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'Growing from an acorn to an oak tree': A thematic analysis of international students' cross-cultural adjustment in the United States

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Abstract

Embarking on an educational journey overseas can be a rewarding, yet stressful experience for many international students. The transition to their new university life, which is not always well understood and supported by host institutions, is often accompanied by unique difficulties and challenges resulting from unfamiliarity with a new academic environment, social and cultural differences, and language barriers. This study examines the cross-cultural transition experiences of international students enrolled at a mid-sized university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States (U.S.). Using qualitative methods, we collected and analyzed data from reflection essays written by 378 international students between 2013 and 2020. This yielded experiential themes surrounding cross-cultural adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation to new local norms and values while studying in the U.S., including during an unwelcoming political climate and a global health pandemic. Drawing on Ward and Kennedy's (1999) model of sociocultural adjustment, we found that the experiences of international students were often characterized by distinctive psychological and sociocultural components. We contextualized the diverse student perspectives and relied on student voices to guide implications and offer recommendations to university staff and administrators with a goal to strengthen support services, enhance experiences, and ensure the well-being and success of this community. To our knowledge, this study represents the first time that a large data set of narratives, through reflection essays, has been analyzed to better understand the cross-cultural encounters of international students, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: International student experience, cross-cultural adaptation, adjustment, acculturation, support services

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Introduction

Adapting to study in a new academic setting with unfamiliar sociocultural norms can prove to be both unsettling and enriching for international students who travel overseas to start their academic journey (Ammigan, 2021). The 2000s saw an unprecedented growth in the number of international students enrolled at higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States (U.S.). Specifically in 2017, international student numbers surpassed one million, and have remained in that range since with minor fluctuations prior to the global pandemic (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020). This new trend brought large numbers of students from diverse backgrounds to American HEIs requiring institutions to apply a stronger emphasis on the integration of their students rather than focus on a deficit-oriented perception of this population (Ninnes et al., 1999; Straker, 2016). As international student numbers increased, specific resources and support services became essential to help this community navigate their new academic and social-cultural environment. This includes academic preparedness and integrating different learning styles in the classroom (Sarkodie-Mensah,1998); linguistic diversity (Kleine & Lawton, 2015); student well-being; mental health (Mori, 2000; Prieto-Welch, 2016); and religious, financial, and immigration support, especially during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Aucejo et al., 2020). Despite restrictive immigration policies and racially charged rhetoric under the Trump administration, the U.S. has maintained its ranking as a premier destination for study (IIE, 2022).

The road to cross-cultural adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation to new local norms and values impacts individual students differently. In-depth insight into the cross-cultural encounters of international students, from their perspective, have been limited. Bridging this gap in research, we give voice to international students using their own stories and narratives as they adapt to study and experience American culture. In the form of reflection essays, international students wrote from their personal cultural perspectives with neither prior determinants, assumptions, nor prescription from outsiders allowing them to provide candid, unaltered, and detailed personal reflections on their adjustments. Our analysis of these essays identified major themes relating to students' sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being. In brief, students recounted experiences about life lessons learned; perceptions of America and perceptions by Americans; language barriers and their effects; adaptation to new cuisines; expectations regarding mass transit; adjustments to new academic environments; accounts of failing, persevering, and succeeding; and the need for intercultural awareness and engagement.

Over the years, numerous studies have addressed challenges faced by international students regarding cross-cultural adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation to new sociocultural and educational environments (Koo et al., 2021; Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Yan, 2020). Largely, studies have addressed international student adaptability using quantitative data methods, leading scholars to call for qualitative studies that consider the personal acculturative experiences of international students (Bastien et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2020; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). To date, existing qualitative documentation has focused on small subsets of students at one point in time (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Tang et al., 2018). In contrast, the current study features an extensive data set of 378 reflection essays, written by students at the university site over a period of seven years. In this paper, we set out to explore cross-cultural adjustment experiences of international students in the U.S and we offer an initial overview of our analysis to advance knowledge in the field. It is our understanding that this research represents the first attempt at using qualitative methods to analyze a written narratives from a large number of international students over a

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period of time. Through in-depth analysis of reflection essays, we categorized information to give voice to 378 international students on cross-cultural adjustment experiences at a U.S. HEI.

The Study

Participants in this study were international students enrolled at a mid-sized university in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. between 2013 and 2020. The university site was selected for its relevance to the study and for its convenience since it is the lead researcher's current institution. This facilitated access to the reflection essays, which were collected as part of an annual contest ran by the university's International Student Services office. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did international students navigate local customs, traditions, and communication expectations as they embarked on their program of study in the U.S.?
2. What did students wish that others understood better about them and their culture?

Literature Review

International Students

International students are defined as those "who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin" (UNESCO, 2022). Internationally mobile students are usually admitted by an institution in their destination country, under specific permits or visas, for the purpose of studying (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015). In 2000, two million international students engaged in tertiary education globally compared to over six million in 2019, representing a 200% increase in enrollment (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Specifically in the U.S., following more than a decade of consistent growth, international student numbers dropped by 15% between 2019 and 2020. However, the number of new, first-time students rebounded in fall 2021 with a 68% surge over 2020 enrollment numbers, showing initial signs of a post-pandemic recovery (Nott, 2021; IIE, 2022).

Traditionally, the U.S. has welcomed the largest number of international students compared to other countries, mainly due to the quality of its HEIs and research, the value of U.S. credentials on the international labor market, and employment opportunities offered upon graduation (Cruz, 2021; Israel & Batalova, 2021). International students make up about 5.5% of all students enrolled in U.S. institutions (IIE, 2022), adding significant value to campuses. In addition to contributing to the local economy and helping create jobs, these students bring diverse perspectives into American classrooms and enhance the quality of teaching, learning, research, and engagement among all students (de Wit, 2016; Obst & Forster, 2011). They serve as a key driver for advancing internationalization, inclusivity, and diversity efforts on campus, and help foster international understanding and cross-cultural awareness in the local community (Smith, 2020). Many campuses, however, tend to underutilize this opportunity and should instead prioritize international student perspectives as a strategic resource in support of their internationalization efforts (Veerasamy, 2021).

While it is common for all students to experience difficulty in adjusting to their university life, international students often face unique challenges such as social and cultural differences, language barriers, financial stress, perceived discrimination, mental wellness, and visa and

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employment restrictions (Baron & Hartwig, 2020; Gautam et al., 2016). The COVID-19 global pandemic has further compounded these challenges with the introduction of travel restrictions, visa delays and denials, health and safety concerns, and an unstable political environment for foreign nationals (Brammer & Clark, 2020; Todoran & Peterson, 2020). Higher education institutions must therefore recognize the challenges that international students often experience inside and outside the classroom, and provide adequate services and resources to support their health, well-being, and success (Roberts et al., 2021; Yan, 2020). Transitioning to new contexts can be a challenging process for anyone, and HEIs have the responsibility to support students who enroll on their campuses.

Acculturation Experiences

In 2005, Berry described two interrelated domains of psychological research which occur when groups or individuals from different ethnic backgrounds interact: ethnic relations and acculturation. In the first instance, Berry states that the groups or individuals from the different ethnic groups negotiate to avoid conflict, and as the two groups interact the process of acculturation occurs allowing "cultural and psychological change" to unfold as the two or more groups come into contact; varying degrees of stress do occur during each domain (Berry, 2005, p.698). Relying on a similar body of research and established models for cross-cultural adaptation, studies have looked at factors which predict international student adjustment outcomes in general. Other studies have considered factors which predict success in international student sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Ma et al., 2020; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Yet, as international student numbers grew in the 2000s, targeted studies and services that address the "complex and multidimensional" nature of intercultural adaptation when studying in the U.S. have remained undeveloped (Zhang & Gordon, p. 140, 2011).

Over the years, scholars have written about the various "stressors" which characterize international student experiences as they settle to study in the U.S. Topping the list are issues such as loneliness, language barriers, academic adjustment, racial prejudice, and finances (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Johnson et al., 2007; Lamar, 2018; Wright & Schartner, 2013). More so, research studies have addressed "stressors" which impact international student cross-cultural adjustment and have offered critical analysis of the acculturation models which underpinned the studies (Luo et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These scholars have described Berry's (2005) model as "bi-dimensional" (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 701) asserting that the models have not been specifically tested on the international student population. In contrast, Safdar, Lay, and Struthers' (2003) multidimensional individual difference acculturation (MIDA) model has been "tested longitudinally on international students (Rasmi et al., 2009), revealing that the predictor variables of hassles and psychosocial resources do predict the outcome variables of psychological and sociocultural adaptation" (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 701).

In more recent research, Sadewo et al. (2020) examined the longitudinal coevolution of friendship networks and cross-cultural adaptation among international students and identified the occurrences of social selection based on the levels of psychological and sociocultural adjustment. They found that similarities in the level of psychological adjustment and differences in sociocultural adjustment were key factors in friendship formation, leading to practical implications for international educators and support staff for enhancing interactions among students and building community across campus.

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Bastien et al. (2018) explored the factors that impact the academic adjustment of international students in the U.S. in comparison with factors that influence psychological adjustment. Their findings indicate that length of stay in the U.S, English proficiency, and help-seeking predicted academic adjustment, whereas age and attachment to the university community predicted psychological adjustment, suggesting the need for targeted support interventions designed to meet the needs of the international student population, and to foster positive adjustment experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Ward & Kennedy's (1994) model of psychological and sociocultural adjustment provided the guiding conceptual framework for our study. This model posits that adjustment consists of two major components: psychological (emotional/affective) and sociocultural adjustment (behavioral). In addition, the model considers the relationship between acculturation attitudes and cross-cultural adjustment by identifying distinct predictors for each adjustment type (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). For example, psychological adjustment is influenced by personality, life changes, self-esteem, and social support, while sociocultural adjustment is predicated on length of stay in the host country, ethnic identity, contact with individuals from the host country, and language proficiency (Berry, 2005; Gebregergis et al., 2020). In the model and the accompanying Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS), the sociocultural domain is linked to the skills and competencies needed to operate in a new cultural setting.

Ward and Kennedy's model and critical components represents seminal work in the field of cross-cultural adaptation and is widely used in international student adjustment research studies (Rasmi et al., 2009; Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016). A review of 94 articles on international student cross-cultural adaptation found that 82% of studies focused on psychological adaptation, 51% focused on sociocultural outcomes, and the Ward-Kennedy sociocultural adaptation scale was used most frequently by quantitative studies (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016). According to a systematic review that examined published research between 2009 and 2018 about undergraduate international student psychosocial adjustment to US universities (Brunsting et al., 2018), two-thirds of the studies focused on psychological well-being, and almost half discussed sociocultural outcomes. The review suggests that since 2009, undergraduate-focused studies have shifted toward frameworks such as acculturation and social identity; however, Ward and Kennedy's model (1994) provides a broad base to encompass the many diverse experiences and perspectives of graduate and undergraduate international students making it relevant to the purpose of our study.

Methodology

Employing a qualitative research method, namely document analysis, we collected data from documents and analyzed their content which we categorized under themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflection essays provided the documents with content for analysis. This study was declared exempt by the university site's Institutional Review Board. Two researchers coded raw data from the reflection essays using NVivo 12 Qualitative Software, and one researcher coded the reflection essays using lean coding without relying on software (Creswell, 2013). The two-step approach to coding permitted us to find fuller meaning in the

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data set. The first round of coding using NVivo 12 focused on axial coding and descriptive

Table 1 *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=378)*

Variable	Description	*n*	%
Age	< 21 years	54	14.3
	21-26 years	190	50.3
	27-31 years	92	24.3
	> 32 years	42	11.1
Gender	Female	212	56.1
	Male	166	43.9
Top Countries of Origin	China	99	26.2
	India	63	16.7
	Brazil	13	3.4
	Turkey	10	2.6
	Colombia	9	2.4
Level of Study	Undergraduate	93	24.6
	Graduate	242	64.0
	English Language Training	43	11.4
Top Programs of Study	Arts/Sciences	115	30.4
	Engineering	90	23.8
	Business/Economics	74	19.6
	Health Sciences	17	4.5
	Agriculture/Natural Resources	16	4.2
Essays Collected	2013	36	9.5
	2014	91	24.1
	2015	84	22.2
	2016	52	13.8
	2017	51	13.5
	2018	36	9.5
	2020	28	7.4

coding. During the lean coding process, several broad codes were identified and were expanded while analyzing the data set (Creswell 2013).

Next, we compared, classified, and categorized our codes from NVivo 12 and lean coding

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under themes. For instance, codes such as cultural distance, adjustment challenges, friendships and relationships were categorized under the general theme of "Aspects of Cultural Adjustment". In all, six dominant themes emerged from the data set, namely, Aspects of Cultural Adjustment; Quality Relationships and Common Humanity Amidst Differences; Mismatch of Expectations and Reality in America; Aspects of Psychological Adjustment; Personal Growth and Hybridized Identity; and Education System and Academic Culture.

As three independent researchers, we held different perspectives on data analysis. We discussed and compared our overall findings to describe emerging codes and themes, and we cross checked recurring codes and themes for validation thus bringing credibility and dependability to our findings. Investigator triangulation ensures trustworthiness of our data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

In 2013, the International Student Services office at the university site launched an essay contest to give its growing international student community a platform for reflecting on their experiences of studying and living in a culture outside of their own. This initiative was introduced in the form of a contest to reach a wider student audience, and to provide those on campus and in the local community with an opportunity to "walk a mile in the shoes" of an international student. The participants and winners of the essay contest were recognized each year at a reception during International Education Week. Their personal stories initiated the data collection process for this study and, to date, serve as a powerful tool for fostering international understanding and cross-cultural awareness on campus. In 2013, the first Reflection Essay Contest (REC) was launched by the International Student Services office at the university site to gather information on the experiences of international students enrolled on campus and initiated the data collection process for this study. All registered international students were invited to participate in the essay contest via email. The contest was not run in 2019 due to an adjustment in the university's programming calendar. Between 2013 and 2020, 378 reflection essays were submitted by students. One strength of this study is that students wrote narratives at various points in their academic journey and acculturation process. For example, some students offered observations after being in the U.S. only a few months, which often resulted in a very raw and fresh perspective of their initial transition. Other students reflected on several years of study, allowing them to share a holistic view with more context and time to connect on campus. Table 1 provides a summary of their demographic characteristics.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has its limitations. First, our research is limited in its scope based on data analysis from a single institution located in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. As such, sharing a sliver of international student experiences limits the transferability and generalizability of this study. Second, this study does not engage in comparative analysis by student nationality, level of study, and other demographic characteristics, which could further explain some of our findings. These considerations could be undertaken by future scholars to extend this study and add value to research on the experiences of international students in the U.S.

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Findings

We report our findings on student cross-cultural experiences under six main themes which were informed by Ward and Kennedy's (1994) model of psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Themes were organized to answer the two guiding research questions. Most themes provided direct answers to the first research question: *How did international students navigate local customs, traditions, and communication expectations as they embarked on their program of study in the U.S.?* Data also emerged in the reported themes to answer the second research question: *What did students wish that others understood better about them and their culture?* In particular, the sub theme 'Cultural Ambassadors' answered the second question directly.

Aspects of Cultural Adjustment

Culture shock, foreign accents, colloquialism, and consumerism impacted students' cultural adjustment in their new environment. As they experienced life in a new socio-cultural environment, many students reported feeling like an outsider looking into a new culture with differences: "Living and studying in the U.S. was one of the toughest hurdles to overcome. Understanding their culture, their perception of life, and their habits of living, was a whole different set of obstacles" (Participant-034). A shocking experience for many, one student wrote, "for the first time in my life it took considerable adjustment…observing actions that seem alien to me, even now" (Participant-012). Reported cultural differences revolved not just around food but also food portions, the weather, increased use of technology in society, and transportation challenges including laments regarding American overreliance on cars and the lack of mass transit. "When I was living in Tehran I had access to various public modes of transportation such as metro, bus, and taxi…[Here], I realized how difficult it is to live without a car" (Participant-007).

Accents, as reported in existing literature, also posed adjustment challenges for students. For one student,

> It certainly could not prepare me for people's reaction to my accent…, a source of much frustration for me…, I am typically an outgoing and chatty person but I found it extremely difficult to engage in conversation because it was…me doing all the talking. (Participant-017)

American colloquialisms too proved confusing: "First time I was in a restaurant and the waiter asked 'Are you good?' I thought to myself what kind of a question; of course I am a good person" (Participant-009).

Challenges highlighted cultural distance between students' home experiences and life in the U.S. Students were shocked by levels of consumerism and wastage. For a student from the "Global South":

> Every time I enter a restroom where the tap has been carelessly left on after someone washed their hands, when lights are left on all night in empty houses, or I observe occasions where large amounts of perfectly good food, clothes, and goods are thrown in the trash for no other reason than to make space for newer versions of the same, my heart grows heavy when I remember all the people in Colombia who would weep for joy at the chance to possess what others here so carelessly discard. (Participant-012)

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Quality Relationships and Common Humanity Amidst Differences

Cultural differences often stood in the way of interactions with Americans. Greeting habits differed, yet American values of tolerance eased the adjustment experiences of students. When comparing cultural differences, students often started from the stance of cultural superiority: “I used to say that my country was the best one in the world” (Participant-037). Other students viewed American ways of behaving as rude, especially students’ interactions with professors. However, over time differences were conceptualized differently allowing for understanding across differences: “The students, professors, and discussion sessions revealed the hidden gem of this society's thoughts and capabilities. And when I cracked this symphony I began to understand the rhythm” (Participant-029).

How to greet Americans impacted social interactions. Students from cultures where kisses were common greetings reported adjustment issues, which often led to deeper revelations. One student reflected: “I came to realize that not wanting to be kissed on the cheeks does not make Americans cold and detached, they just have different ways of doing things” (Participant-113).

Most students viewed Americans as welcoming, polite, helpful, and accepting of diversity. For one student, “The U.S. has been a lovely combination of these two cultural environments where friends can be made in the unlikeliest of places and still stand the test of time” (Participant-012). For many students who came prepared to experience a new culture, they often found joy in the differences. In the words of one student: “The interplay and diversity of ideas helps me liberate [myself] from my dogmatic worldviews…I also keep wondering how skewed my perspectives would have been, if I hadn't dared to try out the challenge first hand” (Participant-028).

Mismatch of Expectations and Reality in America

Participants reported familiarity with American culture, yet the level of cultural diversity in America proved revealing. The majority of students reported familiarity with American culture based on Hollywood and media outlets. As their lives unfurled on campus, some were pleasantly surprised while others were not. While most Americans were viewed as nice and lived up somewhat to Hollywood stereotypes, one student from Spain shared: “I struggled with how some Americans are pro-hunting” (Participant-336). Also, students questioned American values of freedom of speech as they watched political polarization unfold under the Trump administration, leading one to state: “There are many other sides of the country I didn’t expect to face when I was preparing to come here as an international student” (Participant-022). Another student who had lived in the U.S. on two previous occasions said: “The world is a lot different now than it was back in 2007, there is a lot of turmoil and there is a sense of insecurity in people, having a Muslim name doesn’t help either” (Participant-274).

For other students, the level of cultural diversity in America was surprising, both in terms of expectations and based on their own experiences. One student remarked, “Growing up in a homogeneous cultural background, I was constantly culturally-shocked on diversity during my stay in the U.S.” (Participant-063). Another stated: “I thought Americans were ethnocentric…The reality opened my mind and I found out that the United States is not a place with one culture; it is where many kinds of cultures are embraced and coexist” (Participant-037).

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Aspects of Psychological Adjustment

American inability to pronounce their names, lack of outreach by American students, homesickness, and the pandemic exacerbated cultural differences to impact some students' psychological well-being. Others reported relying on self-efficacy to overcome their mental stress. For many, life experiences and cultural adjustment revolved around their names: "It's definitely an ordeal.., to spell my name if I call a helpline for billing or customer service" (Participant-009). Feelings of exclusion and a lack of outreach by American students contributed to their loneliness. The following statement echoes the sentiment many shared: "I had [a] hard time to [make] friends with the students…I felt mental isolation because I did not have friends" (Participant-051). At the heart of the difficulty was cross-cultural differences as captured by an Arabic student:

> America is a strange experience for a Saudi…Two months went by, and I still had not made a real friendship. Having my own apartment…, I tried hard to have a roommate, but I failed. (Participant-039)

However, students also reported gaining acceptance from the host culture over time: "Regarding my three American roommates, I think that after spending a whole year together I could be something more for them than just a foreigner" (Participant-020). For those who made friends, the demands of life in America added to their isolation. As the semester unfolded, acquaintances on campus "began having less and less time to spend with me and people got busier with their schedules. Loneliness began to set in quickly" (Participant-030). And as American students returned to their families during the holiday season, international students felt lonelier. One student shared: "Students were cheerful and happy as they got to spend precious moments with their families, making my loneliness consume me even more" (Participant-030).

Homesickness, as described here, was a pervasive burden for international students: "This deep and undisclosed desire to be understood is called "homesickness": drawn into the new culture, unable to be ourselves and tired of trying, we feel nostalgic for "home", a familiar place where everything is easier and more instinctive" (Participant-019).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The health crisis burdened students' psychological well-being even further: "Not only are we subjected to similar pandemic-related perils local students face, we do so in an unfamiliar culture and traditions, with our family and friends situated at a distance abroad, and with a lack of familiar comforts" (Participant-354). Some students found remote learning challenging: "It was both overwhelming and strange having everything online which made it very hard to meet people and have a sense of community. I was very stressed and felt lost most of the time" (Participant-360).

International students who decided not to travel to the U.S. while enrolled in online, synchronous classes experienced additional stress due to time differences and virtual communication. One student from China noted:

> Due to time differences, I need to stay up late and submit the homework at a different time. Completing the group work online by email, zoom, instant message, and shared documents is harder than previous face-to-face group work. Loneliness and social isolation are the biggest challenges in the online courses and COVID. (Participant-368)

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Personal Growth and Hybridized Identity

Many students reported experiencing personal growth over the course of their stay in America. One student revealed: "Living independently taught me life skills and experiences, accepting other cultures and habits, enriching my mind and ideas" (Participant-034). A female student stated: "Day after day I noticed that I was becoming a stronger and more independent woman who could stand on her own feet without needing help" (Participant-351). In the process of change and adaptation, one student expressed: "After I came to America, I have experienced identity crisis, re-identification thus coming to terms with my new identity" (Participant-021). As they assimilated, students reported losing their cultural identity:

> I was the only other person from my country…and I felt like I was losing my identity. The girl that was so excited to study abroad just a few months earlier was shrinking and disappearing and no one was noticing. (Participant-017)

Having to exist and operate in multiple cultures, some students indicated that self-reflection helped with their adjustment allowing them to relish their new identities, whereas others felt trapped or unhappy with their adjustments. Along the journey, one student noted: "I re-identify myself from the perspective of Western social and political views. To borrow a phrase from my uncle, I was "subverted" by America" (Participant-021). Some students felt a balance in who they were but recognized the difficulties: "The most important thing I learned along the way was to adjust to everything new while keeping my identity intact. However, over the years I learned that this is a lot easier said than done" (Participant-091). Student narratives from this study often demonstrated profound personal growth that every person should strive toward. As one student eloquently said: "I feel the experience I've had here has transformed me into a person more responsible and who's ready for any kind of situation" (Participant-191).

Cultural Ambassadors

Some students became unwitting cultural ambassadors while others came ready to share their cultures. The lack of awareness of world geography and culture often surfaced to impact their encounters, as captured by this Indian student: "When I say I am from India, some people inquire, "So you speak Indian? There is no such language as Indian, as there are tens, if not hundreds, of different languages being spoken in India" (Participant-009). Many students referred to stereotypes held by Americans about their country as well as failure to recognize the complexities of their home countries. "Next time you meet somebody new, don't ask them where they are from; ask them where they have been. The story they will tell you might be that much more interesting" (Participant-079).

However, many students desired to share their culture or seized opportunities to do so. One disclosed: "Through this program I was able to share with [other] traditions and customs from Trinidad" (Participant-030). Seizing the opportunity, another student wrote:

> I was an unofficial ambassador of my country and instead of feeling alone I felt unique and made sure everyone on campus knew about my country. This inspired me to revive and head the AfroCaribe club and be an active contributing member of campus life (Participant-017).

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Education System and Academic Culture

Many students discussed cultural differences within the educational environment. Differences included how to address professors: "In my country everybody calls teachers from first grade with their titles and their last names" (Participant-007). Here, they found that questions from students were welcomed: "I can raise my hand or voice in the middle of a class to ask anything I don't get, no matter how infinitesimally silly. I know that my question will be appreciated and gracefully responded to" (Participant-023). Also, there was a feeling that American classrooms nurture free discussions with people in authority: "I understand for Americans it is typical to express oneself freely, however in Ghana it is strictly forbidden to talk back to anyone in any superior position regardless of how right you may think you are" (Participant-358).

The quality of education in the U.S. surfaced regularly, but with quality education came a competitive environment and heavy assignments loads which caused students to struggle. In particular, collaborative assignments posed problems for students with weaker language proficiency "[The lack of] English proficiency became so acute, that I eventually became too timid to contribute in class discussions or even talk in large groups" (Participant-017). Sometimes students' unfamiliarity with the learning environment could be met with cultural insensitivity from the class, as one student recounted, "I will never forget the laughter when a student from my country tried to stand up to answer the question" (Participant-018). Overall, most students reported having very helpful and supportive professors which impacted them positively. One student stated: "Advisors' help encouraged me to work harder and harder…I go back to Turkey with great experience about educational and economic systems of the USA. I will reach my goal that is to change the education system of Turkey" (Participant-041). Another student shared: "[My adviser] patiently explained every detail of life and school in the U.S. He invited me over to his home several times…He played a huge role in making me [feel] good about staying and studying here" (Participant-326).

Discussion

The study findings highlight the diversity of international student experiences as they transitioned and adjusted to studying and living life in an unfamiliar country. Using Ward and Kennedy's (1994; 1999) model of sociocultural adjustment, we found that students' experiences were often characterized by distinctive psychological and sociocultural components, affirming the utility of this model to better understand students' adjustment experiences. Common psychological adjustment experiences that Ward and Kennedy (1994) described surfaced in this study, including homesickness, life changes, and social difficulties. Additionally, established predictors from the model and other literature in the sociocultural realm were in line with students' narratives, including differences between the home and host culture, cultural separation, and language ability (Bastien et al., 2018; Sadewo et al., 2020). Our study also affirms that these adjustments are often dependent on each other, i.e., where a students' psychological adjustment is impeded because of a lack of meaningful relationships, which often stem from language issues or cultural differences.

The Sociocultural Adjustment Model also argues that context is often most important for a person's adaptation, in essence meaning that the more similar a students' home culture is to their host country, the easier it will be to adapt (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). We did see instances

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of this in students—emphasized by challenges with greetings, academic differences, and language difficulties—but students who came from Westernized or even Anglophone countries still struggled to adapt. Above all, the seeming self-efficacy of a student and desire to grow and learn seem to mediate the psychological or sociocultural challenges that occur when transitioning to any new culture (Gebregergis et al., 2020; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). All students described instances of acculturative stress (Berry, 2005; Koo et al., 2021), but students who had a positive outlook and challenged themselves to push past initial discomfort appeared to achieve a certain level of comfort and stasis within their new cultural context.

There are certain aspects of students' narratives and adjustment which did not fit neatly in the psychological or sociological realm—including some academic experiences or universal transition challenges. However, the depth and breadth of students' narratives fitting relatively neatly within the two dimensions, speaks to the flexibility of this model. While this study focuses on international students in the U.S., the experiences that are described are human experiences and challenges that often occur in any different cultural environment. In any situation, an individual's personality, experiences working with others, and cultural differences often play a role in their success and adaptation to a new environment.

Implications

A major contribution of this paper is the analysis of personal, thought-provoking narratives from a large swath of students about their adjustment and college development experiences. Even when analyzing hundreds of essays, it is important not to make generalizations. International students come from culturally complex societies, and they are but one example of that culture. However, scholars, practitioners, and fellow students in higher education can learn much from these reflections. Sociocultural adjustment is often framed and mitigated with a cultural learning approach (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). With the aid of the host university, this learning can begin prior to the arrival on campus. Specifically, HEIs can ensure that support services, resources, and expectations about university life reach students in advance through pre-departure programming; during orientation programs when they first come to campus; and throughout the duration of their stay in the country. University programs that aid in sociocultural adaptation could include opportunities to engage with local community members, peer-to-peer and student leadership programs, language support, and culturally sensitive training and support for faculty, staff, and students on how to effectively engage with international students.

From a psychological level, HEIs can support international students by developing intentional, adaptable, and student-centered programs and services that address the different and changing needs of students across cultural contexts, foster a sense of belonging, and harness social engagement that leads to new acquaintances and friendships. Campuses should focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion programming as well as campus safety and security efforts to address and combat racism, discrimination, and xenophobia in the local community to support the emotional well-being of students and build an inclusive climate on campus. Mental health challenges have continued to increase over the last 30 years for all students (Mori, 2000; Prieto-Welch, 2016), particularly since the pandemic (Aucejo et al., 2020). HEIs should have a crisis management and response plan that includes counseling services, student wellness resources, and emergency funding to support students experiencing health and wellness, academic, personal, and/or financial difficulties.

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Table 2 *Examples of International Student Programs and Services*

Study Themes	Programming Examples	
Aspects of cultural adjustment	• Pre-departure sessions • Orientation and transition programs • Welcome events • Coffee hours and ice cream socials • Intercultural communication workshops	• Wellness chats • Residence Life socials • Student leadership programs • Volunteer opportunities • Shopping trips • Excursions and field trips • Food festivals • Language practice clubs
Quality relationships and common humanity amidst differences	• Host family programs • Service-learning activities • Registered student organizations • Networking in the community	• Local community clubs • Cultural presentations in local schools • Workshops on local customs, etiquette, and colloquialism
Mismatch of expectations and reality in America	• Campus safety and security resources • Understanding local laws resources • Know your rights workshops	• Intercultural competence training • Thanksgiving dinners • Holiday celebrations • Hospitality programs
Aspects of psychological adjustment	• Addressing culture shock workshops • Student wellness programming • Counseling support and advising	• Student wellness checks • Mindset messaging and communication • Emergency tuition and funding initiatives
Personal Growth and hybridized identity	• Motivational workshops • Student success guidance and support • Programs that strengthen agency freedom • Supporting finding housing	• Student life activities • Student leadership opportunities • Outreach and support from the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office
Education system & academic culture	• Tutoring and peer mentors • First-year seminars • Academic enrichment programs (Studying skills and time management workshops) • Communicating with Teaching Assistants sessions	• 'Teaching across cultures' training for faculty • Enrich course curricula with multicultural and international perspectives • Encourage student-faculty interaction

Intentional outreach and communication to ensure that students are aware of existing campus resources and support services—and how to access them—is critical, especially in times of crisis. HEIs must consider establishing a strategic and dedicated communication plan to effectively reach, seek feedback from, liaise with, and optimize engagement among international students. International students are often met with the directive "Go see the international office" for any issue. The critical task to support international students cannot fall only on the international office—-it should be a campus wide initiative and imperative, built on a

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collaborative model of programming from both academic and non-academic units (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2021). Moreover, universities need to better recognize that international students enhance integrative learning in intercultural classrooms and help build vibrant, diverse campus communities, and should move away from a deficit-orientation perspective about this population. Table 2 lists examples of programs and services for supporting international student adjustment on campus and in the local community, constructed and based on the reflections and recommendations from the 378 students from this study.

Conclusions

Studying overseas is for the most part an enriching experience for international students. However, some struggle to adjust to their new university life due to challenges stemming from language barriers, cultural differences and misunderstandings, and difficulty in developing relationships and friendships locally. In this study, we investigated student adjustment experiences to their new life, giving voice to what students wish others knew about them and their culture.

Six key themes emerged from our analysis, relating to experiences around aspects of cultural adjustment; quality relationships and common humanity amidst differences; mismatch of expectations and reality in America; aspects of psychological adjustment; personal growth and hybridized identity; and education system and academic culture. From these contextualized and compelling student perspectives, we discussed implications and offered recommendations to university staff and administrators for strengthening support services, fostering a sense of belonging on campus and in the community, to ensure a welcoming and friendly cross-cultural climate locally.

Limited by its focus on one institution in the U.S., this study was not intended for generalizability; however, it merits consideration and can serve as a point of reference for further discussion and exploration regarding student adjustments. Future research may consider analyzing a broader representation of student nationalities and experiences from multiple institutions domestically and internationally. A comparative analysis across students' demographic characteristics, level of study, and duration of stay in their host country could also help address the limitations of this study.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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