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Perceptions of Stress and Coping Strategies Among International Women of Color College Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT: *International women of color in U.S. higher education institutions may experience unique stressors, which can affect their mental health and academic performance. This research examined perceptions of stressors influencing health and the coping strategies employed by international women of color in college to inform tailored approaches that better support their well-being and academic achievement. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 international women of color at a large public Midwestern university. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify emergent themes. Participants described stressors, including uncertainty about the future, financial strain, academic pressures, immigration constraints, and sociocultural challenges. These stressors were reported to interfere with their well-being, increasing anxiety and impacting academic engagement. Coping strategies included social support, self-care activities, and structured planning, with participants preferring informal coping mechanisms. The findings reveal distinct support needs and opportunities to enhance culturally responsive systems for student well-being and success.*

Keywords: coping strategies, international women of color, mental health, qualitative research, stress

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INTRODUCTION

Research has consistently documented higher levels of stress among international college students in the United States (U.S.) than among their domestic peers, and this stress has been associated with negative outcomes for both academic performance and mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Wu et al., 2024; Yun & Greenwood, 2022). International students often experience challenges, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation, which have been associated with psychological distress, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating on academic tasks (Amanvermez et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Within this population, international women of color may be at a higher risk of experiencing stress and mental health problems. A study conducted among international students reported that women accounted for a disproportionately higher proportion of those reporting depressive symptoms, with 67.9% of students experiencing depression being women, suggesting increased vulnerability to psychological distress within this subgroup (Chaliawala et al., 2025). This heightened risk may be attributed to academic, physiological, and financial stressors (Banjong, 2015; Chaliawala et al., 2025; Tran et al., 2018; Wiesel-Brown, 2026). Prior research has also shown that female students are more likely to experience financial pressure and increased levels of anxiety, regardless of family support, which may further exacerbate mental health vulnerabilities and academic challenges (Tran et al., 2018). Similarly, research has shown that female college students report higher levels of academic stress and poorer mental well-being than their male counterparts (Barbayannis et al., 2022). This study focuses on international women of color, defined as individuals who self-identify as non-White and as international students studying in the U.S. who have migrated to the U.S. to pursue higher education.

While the literature has extensively examined stress and mental health among international students broadly and women of color generally in the U.S. (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Li & Zizzi, 2018; Nelson et al., 2025; Park & Shimada, 2022), there remains a paucity of studies focusing specifically on international women of color in college. This study extends beyond general international student research by focusing on the experiences of international women of color and their coping strategies, which may be shaped by intersectional identities. International women of color in college may be uniquely exposed to intersectional stress shaped by the interaction of gender, race, immigration status, and academic demands. Intersectionality theory suggests that these overlapping social positions do not operate independently but instead interact to shape distinct lived experiences and vulnerabilities (Atewologun, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989). Consistent with this framework, studies have shown that women often report higher perceived stress than men, including in college and young adult samples (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that women of color in college may face additional stress exposure related to race that is associated with psychological distress and poorer mental health outcomes (Erving et al., 2022). Overlapping stressors may compound stress experiences for international women of color, underscoring the importance of understanding their perceptions of stress. Given the cumulative nature of these stressors, it is equally important to examine how international women of color respond to and manage stress within the college environment. Understanding their coping strategies can provide insight into these responses and inform the development of culturally responsive interventions and support systems. Such insights are valuable for health and mental health professionals in designing prevention efforts and successful referral strategies to support this population.

To effectively design and implement interventions to address the unique needs of international women of color, it is imperative to understand the adaptive strategies they use to alleviate stress. Prior research has identified several coping strategies that college students use to manage academic workload, including mindfulness, emotional sharing, exercise, relaxation techniques, and social support (Lepping et al., 2021; Moeller et al., 2020; Scribner et al., 2020). However, prolonged or accumulated stress, if unaddressed, can contribute to the development of more serious mental health problems that may interfere with students' daily functioning and academic performance, which necessitate referrals for mental health services (Beiter et al., 2015). International women of color may face multiple barriers to accessing mental health services, including stigma, cultural and language challenges, cost, and limited knowledge of available resources. As a result, many individuals rely on self-management strategies or informal support systems before seeking formal care, making stress management knowledge particularly important for this population (Dombou et al., 2023; Nyikavaranda et al., 2023).

This study contributes to the limited literature on stress and stress management for international women of color in the U.S. While prior research has often examined international students and women of color as separate groups, this study centers their intersecting identities to provide a more nuanced

understanding of their experiences. Using a qualitative approach, the study provides in-depth insight into the stressors this population faces and the strategies they use to manage stress in the college environment.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. What stressors do international women of color in U.S. colleges perceive as most salient to their well-being?
2. What coping strategies do international women of color in U.S. colleges adopt to manage these stressors?

METHOD

Participants

Twenty international women of color participated in this qualitative study. The participants were from a large public Midwestern university in the United States. Participants represented diverse national backgrounds, including African, South Asian, and Mexican-origin students. For this study, "women of color" referred to participants who self-identified as non-White and who were international students studying in the U.S. The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study (IRB ID: 2022-0742).

Inclusion Criteria

The participants who were eligible for the study met the following criteria:

1. Identified as international women of color
2. Relocated to the United States specifically to pursue higher education
3. Were 18 years or older
4. Were English-speaking
5. Were currently enrolled at the university at the time of data collection

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants. Additionally, the snowball sampling approach (Raifman et al., 2022) was employed, in which participants referred to friends who met the inclusion criteria. The students referred were screened by the principal investigator (PI) before proceeding with the consent process.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through advertisements in the international office's weekly bulletin, emails sent by professors, and referrals from peers. Interested students contacted the PI (O.S.), who screened them for eligibility. O.S. explained the study's consent process to those who met the qualification criteria. If they chose to participate, eligible participants provided a written informed consent form prior to participation.

The investigators adopted a semi structured interview guide with open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences with stress. The guide included domains on (1) recent experiences of stress and specific sources, (2) particular worries or concerns contributing to stress, and (3) coping strategies and techniques used to manage stress. The interviewer used probing questions to gain more explanation, including 'Tell me more,' Can you give an example?', and 'What do you mean by…?'

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, averaging 50 minutes. Upon completion of the interviews, each participant received a $20 gift card as a "thank you" for their time. O.S. transcribed the audio recordings. Once the transcription process was complete, the original recordings were destroyed to protect participant confidentiality. The data were collected between December 1, 2022, and January 16, 2023.

We received 27 responses for screening; 20 students met the eligibility criteria and consented, and all 20 completed the interviews.

Coding Qualitative Data

Three coders (O.S., L.N., and S.A.) conducted qualitative data analysis using MAXQDA 2020, a software program designed to organize and analyze qualitative data (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). They employed an inductive coding approach to review transcript notes and identify emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). S.A. served as the verification coder (Creswell, 1994).

Initially, O.S. and L.N. independently reviewed the data to generate preliminary categories and themes. Both coders (O.S. and L.N.) met over five sessions to refine and confirm the themes and select illustrative quotes. Subsequently, S.A. independently reviewed the transcripts and identified themes and then met with O.S. and L.N. in two additional 60-minute sessions to reach consensus. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Data saturation was assessed concurrently with data collection and analysis. By the 17th interview, no new codes or themes emerged; subsequent interviews confirmed the absence of new insights (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024; Saunders et al., 2018).

Multiple approaches were used to establish the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings (Morse et al., 2002). The coders engaged in repeated individual and collaborative reviews of the data. Additionally, engaging three coders, with one serving as a verification coder, strengthened the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the findings within a rationalistic framework (Morse et al., 2002; Saldana, 2021). The iterative analytic process, characterized by multiple coding cycles, collaborative discussions, and theme validation, further enhanced the study's methodological rigor.

FINDINGS

Twenty international women of color participated. Eleven (55.0%) were African, seven (35.0%) were South Asian, one (5.0%) was Asian, and one (5.0%) was of Mexican descent. Sixteen (80.0%) were in their 20s, three (15.0%) were

in their 30s, and one (5.0%) was in her 40s. The majority of participants (18, 90.0%) were graduate students. See Table 1 for additional participant demographics.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (*N* = 20)

Variable	Categories	N	(%)
Sex			
	Female	20	100.0
Age			
	20-29 years	16	80.0
	30-39 years	3	15.0
	40 years and above	1	5.0
Race/Ethnicity			
	African	11	55.0
	South Asian	7	35.0
	Asian	1	5.0
	Mexican	1	5.0
Year in College			
	Undergraduate Student	2	10.0
	Graduate Student	18	90.0

Note: "Women of color" refers to participants who self-identified as non-White and as international students studying in the U.S.

The coders identified five themes related to stressors and worries among international women of color, and a sixth theme described coping strategies, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Identified Themes Related to Stressors and Coping Strategies Among International Women of Color

Theme	**Description**
Uncertainty about the Future	Concerns about employment, career decisions, future life outcomes, and relationships.
Financial Concerns	Stress related to tuition costs, limited employment opportunities, and financial strain due to student status.
Academic Concerns	Pressure to maintain academic performance and challenges related to cultural adjustment in learning environments.

Immigration Constraints	Stress related to employment restrictions and uncertainty about post graduation opportunities.
Social and Cultural Challenges	Experiences related to belonging, appearance, homesickness, social connection, and safety concerns.
Stress Coping Techniques	Use of informal coping strategies such as social support, self-care, and other stress management practices.

Theme 1: Uncertainty about the Future

Uncertainty about the future emerged as a source of stress for participants. They reported feeling anxious about finding employment and achieving their long-term goals. The sense of not being sure of what was to come next, after college had ended, was described as stressful, and respondents linked it with heightened anxiety and impacting their studies. Fear of making mistakes in career decisions or in pursuing studies led others to lie awake at night, particularly during the period preceding graduation. Apart from academic and professional concerns, there was also uncertainty about their personal lives and futures. One participant expressed, “It is more about thinking about the future. Did I make the right decision to leave my previous job and come for a master's? Did I make a mistake? You know, so that gets me anxious" (Participant 3). Another noted, “As international women, the fear of what we're going to do after school brings a lot of anxiety for us” (Participant 15). Participants expressed concerns about reuniting with family and partners upon returning to their home countries. Another participant mentioned, “Thinking about how the future will be and how I would reconnect with my partner triggers me" (Participant 17).

Theme 2: Financial Concerns

Financial stress and the need to support oneself were prominent concerns, as participants described challenges paying tuition, managing living expenses (e.g., rent, food, and electricity bills), and securing employment to meet their financial obligations. Students with visas were limited to on-campus jobs, restricting the number and types of jobs they could apply for. Additionally, many campus jobs were work-study positions, offering lower pay than students could earn in other community jobs. Participant 18 shared, "I worry about my finances. I feel that we have to pay a lot here. Sometimes I feel like we all go to classes together, but we are more stressed than domestic students." Stress related to ruminating about making ends meet could affect their moods or their ability to concentrate on schoolwork or daily activities, thereby activating feelings of sadness, anxiety, and isolation. Another participant noted, "I worry about postgraduation a lot, especially with finances, because I'm unsure if, you know, I'm going to get a job" (Participant 3). However, another mentioned,

> "There are so many limitations regarding finances. My family had to send $1500 to supplement my tuition. Shortly after that, I was told that living expenses are like $8,000 more. Although the cost of living has increased, the stipend has not truly changed much. Living on this minimal income is difficult, which causes stress for us" (Participant 17).

As mentioned, another source of frustration was having to work on campus or being limited to the number of hours one could work each week. For example, one woman felt frustrated about having fewer hours to make money, stating that "The working hours are different for us. There is no cap on the amount of money other students (domestic students) can make or the number of hours they can work" (Participant 2).

Theme 3: Academic Concerns

Participants frequently expressed concerns about performing well in their courses, understanding the material, and maintaining high grades. They were concerned that lower academic achievement, resulting in lower grade point averages (GPAs), might jeopardize future employment opportunities or make it difficult to keep graduate assistantships (due to GPA requirements), "Grades are important for scholarship and job search, so it gets me worried" (Participant 10). "I worry all the time. I worry about the course load because I feel pressure to take certain credits" (Participant 7). Another mentioned, "Yes, getting to understand the academic system here, it is quite demanding and different from what I am used to. Most of my courses are online, and I have to read to understand (instructions and materials) on my own" (Participant 9). Academic pressure increased when participants felt they did not understand the course content due to unfamiliar curriculum structures. For instance, they indicated that some materials were challenging to understand and that the material presented by instructors was new to them. One participant commented on challenges with adapting to the curriculum:

> "I worry about my grades because I feel like we are learning different concepts, which are different from what I am used to. Some examples they use in class are here (based on what occurs in the local community and the United States), and as a student who recently moved to the U.S., I miss out on some information" (Participant 18).

Participants also described pressure to fulfill family and personal goals for high achievement, often reflected in maintaining "good" grades (high GPAs). They noted that their families had made significant financial and emotional sacrifices to support their education, creating a sense of responsibility to succeed. Striving to achieve their own and their families' educational and academic ideals could be stressful and anxiety-provoking for these participants.

Theme 4: Immigration Constraints

Immigration constraints were a significant source of stress, as participants described challenges related to navigating the immigration process, including securing visas and managing travel documentation independently. One of the participants said, “I had to deal with all the visa and all the traveling documentation stuff all alone, and that even added to the stress” (Participant 5). Participants also expressed concerns about their visa status and associated restrictions, including fears of visa revocation. Despite being on F-1 visa status, many worried about the uncertainty of maintaining legal status, as one participant noted, “Visa-related issues are more concerning and overwhelming for us because we feel like if something goes wrong and the government says, 'Please go back,' we have to go back” (Participant 3). Additionally, participants highlighted employment restrictions tied to their visa status, particularly limitations on working hours, which contributed to concerns about achieving financial stability.

Theme 5: Social and Cultural Challenges

Participants described social and cultural challenges related to differences in eating and socializing, appearance, and cultural practices. They reported feeling different because of their hair and skin color. They also reported homesickness, loneliness, and isolation from social experiences (meals, celebrations) that were integral to their home cultures. Women reported having difficulty forming social connections, especially with persons from the new culture who did not understand their customs.

Concerns about appearance and being perceived as different from those in the dominant culture were recurring sources of stress. Some participants felt pressure to present themselves in a certain way to “fit” the dress code of the local culture. Having straight hair and dressing like those in the local culture was seen as pressure to be like those around them, to avoid being judged as different or “foreign.” One of the participants shared, “Like any time, I'm going for any job interview or career fair, I stress about my hair. Therefore, I'm wondering if braids are acceptable. Should I straighten it? Should I pack it up in a puff? Those are things you think about every time” (Participant 3).

Another participant explained how appearance shaped how she felt she was perceived in public spaces: “Sometimes, going to the grocery store, I do not want to dress casually because I do not want to be seen as someone who might steal something. Yeah. Therefore, you try to look presentable every time; it is stressful because sometimes I just want to be free” (Participant 4).

Homesickness and difficulty building social support were also prominent. Participants missed family and familiar support systems and described loneliness, particularly during their first year in the U.S. One participant shared, "I miss my people back home. Sometimes, I wish I could have some physical interactions with them. I try to make up via social media and phone calls” (Participant 14). Another participant explained:

> "My first year was kind of rough. It was lonely. I did not have many friends because I was new, and most of my friends were back home…. I lived far away from school, so I could not participate in a lot of social activities." (Participant 3)

Some participants also found it challenging to build connections with domestic students. While some formed bonds with other international students or people of color, they noted that connecting with domestic peers often required extra effort. These participants found it easier to establish rapport with peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds, languages, or lived experiences, as this provided an immediate sense of familiarity and belonging. One of the participants shared, "I do not have any difficulties connecting with people, but having people to reciprocate that connection is very difficult. Domestic people may be difficult to connect with here; some build a boundary, making it hard to approach them easily. I find it easier to communicate with other people of color" (Participant 10). Another mentioned,

> "I think there is not much interaction with domestic people, mostly because I do not have any. I personally do not have any friends who are domestic because there is very minimal interaction. Therefore, I think there are few interactions or activities" (Participant 6).

Safety concerns further contributed to unease, particularly fears related to gun violence in the surrounding environment, which limited participants' sense of security and freedom of movement. One participant recounted, "Thinking about gun violence, initially, I had serious worries about this. There was no day I would stand outside and not watch over my shoulders" (Participant 14). Another recalled a frightening experience: "I was coming from class one day, and I met a man who had a gun on his waist, and I was truly scared. It made it difficult to move around freely. I had to get someone to always come pick me up at night" (Participant 15).

Theme 6. Stress Coping Techniques

Despite the stressors they faced, participants learned to cope by adopting several strategies. This included socializing with friends to build support networks, which provided them with emotional reassurance and a sense of belonging, as well as a safe space to share their worries and get comfort. Participants described using yoga, meditation, listening to music, dancing, and social media as helpful coping strategies. They also described using planning and organizational strategies, such as making lists and setting deadlines, to manage academic demands and intentionally creating time for rest and relaxation, all of which supported emotional regulation and a greater sense of control over their stressors. One participant explained, "I plan ahead of time by making a list and assigning a deadline. I also dance to relieve my stress. I talk to my friends and my family" (Participant 9).

Others adopted more structured approaches, such as journaling or using wellness apps to monitor their habits and emotional states. "I have an app that

helps me track the distance that I have covered to help me do more. Recently, I tried to reduce my overthinking, and journaling has truly helped" (Participant 18). "I take breaks, like watching movies and spending time on social media. Social media is more like a vain inspiration to me. I dance and hang out at other times" (Participant 11).

Participants appreciated the effectiveness of self-care strategies, as seen in the following quote: "I do things that make me feel good about myself. For example, taking care of my body makes me feel good, so I do yoga or hit the gym. That makes me feel more confident" (Participant 5). "I listen to music with lyrics that calm me down. I say words of affirmation. I play sports such as volleyball. I try not to overthink things" (Participant 14). Others highlighted how their coping routines varied depending on their schedule: "When I'm in classes, I do not get much time, so it is just walking. However, now, since I'm free, I'm trying to be involved in swimming and exercise" (Participant 7). "I go out with friends, read, and color on my iPad. I take a day off during the week where I don't worry about what needs to be done" (Participant 19).

Social connection was another key strategy. The participants emphasized the importance of not isolating themselves when they felt overwhelmed. To cope with stress, they prioritize time spent with friends, peers, or relatives on activities or meals. Such interactions gave them a sense of belonging and reminded them that they were not alone in overcoming adversity. Being able to talk to someone and connect helped alleviate feelings of pressure and served as a healthy distractor from academic and personal stressors. This social support buffered stress and supported resilience. "Whenever I'm stressed out, I do not deal with everything by myself. I try to talk to people and share what I'm feeling. I will not try to be alone for long, just sitting back and thinking. As soon as I feel a little lonely or something like that, I try to get along with people and be in groups as much as possible" (Participant 6).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer insight into the lived experiences of international women of color in college, including their stressors and stress management strategies. These stressors, including uncertainty about the future, academic and financial stress, immigration concerns, and cultural and social issues, may increase vulnerability to mental and psychological issues (Akiba et al., 2024). Participants described how these stressors affect their health and everyday lives, as well as the coping strategies they use to navigate these challenges.

Several factors contributed to uncertainty about the future, as well as academic and financial concerns among international women of color. Many of these themes extend prior work on international students to this subgroup. Study participants identified uncertainty about the future as a central source of stress and anxiety, particularly fears related to securing employment after graduation, choosing the "right" profession, and reconnecting with loved ones. For some, restrictions on employment opportunities and limited access to financial resources

due to their student status further contributed to financial strain. These findings align with previous research indicating that international students experience psychological distress related to financial pressures, academic demands, and adjustment challenges, including social isolation, cultural differences, and loss of support systems (Alshammari et al., 2023; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Prasath et al., 2022). Broader structural uncertainties, such as immigration-related challenges and labor market instability, may further intensify feelings of anxiety and insecurity (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Prasath et al., 2022). These overlapping pressures can contribute to heightened anxiety and self-doubt.

These stressors may be experienced differently across gender and racial identities. Dy et al. (2022) highlight that gender shapes the types of stressors encountered by international students, even when overall mental health outcomes vary across contexts. The present findings extend prior research on international students by demonstrating how uncertainty about the future is uniquely shaped by the intersecting experiences of being both international and a woman of color. The internalized pressure to perform, combined with the ambiguity of the future, may increase the emotional burden carried by international women of color as they navigate studying abroad. This increased vulnerability may reflect the multiple, overlapping challenges associated with being both international and a woman of color, which can shape how they experience and respond to uncertainty about the future.

The interconnection between financial and academic pressures suggests that stressors were not experienced in isolation but as mutually reinforcing burdens that shaped participants' emotional well-being. Participants expressed concerns about tuition fees and on-campus employment restrictions (limited to 20 hours per week), which can make it difficult to afford basic living expenses while balancing academic responsibilities. These concerns about finances align with previous studies documenting that international students often experience significant financial strain, which can impact their academic performance and increase psychological distress (Banjong, 2015; Olatunji et al., 2023). This financial burden not only jeopardizes their academic performance and increases their risk of dropout but also contributes to chronic stress and difficulty concentrating in class (Moore et al., 2021).

The participants reported that stress could hamper their efforts to provide their "best" academic performance, leading to worries about their GPAs, which needed to be high to maintain assistantships. Others were worried about poor grades because cultural barriers could affect future job prospects. These challenges related to cultural adjustment, including adapting to new educational systems, communication styles, and classroom expectations, may further affect comprehension, participation, and performance. Stress over school achievement could come full circle, negatively impacting the ability to study and perform well on tests and written assignments, ultimately affecting grades. Chaliawala et al. (2025) also emphasized the association between stress and performance among international women. Consistent with prior research, academic stress is also associated with increased anxiety and broader mental health challenges (Van Horne et al., 2018). These findings highlight the need for targeted support for

international women of color. Providing opportunities for employment support and financial guidance may help alleviate financial stress.

Immigration concerns emerged as a source of stress for the participants. Persistent worry about maintaining their nonimmigrant status and the uncertainty surrounding postgraduation employment for those interested in securing one contributed to the anxiety experienced by these international women of color. The experience of stress related to these factors is not far-fetched, as prior research among the international population in general has also documented this (Naseh et al., 2023; Park & Shimada, 2022). Park and Shimada (2022) reported that visa policies, employment restrictions, and uncertainty about long-term residency directly impact international students' psychological adjustment and well-being. Drawing on intersectionality theory, these stressors do not occur in isolation but may intersect with gender and race, shaping how international women of color navigate institutional systems and employment opportunities. Our study further highlights how visa-related uncertainty, alongside constrained employment options, shapes participants' well-being in ways that domestic students do not experience.

Homesickness was a common experience among the participants. Studying away from home and family contributed to loneliness, which could impact their mental health (Banjong, 2015). Homesickness has been widely documented as a common experience among international students adjusting to new cultural and social environments. Although Mohamud et al. (2024) found no significant gender differences in homesickness, females reported higher neuroticism levels, which may be associated with greater emotional vulnerability and adjustment challenges.

Study participants noted safety concerns related to violence in their neighborhoods, which led to anxiety. While prior research highlighted the psychological impact of perceived safety risks among international students (Maffini, 2018), broader literature shows that concerns about campus safety, including experiences of discrimination and violence, are significant issues affecting international students' well-being (Ramrakhiani et al., 2021). Our findings showed how international women of color experienced these persistent concerns that shape their daily routines and sense of security, making safety-related anxiety a significant component of their lived experiences.

Study participants worried about being judged unfairly based on their appearance, particularly when they have to go to the store or for an interview. They felt under pressure to "do everything perfectly" to avoid being misread or misjudged. This vigilant self-monitoring is from the fear that minor misperceptions will be overgeneralized to their character or competence, which could cause more anxiety. This aligns with findings from Vidal and Kamp's (2025) study. In their study, international students reported that traits such as accent, hairstyle, or complexion led them to be continuously "read" as foreigners, which could make them feel unwelcome. They noted that acceptance was contingent on how closely one's appearance and behavior matched those of others (Vidal & Kamp, 2025). Additionally, research by Bjornsdottir et al. (2024) demonstrated that perceptions of trustworthiness, competence, and social status

are frequently inferred from facial appearance, a process shaped by race and gender biases, placing international women of color at heightened risk of negative social evaluation. This highlights the unique challenges that international women of color in college may face as they navigate environments where they perceive that they are being judged on multiple aspects of their identity. These factors could foster self-consciousness, which in turn exacerbates stress and inhibits genuine participation in everyday interactions.

Participants also expressed difficulty forming connections with students from the host culture, noting that they felt more comfortable interacting with peers from similar cultural or regional backgrounds. This challenge of cultural integration aligns with previous research, which has found that international students often face barriers to forming relationships with their domestic peers (Li & Zizzi, 2018; Van Horne et al., 2018). International offices and on-campus women's centers could develop recreational activities or support groups to foster social connections among women.

These cultural and social struggles, along with academic pressure, financial concerns, and visa concerns, highlight the complex realities international women of color face as college students. In the absence of sufficient social support and culturally relevant programming, these experiences may negatively affect students' mental well-being, academic engagement, and overall sense of belonging. To better support the well-being of international women of color, higher education institutions can implement culturally adaptive interventions, such as peer mentoring, wellness workshops, and inclusive counseling services, to build stronger community and academic support systems (Patel et al., 2024; Patterson et al., 2024). By prioritizing preventive and supportive strategies, institutions can promote holistic well-being and empower students to thrive academically and personally.

Although prior research has documented stress among international students in general (Chaliawala et al., 2025; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016), our study expands on this literature by focusing specifically on international women of color and applying intersectionality theory to illuminate how structural and identity-based factors shape their stress experiences. Despite the stressors they experienced, participants learned to adopt several stress-coping mechanisms. Stress, appraisal, and coping theory emphasizes that individuals select coping strategies based on how they appraise stressors and their perceived ability to manage them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this study, participants primarily engaged in emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, relying heavily on social coping as a key emotion-focused strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Emotion-focused coping strategies were used to regulate emotional distress associated with stressors that were perceived as difficult to control. These strategies included talking to friends, meditating, practicing yoga, listening to music, dancing, spending time on social media, journaling, and taking time away from stressors. They also adopted problem-focused coping strategies aimed at addressing the source of stress, including structured planning and efforts to organize academic or personal responsibilities. Participants perceived both approaches as helpful, although emotion-focused strategies were more commonly

utilized. These findings align with prior research highlighting self-care, relaxation, and social support as beneficial strategies for managing academic and emotional stress (Moeller et al., 2020; Scribner et al., 2020). Consistent with prior research, international students may be less likely to access formal mental health services due to stigma, cultural expectations, or unfamiliarity with counseling systems (Dombou et al., 2023).

Participants described the importance of their social network and the quality of their relationships as mediating factors. They emphasized the importance of talking to close friends, particularly other international students and women of color, who could relate to their experiences and provide meaningful emotional support. This reflects the principles of stress, appraisal, and coping theory, whereby individuals rely on social coping strategies when stressors are perceived as ongoing or difficult to control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These findings suggest opportunities to design peer-to-peer interventions that adopt culturally and socially responsive approaches, which may be particularly effective for women who are more open to relational and conversational forms of support.

Participants demonstrated a clear preference for informal coping mechanisms over professional counseling services. This preference may reflect structural and cultural barriers, including stigma, limited familiarity with mental health services, and a lack of culturally concordant providers (Dombou et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2023). For some, professional services felt more accessible when professionals shared similar cultural backgrounds or life experiences, an option that is not always available within host institutions. In addition, limited knowledge of how counseling works in the host country further compounds these challenges and can create barriers that make professional help seem unappealing or inaccessible.

When professional services felt less accessible or less relatable, peer support and self-help strategies offered more immediate, relatable, and culturally grounded support (Dombou et al., 2023; Nyikavaranda et al., 2023). Reliance on peer-based and self-directed strategies may provide emotional relief but may not adequately address chronic or severe stress, potentially delaying engagement with professional care when needed. It also highlights the need for institutions to integrate informal and formal support systems, such as embedding peer support within mental health programming, increasing the cultural responsiveness of counseling services, and reducing structural barriers to care.

The findings indicate that participants' stress experiences were shaped by multiple co-occurring academic, financial, visa-related, and sociocultural stressors, including gendered and racialized concerns about safety, appearance, and belonging. The reliance on informal coping strategies highlights the importance of institutional responses that prioritize culturally responsive, low-barrier supports tailored to international women of color to strengthen social belonging, reduce isolation, and provide coordinated academic, financial, and immigration guidance.

Implications

Our study's findings suggest that higher education institutions should adopt intersectional, structurally informed approaches to supporting international women of color. Rather than focusing on individual stressors such as academic challenges, institutions should recognize that this population may experience the intersection of academic, financial, immigration, and social stressors, which may compound students' experiences. The following recommendations highlight actionable strategies:

Develop integrated support systems. International offices, the financial aid department, and academic advising units should collaborate to provide integrated support services that can improve students' experiences.

Expand financial and employment support. Institutions may benefit from expanding on-campus employment opportunities for international women of color and from advocating for flexible policies that ease financial strain while maintaining immigration compliance.

Provide proactive immigration and career guidance. Participants described anxiety about visa status, postgraduation employment, and forced return, suggesting the need for proactive, routine immigration support. Institutions can offer recurring visa and career-planning sessions and create referral pathways to reduce confusion and improve access to accurate information.

Implement culturally responsive peer mentoring programs. Given the importance of peer-based and informal support, institutions can develop mentoring programs that intentionally connect international women of color to relevant resources and supportive networks. Consistent with prior research highlighting the importance of social integration and peer connection for international student adjustment (Li & Zizzi, 2018; Van Horne et al., 2018), participants in this study described peer-based and informal support as more accessible than formal counseling services. This suggests that culturally responsive peer mentoring programs and community-building initiatives may be particularly appropriate for international women of color. Therefore, they may benefit from programs that foster belonging, normalize shared experiences, and provide practical guidance for navigating academic and social environments, such as:

- Senior international students or alumni who share similar cultural or racial identities
- Peer support groups facilitated through cultural centers or international student organizations
- Identity-based mentoring spaces (e.g., women of color support circles or affinity groups)

Enhance culturally responsive mental health services. Campus counseling services should incorporate culturally sensitive outreach, including workshops, informational sessions, and partnerships with student organizations, to reduce the stigma associated with seeking professional support.

Integrate accessible stress management programming. Institutions may consider embedding workshops on stress management, mindfulness, and self-care

into academic and international student programming to improve accessibility and engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

While this research offers important insights into the stress experiences and coping strategies of international women of color in higher education institutions, it also has limitations. The sample was drawn from a single public Midwestern university and consisted primarily of graduate students, which may limit its ability to capture the heterogeneity of international women of color from diverse geographical regions, academic levels, fields of study, or institutional types. Future research should examine whether stress experiences and coping strategies vary across academic levels, institutional contexts, and regional settings.

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which are susceptible to social desirability and recall biases. Participants may have underreported stressors or overreported positive coping strategies to portray a good image or to conform to cultural expectations. Further research using mixed-methods or longitudinal designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of stress trajectories over time.

This study did not examine how the length of stay in the host country and the phases of acculturation influence students' experience. Conducting a longitudinal study to investigate the early versus later phases of adjustment could yield important insights into the evolving nature of stressors and the support needs of international women of color. Moreover, future studies should explore barriers to professional mental health service utilization in greater depth and assess the feasibility and effectiveness of culturally responsive peer-based interventions for international women of color.

Conclusion

This research offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of stress and coping strategies among international women of color students in the U.S. Study participants reported multidimensional and intersecting stressors, including academic and financial stress, uncertainty about the future, immigration concerns, and social and cultural challenges such as safety concerns, loneliness, concerns about physical appearance, and limited connections with domestic peers. The convergence of these ongoing stressors may heighten the risk for chronic stress among international women of color, whose experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender, race, and immigration status.

Despite these stressors, the majority of participants demonstrated resilience by employing personal coping strategies, including peer support, mindfulness, and self-care. However, a dependence on coping at the individual level may not be enough to buffer against chronic stressors. These results highlight the importance of developing accessible, culturally responsive support systems tailored to the distinct needs of international women of color. These interventions may be more effective if they integrate frequently utilized stress-coping techniques with formal approaches. Institutions of higher education need to be proactive in building a more welcoming campus community, one that

acknowledges the intersecting barriers these students face and supports their mental well-being, academic success, and sense of belonging.

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