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## From Africa to the United States: Exploring African Students' Lived Experiences at an American University

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study explores the lived experiences of African students studying in the US, focusing on both their positive and negative experiences. Following a descriptive study design, the study uses in-depth interviews with 21 participants enrolled at a U.S. university. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The findings reveal that the main incentives for studying in the US are the perceptions of American institutions of higher learning as outstanding and better career prospects after graduation. Students view university-organized orientations, media shows on American culture, and participation in cross-cultural events as factors that help them acclimate to the new environment. The key challenges that they face are language barriers, discrimination, and culture shock. This research illustrates how prospective African students can navigate challenges as they adapt to new learning environments while studying abroad.*

**Keywords:** American culture, African students, cross-cultural adaptation, international students, sojourn

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a universal human right that is highly regarded in all societies. In this context, Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to education (United Nations, 2025). Globalization has led to many advancements, including the internationalization of education. Many African countries have educational partnerships with Western nations, such as the US, to bridge technological and knowledge gaps. As a result, many African students travel abroad each year to further their education. In developing countries, foreign degrees are highly regarded because people perceive them as of higher quality than those earned locally (Shin et al., 2014).

Statistics show that the global education market has grown by over 70% since 2000 (Terra Dotta, n.d.). Between 2000 and 2020, the number of students enrolled in higher education globally rose by 42.5%—from 100 million to 235 million (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022). Do you have 2026 data here??? It is expected to more than double total annual expenditure by 2030—arguably at a conservative annual growth rate of 7.4% (Holon IQ, 2022). The US remains the most preferred destination for many international students, at 24.0%, followed by Australia at 23% (International College for Economics and Finance [ICEF], 2024; Karuppari & Barari, 2011). In Africa, nine in 10 prospective students from Nigeria and South Africa listed the US as their first-choice destination,” says a report from the New York-based Institute of International Education (IIE, 2015). Karuppari and Barari (2011) argue that US schools attract the largest share of international students because of their high capacity and quality of education compared to those of other developed countries.

According to the 2015 immigration report released by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the number of international students studying in America increased by 14.18% in 2015 alone compared with previous years (US Immigration & Customs Enforcement, 2015). The immigration report also shows that currently, there are 54,817 international students from South America, 71,850 from North America, 91,206 from Europe, 919,482 from Asia, 50,810 from Africa, and 6,567 from Australia and the Pacific Islands (US Immigration & Customs Enforcement, 2015). Although Africa is the second most populous continent after Asia, it has the second lowest number of students in the US, with 5.0% between 2018 and 2022 (Krampah & Eduful, 2024).

However, in recent years, the number of African students pursuing education in the US has increased. For example, in the 2023 to 2024 academic year, there were more than 56,780 students from sub-Saharan African nations at U.S. colleges and universities—an increase of more than 13.0% from the previous year (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2024). Despite these statistics, few

studies have examined African students' experiences in US colleges and universities.

Therefore, the overarching goal of the present research is to address this gap by investigating the experiences of African college students studying in the United States. Specifically, the research explores (a) factors that motivate African students to study in the US, (b) factors that enhance their adaptation to life in the US higher education system, (c) perceptions about their American student counterparts, and (d) challenges that they experience during their study sojourn.

Guerriche and Grimshaw (2024) note that the experience of an unfamiliar cultural environment can be both anxiety-inducing and alienating—thus creating a fertile ground for inquiry within the theoretical framework of the Integrated Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA), which is theorized in the next section. While the study will help narrow the research gap identified above, it will also make a useful contribution to the growth of ITCCA—especially from an African perspective, where studies of this nature remain scarce. In addition, the present work will be important to players in higher education, governments, scholars and students of intercultural communication, and researchers of global migration, among others. For instance, based on the current study's findings, university managers could develop better policies for their foreign students, focusing on adaptation to new environments and cultures. The following research questions guided this study:

- **RQ1:** What motivates African students to choose to study in the US?
- **RQ2a:** What factors do African students perceive as important in enhancing acclimatization when studying in the US?
- **RQ2b:** What are the perceptions of African students toward their American colleagues?
- **RQ3:** What challenges do African students encounter while studying in US colleges and universities?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded in the integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation (ITCCA) advanced by Kim (2001; 2015; 2017). The theory focuses on the adaptation process of sojourners and factors that influence it. It assumes that an individual is interdependent with the environment in that, as one struggles to overcome cultural challenges, the process is influenced by the environment in which one lives. Kim (2001) adds that “each person is seen not as a rather static package of more or less stable internal structure, but as a reflexive system that renews itself as it continuously interacts with the environment” (p. 35). Thus, its major characteristics are (a) explicating how adaptation across cultures takes place; (b) predicting the changes or experiences that one may go through when he/she relocates into a different culture; (c) the role of intercultural exposure in developing sojourners' interculturality; (d) personal growth that occurs through intercultural transformation; and (e) adaptation relies strongly on

communication—specifically, an individual’s ability and willingness to interact with the host culture (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024; Kim, 2001). Neyestani (2005) explains that issues embedded in the theory’s characteristics remain relevant within the context of increased migration and growth in intercultural and international interactions. Guerriche and Grimshaw (2024) assert that these issues manifest in the experiences of migrant populations and the employees of multinational enterprises. In fact, the internationalization of higher education has led to increased student mobility (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024)—moving from one country to another in search of higher-quality education.

In relation to the characteristics highlighted above, “adaptation” is the main catchphrase. Kim (2001) says adaptation is crucial to human existence, as it helps living organisms instinctively navigate and overcome challenges and threats. Therefore, people perceive the adaptation aspect as ongoing, provided they actively encode and decode messages. Kim (2001) observes that for the integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation to hold, “the stranger must have been socialized in one culture and then moved to another; he/she must be dependent on the host culture for survival and engaging in continuous interaction with the host culture” (p. 34). Similarly, Kim (2005) argues that the process of shedding one’s old culture to adapt to the host environment is often stressful due to the dissonance of learning new aspects of the host culture, which may at times contradict the old culture.

Relatedly, the ITCCA model suggests that stress-adaptation-growth is a dynamic process in which stressful experiences are associated with negative feelings that help the individual develop his or her adaptive energy (Kim, 2001). The model takes the dimension of a spiral—thus displaying psychological movement in the forward and upward directions through increased opportunities for adaptation and growth in the new cultural environment (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024). In turn, this creates an energy that pushes the sojourner forward (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024). The repeated process occurs in response to the sociocultural and linguistic challenges that sojourners face in the host society (Kim, 2001). In the same vein, Kim (2017) explains that each adaptive challenge that sojourners face signifies an opportunity to transcend the boundaries of the original culture, enabling them to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and enhance self-awareness. In conclusion, Kim’s (2001; 2015; 2017) theoretical model is based on a “general system perspective” (Ruben, 1983), which assumes that individuals adapt to changes encountered in the new host environment and strive to reach a psychological equilibrium.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Africa remains unknown to the Western world, and very few studies in intercultural communication have been conducted on the vast continent (Miller et al., 2013). For instance, in a study of 213 American undergraduates, Lindemann (2005) observed that the students viewed Africa as one country. However, it is imperative to note that Africa is the second-largest continent, comprising 54 nations with distinct cultures and languages. Compared with the US, most African

nations have a conservative, collectivist culture in which family is highly regarded and always the center of reference in quotidian interactions. African students who study in the US experience culture shock as a result of moving from a collectivist culture into an individualistic culture. Previous studies have shown that members of collectivist and individualistic cultures communicate differently. For example, Kim, Sharkey, and Singelis (1994) point out that during interactions, members from individualistic cultures value clarity, while those from collectivist cultures value positive evaluation by their colleagues. In a study of how Japanese students viewed American students, Toyasaki (2004) found that Japanese think Americans are talkative and value having many ideas during interaction. Kim et al. (1994) also found that individualistic cultures place a high premium on autonomy and clarity, in contrast to collectivist cultures, which emphasize in-group harmony—hence, their focus is on how interaction serves the group rather than personal interests.

The adaptation of international students significantly impacts their academic adjustment. However, those able to adjust report higher academic scores, while those who take time to adapt are seen to struggle, especially during the time they spend trying to acclimatize (Bilir Koca & Karadağ, 2025). Therefore, US institutions of higher learning need to recognize the diversity of international students joining their colleges and universities, as they bring different experiences and needs (Al Juboori, Barker, & Kim, 2025; Ihuoma & Bista, 2025). International students can be divided into various categories: those from developed countries and those from developing countries. In addition, Ortaçtepe (2013) observed that some students come to the US to further their studies after working for some time in their home nations. Thus, such differences warrant a careful approach to ensure that students abroad can adjust comfortably to the new learning environment. In this context, Gennaro (2009) observes that linguistic differences exist between the spoken and written language of international students who study in high schools and colleges in the US and those who take high school or part of their college education in foreign countries and then travel to the US for higher education. Furthermore, Gennaro observes that students who studied abroad and then traveled to the US for higher studies tend to be more articulate in written language, whereas students who took all or part of their studies in the US tend to be more expressive in oral language. Most African countries have education systems different from those in the US, and English is studied as a second or even third language in most countries; thus, inevitably, when learners travel to the US to study, they encounter challenges when interacting with English-speaking natives.

### **Why Study Abroad?**

Many economies around the globe value international studies for various reasons. For instance, Menzies and Baron (2014) posit that international students bring monetary value to host nations; hence, it is important that they receive a valuable education. Similarly, Brown and Jones (2013) contend that the higher education sector is a major export market for the US. Lee and Rice (2007) support this

argument by observing that the US government receives revenue from international students. In addition to their economic importance, international students also enrich the diversity of American schools by bringing new perspectives from their home countries (Lee & Rice, 2007). Thus, it is important to understand why students choose to study abroad. Within this context, students elect to study abroad for various reasons, such as better-quality education (Iraili, Erguven, & Armani, 2026; Yin, 2013), the desire to travel abroad (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014), the desire to experience new cultures, traditions, and lifestyles (Ang, Yang, & Toh, 2026; Krampah & Eduful, 2024; Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014), the desire to gain new knowledge and skills (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014; Sobkowiak, 2019), the desire to learn a new language (Krampah & Eduful, 2024), global job prospects (Sisavath, 2021), and the favorable reputation of a foreign university (Krampah & Eduful, 2024).

Yun (2014) argues that international studies foster public diplomacy among nations. In a study of Chinese students in South Korea, Yun observed that study abroad programs positively influenced Chinese students' attitudes toward South Korea, making them more likely to refer other students to study there. Therefore, it is imperative that international students be treated with respect, as any perceived dissatisfaction can influence their perceptions of the host country and their discussions of it with friends and family back home. Furthermore, Miller-Perrin and Thompson (2014) argue that students who study abroad become globalized; thus, they are aware of global challenges and open to global solutions to problems rather than remedies for their home challenges alone.

### **Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Perceptions Toward American Students**

The adaptation of international students is influenced by several factors that contribute to acclimation. For example, Kim (2005) argues that the ability of a "stranger" to communicate effectively in a way that the host understands determines the extent to which they acclimatize to the new culture. Similarly, Brown and Jones (2013) argue that host receptivity (the willingness of members of the host culture to welcome a stranger) is important for enhancing international students' adaptation. Kim (2001) identifies ethnic proximity (the degree to which the stranger's culture aligns with the host environment) as another factor that influences the adjustment process. For instance, in the initial stages of entering a new culture, one seeks to connect with one's home culture through ethnic media and with people from one's ethnic group or country as a way to retain central elements of one's homeland culture and to learn about the new culture. Somani (2011) observes that ethnic media serve as a bridge, helping immigrants acclimate by exposing them to local neighborhood events.

It is important to note that one's cultural background influences how he/she interacts with others (Whittal & Rosenberg, 2015). Dervin and Layne (2013) argue that most host cultures have aspects that foreigners may not like; as a result, when people from different cultures interact, misunderstandings are inevitable. Althen (1988) argues that during interpersonal interactions, Americans are

explicitly taught to avoid discussing religion and politics unless they know the other interactants well because these topics are considered controversial and could lead to unnecessary arguments.

Lee and Rice (2007) argue that although many studies emphasize the need for international students to adapt to the host environment, few acknowledge the host environment's shortcomings that may impede their adjustment. Yun (2014) posits that interactions with the host culture shape international students' experiences. This position is consistent with Kim's (2001) argument that every interaction between the host and the stranger is often an opportunity for the latter to learn about the new culture. Furthermore, Ortaçtepe (2013) observes that interacting with people in the host culture provides opportunities for English-as-a-second-language speakers to improve their spoken English.

Karuppari and Barari (2011) hypothesized that students' engagement mediates the relationship between perceived discrimination and student learning outcomes. Their findings support this hypothesis. The findings also reflect Menzies' and Baron's (2014) study, which found that respondents rated students' societies as important in enhancing adaptation by offering platforms for improving their language, offering social support, and acting as a forum for making new friends—helpful during acculturation. Many studies recognize friends as important social support systems for international students since they fill the role of friends and family left behind in their home countries (Bertram et al., 2014; Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011).

In a similar context, technology also plays a vital role in enhancing international students' adaptation to their new learning institutions and in communication with their families and friends back home. Habib et al. (2014) found that international students view technology as helpful for classroom adjustment—especially for conducting assignments and research. Phuaa and Jin (2011) noted that social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp help international students connect and maintain communication with friends left behind in their home countries and in the host countries. From these findings, it is reasonable to infer that most African students in the US rely heavily on social media to communicate with family and friends back home, a technology-enabled form of communication.

Turning to international students' perceptions of their American counterparts, Toyasaki (2004) found that Japanese students viewed their American colleagues as talkative and as valuing the exchange of many ideas during interactions. Lee and Rice (2007) explored the experiences of international students at a research university in the US Southwest. Their findings indicated that students encountered struggles in adaptation, such as racism, unfairness, lack of hospitality, and cultural intolerance. The research was based on a sample of 24 students from 15 nations. Similarly, Lee and Opio (2011) found that the vast majority of African student athletes in the US experienced negative stereotypes and discrimination based on their race and region of origin.

## Challenges of Studying Abroad

Menzies and Baron (2014) argue that international students face many challenges compared to local students because they are separated from their social and cultural environments. Relatedly, changing global dynamics, such as the refugee crisis in Europe, have created hostile environments for minority races residing in Western nations. Whittal and Rosenberg (2015) contend that immigrants face discrimination in workplaces and health institutions and are treated differently from the rest of the population, and international students have not been spared either. In fact, Karuppari and Barari (2011) observe that international students are susceptible to discrimination because of their cultural origins. To overcome these challenges, they are expected to adapt to the culture of their respective host nations as quickly as possible. Lee and Rice (2007) posit that the September 11<sup>th</sup> bombing of America led to increased focus on the college enrollment of international students in America. Since then, immigration regulations have remained the most significant hurdle for international students seeking education in the US (Lee & Rice, 2007). Consequently, the denial of visas to many prospective students often rests on weak grounds.

In their research on international students in Scandinavian countries, Habib et al. (2014) found that most students from developing nations have lower technological literacy than those from developed countries. Therefore, African students joining schools in the US face a significant adaptation challenge when shifting from a low-technology region (Africa) to a technology-rich education system (US). Lee and Rice (2007) discovered that international students of color experience more problems associated with neo-racism (discrimination based on one's culture and nationality) than their international white counterparts. Karuppari and Barari (2011) also found that perceived discrimination negatively affected students' learning outcomes and engagement. Lee and Rice (2007) reported that some students who spoke English as a second language experienced discrimination from impatient professors who refused to allow them time to explain themselves, thereby undermining their confidence. Thus, it is highly likely that, based on their origin and English not being their first language, African students experience interactional challenges—most likely, discrimination during their stay in America. Most cultural intolerance stems from generalized stereotypes about regions of the world and other cultures.

Studying in the US is challenging for students who speak English as a second language, and some report misunderstandings with their American counterparts (Bertram et al., 2014). Language difficulties and culture shock contribute to stress and impede the acculturation process of international students (Gao, 2026; Yin, 2013; Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011). In learning environments, language barriers pose difficulties, as they directly interfere with a learner's ability to express his/her thoughts in the classroom and to build relationships with other students. As a result of the challenges they experience when interacting with fellow Americans, Yin (2013) argues that most international students prefer to speak their ethnic languages with people of their nationality because they feel more comfortable and confident than when speaking English. Vaccarino and



Dresler-Hawke (2011) noted that students identified cultural differences, language accents or barriers, a lack of time, and beliefs and values as impediments to cross-cultural adaptation.

Researchers have observed that international students report feeling discomfort, perceived inhospitality, and isolation from social events by American students (Lee & Rice, 2007; Yin, 2013). This can be challenging, especially as one adjusts to a new learning environment. Lee and Rice (2007) also found that many international students feel negative about themselves because the media does not portray their countries and cultures fairly. Lin (2012) found that international students face significant financial, academic, psychological, and emotional challenges in coping with American academic, professional, and social life. African international students have such obstacles as language barriers, cultural shock, discrimination, stereotypes, accommodation and transportation issues, and financial difficulties, as well as stress and anxiety (Bimpong, 2023). In conclusion, these challenges dampen international students' morale and impede their adaptation. Considering these challenges, it is evident that studying abroad requires courage and flexibility in cultural values and beliefs to better adapt to the new learning environment.

## **METHOD**

In-depth interviews were used to collect data on the four research questions within the context of the study's objectives—examining the lived experiences of African students studying at American institutions of higher learning. The use of in-depth interviews was suitable for the present research, as they have been successfully employed in similar studies (Chukwuezi, 2024; Habib et al., 2014; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Yaro & Smith, 2024). It is advantageous to use in-depth interviews because they provide researchers with a wealth of detail and accurate responses on sensitive issues, such as the lived experiences of foreign students studying in America—courtesy of the rapport established between the interviewer and the interviewee. Semistructured interviews are also convenient for studying implicit beliefs and attitudes, such as the present one (Keyton, 2015; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Interviews also help a researcher monitor an interviewee's nonverbal cues and adjust the interview process accordingly.

### **Research Design and Sample**

This study employed a descriptive research design, as it is suitable for identifying students' lived experiences while studying in the US and their interactions with other students (Gibbs et al., 2007). A descriptive design is also flexible, enabling an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences (Doyle et al., 2019).

The study involved ( $n = 21$ ) African graduate students in a large Midwestern university in the US. Thirteen participants identified as male and eight as female. Their ages ranged between 25 and 35 years. The participants were drawn from seven disciplines—namely, economics, mathematics and actuarial science, information technology, hydrology, communication, project management, and

business administration. In terms of marital status, all of the participants identified as single. All the participants, except one who was a permanent resident in the US, had taken their undergraduate studies in Africa and then proceeded to graduate schools in the US. The 21 participants were drawn from Ghana ( $n = 7$ ), Kenya ( $n = 6$ ), Nigeria ( $n = 4$ ), Zimbabwe ( $n = 2$ ), Togo ( $n = 1$ ), and Ethiopia ( $n = 1$ )—and all of them spoke English as either a second or third language. Of the 21 participants, 19 participated in the in-depth interviews, while 2 were used to pilot the interview questions and the interviewing process.

### **Inclusion criteria**

The inclusion criteria used to recruit participants were as follows: participants must have been born in Africa; they were also required to have spent a significant part of their lives in Africa (more than 5 years), so the US was quite a foreign country; they also must have held citizenship of an African country by the time of the study, and they must have been enrolled for studies at an American institution of higher learning for more than one academic semester. Additionally, they were required to be at least 18 years old to provide informed consent.

### **Procedures**

The research was first approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the in-depth interviews were conducted. The participants were informed that they would be audiotaped using voice recording software (Audacity) to ensure the accuracy of data collected during transcription and were also requested to sign a consent form if they agreed to be audiotaped. In addition, participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Participants were recruited via email and phone, and purposive sampling was used to include those who met the selection criterion. The participants answered questions about their decisions and motivations to study in America, adaptation experiences to the US cultural and educational system, feelings upon arrival, and challenges during their study sojourn. They were also asked questions about their experiences interacting with Americans and other international students from other continents and how they communicated with their friends and families back in Africa. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the data have been anonymized. Any information that could lead to the identification of the interviewees has been removed from the data, and participants have been assigned pseudonyms—for example, Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. The audiotaped interviews were also destroyed upon completion of transcription, and the collected data were stored in a safe computer. The interviews were conducted in spring 2016.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis because it helps bring out the explicit nature of the themes under study and allows for flexibility in data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Okidu, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a way of analyzing and reporting patterns within data” (p. 79). Themes were determined by the extent to which words or phrases captured issues pertinent to the research questions. The researcher used unitizing to inductively analyze and break down interview responses into idea units based on emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guetzkow (1950) argues that “coding of qualitative data involves two operations: that of separating the qualitative material into units, and that of establishing category-sets into which the unitized material may be classified” (p. 47). The units of analysis were words, phrases, and emerging patterns (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Braun and Clarke (2006) define inductive analysis as a data-driven way of coding data without classifying it into preexisting categories or preconceptions. The idea units were then organized into categories based on their similarities and on how well they addressed each research question.

## **RESULTS**

The research findings are presented in the order of the four research questions, which probe motivations for African students studying in the US, the cross-cultural adaptation process, African learners’ perceptions of American students, and the challenges they face when studying in the US.

### **Reasons for Studying in America**

This study’s research question 1 examined the factors that motivate African students to study in American colleges and universities. The interviews generated themes that were developed into a single category: reasons for studying in the US. From the data analysis, the following themes emerged: higher-quality education, career prospects, the possibility of permanent residence, and referrals from friends and relatives. Most participants said they chose to study in the US because of the high quality of education offered by American institutions compared to other parts of the world. Relatedly, the participants exuded confidence that studying in the US would equip them with the skills needed to succeed after school. Some participants reported that their friends already studying in the US, as well as their parents, had influenced them. Most students felt there were many opportunities in the US, such as internships and jobs after completing their studies, compared to their home countries. The excerpts from the interview below show some of the comments from two participants.

Participant 3 (Ghana) explains: “I realized the best place to study is in the USA, because there are many funding opportunities, unlike other places.” On the other hand, Participant 7 (Kenya) says that “Americans have better education compared to home, and there are also more opportunities compared to the

motherland.” Generally, these observations indicate that the interviewees feel there are more resources in American schools and more employment opportunities upon graduation.

### **Factors that Facilitate Adaptation**

Research question 2a examined factors that African students perceive as important in enhancing acclimatization during their studies in the US. The themes, phrases, and words from the interviews were condensed into a single category: factors enhancing the adaptation of African students in the US. This classification comprises the following themes, words, and phrases: orientation, television, being hosted by American families, open-mindedness, participation in cross-cultural events, help from other African students, reaching out to American students, asking questions, and research before traveling.

All interviewees, except Participant 14 (Nigeria), identified the orientation organized by the international studies department as valuable to their adjustment process. Some of the participants also identified participating in social events with American students, as well as asking them questions, as helpful in their adaptation. Those who knew other African students before traveling to the US also found them resourceful in the adjustment process. Other interviewees found the media, specifically television, useful for learning about American culture. The two comments from the interviewees below show some of the statements they made.

“Hanging out more with people and involvement with classmates. I talked with people and asked more questions about the American and other cultures,” says Participant 1 (Ghana). Participant 13 (Nigeria) added, “I knew about the culture before coming here [USA]. I watched the shows and movies, so I knew of the things to have a conversation about.”

As such, these comments show that African students perceive interacting with the host students as important in the adaptation process. This is because they can ask questions about culture and other areas they need help with. Likewise, the observations demonstrate that the participants believe the media is useful in learning about another culture.

### **African Students’ Perceptions of American Students**

The following themes emerged from the interviews about the participants’ perceptions of their American counterparts: hospitable, supportive, inhospitable, limited knowledge of world geography, helpful, open-minded, condescending, independent, and honest. This aligns with research question 2b. The nine themes demonstrate that participants had varied opinions about American students—some negative, others positive. Some of the most positive descriptions of the American students included being supportive, independent, honest, hospitable, and open-minded. Most interviewees narrated some episodes of how the American students had helped them. For example, Aisha says she found them hospitable and open-minded.

“It takes a while to get involved [in activities] by American students, but yeah, they treat me equally. I spend a lot of time with Americans,” Participant 13 (Nigeria).

However, in contrast, Participant 18 (Togo) noted that compared to international students, American students are inhospitable. As such, he narrated how he faced difficulties in establishing relationships with American learners—courtesy of being inhospitable. In this context, Participant 16 (Zimbabwe) says:

“They [American students] are not the most hospitable people. I think they pretend to be welcoming because they see that as an obligation, not something they want to do.”

Most of the participants who had negative perceptions of American students felt that Americans do not take time to understand the challenges that international students go through. The excerpts below capture some of the comments made by the interviewees.

“American students are very independent in what they do, so if one is struggling in school, they don’t truly care what you are going through. They are also isolated and prefer to work on their own,” says Participant 3 (Ghana).

Participant 1 (Ghana) feels their American colleagues don’t understand the challenges that international students go through coming from a different [education] system. Other interviewees felt that American students have limited knowledge on geography and cultures outside of their country. This is evidenced through finite awareness of the location of various countries on the world map. Participant 17 (Zimbabwe) notes:

“They are very uneducated about things that happen in other parts of the world. Anything outside of the Americas, they seem to have very slight knowledge about them. I spend a lot of time with Africans. I believe we have a lot in common and there won’t be a lot of culture shock because we come from similar cultures.”

Similarly, Participant 11 (Kenya) adds, “They also don’t learn about other cultures; so when you are new, they don’t give you the benefit of the doubt that, may be, what you are doing is done that way where you are coming from; if it isn’t done their way, then it is not the right thing.”

In conclusion, these insightful comments reveal some of the bitter experiences that some African students go through and warrant an in-depth investigation. Considering the economic input of international students in the American economy, there is a need for host institutions to closely monitor the challenges they face and ensure that they are addressed in a timely and helpful manner. These insights are discussed in-depth in the following section.

## Challenges of African Students in the US

Research question three interrogated the challenges that African students face in American institutions. The following themes emerged from the interviews: time difference from home country, isolation, culture shock, learning American culture, many assignments, perceived avoidance by fellow American students, weather, assault, and poor public transport. The obvious challenge identified by the interviewees was weather—especially during winter. As a result of extreme winter weather conditions, the majority of them reported getting sick and feeling stressed by the cold temperatures, which they never experienced while in Africa. This was an especially major challenge faced by those who came to the US in the spring semester.

“When winter came, I started having colds, and when I went to the hospital, they told me I was okay. I had headaches, and I was always generally tired,” notes Participant 9 (Kenya). In the same vein, Participant 2 (Ghana) observes, “I was eager to arrive in the US, although I was disappointed upon arrival, because it was freezing, and actually I wanted to go home.”

Most of the participants reported feeling confused and anxious upon arrival in the US. They also revealed that they had trouble comprehending the accents of the professors, more so for those who spoke fast. Relatedly, the participants noted that their professors complained they could not understand their accents. This was quite frustrating in the first days as students tried to adjust to the new learning environments and were expected to establish rapport with other students and professors. The difficulty with the accent was also identified as a problem outside of the school environment.

“The accent was a big problem, because once you get out of town, ‘it’s pardon me, mum, pardon me, mum,’ says Participant 10 (Kenya). Participant 19 (Ethiopia) concurs with Participant 10: “I had challenges with one lecturer who said she couldn’t hear my accent. I also found it challenging to hear European and Ukrainian accents.”

However, another challenge was the stress of having to learn American culture. They experienced culture shock, as most of the cultural practices they were accustomed to were quite different from those in the US. As noted above, there are major differences between African and American cultures, so it was a challenge for the students coming from a collectivist culture into an individualistic culture. In this context, Participant 15 (Nigeria) observes:

“I was worried when I arrived because I had to make new friends all over again. I felt like I was starting life all over again [and] was worried about how my graduate studies would turn out.” “I felt I had to change to adapt

to the new environment. I felt I had to shed the old culture [African] and learn the new one [American],” adds Participant 8 (Kenya).

Some participants felt ignored by their American counterparts, who they felt lacked empathy for the challenges they faced. To overcome this challenge, most of the interviewees turned to fellow African students for help with academic work because they felt comfortable interacting with them and facing similar challenges. The excerpts below highlight some of the perceptions about American students.

“When I’m in class, I spend more time with American students, but when working on assignments, I spend more time with Africans because I feel they understand me better than Americans,” says Participant 6 (Ghana). Participant 12 (Nigeria) observes, “Here everyone comes to class, listens to lectures, and goes their way. Nobody talks to you, unless you put in extra effort, nobody truly cares. I spend more time with other international students.

The participants also identified Americans as temperamental and sensitive to “petty things”. “I think a lot of Americans have issues with anger. The first time in Maryland, I don’t know what I did, then this one man started shouting and saying he would kill me; it was that bad. Apparently, when I boarded the bus, my bag touched him. Other people in the bus saw it but did nothing,” explains Participant 19 (Ethiopia).

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings provide useful insights into the experiences of African students during their sojourn in American colleges and universities. The results suggest that while studying in the US, African students experience many challenges ranging from anxiety, isolation, and culture shock to discrimination, language barriers, and even severe winter weather conditions. These findings align with previous studies (see Bertram et al., 2014; Habib et al., 2014; Gao, 2026; Karuppari & Barari, 2011; Menzies & Baron, 2014), which found that study abroad sojourns elicit fear, uncertainty, discrimination, and anxiety in students, among other challenges.

The results reveal that the participants chose to study in America because they perceive the education offered to be better than that offered in their home countries. Previous studies have argued that satisfied international students are the best ambassadors, who can raise the profile of host institutions through referrals (Karuppari & Barari, 2011). The finding that the majority of the participants have high regard for education in the US is enough reason for enhancing the satisfaction of international students to increase their chances of recommending American institutions of higher learning to their friends and relatives back home. Kim (2005) argues that engagement in the host’s activities helps a stranger to adapt to the new intercultural environment. The scholar also contends that every interaction with

the host is usually a chance to learn about his/her culture. This is usually helpful in the adaptation process. As such, the findings reveal that most students reached out to American students and host families for help, especially with learning American culture and traditions. This finding supports Kim's (2005) argument—suggesting that international students need to engage with those in the host environment as a way of learning ways of addressing the cultural challenges they face.

The major challenge identified by the participants was the difficulty with accents, where the African students took time to understand what Americans were saying and vice versa. Lee and Rice (2007) observe that students who speak English as a second language are vulnerable to discrimination; thus, there is a need for further research into how “strangers” can transcend linguistic challenges and adapt with ease. The results of the study also indicate that some African students perceive American students as supportive and hospitable, while some of the students view them as condescending and intolerant. There is, therefore, a need for institutions to encourage interactions and cooperation between the host (American students) and international students. This could be, for instance, through encouraging group tasks and assigning international students mentors to help them in the adaptation process. This would help to create intercultural awareness among American students and encourage them to learn about the experiences of foreign learners and hopefully be more understanding and supportive of them as they navigate through the new culture. Intercultural awareness entails understanding cultural aspects that influence other people's behavior and thoughts, hence encouraging the host group to be cautious and accommodating of diversity (Samovar & Porter, 2000). Encouraging international students to work with host students would go a long way in enhancing their study abroad experiences and helping them acclimate faster.

Furthermore, host institutions need to invest more in onboarding international students with the sensitivity of the specific challenges that they face. By providing cultural and social support resources, universities can enhance students' academic adaptation (Al Juboori, Barker, & Kim, 2025). While the present study offers useful glimpses into the lived experiences of African students in US institutions, the research has limitations that future studies could address. For instance, the study involved graduate students only—hence the findings might not represent the experiences of undergraduates. It is possible that owing to their advanced age and many years of academic experience, graduate students are more likely to cope and handle challenges better than those in undergraduate programs. As such, future studies should consider including undergraduate students, who are more numerous than graduate learners. Similarly, for stronger findings, future research should incorporate more universities, as opposed to one in the present case—hence creating a diversity of knowledge. The other problem lies in the use of a small sample. Even if qualitative data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews or focus group discussions are used, future research should employ a relatively larger sample to provide more holistic knowledge about this important topic of inquiry. In this context, future studies should also employ survey research,



which is suited to large sample sizes and is generalizable to the larger universe when probability sampling techniques are used to draw the sample.

Another limitation is the lack of sufficient literature on the perceptions of international students toward American learners, which aligns with research question 2b explored. As evidenced in the literature review above, only three studies are cited, demonstrating an enormous research gap. Therefore, more future studies should focus on investigating this area—considering the fact that America is the preferred destination for many international students (Galan, 2025; ICEF, 2024; Karuppari & Barari, 2011). In addition, future research should examine the gender differences in the experiences of African students studying in the US. This would provide useful insights into whether African men and women have different experiences during their study time in America. Future studies could take a comparative approach—comparing African students with those from other world regions—to determine whether their experiences studying in the US are similar or dissimilar. This study also has generalized experiences of African students, both male and female. Future studies could consider incorporating differences experienced per gender. They may consider, for instance, whether more females than males experience sexual harassment. Similar previous studies have examined the challenges faced by African students; however, the coping mechanisms they use to address these challenges remain largely understudied.

### **Conclusion**

By using in-depth semi structured interviews, this research examined four things in relation to the experiences of African students studying in the US: (a) factors that motivate African students to study in the US, (b) factors that enhance their adaptation process in American institutions of higher education, (c) perceptions toward their American student counterparts, and (d) the challenges experienced during their study sojourn. The findings reveal that the main motives for studying in the US are the superiority of American institutions and better career prospects. Orientations offered by host institutions, the use of television to learn about American culture, and participation in cross-cultural events are among the factors that aid African students in adapting to their new culture. The participants show positive and negative perceptions about American students, such as being hospitable for the former. The major challenges include language barriers, discrimination, and culture shock. These findings can enhance diversity and inclusion programs by developing tailor-made interventions for students from specific demographics. For instance, academic institutions could introduce interventions, such as linguistic interaction meetings, to reduce accent-based gaps. The institutionalization of tailor-made interventions is a crucial factor that could accelerate the adaptation process.

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