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Negotiating Cultural and Contextual Experiences: Exploring Acculturative Stress and Coping Strategies among International Students in Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the intercultural and contextual stressors experienced by undergraduate international students in a business program at a private Canadian university. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, we drew on Redfield et al.*'s (1936) concept of acculturation and Berry's (2001) theoretical model. First, we invited all international students in the program to complete a survey that included Sandhu and Asrabadi's (1994) Acculturative Stress Scale. Second, the survey data were complemented by focus groups organized by students' year in the program. The participants were presented with aggregated survey data to prompt discussion about the results. Intercultural stressors, such as cultural shock and homesickness, pose challenges in adapting to new cultural norms. Contextual stressors, including students' unmet expectations and uncertainties related to immigration policies, underscore structural issues that intensify students' challenges. This research underscores the significance of clear communication and proactive institutional support in enriching the academic and social experiences of international students.*

Keywords: acculturative stress, Canada, contextual stressors, undergraduate international students, intercultural communication, intercultural experiences, learning sciences, mixed methods.

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INTRODUCTION

Studying acculturative stress is particularly meaningful in multicultural societies such as Canada, where cultural preservation and diversity are actively encouraged. International students bring diverse perspectives, social meanings, and learning needs to Canadian universities; however, transitioning to a new academic and cultural environment can present significant challenges for both the students and the institutions that host them (Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024).

Canada's policies on cultural diversity, including the Canadian Multiculturalism *Act* (Government of Canada, 1988), promote inclusivity while enabling cultural groups to retain their distinct identities, and offer a model of immigration that differs from the "melting pot" models of other countries (Noels & Berry, 2016). Canada's approach to multiculturalism presents both opportunities and challenges for international students, who must navigate academic, social, and systemic issues, such as employment and immigration pathways, in a culture that may not be fully understood.

This study examines the acculturative stress experienced by international undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor of Business Administration program at a private university in Ontario. It investigates key sources of stress, including cultural shock and students' unmet expectations, and examines how students perceive and navigate their transition to a new cultural and academic environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant number of international students live in Ontario, Canada (Legusov et al., 2023). For many of them, studying in Canada is their first experience living in a new culture and away from their families (Marom, 2023). International students in Canada are not a homogeneous population; rather, they are highly diverse in their learning and living needs, as well as in how they respond to a new culture (Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024).

Defining Acculturation and Acculturative Stress

"Acculturation" is a term with a long history; it was first proposed in 1880 by American ethnologist John Powell (Sokolskaya & Valentonis, 2020). Over time, the concept has been subject to considerable debate and controversy, generating a substantial body of studies and theoretical discussions (Berry, 1997; Gamsakhurdia, 2022; Redfield et al., 1936; Social Science Research Council, 1954).

Acculturation has been understood as "… those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both" (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). Berry (2001) expanded on this concept by focusing on the psychological dimension of the acculturative process, introducing the concept of acculturative stress. He identified four acculturation strategies that individuals may adopt: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

These strategies are not linear stages but rather flexible and dynamic approaches that individuals may adopt as they navigate new social, cultural, and academic environments. Acculturative stress arises from the tension and challenges inherent in the acculturation process, such as cultural shock, homesickness, unmet expectations, perceived discrimination, and systemic uncertainties (Berry, 2001; Smith & Khawaja, 2011, 2014).

Gamsakhurdia's (2022) theory of proculturation offers a critical perspective that moves beyond static or linear notions of cultural adaptation. Rather than conceiving of international students as passive recipients of a new cultural identity, proculturation recognizes them as active agents who engage in the ongoing negotiation of meanings, practices, and identities as they encounter unfamiliar sociocultural environments. This negotiation process involves the creation of hybrid positions that are not merely additive or substitutive but also dialogical and dynamic. In contrast to traditional acculturation models, which often imply a unidirectional shift toward assimilation, proculturation emphasizes the coconstruction of the self in response to cultural novelty and contradictions (Gamsakhurdia, 2022).

Acculturative Stress in the Canadian Multicultural Context

Canada's approach to cultural diversity provides an interesting context for studying acculturative stress. Based on Berry's (1997) conceptual framework, international students in Canada could follow any of the following acculturation strategies: 1) integration, 2) assimilation, 3) separation/segregation, and/or 4) marginalization. In a multicultural society such as Canada, the preferred acculturative strategy—building upon Berry's (1997) concepts of integration and adaptation—is for international students to develop intercultural competency, which includes understanding the new culture and appreciating cultural diversity as a widespread social value. Longitudinal evidence gathered by Doucerain et al. (2025) suggests that psychological adjustment plays a central role, as international students who achieve stronger emotional stability and self-regulatory skills are

more likely to engage successfully with the new culture over time. This insight invites a shift in focus: Rather than promoting integration as a path to wellness, support systems should prioritize emotional adjustment as the foundation for meaningful cultural engagement.

Berry (2001) suggested that although the main cause of stress depends on the size of the cultural gap, the policies of the host country also have an impact on the psychological state of newcomers. Therefore, studies related to acculturation are particularly relevant in multicultural countries such as Canada, as Canada has traditionally invited people from around the world to consider immigration a viable pathway to permanent residency.

While Canada's multiculturalism is often presented as a model of inclusivity, Bannerji (2000) argues that this discourse masks the embedded underlying structures of exclusion and the racial hierarchy. She contends that Canadian multiculturalism functions less as a genuine celebration of diversity and more as a mechanism of state management, where cultural differences are tolerated only to the extent that they do not challenge dominant norms.

Examining how international students experience and understand the process of learning a new culture is highly complex since it implies—for some international students—a learning process that can involve significant amounts of stress (Le, 2022; Liu et al., 2020). Torres-Arends' (2023) investigation into international students' understanding of basic academic agreements revealed that this learning process can occur at a high emotional cost. Among the research findings, Torres-Arends (2023) reported that many international students struggled to understand new sociocultural conventions. The complexity of communication between international students and the academic institutions they attend could factor into the acculturative stress that students experience as they seek to understand and become familiar with a new culture.

The extent to which international students perceive and understand Canadian culture significantly influences their transition process and academic success. Even though the nature of living in and learning a new culture would seem to cause an unavoidable level of stress (Berry, 1997), studies have shown that the acculturation process can be eased by becoming familiar with the particularities of the process; furthermore, learning strategies can be designed to alleviate learner stress and facilitate the process (Koo & Nyunt, 2020).

Factors Contributed to Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress among international students arises from several interconnected factors, each contributing to the challenges of adapting to a new culture and academic environment. The transition process of international students has been widely studied (Xie & Xu, 2024; Zhao & Harji, 2024). Studies have focused on students' understanding of their new academic environments (Kaur, 2019; Qin et al., 2023; Sirin & Sin, 2023; Torres-Arends, 2025) and the implications of experiencing novel learning experiences (Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024). One of the most documented sources of stress is cultural shock (Ward et al., 2001), which refers to the difficulty of adjusting to unfamiliar

cultural norms, new food, and time management practices (Brown et al., 2010; Hartwell et al., 2011; Pilli & Slater, 2021) and homesickness (Ma, 2021). Perceived discrimination can also contribute to stress (Karuppan & Barari, 2011).

While homesickness and emotional vulnerability are common, it is essential to recognize the strengths that international students bring with them. Larcombe et al. (2024) reported that international students often demonstrate higher levels of self-compassion than their domestic peers do, which acts as a protective factor against depression and anxiety. These findings counter stereotypical assumptions of vulnerability and underscore the importance of promoting a strengths-based perspective that recognizes international students' internal coping resources alongside their challenges.

Unrealistic or unmet expectations often exacerbate acculturative stress. Many international students arrive in Canada with expectations shaped by federal policies that link education to work permits and pathways to permanent residency (Usher, 2024). In addition, overseas recruitment practices often present education in Canada as a straightforward path to immigration and career success, which contrasts sharply with the lived realities that many international students face (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Expectations can fail to align with reality, leaving students uncertain and frustrated as they navigate complex systems and unanticipated challenges (CBIE, 2024a, 2024b).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this qualitative study was to explore the nature and extent of acculturative stress experienced by international undergraduate students, as well as how they make sense of their encounters with a new cultural environment. To examine potential changes over time, we divided our sample into two groups: students in the early stages of their academic program (hereafter referred to as "beginners") and upper-year students who had already progressed further (hereafter referred to as "advanced students"). This division allowed us to identify the most challenging aspects of the transition process for students at different stages of their educational program and to determine whether and in what ways students' experiences evolved over time. Our research questions are as follows:

1. What are international students' primary sources of acculturative stress?
2. How do international students understand and navigate a new cultural and academic environment?

We utilized a qualitative methodology within a sequential multimethod approach to gather both survey and focus group data. A descriptive analysis of the survey data yielded aggregate findings that were then used as prompts in four focus groups. The sequential approach, which involves gathering survey data and then using descriptive findings to structure focus group interactions, can be defined as "data-linked nesting" (Schatz, 2012).

Although the study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, it should be fundamentally understood as a qualitative study, given that the primary objective was to collect focus group data for thematic analysis of participants'

experience. The methodological design is aligned with the requirements established by the Research Ethics Board, particularly to ensure anonymity and protect the identities of all participating students.

Sample Description

Our sample included two groups of international undergraduate students.

Sample 1

We sampled all international students in the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) program at the Ontario campus. Students were asked to provide their written consent before completing the online survey. The data collected were restricted to the students' age, amount of time living in Canada, and the number of terms completed at the university, preserving their anonymity. A total of 123 international students completed the survey, representing 15% of the international student population in the BBA at this Ontario educational institution.

Sample 2

The participants in the focus groups were divided into two categories: (a) students at the beginning of their BBA program and (b) students who were advanced in their BBA program. The focus groups for beginner students included eight participants, who were divided into two groups of four students each. The focus groups for advanced students consisted of nine participants, who were divided into one group of four students and one group of five students.

Data collection process

Survey

The Acculturative Stress Questionnaire (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) was developed for international students from August 21 to September 1, 2023. The survey was delivered via the University of Calgary's local installation of Qualtrics. Students were invited to complete the survey through three primary channels: (a) an email invitation containing the survey link, (b) QR codes to the survey displayed on posters, and (c) a brief presentation in eight randomly selected classrooms, including both first-term and advanced-term courses, to share the research objectives, methodology, and importance of participation. The email invitations were sent to all international students, ensuring comprehensive coverage. The QR codes were strategically placed in high-traffic areas on campus to maximize visibility. The completion of the survey was voluntary, and anonymity was assured to encourage honest responses. Participants' privacy and rights were protected throughout the study. The survey data were subjected to descriptive analysis and then used to structure and guide the focus group interviews.

The primary purpose of administering Sandhu and Asrabadi's (1994) Acculturative Stress Scale was not to generate generalizable findings. Instead, the survey served as a tool to gather initial data that informed the development of prompts and discussion topics for the focus groups. Our study employs a qualitative research design, and the focus group data—not the survey data—constitute the core of our analysis.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted between January and March 2024, with 17 international students participating. Two research assistants conducted the focus group sessions. The participants were selected from among the students who volunteered based on their level of advancement in the program, allowing for the formation of groups of beginners and more advanced students. In terms of the cultural background of the international students, most participants were from South Asia, with 83% being Indian and the remaining 17% from Iran and Nepal, a composition that reflects the broader demographic trends observed in the university's international student population, where South Asian representation is particularly prominent.

The recruitment process for the focus groups involved two methods: (a) a poster displayed on the student affairs bulletin board and (b) the promotion of participation during activities organized by the academic support department. Students who agreed to participate in a focus group were required to provide written informed consent and were asked to choose a time among several scheduling options that best suited their availability. The participants were told that they would be offered refreshments and given a token of appreciation in the form of a $25 gift card.

During each focus group session, the research assistants visually displayed the aggregated survey results to prompt and guide discussion. This approach to organizing and facilitating focus group discussions enabled the research team to develop a deeper understanding of students' experiences beyond the survey results. The focus groups lasted between two hours and 15 minutes and three hours. During this time, a break was provided, and refreshments were offered to the participants. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research assistants. The transcripts were anonymized before analysis by the researchers.

Data analysis

Acculturative Stress Scale Survey: A descriptive statistical analysis was performed on survey data to explore participants' overall characteristics and answers. The aggregated survey data were utilized to facilitate discussions in the focus groups. For example, participants were shown specific survey questions, such as the one on food adjustment, along with a summary of responses to prompt discussion and reflection.

Focus Group thematic analysis

The transcripts were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. The process involved the following steps:

1) The two researchers who had not conducted the focus groups independently carried out a semantic coding process for each transcript, exploring explicit meanings in the data as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022).

2) After completing their independent coding, the researchers met to compare and discuss their interpretations of the data. Through this dialogic process, they refined the coding framework, documented any new or adjusted codes, and resolved discrepancies through consensus.

3) Based on the reviewed codes, the researchers collaboratively developed candidate themes grounded in the data.

4) These themes were then presented and discussed with the two research assistants, who facilitated the focus groups. This step was essential to ensure that the coded data and emerging themes aligned with the assistants' first-hand observations and experiences during the focus group sessions.

The final set of themes was established through an iterative and reflexive process involving multiple rounds of verification and collaborative dialog. This approach enhanced the credibility of the analysis and supported the identification of themes that most accurately reflected the meanings conveyed in the students' responses and interactions.

Findings and Discussion

We present our findings together with our discussion of these findings to enable more direct engagement with the literature and to contextualize our results within current scholarly debates. We adopted the six-factor framework that Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) developed to examine the sources of acculturative stress among international students. These factors, which include (a) culture shock, (b) homesickness, (c) students' expectations, (d) family pressure, (e) perceived discrimination, and (f) fear, provided an analytical lens through which we identified specific themes during the process of reflexive thematic analysis. The themes presented in the following sections were identified in relation to these six factors, as synthesized in Figure 1.

Cultural Shock

Within the category of cultural shock, the participants highlighted two elements as essential sources of stress: food and time management. Food was a central theme that was closely associated with home and family. The beginner students indicated that they faced challenges with food quality and learning to cook and that they perceived trying new foods as risky because of concerns about the origin of the food, a lack of familiarity with the ingredients used, and the inability to verify whether the food preparation met the standards they were accustomed to or the dietary requirements of their religion or culture. On the other

hand, while the advanced students also described food as connected to their identity and home, they placed greater emphasis on time and life management and integration with the local community. Compared with the beginner students, the experiences described by the advanced students reflected greater understanding and confidence in handling food preparation responsibilities and time management. While the beginners struggled with the initial adaptation to food and local customs, the advanced students described how they had developed effective coping strategies to balance their responsibilities.

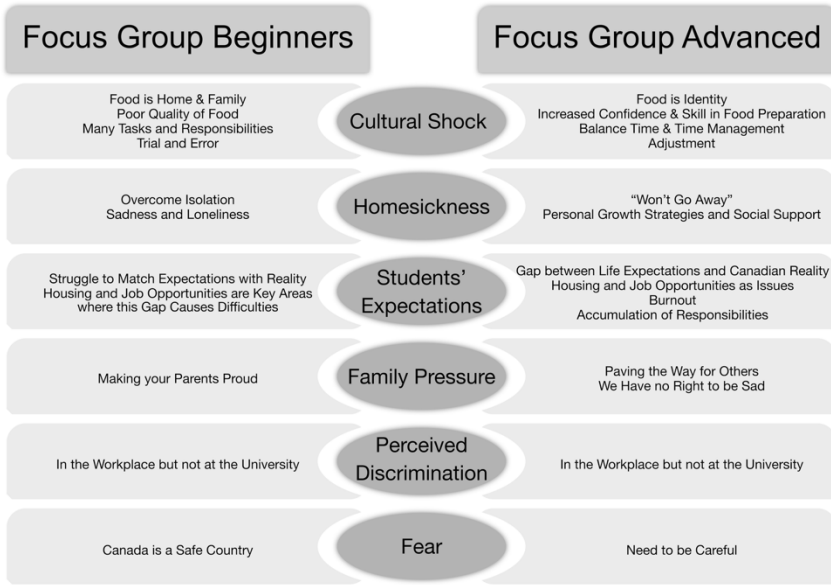

Figure 1. Themes Identified in Beginner and Advanced Student Responses

Food provides emotional connection and comfort, and thus, the changes in the food culture that international students encounter in Canada represent a crucial element of the culture shock that they experience. Food serves as a link to home, family, and cultural identity, making the challenge of finding familiar flavors a significant source of stress. As one student explained, "…when you're feeling down, you want to eat something familiar to make you feel better …" This finding is consistent with research by Verbeke and Lopez (2005), who highlight food's emotional and symbolic value, linking it to memories of holidays and nostalgia for past events.

For many international students, Canadian food is perceived as unhealthy and overly reliant on processed ingredients. As noted by Pilli and Slater (2021), the Canadian diet is characterized by high consumption of ultra-processed foods, which can conflict with the culinary traditions of international students and

amplify feelings of alienation. Brown et al. (2019) reported that students often adopt a home-country diet by sourcing ingredients locally or receiving them from home, as recreating familiar dishes offers emotional sustenance and a means of social connection. However, for some students, limited food preparation skills and time constraints pose additional barriers, leading to unhealthy dietary habits (Pilli & Slater, 2021).

The taste and quality of local food can further exacerbate the stress associated with cultural adaptation. Brown et al. (2010) reported that when food in the host country differs significantly from that of the home culture, students may experience a heightened sense of food shock. For example, Southeast Asian students reported adverse reactions to Western cuisine's unfamiliar flavors and textures, perceiving it as bland and unappealing. Similarly, Hartwell et al. (2011) reported that some students from European backgrounds expressed concerns about ingredient quality and the health implications of convenience food in the host country.

Despite these challenges, food acculturation also presents opportunities for growth and learning. As students learn to negotiate flavors, they often discover other cuisines worth exploring. This process reflects a shift in dietary habits and opens the door to broader intercultural engagement. Ting-Toomey's (2005) concept of mindful identity negotiation highlights the importance of developing intercultural competence through self-awareness, perspective shifting, and communication. In this context, engaging with unfamiliar food can be a tangible and everyday practice through which students learn to recognize and creatively navigate cultural differences, ultimately fostering more inclusive and open interactions.

Time is a cultural concept that strongly influences how international students organize their lives and manage their daily activities. For international students, managing time can be particularly challenging, as their circumstances often involve high levels of uncertainty. The idea of "*predictive blocking* time"—that one can schedule activities and organize time with the certainty that external factors will behave predictably—can seem impractical. The transition process occurs when the idea that "*time can be managed*" becomes especially relevant as students begin to understand a new cultural context, temporal expectations, and rhythms. Understanding how international students think about and manage their time involves recognizing the unpredictability they face and the need for flexibility in scheduling. This underscores the importance of providing guidance on time management that takes into account the cultural dimensions of time and the unique challenges international students face when adapting to a new culture.

Homesickness

Homesickness was widespread among beginner students, impacting their academic progress and emotional well-being. Social connections, university support, and preparation for hardships were essential in coping with feelings of homesickness. While advanced students reported experiencing homesickness, they had learned to manage it better through personal growth strategies and social

support, including employment and productivity, which played a key role in reducing these feelings. Homesickness affected both groups, but its impact diminished as students advanced in their studies and developed more robust support networks.

In the words of one student, "Homesickness won't go away," but international students can learn to manage it with various coping strategies and support systems. While feelings of longing for home persist, homesickness can be alleviated by building social support networks that help create a sense of a family away from home. Our findings align with those of Hartwell et al. (2011), who reported that homesickness was most pronounced within the first month of arrival and on special occasions, such as birthdays and holidays, but that students generally adapted to their new environment over time.

Advanced students reported that engaging in school, social, and cultural activities played a significant role in helping them manage their feelings of homesickness. Group work during class can foster a sense of belonging and build stronger connections among peers. However, Ma (2021) emphasized that while social support is critical, it often requires time to develop. This finding highlights the importance of early interventions by universities to help students cultivate meaningful relationships and support systems. Ma (2021) suggested that involving senior students with common cultural backgrounds in orientation programs can increase new students' awareness of available resources and foster a socially supportive environment.

The advanced students in our study emphasized the importance of finding culturally familiar food and celebrating significant events, such as festivals, which helped them maintain emotional well-being and mitigate feelings of homesickness. Our findings corroborate Hartwell et al.'s (2011) finding that cultural events and familiar practices can help students feel more comfortable and integrated into their new environment. Additionally, securing employment or finding engaging activities that can provide a routine and sense of purpose may help reduce the intensity of homesickness.

It is essential to acknowledge cultural differences in coping strategies. Ma (2021) noted that many Asian international students prefer internal regulation, such as relying on willpower, over seeking professional help due to cultural stigmas around mental health and the value placed on family privacy. This tendency underscores the need for culturally sensitive counseling services that respect and accommodate students' traditional values. Zhang and Dixon (2003) further suggest that students may feel more comfortable seeking support from counsellors with similar ethnic backgrounds. As Ma (2021) highlights, traditional Western approaches to psychotherapy may not always resonate with the cultural perspectives of all international students. These findings highlight the importance of universities continuously working to ensure that their counseling services are culturally responsive and foster trust, respect, and an understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds. It is crucial that university staff be perceived as friendly and welcoming, particularly when students have newly arrived and have not yet established social networks. In our study, the participants highlighted the positive

impact of warm and approachable staff, which helped them feel welcome and contributed significantly to their sense of belonging.

Students' Expectations

Beginning students talked about the struggle to align their expectations with the reality that many international students experience, particularly with respect to economic realities in Canada and new practical responsibilities. Academic requirements imposed by professors during the initial terms were not perceived as a significant source of pressure, but time management posed a major challenge for beginner students. Advanced students faced similar pressures related to the disparity between their expectations of life in Canada and the reality they encountered. In contrast to beginners, advanced students demonstrated a remarkable ability to manage academic and work demands. However, they experienced more frequent pressure and burnout, reflecting the accumulation of responsibilities and family and social expectations. As one advanced student noted, "… I do not have enough space in my mind …. So I think if you have work, so it's easy for you to connect with the environment of Canada*…"* The transition from initial disappointment to more realistic expectations over time illustrates that while challenges persist, students' ability to cope appears to improve the longer they study in Canada.

Housing and job opportunities emerged as two main areas where students experienced a misalignment between their expectations and reality. The findings of the 2023 CBIE International Student Survey (ISS) align with our findings, reporting that 60% of respondents, especially first-year students, faced challenges finding suitable housing (CBIE, 2024a, p. 24). Similarly, employment expectations were often unmet, with many students discovering that obtaining a job in Canada was far more challenging than anticipated. While 70% of working international students in the CBIE (2024a) survey reported that their income was "absolutely needed," they faced significant barriers in navigating the Canadian job market, including a lack of Canadian work experience, which was cited by 27% of respondents (CBIE, 2024a, pp. 30, 33).

The connection between education and immigration pathways further complicates these expectations. Canada's federal regulatory framework ties postsecondary education to opportunities such as the postgraduation work permit (PGWP) and pathways to permanent residence (Government of Canada, 2023). This framework attracts students but also creates uncertainty. Many recruitment agencies market Canadian education as a straightforward route to high-paying jobs and immigration success, but this portrayal often leads to unrealistic expectations. Students frequently arrive believing that studying in Canada guarantees employment, only to find that jobs are not readily available nor are they guaranteed. The gap between expectations and reality, such as encountering housing shortages or financial struggles, often exacerbates international students' feelings of stress and failure.

The COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to student misconceptions. During the pandemic, international students were temporarily allowed to work

full-time to address labor market shortages, creating a perception of greater employment flexibility (Government of Canada, 2024). However, restoring prepandemic work hours limits left many students confused and uncertain about their opportunities (CBIE, 2024b).

Family pressure

The stress of family pressure was a recurring theme among beginner students, who emphasized their desire to meet the academic and financial expectations of their family. In contrast, while advanced students continued to feel family pressure, they developed coping mechanisms, such as prioritizing tasks. Nevertheless, while self-imposed pressure and guilt remained significant concerns for advanced students, they managed these concerns better by acquiring skills and experiences.

The expectations placed on students by their family and community may amplify their stress. Phrases during focus groups, such as "paving the way for others," "we have no right to be sad," and "making your parents proud," illustrate the weight of these expectations on students. Family pressures can be particularly daunting for students aged 18 to 22 as they navigate their new environment. Our findings highlight the significant role of family expectations in shaping students' experiences. Many students reported feeling under immense pressure to succeed academically and professionally, often viewing their education abroad as a means of improving their family's social and economic standing. Our findings align with observations by Shafaei et al. (2016), who noted that community and family aspirations frequently drive decisions to study abroad.

Family pressure is often tied to the expectation that students must achieve outstanding academic success to secure good jobs and, consequently, a "good life." These expectations stem from parents and the extended community, which can further intensify stress. For example, one student shared that when neighbors know that a student is studying in Canada, they may closely monitor academic results, with any slip in grades being described as "a fire in the jungle." This pressure can lead students to feel as although they have "no right to be sad" owing to the high expectations placed upon them.

Self-imposed pressure and feelings of guilt arise when students fail to meet the expectations of their families or communities, creating a substantial emotional burden. Despite these challenges, some students highlighted the value of learning from difficult experiences and obstacles and developing coping mechanisms to manage constant stress and pressure.

Perceived discrimination

We found that beginner students did not report experiences with discrimination within the university but did report perceptions of discrimination outside the campus, particularly in the workplace. Advanced students shared similar nondiscriminatory experiences at the university but also mentioned social exclusion within homogeneous groups in classes and the perception of cultural

privilege, which could make some students feel invisible. We found that both student groups reported being affected by the perception of discrimination, particularly in the workplace or concerning job opportunities. The students perceived that obtaining a job in Canada may depend on their cultural background and the identity of the hiring manager, as they perceived that workplaces tend to hire individuals who share the same cultural background. However, advanced students are more aware of complex social and cultural dynamics. As one student shared, reflecting on experiences in their workplace, *"...some of my coworkers did face this, just because you're brown. They use words like 'you bloody immigrants, go back to your country..."*

A discrepancy was found between the survey results and the focus group discussions regarding perceived discrimination. This divergence highlights perceived discrimination's complex and nuanced nature, which may not always surface in quantitative measures but may become evident through qualitative exploration. On the basis of the survey data, the students generally perceived the university environment as welcoming, and overt forms of discrimination were minimal or nonexistent. However, during the focus groups, students openly shared experiences of discrimination in two key areas: 1) among peers, on the basis of their cultural background, and 2) in the job market. Among peers, students reported subtle but impactful forms of discrimination tied to their ethnic origins, such as not being selected for group projects by peers with a different "status." Although not overtly acknowledged or visible, these interactions affect students' sense of belonging and require further investigation to understand their full scope.

The issue of job discrimination was also significant, with students expressing concerns that their cultural background might negatively influence their job prospects. This finding aligns with broader observations in the literature. For example, the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2024a) noted that international students report more experiences of discrimination in off-campus settings than in on-campus settings, reflecting a broader societal issue. The implications of perceived discrimination extend beyond immediate social experiences, as it negatively impacts student learning outcomes (Karuppan & Barari, 2011).

Fear

The international students in our study reported that, upon arrival, they perceived Canada as a safe and secure society, although some students expressed fears about cyber insecurity and racism. As described by a student, *"...I feel safe here like walking on the street … back home I was always afraid of walking in the street, someone is going to come and steal my purse..."* As students progressed in their programs and spent more time in Canada, they learned that, like any other place, Canada has risks and potential dangers that require caution and awareness. This realization can lead to a more nuanced understanding of safety, where students recognize the importance of being vigilant and taking precautions in their daily lives.

In addition, safety concerns play a role in shaping students' perceptions of their surroundings. The CBIE (2024a) reports that students felt less secure in public spaces, particularly on public transit, where only 21% of respondents indicated that they felt safe (p. 27). This broader sense of insecurity may contribute to heightened perceptions of discrimination in these contexts, further complicating students' adjustment processes.

In light of our findings, we contend that institutions should establish a coordinated support team for international students that centralizes access to key resources, including guidance related to housing, employment, food, and academic performance. For example, a designated team could organize weekly drop-in sessions where international students can engage with peer mentors and student service staff to address immediate concerns and receive timely support. In addition, this team could manage and regularly update a digital platform with practical, multilingual guides, such as grocery maps, job search strategies, or housing tips, ensuring that essential information is both accessible and culturally relevant.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings affirm that international students are not passive recipients of a host culture. Instead, they are active negotiators, engaging in complex processes of meaning-making and resistance. Stress related to food, time management, and cultural understanding reflects not a linear journey of assimilation but a dynamic interplay of identity, agency, and structural constraints.

The international students in our study experienced a wide range of stressors, including the six factors of culture shock, homesickness, family pressure, unmet expectations, perceived discrimination, and fear. While these factors are complex and varied in nature, one of the key contributions of this study is that the sources of stress experienced by international students are not homogeneous. Instead, they emerge from two distinct yet interrelated dimensions: intercultural stressors, which arise from interactions with a new cultural environment, and contextual stressors, which are rooted in specific conditions of the Canadian academic and immigration landscape. This distinction is crucial in understanding the complex challenges that shape the experiences of international students.

We define contextual stressors as unexpected external events or changes—social, political, institutional, or regulatory—that directly impact an international student's legal status, living conditions, academic requirements, or sense of stability in the host country. These stressors are often beyond the individual's control and can significantly disrupt their sense of predictability and security. Unlike intercultural stressors, which emerge from the process of understanding and navigating a new cultural environment, contextual stressors are not rooted in cultural differences; instead, they are situational disruptions that fall outside the expected challenges of learning a new culture.

Understanding international students' experiences of stress requires a broader analytical lens—one that recognizes the intersection of intercultural learning and policy regulation. The dynamics between intercultural and

contextual stressors warrant further investigation since what is commonly understood as acculturative stress may be more strongly mediated by contextual factors than by cultural factors. This insight opens a valuable avenue for future research to examine the interplay between these sources of stress.

Some of the most significant stressors—such as confusion around immigration pathways, unmet expectations about finding employment, and shifting federal policies—are contextually induced. Recent changes in regulations related to international students' work permits have generated confusion and frustration among students who arrived with expectations shaped by recruitment messages or prior policy announcements. These forms of stress do not fully align with traditional definitions of acculturative stress and may require a reconceptualization or expansion of the term to include systemic and structural sources of uncertainty. Providing international students with accurate information before arrival and creating ongoing spaces for clarification are crucial. However, this may be easier said than done, as federal decisions regarding immigration policy are often interpreted and implemented at the provincial level, particularly in relation to postsecondary education. As a result, academic institutions are sometimes left without clear guidance or the ability to anticipate regulatory changes. In many cases, they are simply unaware of how—or when—new policies will be applied, making it difficult to provide students with timely and accurate information. Clear and transparent communication about the realities of studying and working in Canada is essential to address these challenges. Institutions and policymakers must work together to provide accurate information about employment opportunities, housing availability, the cost of living, and pathways to permanent residency. As CBIE (2024b) recommends, managing expectations before, during, and after students arrive in Canada can significantly alleviate stress. Additionally, enhanced institutional support through career counseling and employment readiness programs can bridge the gap between students' aspirations, expectations, and lived experiences.

One important element to consider in future research is the role of family support. Compared with those without such support, students who received financial assistance from their families or lived with relatives in Canada tended to report a different trajectory of stress. The data suggest that family involvement—both financial and emotional—may play a protective role by alleviating stress and fostering a more stable process of understanding and navigating a new academic and cultural environment. This dimension should be explored in greater depth, as it may be key to understanding the variability in international students' acculturative experiences.

Relying exclusively on survey data may lead to inaccurate conclusions, as one cannot assume that all respondents, regardless of their cultural background, interpret and respond to questionnaires uniformly. It is necessary to consider that international students may have previous experiences with surveys in places where anonymity is not respected or where survey responses have led to punitive measures; thus, their responses may reflect what they believe will please the researcher rather than their honest perceptions, even when they are assured of anonymity.

Inviting international students to engage in conversations about their experiences upon arriving in a new country and advancing in their postsecondary education in Canada requires the intentional design of spaces where they feel safe expressing their perspectives. This perception of safety is essential, particularly because in some students' previous educational or cultural contexts, expressing disagreement may have been discouraged or penalized. Additionally, in many cultural contexts, speaking in the first person or displaying vulnerability is not encouraged and may be interpreted as a sign of weakness. The survey results discussed during the focus groups were not necessarily the students' own responses since they were not required to have completed the survey to participate in a focus group. We invited the students to comment on the survey results via an indirect approach to ensure that they understood that our aim was not to gather personal experiences but rather to discuss the survey results more generally. Allowing the participants to frame their views as general reflections rather than personal opinions contributed to creating a safe research space that reduced the perceived risk of speaking up. Our goal with this methodological approach was to reduce the possibility that the participants would perceive the discussion as an interrogation, which could place them in a vulnerable position. Creating a research environment in which the participants can contribute their insights without feeling exposed or at risk is essential for fostering authentic, respectful, and productive dialog. Thus, the success of the focus group discussions can be attributed to both the research design and the research assistants, who created a safe environment rich in trust and familiarity.

Ethical considerations

This study received ethical approval from Yorkville University's Research Ethics Board - REB Certificate #24-01-IT-1F.

Conflict of interest declaration

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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