario, participant (3) mentioned the lack of effort among some group of people for communicating and understanding her accent, leaving her frustrated by sharing that

“But I know for a fact that I do not think my English is that bad that you do not understand me. So this girl would just not communicate (with her)”

While mental health and well-being manifested differently on the basis of race, nationality, gender and other intersectional identities, almost all the participants experienced psychological distress. Prioritizing preventative mental health support could prevent the development of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression.

### **Linguistics and Communication Barriers**

Linguistics and communication barriers emerged as among the most prominent themes across the interviews, transcending participants' levels of English proficiency. Regardless of their facility with the language, most participants recounted experiences where communication breakdowns undermined their sense of belonging and exacerbated their feelings of being an outsider.

Interestingly, these linguistic hurdles often stem from interactions with domestic peers rather than concerns about their own English competencies. In other words, the participants did not necessarily feel that their language skills were deficient but rather encountered behaviors and communication styles from native speakers that fostered alienation and frustration.

For example, P (4), who lived in the U.S. as a teenager and barely has an accent, reported the following:

What did happen to me though is that one roommate I lived with, sometimes I feel like discredits a little bit my ability to speak English. In addition, even though I think I speak relatively clearly. I sometimes feel like he does not want to understand me, and he's everything back to me like I do not know. It is a little bit of an awkward conversation, and I would not say it is discrimination, but I say I feel a little bit questioned in my ability to express myself when somebody constantly repeats back like a child like what it has said. So that is been a little bit awkward.

Fear of mispronunciation, difficulty fully expressing personality in English, unable to understand accents/slang, and inability to participate in class discussion appear as codes demonstrating the linguistics and communication barrier.

The participants also disclosed encountering communication disconnects extending beyond just language, shaped by embedded cultural norms around interaction styles. As Participants 3 (P3) articulated, "I think they just, they just knew they called it; they called this the hidden curriculum... I learned with every year in the program I learned more but then when I came in I did not know that oh these are all available to me."

These narratives underscore that linguistics poses multilayered challenges, manifesting not only in vocabulary or grammar but also in culturally contingent pragmatics of communication and common knowledge. Overcoming these linguistic and communicative barriers demands targeted institutional resources paired with heightened cultural responsiveness among host communities.

## **Lack of Resources**

A lack of resources emerged as one of the most pervasive and detrimental themes across participants' lived experiences, significantly impeding their transition and causing stress.

The participants consistently reported a lack of adequate informational resources prior to arriving, upon arriving on campus, and even postarrival—sowing anxiety, frustration, and consuming immense time and energy simply attempting to access reliable guidance. Codes encapsulating this lack of resources included lack of prearrival information, insufficient institutional knowledge, absence of centralized support, and inadequate university guidance and knowledge.

For example, participant 2 (P2) shared his struggles:

If you're looking for a house and you're not able to go there and see the place. Because you do not have a car. So then you're risking like, and you do not know, you do not know about neighborhoods. However, you might end up with like an unsafe place to live in. And then you do not know how. Now, what they call it, it is like the. The contract or the lease. How you should read the lease. What are your rights as a tenant? And what's the rights as an as a landlord So these are all the confusing parts.

In a similar vein, Participant 5's (P5) account underscored the compounding ramifications of lacking access to information by mentioning the following:

But considering that the US culture Oh. Well. I would say that international students should be aware of some local law. Like legal policies can apply to their situation for example like the domestic court. Like schools, law services. Like your car got still, how do I deal with insurance? If my roommates stop paying the rent, can I sue her?

She also added that "I think that's like the small little confusion part that related to legal issues that really scared us and stopped us from participating and using our rights as local students." This poignant example illuminates how the void of reliable, accessible resources propagated fears and uncertainty among international students. Across domains such as housing, campus resources, academic policies, and career pathways, participants described searching exhaustively for basic knowledge and support structures that their domestic peers likely took for granted.

This lack of comprehensive information and guidance underscores the role of universities and institutions in supporting the transition of intentional students and assisting them in adjusting and learning new policies and cultures.

## **Building connection and social support**

Building connections and social support emerged as one of the most vital coping strategies participants utilized to overcome the challenges and stressors they confronted in the U.S. Codes illustrating this theme included conational connections, host connections, maintaining ties to family and friends back home, and developing domestic friendships. International students cultivated diverse social anchors that could be categorized into three main spheres: *1) bonds with other international students, including those from different national origins; 2) links with peers sharing the same nationality or cultural background; and 3) relationships with domestic American students.*

Each connection type serves distinct functions in facilitating emotional support, cultural guidance, shared understanding, and mutual learning to ease the acculturation process.

For instance, Participant 6 (P6) shared the following:

So she's not from here (the U.S.) but just like having someone No, that you can turn to and talk to and share experiences has been a great, you know, support. Just having that person (international friend) like to have your person, you know? To ask questions, to share things, to learn together or to make mistakes together, that has been an enormous, it has had a huge impact.

Participant 7 (P7) also echoed this notion, conveying that "I feel like our own country community is something that helps a lot. Some people who know they have the same background and it is probably facing the same issues and some people." Moreover, cultivating connections with domestic students, particularly those exhibiting heightened cultural awareness, proved invaluable for international participants navigating the intricacies of American cultural norms and linguistic nuances. As P4 shared,

I think what really helped us, meeting domestic students, definitely. I really enjoy the fellow domestic students. And in my program and I think they have helped me a lot a little bit here and there maybe taking me to a basketball game or a baseball game or showing me some cool spots downtown or giving me some tip offs like which, things to do in the U.S. that are super American.

Similarly, P5 mentioned the following:

They (domestic people) gave me a different perspective toward some life problems. For example, if a driver has a license, if the Chinese people do, they have their own way.

In fact, the local people have their own way. They help me to, I mean, their ways.

Collectively, these accounts illuminate how constructing a sturdy web of diverse social connections in the U.S. catalyzed resilience by offering guidance, reassurance and opportunities for learning and feeling belongingness. Building these supportive networks has emerged as a pivotal coping mechanism facilitating international students' navigation of the acculturation process.

### **Cultivating Resilience and Personal Development**

Cultivating resilience and personal development emerged as one of the vital strategies international students implemented to overcome acculturation challenges and facilitate their transition to the United States. The acculturation process can induce immense stress; however, accepting, letting go of uncontrollable aspects, and harnessing powers of resilience enables students to preserve their mental health and academic focus. Participant 3 (P3) exemplified this outlook:

However, there are some Americans who will just completely not say my name or they say they will just say it wrong and not even bother to see if I'm, you know. Therefore, it makes me a little frustrated and honestly a little mad that you know make an attempt. I just accepted it and moved on and ignored it and moved on because I was a PhD student. I did not have time to like sit on those things and worry about it.

Codes encapsulating this theme included building resilience over time, time management, acceptance, selective ignoring as a coping mechanism, and careful observation to glean cultural insights. For example, the habit of astute observation empowered students to learn about the new cultural landscape through an open-minded lens. As P6 recounted, "I was always very cautious. I always, you know, I was always myself, but just keep in mind that I had to learn how people function here."

International students armed themselves with vital internal resources such as cultivating a resilient mindset. These enabled them to withstand acculturative stressors, adapt fluidly to unfamiliar norms, and deal with uncertainty.

### **Leveraging Technology and Media**

Another emergent theme focused on international students' savvy leveraging of technology and multimedia resources to aid linguistic/cultural learning. Codes such as books, TV shows, English learning software, and social media reflected the diverse platforms that students harnessed as virtual learning aids. For example, Participant 3 (P 3) shared, "See in India, we learn a lot about American culture through TV. Movies or books. You know, you grow up reading books."

Participant 1 echoed these sentiments, stating, "I pay [for] Grammarly that truly helped me through the PhD to write everything." These insights highlight the myriad ways in which digital tools provide linguistic scaffolding.

While revealing international students' adeptness, this theme also signals opportunities for universities to deliberately incorporate multimedia learning, provide software/app guides, and promote thoughtful technology integration into support services. Proactively connecting students with tailored technological resources could streamline acculturation processes.

## **DISCUSSION**

International students bring immense value to their host countries, such as economic growth, diverse perspectives, cultures, and experiences, to their host countries. However, to truly harness their talents and unique backgrounds, it is crucial to address the challenges they encounter in their new environments. These challenges might lead to mental health issues and prevent international students from thriving in the new environment and benefitting their host countries. However, recognizing these challenges and providing institutional support can help mitigate barriers, foster smoother adjustment and promote overall well-being.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of social support and self-resilience for international students. The participants underscore the lack of resources and guidance to cope with challenges, as well as the stress and anxiety that can arise from navigating unfamiliar cultural contexts. Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of implementing robust institutional support mechanisms and technology tools to facilitate this process.

This study highlights the important role of institutional support and the cultivation of personal resilience. On the basis of our findings, mentoring for international students can be promising. Peer mentoring or AI mentoring can benefit international students in providing crucial cultural guidance and academic assistance. Mentoring programs have strong evidence of positive effects across different aspects and groups (Crisp et al., 2017; Denson & Bayati, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Mason & Hickman, 2019; Schneider et al., 2020). Such a mentoring program can ease the acculturation process for international students. For example, students who experience language barriers and unfamiliarity with the educational system or culture in the U.S. could receive assistance from their peer mentors or AI mentors to facilitate the process. Peer mentors who have already gone through the acculturation process can provide firsthand guidance, sharing insights and strategies for navigating cultural differences, communicating effectively, and understanding academic expectations. As Lannin et al. (2021) suggested, seeking help can be challenging for those with more introverted personalities. Given the diversity among international students, it is vital to provide online resources and AI mentors where some students feel more comfortable seeking assistance. Online programs or AI mentors that allow international students to access help privately before pursuing in-person treatment can be crucial in improving their mental health and preventing the development of conditions such as depression and anxiety, as many participants in this study shared health-related concerns.

The acculturation process can be facilitated by pairing international students with peer mentors. Mentors can explain unfamiliar practices, idioms, or behavioral norms, preventing misunderstandings and the fear of speaking among this group. They can also share study strategies, time management tips, and coping mechanisms for any obstacles encountered. With this support system, international students gain a smoother introduction to the U.S. academic and cultural environment.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that international students adopt various acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997) when transitioning to U.S. higher education. Through an in-depth qualitative approach, the research illuminated the multifaceted challenges this population confronts, the resilience strategies they employ to overcome these challenges and the acculturation process they go through. This exploration underscores the pressing need for comprehensive institutional support systems tailored to international students' distinct needs and trajectories.

The findings revealed that the acculturation process is rife with several obstacles. The participants experienced challenges related to 1) cultural differences and adjustments, 2) practical and daily living, 3) academic and educational, 4) mental health and well-being, 5) linguistics and communication barriers, and 6) a lack of resources. International students employed different coping mechanisms in the acculturation process, such as 1) building connection and social support, 2) cultivating resilience and personal development, and 3) leveraging technology and media.

While building networks and resilience facilitated perseverance, participants underscored the need for institutional support as the bedrock for holistic flourishing. Accessible mentorship initiatives, comprehensive resources, and an inclusive campus ethos nurturing international perspectives were highlighted as pressing needs. By supporting international students' unique trajectories while channeling their talents, we could transform universities into globalized leadership incubators prepared for an interconnected century.

## Future Research

Future research should focus on implementing innovative mentorship models, such as AI power tools or e-mentoring platforms, to connect international students with experienced international or domestic student mentors. Leveraging technology and AI could facilitate efficient matching of mentors and mentees, help international students, and allow seamless communication across time zones and geographic distances. This study focused specifically on the experiences of international graduate students, but future research might explore the nuanced differences in acculturation challenges and trajectories between graduate and undergraduate international students. Age and life stage could impact the acculturation process, coping mechanisms, and types of stressors encountered.

Examining these differences could inform the development of targeted support systems and resources tailored to the distinct needs of international students at various educational levels. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking international students' acculturation journeys across multiple years could yield valuable insights into how age and maturity influence the adaptation process over time. Such research could elucidate how coping strategies, resilience, and identity negotiation evolve as international students progress through their academic careers, informing the provision of age-appropriate and developmentally attuned support services throughout their educational trajectories.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on international graduate students, limiting the transferability of findings to undergraduate populations, who may face distinct acculturation challenges. Second, the small sample size of eight participants may not capture the full spectrum of experiences, potentially overlooking unique barriers and facilitators of acculturation. Finally, English proficiency was a prerequisite for participation, which may have constrained the study's ability to explore language-related challenges fully. While linguistic and communication barriers emerged as key themes, the perspectives of those with lower English proficiency remain underrepresented.

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