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## **Navigating Acculturative Stress: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of International Students in Pakistan**

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**ABSTRACT:** *A considerable number of international students are enrolled in Pakistani universities. This research seeks to examine the psychological experiences of international students in Pakistan. A meticulously chosen cohort of overseas students participated in semistructured interviews. The data were gathered from six different institutions in Pakistan. The data analysis used interpretative phenomenological analysis as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The research identified ten prominent themes among individuals facing mental health challenges: perceived cultural disparities, communication barriers, academic difficulties, social hindrances, psychological issues, physical health problems, diminished life satisfaction, decreased self-esteem, financial limitations, and insufficient coping strategies. International students with better mental health were identified with ten significant themes: perceived cultural disparities, communication obstacles, academic apprehensions, social issues, psychological challenges, increased life satisfaction, heightened self-esteem, perceived optimism, personal drive, and effective coping strategies. The findings have*

*significant relevance for both practitioners and scholars involved with international students.*

Keywords: Acculturative Stress, Lived Experiences, International Students, Phenomenological Study

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Pakistan has emerged as a destination for international students, hosting individuals from more than 37 countries across Asia, Europe, North America, and Africa (Butt, 2014). This shift reflects a broader trend in global student mobility, with an increasing number of students opting for higher education in Asian countries, including Pakistan, due to improved educational standards and visa restrictions in Western nations after 9/11 (Nasir, 2011). However, studying in a foreign country often presents challenges related to cultural adaptation, communication barriers, and psychological well-being (Riaz & Rafique, 2019; Riaz et al., 2025).

Acculturative stress, from the adjustment process to a new cultural and academic environment, has been widely documented as impacting international students' mental health (Aljaberi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2020). Difficulties such as language barriers, social isolation, and perceived discrimination contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression among international students (Ansari Lari et al., 2025; Abu-Rabiah, 2025). Research has indicated that Asian and African students in particular face challenges in navigating cultural differences, with emotional self-regulation strategies sometimes exacerbating stress rather than alleviating it (Chun et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2005).

Despite the growing presence of international students in Pakistan, limited research has explored their acculturation experiences and mental health outcomes in this context (Riaz et al., 2025). Given the increasing number of international students in Pakistani universities, it is crucial to investigate their psychological adjustment and coping mechanisms. This study aims to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of international students in Pakistan, focusing on the relationship between acculturative stress and mental health outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturative stress refers to the psychological impact of adapting to a new cultural environment and is often characterized by anxiety, depression, and feelings of marginalization (Berry, 2005). For international students, the process of adjusting to unfamiliar educational, social, and cultural contexts involves managing linguistic barriers, academic expectations, and intercultural relationships (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Studies conducted in Western and East Asian contexts have documented how such stress can affect students' academic performance, mental health, and social integration (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). While the global literature offers substantial insights into the challenges faced by international students, much of it is geographically limited, focusing on students in North America, Europe, and Australia, with far less attention given to host countries in South Asia, particularly Pakistan.

Emerging research on South Asian contexts suggests that sociocultural norms, educational structures, and institutional support systems differ significantly from those in Western models, potentially influencing how acculturative stress manifests and is managed (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Pakistan, as a developing country with growing numbers of inbound international students from neighboring Asian and African nations, presents a unique sociocultural environment characterized by collectivist values, strong religious influences, and limited mental health support in higher education (Qureshi & Qureshi, 2019). However, empirical work exploring the lived experiences of these students remains sparse. The limited existing studies tend to adopt quantitative approaches that measure acculturative stress levels rather than qualitatively examining the nuanced, lived realities and coping mechanisms of international students in this context. This gap leaves unanswered questions about how cultural, institutional, and interpersonal factors uniquely shape their adaptation journeys in Pakistan.

This study addresses this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of international students in Pakistan, aiming to understand not only the prevalence but also the *essence* of their acculturative stress. By foregrounding their personal narratives, this research seeks to uncover the culturally embedded challenges and resilience strategies employed during their adaptation. This qualitative focus is critical for developing contextually relevant policies and support structures in Pakistani universities, as existing interventions often rely on Western-based models that may not align with local cultural realities. Ultimately, the study's findings contribute to both theoretical understandings of acculturation in non-Western contexts and practical strategies for improving the academic and socioemotional well-being of international students in Pakistan.

### **Regional Context**

Pakistan's higher education system has undergone significant expansion and reform over the past two decades, driven largely by the establishment of the higher education commission (HEC) in 2002, which aimed to increase quality, access, and research productivity (HEC, 2023). The country currently hosts more

than 250 recognized public and private universities and degree-awarding institutions, catering to a diverse student population across disciplines (HEC, 2023). Institutional structures vary from large public-sector universities with multicampus setups to specialized private institutions focusing on targeted fields such as business, medicine, and engineering. Governance is centralized under the HEC, but provincial higher education commissions also play a role in policy implementation.

International student mobility to Pakistan, while modest compared with that to regional hubs, has seen gradual growth in recent years, particularly in China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). HEC initiatives, such as scholarships, bilateral exchange programs, and the “Study in Pakistan” campaign launched in 2019, aim to attract more international students by offering English-medium instruction and affordable tuition fees (HEC, 2019). As of 2021, Pakistan hosted approximately 6,000 international students, with numbers rising steadily because of regional connectivity projects such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and increased promotion of academic collaborations (UNESCO, 2022).

This context is essential for interpreting the study’s findings, as Pakistan’s higher education sector is positioned at the intersection of rapid domestic expansion and growing international engagement. Institutional capacity, diversity of academic offerings, and the increasing presence of foreign students shape both the opportunities and challenges faced by universities in delivering quality education and fostering internationalization.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in acculturation theory, as proposed by Berry (1997), which provides a foundational lens for understanding the cultural adaptation processes of individuals navigating between their heritage culture and a host culture. Berry identifies four acculturation strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—that reflect how individuals manage the dual demands of cultural maintenance and participation in the new cultural environment. For international students in Pakistan, these strategies may manifest to varying degrees depending on factors such as language proficiency, cultural distance, social support, and institutional inclusivity. Acculturation theory has been widely used to examine how cross-cultural interactions shape both psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Khadra et al., 2025; Schwartz et al., 2010).

The phenomenon of acculturative stress, defined as the stress response to life events rooted in the experience of acculturation, serves as a key construct in this study (Berry, 2006). Acculturative stress can stem from challenges such as discrimination, communication barriers, academic pressure, and cultural misunderstandings. While some stressors are universal to student life, others are culturally specific and arise from the navigation of unfamiliar norms, values, and institutional practices (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Acculturation theory posits that the coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies employed by individuals—such

as seeking social support, reframing experiences, or adopting aspects of the host culture—play a pivotal role in shaping the level and impact of such stress.

Additionally, the study draws upon phenomenological inquiry as a methodological alignment with the theoretical lens, enabling an exploration of the *lived experiences* of international students in Pakistan. Phenomenology emphasizes the subjective perception of reality, which complements Acculturation Theory's recognition that adaptation is not uniform but is shaped by individual agency, contextual variables, and cultural interplay (Moustakas, 1994). By integrating these perspectives, this framework acknowledges that while acculturation processes can be conceptualized in broad categories, the personal narratives and meaning-making of international students provide essential insights into the complexity of navigating acculturative stress in the Pakistani educational context.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do international students in Pakistan experience and navigate acculturative stress in their academic and social lives?
2. What are the factors associated with international students' satisfactory and unsatisfactory levels of mental health?
3. What coping strategies and support systems do international students use to manage acculturative stress?

### **METHOD**

This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of international students and their subjective meaning-making of acculturative stress. An IPA, rooted in phenomenology, allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences within a specific sociocultural and academic context. It follows a double hermeneutical approach, where the researcher not only interprets participants' accounts but also reflects on their understanding and preconceptions (Larkin et al., 2006).

#### **Participants**

International students studying at the degree level at Pakistani universities who did not have English as a barrier to their studies were included in the sample. The international students came from different cultural, linguistic, or ethnic backgrounds with limited exposure to the local culture and obtained a student visa to study in a foreign country. Students who studied at the host institution for 2 or 4 years and for a minimum of 6 months were included (e.g., Butt, 2014; Sawhney, 2008). Data were initially collected from 450 international students. After the initial selection of 450 international students, 10 international students (5 men, 5 women; i.e., Creswell, 2013) were chosen on the basis of their extreme scores on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007), categorizing them into two groups: those with "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" mental health (Riaz, 2020). The semistructured interview schedule was created in accordance with the concepts established by McNamara (2013). The inclusion criteria were also established.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Pseudonyms	Length of Stay	Gender	Age	Major	Religion	Marital Status	Country
Yang	17 Months	Man	23	Sharia & Law	Muslim	Unmarried	China
Kim	1 Year	Woman	25	Language	Buddhist	Married	China
Alveena	18 Months	Woman	24	Language	Muslim	Unmarried	Yemen
Alhuda	16 Months	Woman	21	Islamic studies	Muslim	Married	Saudi Arabia
Musa	2 Years	Man	26	Economics	Muslim	Unmarried	Egypt
Mica	16 Months	Woman	24	Admin Sciences	Hindu	Unmarried	Nepal
Joseph	1 Year	Man	25	Physics	Muslim	Unmarried	Egypt
Jenifer	14 Months	Woman	23	Pharmacy	Muslim	Married	Yemen
Jona	16 Months	Man	22	Engineering	Muslim	Unmarried	UAE
Nodi	1 Year	Man	21	Area Studies	Christian	Unmarried	Mali

## Measures

Data were collected using semistructured interviews designed to capture students' academic and social adaptation, mental health challenges, and coping strategies. The interview protocol was developed on the basis of the literature and was reviewed by faculty experts at International Islamic University, Islamabad, and pilot tested before final implementation. The interviews were conducted across six universities, with each session lasting 40–60 minutes. Thematic analysis was performed following the six-step IPA process outlined by Smith et al. (2009), which included reading transcripts, initially noting, developing themes, identifying connections, analyzing individual cases, and recognizing patterns across cases. This analytical approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of international students' acculturative stress and adaptation strategies.

The committee felt that the line of questions elicited students' lived experiences at the university and suggested some necessary changes in the interview protocol. The researcher modified the interview protocol based on the experts' suggestions. The interview protocol was further pilot tested on international students. A group of three students was asked to participate in the pilot test. These three participants were asked to provide feedback on the questions after the pilot test. The international students who participated in the pilot study were selected on similar criteria as those of the main sample of the study.

In accordance with the study requirements, international students were interviewed at 6 universities, including International Islamic University Islamabad, National University of Modern Languages Lahore, Lahore University of Management Sciences, and Govt. College University Lahore, University of the Punjab Lahore, and Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. Responses to the open-ended questions were collected to demonstrate the phenomenon of acculturation as well as difficulties and challenges that several students experienced as they adjusted to living and studying in Pakistan. The following questions have been formulated in the current study: 1) What are your personal life experiences in attending a Pakistani university? Could you provide an example? (e.g., hostel, physical health, feelings, emotions, 2) What are your

experiences related to your social life at the university? (e.g., visits to different places, relationships, participation in recreational activities, etc.); 3) Do you think the study in another country has affected your mental health? 4) What do you do to cope with your condition? & 5) Are there any other experiences that you would like to mention? The interview protocol is given in the annexure.

This study has several limitations. The data were collected only from universities in Punjab and the capital territory of Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the correlational research design constrains causal inferences; a longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into the developmental processes of acculturation and adjustment. The study was also limited to students enrolled in two- or four-year academic programs and excluded short-term exchange students and domestic migrants from other provinces. Despite these limitations, the findings contribute to a better understanding of international students' experiences, emphasizing the need for targeted institutional support to enhance their well-being and academic success.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The participants included international students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who were enrolled in Pakistani universities for the first time. Their academic disciplines varied and included Sharia & Law, Economics, Language Studies, Pharmacy, Engineering, and Area Studies. The selection criteria ensured that the students had functional English proficiency, as assessed through a self-rated language scale, to facilitate meaningful participation in the interviews. Ethical considerations were strictly in line with APA guidelines and the ethical standards of the University of Punjab. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to voluntary participation and withdrawal at any stage. Informed consent was obtained before data collection, ensuring ethical integrity. Data collection was conducted in the researcher's presence, allowing participants to clarify any concerns. The response rate was 85%, ensuring a substantial dataset for meaningful analysis.

## **RESULTS**

### **Participants with Unsatisfactory Mental Health**

International students with poor mental well-being reported significant cultural differences from their Pakistani peers, particularly in terms of values, customs, traditions, and food habits. These differences created challenges in social integration and adaptation. For instance, Nodi highlighted the collectivist nature of Pakistani society, stating, "People here are more relationship-oriented, cooperative, and prioritize group needs over individual desires." Another participant emphasized disparities in lifestyle, dress, and daily customs and referred to some practices as "pre-Islamic customs and traditions".

Despite having functional English proficiency, many international students face linguistic barriers because of the prevalent use of local languages among Pakistani students and faculty. Yang expressed frustration, stating, "In Pakistan, people tend to speak in their local language, which is stressful for me as

I don't understand it." Similarly, Joseph noted, "Some teachers deliver lectures in Urdu or Arabic instead of English, making comprehension difficult."

Academic challenges were common among students with unsatisfactory mental health, manifesting as reduced academic engagement, lower performance, and poor concentration. Many participants reported a decline in work-related activities, particularly during periods of stress. One student stated, "When I feel stressed, I am unable to study or work properly." Mika shared a similar experience, adding, "My academic performance suffered as I struggled to adjust in a society that completely neglected me."

Social difficulties were also major concerns for these students, as they often felt isolated from their peers. Many reported experiencing exclusions in academic settings, particularly when students formed study groups, leaving them alone. Joseph described this as "the most stressful situation". Another student expressed feelings of alienation, saying, "I had no close friends or relatives here, which affected my social life and leisure time." Several students also perceived discrimination from host country peers, particularly within the campus, hostels, and other social settings. Nodi shared, "Being a foreigner, I was treated differently. Owing to cultural, linguistic, and social differences, people did not let me enter their groups." Similarly, Kim stated, "I was treated as an alien. Without any social contact or friends, I felt alone and avoided."

Psychological distress was prevalent among international students with poor mental health. Many reported experiencing depression, stress, homesickness, pessimistic thinking, sleep problems, frustration, and adjustment issues. Yang revealed, "Throughout my stay, I experienced depressive moods most of the time." Joseph linked his distress to perceived discrimination, stating, "Being treated differently caused psychological stress and tension, making it difficult to focus on my goals." Kim also struggled with adjustment and explained, "Although I was mentally prepared, the reality of cultural adaptation was much more difficult than I had anticipated." Homesickness was another common issue; as one student noted, "I experienced severe homesickness, which added to my distress." Sleep problems were also reported, with Nodi stating, "For days, I struggled to fall asleep."

Some married international students face additional stress related to communication barriers and poor life satisfaction. Kim described the experience as "living in isolation, like in a desert. We could only communicate through digital mediums, which reduced face-to-face interactions." Alhuda highlighted the impact of limited communication on marital relationships, stating, "Sometimes, we fought because of our inability to talk as much as we wanted, which led to misunderstandings." Additionally, some students expressed dissatisfaction with their overall experience in the host country, with Yang stating, "I don't feel that I have life satisfaction here".

Coping mechanisms among international students were often weak, with many struggling to manage stress effectively. Some students lacked access to counseling services or were indecisive about seeking professional help. Mika admitted, "I often felt confused and didn't know how to handle stressful situations. Sometimes, I couldn't even decide whether I should go to a counsellor

or not." Joseph echoed this sentiment, stating, "Even when I knew I should seek psychological support, I remained unable to do so, which affected my university life." Despite these challenges, social support emerged as a key protective factor for international students, regardless of their mental health status. Many reported receiving emotional support from family, friends, and host country peers. One student shared, "My family helps me cope with stress. Another expressed appreciation for the support from Pakistani students, stating, "I found my Pakistani fellows to be very cooperative and friendly.

### **Participants with Satisfactory Mental Health**

International students with satisfactory mental health experienced cultural differences from their Pakistani peers, particularly in terms of values, customs, traditions, and food. Some participants noted that cultural norms influenced social interactions, with one stating, "I experience cultural differences on campus, and people behave according to their cultural norms." Differences in food were also highlighted; as one student observed, "I saw different types of food in Pakistan that were unfamiliar to me."

Language barriers were another challenge, although students with better mental health adapted more effectively. Some struggled with communication due to linguistic differences, which affected their social interactions. One participant explained, "In a completely new social setup, my classmates could not understand me because of linguistic barriers, and I had no friends, which affected me significantly." However, many have adapted by modifying their communication styles. Nodi explained, "I changed my habits and communication patterns and learned how Pakistani students interact with each other and their teachers."

Academically, international students with higher mental well-being reported both challenges and positive experiences. They appreciated the supportive attitude of Pakistani teachers, with one stating, "My overall impression of Pakistani teachers is positive. Studying here has been a good experience because teachers are encouraging." Academic stress was also prevalent, with students struggling to manage coursework, compulsory attendance, and frequent exams. Yang noted, "Managing daily academic tasks was not easy for me. Poor time management led to delays in completing assignments and projects." Linguistic barriers further complicated their academic experiences, as Kim explained, "Owing to language difficulties, completing assignments, understanding lectures, and taking exams were major challenges." Some students, however, developed coping mechanisms to manage their workload. Jona shared, "Initially, I felt overwhelmed, but I focused more on my studies and kept myself busy, which helped me manage the workload."

Social experiences varied, with some students successfully integrating into campus life while others encountered challenges. Many engaged in social and recreational activities, with Janifer stating, "I have many international and local friends. I participate in parties and other social events on campus." Others took proactive steps to enhance social integration, such as learning the local language and joining student associations. Alhuda mentioned, "I started learning Urdu to improve communication and joined various student associations at the

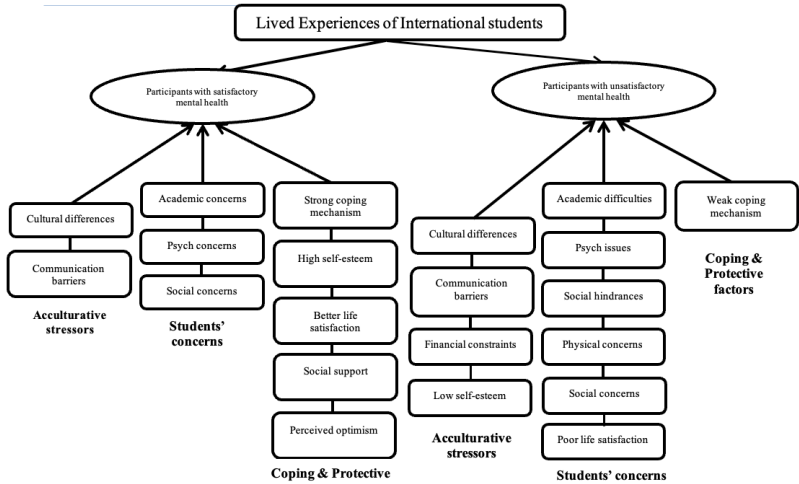
university". Psychological challenges were present but less severe among students with satisfactory mental health. Many reported experiencing initial distress upon arrival but adapted over time. One participant reflected, "At first, I was very frustrated, but over time, I learned to cope." Homesickness was a common issue, although its impact varied. Jona shared, "Homesickness disturbed me at times, but not always."

Coping strategies played a crucial role in maintaining well-being. Many students actively participate in social gatherings to alleviate stress. Jona described, "I have good relationships with my host fellows and engage in social events. My friends frequently visit me to help relieve my stress." Talking to friends and family was another common coping mechanism. Musa stated, "I got rid of stress by discussing my problems with my friends and classmates." Religious coping was also prevalent, with students finding solace in prayer and spiritual practices. Janifer explained, "Through my prayers and religious sermons, I tried to avoid stressors." Musa emphasized the role of religious practices and sharing: "I pray five times a day. When I feel sad, I go to the mosque, and it brings me comfort."

Social support was a key protective factor, with students receiving assistance from family, friends, and host country peers. One participant noted, "My friends help me cope by offering optimistic perspectives on challenges." Another stated, "My Pakistani fellows are very cooperative and welcoming; they never let me feel alone." Teachers also provided support; as one student explained, "My professors are supportive and offer additional help during office hours when needed." Some students sought professional psychological support, with one reporting, "I sometimes visit the psychology clinic when I feel upset. It helps me manage daily life stresses."

Several students demonstrated optimism, life satisfaction, and high self-esteem, which contributed to their resilience. Mica emphasized the role of self-worth, stating, "Self-esteem depends on your behavior and interactions with others, so I ensure it remains unaffected." Another student expressed a strong sense of optimism: "Studying in Pakistan has increased my positivity and optimism while reducing negative perceptions of other cultures."

Figure 1 presents a comparative visual summary of the lived experiences of international students in Pakistan, differentiating between those who reported satisfactory mental health and those who reported unsatisfactory mental health. For students with satisfactory mental health, the figure highlights positive adaptation factors such as effective coping strategies, supportive peer and faculty relationships, proactive help-seeking behaviors, and successful engagement in academic and extracurricular activities. In contrast, the section depicting students with unsatisfactory mental health emphasizes challenges such as feelings of isolation, language barriers, academic pressure, limited access to culturally sensitive counseling services, and difficulties navigating local cultural norms. Together, the figure illustrates how varying mental health statuses shape international students' acculturation experiences, influencing their ability to adapt, access support, and maintain overall well-being in the host environment.



**Figure 1: Semantic Presentation of Superordinate Themes among Participants**

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study align with the broader framework of acculturation, encompassing acculturative stressors such as linguistic barriers, academic pressure, and workload challenges. These stressors, in turn, influence cognitive appraisals of stress and coping strategies, ultimately shaping mental health outcomes. These results are consistent with those of the RAEM model, which highlights the dynamic interplay between acculturation experiences and psychological well-being.

The findings of the current study are consistent with the relative acculturation extended model (RAEM) suggested by Navas et al. (2005) as criteria for psychological acculturation and its outcomes. This extended model is based on some preexisting models and gathered information from some previous models (e.g., existing acculturation models (e.g., Berry et al., 1989; Tekel et al., 2025)). The main strength of this model is that it discusses acculturation from the political, work, economic, family, social, religious, and way of thinking perspectives. Therefore, as in the current study, acculturation and its outcomes with respect to interpretative phenomenological analysis have been portrayed by this model in the classic sequence of acculturative stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping, and mental health outcomes.

A central theme that emerged was the perception of cultural differences among international students, particularly with respect to host fellows, food, and traditional customs. These cultural contrasts were universally experienced, irrespective of mental health status, reinforcing prior research that international

students inevitably face cultural adjustments when studying abroad (Berry, 2006; Xue & Singh, 2025). Pakistan's distinct cultural and religious identity further accentuates these differences, influencing students' social and academic integration (Basham, 1968; Qazi, 2021).

Linguistic barriers also emerged as a significant challenge, affecting communication and academic experiences. Despite proficiency in English, many international students struggled with the prevalence of Urdu in casual conversations and, at times, in academic settings. This aligns with the literature that highlights language barriers as major contributors to acculturative stress and diminished mental well-being among international students (Bekteshi & Bellamy, 2024; Sharma, 2024). Communication difficulties extended beyond the classroom to interactions in workplaces and social settings, limiting international students' engagement with host peers. Previous studies have similarly documented how differences in linguistic patterns and expectations contribute to miscommunication and stress (Szemberg, 2008; Xie & Chao, 2022). However, students with better mental health demonstrate adaptive communication strategies and adjust their conversational styles to navigate linguistic and cultural differences more effectively (Gros, 2009).

Academic concerns were another major theme, encompassing workload, stress, and linguistic barriers in the classroom. While some students reported positive interactions with teachers and classmates, others reported that language difficulties and workload pressures negatively affect their academic performance, reinforcing prior findings that limited engagement with host faculty and peers exacerbates psychological distress (Ward, 2001; Wu et al., 2018). Interestingly, students with better mental health acknowledged initial academic burdens but developed effective coping mechanisms, such as time management and structured study habits, to mitigate stress. This finding corresponds with prior research indicating that active coping strategies contribute to more favorable mental health outcomes (Kosheleva et al., 2015; Szabo et al., 2016).

Additionally, positive student–teacher interactions were associated with improved well-being, reflecting the findings of existing studies that emphasize the importance of intercultural contact in reducing prejudice, discrimination, and psychological distress (Cherry, 2018; Wu et al., 2015). However, students who reported lower mental health struggled with academic adjustment and exhibited reduced work efficiency and concentration. Poor planning, assignment overload, and language barriers contributed to these difficulties, reinforcing previous research suggesting that international students face heightened stress because of unfamiliar academic environments and performance expectations (Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). The inability to effectively manage these stressors has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, somatic symptoms, and reduced vitality (Rajab, 2001; Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018).

The study further highlights the significance of social, psychological, and physical health concerns in shaping the overall well-being of international students. Social concerns emerged as a major theme, with students reporting reduced social functioning, perceived discrimination, social isolation, and

difficulties in forming relationships. Those with unsatisfactory mental health frequently experience exclusion in academic and social settings, reinforcing prior research that links perceived discrimination and isolation to psychological distress (Omodona, 2012; Rimsha, 2024; Snoubar, 2017). The perception of being treated as an outsider affects interpersonal relationships, cooperation, and communication with host peers, further exacerbating social withdrawal and mental health issues (Jung et al., 2007).

Conversely, students with satisfactory mental health exhibited stronger social engagement, participated in recreational activities and actively enhanced social connections. Supportive relationships, both within the host environment and with family, were associated with higher life satisfaction and better psychological well-being, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies emphasizing the protective role of social support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Beri et al., 2025). Engagement in leisure activities was also identified as a crucial factor in social adaptation, with findings suggesting that international students benefit psychologically, socially, and physically from participation in recreational opportunities (Zerengok et al., 2018). These results indicate a need for universities to facilitate inclusive environments that foster social interaction and engagement.

Psychological concerns were another central theme, with students experiencing distress, pessimistic thinking, homesickness, frustration, and adjustment difficulties. Acculturative stress emerged as a key contributor to these psychological symptoms, reflecting prior evidence that cultural adaptation challenges significantly impact mental health (Demir et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025). Adjustment difficulties are commonly linked to emotional distress, affecting students' ability to integrate into their new environment (Koo et al., 2021; Raza et al., 2021). However, students with better mental health reported developing coping strategies over time, such as maintaining communication with family to mitigate homesickness. Homesickness was among the most frequently reported acculturative stressors, with nearly one-third of international students experiencing it as a challenge (Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011). Those who managed homesickness effectively demonstrated better overall psychological adjustment (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

Physical health concerns also emerged, particularly among students experiencing psychological distress. Reported symptoms included headaches, stomach problems, and fatigue, which aligns with existing research that highlights the interconnection between mental and physical health among international students (Akinola, 2014). Previous studies have indicated that fatigue and colds are among the most commonly reported health concerns among international students, particularly those from East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American backgrounds (Miller & Harwell, 1983). The presence of physical health issues alongside psychological distress further underscores the holistic nature of well-being, emphasizing the need for institutions to address both mental and physical health concerns in their support programs for international students.

This study explored the personal and social experiences of international students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs at Pakistani universities. The findings identified key themes differentiating students

with satisfactory and unsatisfactory mental health. Students who experienced psychological distress reported challenges related to cultural differences, communication barriers, academic and social concerns, low life satisfaction and self-esteem, financial constraints, marital concerns, and ineffective coping mechanisms. In contrast, students with better mental health exhibited higher self-esteem, perceived optimism, and personal motivation and stronger coping strategies. These findings align with the RAEM model, which explains psychological acculturation in terms of mental health outcomes.

The present study highlights several critical factors influencing the mental health of international students, including self-esteem, life satisfaction, financial constraints, media violence, optimism, coping mechanisms, and social support. Self-esteem was a distinguishing factor, with students who reported unsatisfactory levels of self-esteem experiencing lower mental health and those with better mental health reporting higher levels of self-worth. Self-esteem serves as an important psychological resource that can act as an antecedent, moderator, or consequence of stress (Amorim & Lam, 2013). Prior research supports its role as a buffering agent against anxiety, with confidence and self-perception influencing both coping mechanisms and behavioral responses to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Eisenbarth, 2012).

## Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted nature of international students' mental health challenges and the importance of institutional support in mitigating these issues. Universities should adopt policies that promote cultural sensitivity, enhance language support services, and foster inclusive academic and social environments. Strengthening social support networks, providing financial assistance, and encouraging effective coping strategies can significantly improve students' mental well-being. By addressing these concerns holistically, institutions can facilitate smoother cultural adaptation and enhance the overall academic and personal experiences of international students in Pakistan.

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<b>Annexure</b> <b>Interview Agenda</b> Hello, my name is _____, and I have been asked to participate in an interview. In this interview, I would like to discuss the experiences as an international student studying in Pakistani university/institution. Signature:		
Main question	Additional questions	Clarifying questions
What are your personal life related experiences in attending Pakistani university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you feel that other people treated you differently, could you provide an example?</li> <li>What stressful situations are affecting your life at the university?</li> <li>What was your emotional reaction toward change in your culture in attending university?</li> <li>Do you think your self-esteem has affected?</li> <li>Tell me about the psychological problems you face due to acculturation?</li> <li>Do you experience academic problems?</li> <li>Do you experience financial problems?</li> </ul>	Can you expand a little on this?  Can you give me an example?  Can you tell me anything else
What are your social experiences in the university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you feel during social contacts with Pakistani fellows?</li> <li>Do you think the study in Pakistani institution has affected your close relations?</li> <li>What sort of changes have you experienced in your social functioning and leisure time activities due to stressors?</li> <li>Have your studies/work been affected due to stress?</li> <li>What sort of changes you experienced in your family life?</li> <li>Tell about the most frequent social problems you face?</li> </ul>	Can you expand a little on this?  Can you give me an example?  Can you tell me anything else?
What do you do to cope/manage with your condition?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you cope with stressors facing in Pakistan?</li> <li>Do your family and friends help you to cope with the condition?</li> <li>What particular type/s of coping strategies have you developed that you find beneficial in terms of coping with stress.</li> </ul>	Can you expand a little on this? Can you give me an example? Can you tell me anything else?
Do you think the study in another country has affected your mental health?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you experience mental health problems when other people treated you differently?</li> <li>Have you experienced psychological distress due to your condition?</li> <li>Do you feel the change in the mood you experience because of your condition? (e.g., Stress, depression etc.)</li> <li>Do you feel physical symptoms after facing a stressful situation?</li> <li>Do you feel satisfied with your life?</li> </ul>	Can you expand a little on this? Can you give me an example? Can you tell me anything else?
Are there any other experiences that have not been discussed that you would like to mention?		