

Lived Experiences of Pakistani Female International Students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Objective: International students significantly enrich UK universities with cultural diversity but face numerous challenges, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, and academic demands. Despite the critical role these students play, there is a paucity of research specifically addressing how acculturative stress, coping strategies, and social support impact their mental health. This study investigates the acculturative experiences and psychological well-being of Pakistani female international students in the United Kingdom. **Methodology:** This research employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to deeply explore these experiences among ten first-year female Pakistani students in the UK. These participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria: they must have completed at least six months of education in the UK, reside in either private or institutional settings, and be enrolled in a degree program lasting one to four years. Exclusion criteria include tenancy durations of less than one-year, recent arrivals specifically for graduate studies, and individuals pursuing a second degree. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, covering various aspects of their educational life, including coping mechanisms, social interactions, and mental health consequences. **Findings:** Findings revealed that key themes identified include perceived cultural differences, communication barriers, academic and social concerns, psychological and physical health issues, coping mechanisms, and social support. Findings reveal that cultural and linguistic challenges significantly affect students' academic performance and mental well-being. Effective coping strategies and robust social support networks are crucial in mitigating acculturative stress and promoting mental health. The study underscores the need for comprehensive support services to address the multifaceted challenges faced by international students. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Pakistani female students in the UK and highlights the importance of targeted interventions to enhance their well-being and academic success. Further research is recommended to develop and implement effective support mechanisms for international students.

Keywords: International Students, Acculturative Stress, Coping Strategies, Social Support, Psychological Well-being

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Introduction

A notable segment of international students enroll in public and private universities in the United Kingdom. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020), the universities in the UK made a significant contribution of £470,226 million to the economy during the fiscal year 2018–19. The aforementioned contribution was facilitated by a range of services, such as offering specialized training, sharing up-to-date information, and participating in international commerce and diplomacy (Sadia et al., 2020). The presence of international students from many nationalities enriches the academic progress and cultural diversity of university life. Moreover, it enhances societal adaptability by fostering an understanding and respect for diverse socioeconomic circumstances and ways of living (Chaiyasat, 2020; Shu et al., 2020).

According to the UK Council for Foreign Student Affairs (UKCISA, 2019), the UK was recognized as the top choice for international students to study during the 2017–18 academic year. A total of 32,000 students originated from Pakistan (Sadia et al., 2020). Hussain et al. (2020) discovered that previous research indicates that Pakistani students choose international higher education to enhance their academic opportunities and achieve political, economic, and social stability. Many students seeking to enhance their credentials and skills and get a competitive edge over graduates from other nations in the labor market are widely recognized to see the UK as a very appealing destination. It is crucial to thoroughly analyze the factors that might impact the experiences of these students in the UK. Regrettably, there has been a dearth of research conducted on the challenges encountered by Pakistani female students studying in the United Kingdom.

Literature Review

Ligorio et al. (2013) hypothesized that the involvement of foreign students studying abroad in educational activities in the host country and their interactions with academic staff, other students, and the wider research community have an impact on how they present and perceive themselves. Moreover, there has been a focus on studying the process of adaptation for female Pakistani students who face challenges while trying to adjust to a different culture. This is particularly relevant due to the conventional societal expectations sometimes imposed on them (Khattak, 2020). This shift may be attributed to the challenges associated with adapting to a different culture and meeting the requirements that come with it. The psychological welfare of people may be significantly impacted by the stress they encounter (Freeman, 2022). Moreover, it is crucial to examine the influence of social support on the process of adjustment, as it may function as a safeguard against the negative effects of acculturative stress and foster positive mental health outcomes (Sung, 2022).

The emotional well-being of international students has also been the subject of investigation (Ammigan & Langton, 2018). Feelings of alienation and exclusion, a lack of acceptance from one's peers due to cultural differences, and coping with prejudice and social exclusion are all factors that may lead to this. The mental health of overseas students is impacted negatively by these problems. These characteristics may affect the personal mental well-being of female international students and their capacity to continue education (Can et al., 2021).

Despite their cultural diversity, international students come together as a cohesive group due to shared experiences. Although these traits may only be around for a short time, they certainly add stress to the lives of foreign students as they adapt to a whole new social and cultural milieu (Singh et al., 2022). There are several kinds of stress that immigrants and students face in the host nation. One of these is called acculturative stress. The adjustment

process for overseas students may be significantly influenced by the experience of living in a new country. Understanding that the challenges of studying abroad are transient and that success is possible via cultural adaptation is crucial for international students (Bethel et al., 2020).

For instance, a study conducted by Rabia (2017) looked at the challenges that Arab foreign students at US universities had while trying to acclimate to life in the US. The results brought attention to major obstacles like language barriers, solitude, culture shock, and cultural differences. Likewise, methods of education, whether in lectures or other classroom activities, learning in a student-centered environment, learning to think critically, navigating study groups and group activities as an evaluation tool, and adjusting to a new way of studying might be challenging for international students face (Beech, 2020).

Furthermore, the social and cultural experiences of overseas students were the subject of research (Deuchar, 2022). International students, according to them, go through a three-part process: setting lofty goals at the outset, dealing with culture shock, and adjusting to new forms of housing. When thinking about social life, adjustment-related aspects are crucial as well (Crutchfield, 2021). Many overseas students have difficulties with language and social relations. Their limited exposure to local students and fellows in the area prevents them from fully immersing themselves in the host country's culture and society (Tsegay et al., 2018). Access to the university's administration office, online library resources, and safety measures are all elements that contribute to a good experience, making friends with local students, working while studying, and financial aid, are all areas that may need further research (Teoh et al., 2024). For this purpose, this study was designed using the qualitative approach to study the in-depth experiences of female Pakistani international students as this is the least studied sample in the previous literature.

Method

This study thoroughly examines and evaluates the experiences of the participants using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study will include a group of ten female international students who are in their first year and come from universities in the United Kingdom. Explicit criteria for inclusion and exclusion will be implemented for selection. It is required for individuals to undergo at least six months of education in the United Kingdom, during which they must live either in private households or institutional settings. In addition, enrollment in a degree program in the United Kingdom for a duration of one to four years is required. Students in both undergraduate and graduate programs with durations ranging from one to four years are eligible to take part.

Students who are not eligible include those with tenancy durations of less than one year, individuals who have recently arrived in the United Kingdom specifically for graduate studies, and those who are currently pursuing a second degree. Our research will focus on the unique challenges faced by first-generation female students as they adjust to life in the United Kingdom. We will carefully select participants to ensure the accuracy and reliability of our findings. The demographic information document collects details like name, age, duration of domicile, and academic term. The researcher created a protocol for semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2011). The document contained guidelines for conducting interviews, a list of questions to ask, suggestions for follow-up inquiries, and a designated space for taking notes. The Zoom interviews were conducted to gather information from participants about different aspects of college life, including coping mechanisms, social interactions, and mental health consequences. The data analysis followed a systematic approach that involved carefully reading and reprocessing the data, making initial observations, identifying patterns,

investigating interrelationships, moving on to the next instance, and identifying recurring themes across multiple cases.

Themes

The study explored the experiences of international students in the UK, focusing on various themes related to their mental well-being, social interactions, academic challenges, and coping mechanisms.

Perceived Cultural Differences: Pakistani female international students face challenges related to cultural differences with their UK peers. They had to adapt to different cultural values, customs, and traditions, which sometimes led to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding. For example, a student reported, “I felt there were significant cultural differences between UK culture and my own. Here, people are more relationship-oriented, cooperative, and focus more on the needs and desires of the group than those of individuals.” Another participant expressed similar feelings: “People living in the UK are different from me in terms of their lifestyle, dress, food, customs, and traditions. They have their own unique customs and daily practices.” One participant expressed her thoughts: “I experience cultural differences on campus, and therefore some students behave according to their cultural norms.”

Communication Barriers: Language-related difficulties were prominent among international students, even those with good English proficiency. Some students faced challenges in understanding local dialects which affected their social interactions and academic performance. For example, a participant, revealed, “In the UK, people tend to speak in their local dialect, which is stressful for me as I don’t understand it, even when they speak in their local dialect.” Another student revealed her experience, stating, “I changed my communication style to learn how UK peers communicate with each other and with their teachers.”

Academic Concerns: International students, also struggled with managing their studies, coping with academic stress, and meeting their academic goals due to high workload expectations. For example, a participant expressed, “I feel like my work/studies have decreased, especially when I feel stressed. I am not able to work or study properly.” Compulsory class attendance and frequent campus examinations added more stress to international students. For example, the student said, “Managing day-to-day academic activities was not easy for me. Due to my poor planning and poor management of my timetable, I often ask for extensions to complete assignments and projects.”

Social Concerns: Perceived isolation, insecurity, and discrimination from local peers, were significant social concerns among international students. Many felt isolated and alienated, which affected their social and leisure activities. For example, one of the students stated, “In class, students form their groups for study purposes, and we remain alone; their attitudes towards them were unfair and biased, and local students were not interested in helping them or listening to their concerns.”

Psychological and Physical Health Concerns: Psychological distress, homesickness, sleep problems, and adjustment issues were prevalent among international students. For instance, a student explained, “I suffer from discrimination that causes a lot of psychological stress and tension in me. I was having a sense of restlessness and hopelessness. Due to these issues, I couldn’t focus on my purpose of studying in the UK.”

Coping Mechanisms: International students employed various coping strategies, such as participating in social gatherings, relying on religious beliefs, and seeking support from family and friends. These strategies helped them manage acculturative stress and improve their mental well-being. One student reflected, “I have developed good relationships with my peers

here and participate in social gatherings. They have been consistently supportive, with friends visiting me frequently to help alleviate my stress and tension." Another student mentioned, "I found relief from stress by discussing my problems with friends and classmates." One student described using religious practices to cope, saying, "I turned to my religious prayers and sermons to cope with stressors." Another student mentioned regularly offering the five daily prayers at the campus mosque, expressing, "I made sure to pray five times a day. Praying, especially when I'm feeling low, gives me comfort. I find solace in praying and reciting the Quran regularly. This practice gave me spiritual satisfaction during my time in the UK."

Social Support: Family, friends, and local peers played a crucial role in providing social support to international students. Positive interactions and support networks helped alleviate stress and improve mental health outcomes. For example, one student mentioned, "I found my peers in the UK to be incredibly helpful and supportive. They are welcoming and friendly, never letting me feel isolated." One participant, who received assistance from a professor, shared, "My professors are supportive, offering additional time in their offices when needed." A student at the university added, "I occasionally utilize the well-being services provided by my institute when I feel upset. Here, I receive support for everyday challenges and psychological stresses, as well as when I feel down." Similarly, another international student at the same university remarked, "A lecturer in the department provides counselling services for both international and local students. I have reached out to him several times during office hours for counselling, and he has always been very kind and helpful."

Perceived Optimism, Better Life Satisfaction, and Higher Self-Esteem: Some international students exhibited optimism, higher life satisfaction, and elevated self-esteem, which served as protective factors against acculturative stress. Maintaining a positive outlook and strong self-esteem helped them navigate their cross-cultural experiences more effectively. One student confidently expressed a strong sense of self-worth, stating, "Self-esteem is shaped by both our actions and the actions of those around you." It's important not to let others influence your self-esteem. I consider myself to have a high level of self-esteem." Another student, who maintained a notably optimistic attitude throughout their cross-cultural experience in the UK, displayed a positive outlook. They noted, "Studying in the UK has boosted my positivity and optimism while diminishing my negative views of individuals from different cultures."

Discussion

The study's findings on acculturation among international students in Pakistan reveal several key domains: acculturative stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and mental health, including both positive and negative effects. A prominent theme identified was the perceived cultural differences. All international students, regardless of their mental health status, experienced cultural differences with their host peers, particularly in aspects such as food, values, customs, and traditions. These findings align with existing research indicating that international students commonly face cultural challenges when studying abroad (Wu et al., 2015). In the UK, the unique cultural values, customs, and traditions, including dress, food, religion, lifestyle, and a distinct Islamic identity, further accentuated these differences (Akhwan et al., 2021).

Communication barriers, particularly linguistic barriers, were another significant theme. These barriers were prevalent among all international students. Even students proficient in English faced comprehension challenges due to local slang or accents (Park et al., 2017). Language-related barriers adversely affect international students' interactions with peers and teachers, both in academic and social settings (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020)

Academic concerns also emerged as a crucial theme, encompassing workload, academic stress, linguistic barriers in the classroom, managing academic activities, and teacher interactions. Students reported positive experiences with teachers and classmates and managed academic burdens through effective coping strategies. In contrast, some students also reported reduced academic performance, poor concentration, and stress due to workload, assignment deadlines, and language barriers. Previous research underscores that limited interaction with host country peers and teachers can lead to frustration and psychological issues among international students (Bui et al., 2020).

Social concerns were another significant theme. Students with unsatisfactory mental health reported reduced social functioning, leisure activities, perceived discrimination, isolation, poor family relationships, and difficulty making friends. Aligning with existing research, these factors negatively impacted their mental health (Snoubar, 2017). Conversely, students with satisfactory mental health have better social functioning, participation in recreational activities, supportive relationships, and enhanced social contacts, contributing to better mental (Citak Tunc et al., 2021).

Psychological concerns, including psychological distress, mood swings, homesickness, mixed emotions, and sadness, were also prominent. Previous studies show that students with satisfactory mental health managed their psychological concerns and adjusted better over time. However, those with unsatisfactory mental health reported significant psychological distress, frustration, hopelessness, and adjustment issues due to acculturative stress (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Moreover, some students reported high life satisfaction while studying in the United Kingdom, correlating with better mental health. Factors contributing to life satisfaction included mental health, social support, financial satisfaction, and positive intercultural interactions (Wen, 2019).

Financial constraints were another theme, with a few students reporting financial issues during their studies, negatively impacting their mental health. Financial constraints are a common concern among international students, with limited financial aid available compared to domestic students (Shu et al., 2020).

Coping strategies emerged as a significant theme. International students with better mental health employed effective strategies such as religious coping, adapting to social norms, and personal motivation. Religious coping, including frequent mosque visits and Quran recitations, proved effective in alleviating acculturative stress (Stuart & Ward, 2018). Conversely, some students also resorted to less effective coping strategies like listening to music and walking, often struggling due to a lack of social support networks and unfamiliarity with counseling services (Li et al., 2016). Perceived social support varied among students, with positive experiences enhancing mental health, well-being, self-esteem, confidence, and self-awareness. The loss of social support can lead to feelings of disengagement and stress (Li et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This research sheds light on the intricate nature of acculturation experiences among international students in the UK, emphasizing the influence of different factors on their mental health and overall well-being. The impact of cultural differences on students' mental health and academic performance is significant, stemming from variations in diet, beliefs, rituals, traditions, and language barriers. Academic challenges such as work, stress, and language difficulties can have a significant impact on students' mental well-being, resulting in psychological distress, fluctuating moods, homesickness, and conflicting emotions.

Physical health problems underscore the interconnectedness of mental and physical well-being. Individuals who possess a high level of mental well-being often experience a greater sense of contentment in their lives. This can be attributed to various factors, including strong social networks, financial stability, and positive interactions with people from different cultures. Financial constraints can hurt one's mental health.

Effective coping mechanisms, such as religious coping, are crucial for managing acculturative stress and improving mental well-being. Insufficient mental well-being can be exacerbated by ineffective coping mechanisms and a lack of social support systems, leading to heightened stress levels among students. Having a strong support system has a profound impact on mental health, overall well-being, self-esteem, confidence, and self-awareness. Conversely, when support is lacking, it can lead to disengagement and increased stress levels.

Offering comprehensive support services to address cultural, linguistic, academic, social, psychological, and financial challenges is essential for improving the mental health and overall well-being of international students in the UK. Additional research is required to develop more effective interventions and support systems for international students.

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest.

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