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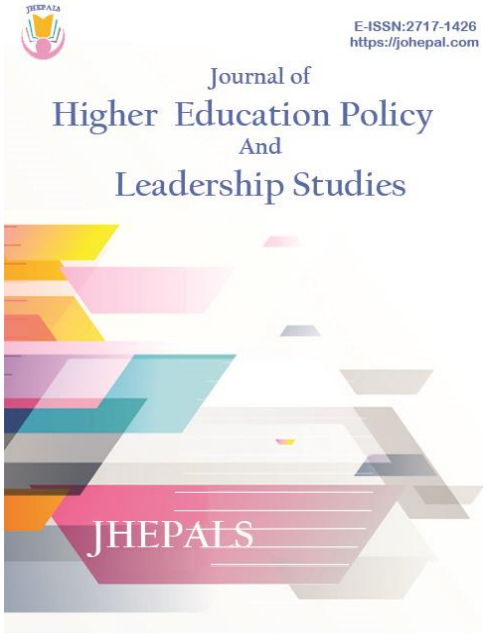

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Exploration of Coping Strategies among International Students Confronting Acculturation Challenges in Iranian Universities

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Abstract

Understanding acculturation process among international students, particularly coping strategies for acculturative stress, addressing educational migration challenges, and balancing intrapersonal and environmental factors during their stay in the host country, is critically important. This study sought to fill a research gap by exploring the coping strategies of international students residing in Iran concerning their acculturation process. The present exploratory qualitative research is grounded in the Husserlian phenomenological approach, with 40 international students from prominent Iranian universities as participants, selected through snowball sampling technique. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews based on Sideman's three-stage interview process (2006), and the validity of the collected data was confirmed based on the evaluation criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985). In order to analyze the data, the seven-step process of thematic analysis by Colaizzi (1978) was employed, aiming to extract significant statements and quotations from the interview texts. The research findings regarding the most significant coping strategies employed by these students in their acculturation process include self-direction, networking, personal development, cross-cultural interaction, and social support. Recommendations from this research will benefit Iranian policymakers, higher education experts, university administrators, and relevant stakeholders in enhancing cross-cultural counseling services, offering support, and implementing international university programs effectively.

Keywords: Acculturation; Copying Strategies; International Students; Higher Education Policies; Internationalization of HE

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Introduction

Today, across the world, the mutual influence of cultures on a global scale and the increasing trend of international student migration (Sharif, 2019), as well as the expansion of cross-cultural interactions among native and international students within international university environments, are noticeably evident (Di Pietro, 2022). Indeed, encountering other cultures leads to acquiring experience and knowledge that may not be attainable within one's own homeland (Khodaverdi, 2012). Consequently, studying abroad provides international students with a rich academic and intercultural experience, known as academic learning experience, which solely occurs outside their homeland (Duke, 2014), impacting students' cultural awareness and enhancing intercultural skills (Papatsiba, 2005). In this regard, Bostrom (2010) considers the internationalization of higher education as a combination of global and intercultural aspects in performance, programs, and objectives of higher education, emphasizing respect for cultural differences and diverse traditions, which, according to Huber (2002), universities can better, fulfill their role in the new millennium through the development of intercultural knowledge and cultural values.

In this context, one can refer to the perception of cultural diplomacy as a form of educational strategy that, through the gateway of culture and education, engages in the establishment and expansion of relationships with international students; a process through which a nation's culture is disseminated to the world through scholarly exchanges (Dehshiri & Taheri, 2016; Zaker Salehi & Salehi Najafabadi, 2012). This is why "the attraction of international students serves as an introduction to one's culture and society to the future political leaders and senior managers of world countries" as most political elites have always been university graduates (Khodaverdi, 2012, p. 138). Thus, according to Knight (2004), the approach of internationalization at home is one of the internationalization strategies at the university level, which demonstrates culturalization and the creation of a specific environment within the university in a manner that fosters increased intercultural understanding. Based on this, connecting with the host nationality provides opportunities for international students to learn about culture and acquire specific cultural skills, which are considered valuable economic assets for universities (Bevis, 2002), and it seeks measures and facilities to attract support from members of the host community (Ataca & Berry, 2002).

Nevertheless, while studying abroad is considered an opportunity for the personal growth and advancement of international students (Aldawsari et al., 2018), if these students fail to adapt to the requirements of their new environment or are unable to cope effectively with this situation (Desa et al., 2012), their mental health may be disrupted (Jackson et al., 2013). They may experience acculturative stress [i.e., stress resulting from life changes in the acculturation process (Berry, 2006)] and encounter problems and difficulties related to cultural-social adaptation, which can lead to outcomes such as depression, anxiety, physical ailments, stress, and feelings of insecurity and inadequacy (Aldawsari et al., 2018; Sam & Berry, 2010).

Considering the research by Nguyen and Benet-Martinez (as cited in Galdan, 2019), the encounter with different cultures and the quest for a kind of balance and harmony resulting from the stress caused by migration to another country and studying in an unfamiliar environment, commonly known as the acculturation process, encompasses the

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psychological, social, and cultural challenges an individual faces in a different culture while assimilating the values and lifestyle of that dominant culture (Sam & Berry, 2016). This indicates that international students encounter challenges of acculturation and adaptation in three main domains: academic performance, social interactions in the new environment, and emotional interactions (Gebhard, 2012). These adaptations sometimes occur easily through processes of cultural accommodation (tolerance of cultural values) and learnable cultural behaviors. However, on the other hand, they can also lead to cultural conflicts and acculturative stress during intercultural interactions (Berry, 2005). This has led to the challenges of acculturation among these students receiving attention from international education leaders (Bu, 2019). Indeed, these challenges stem from linguistic barriers, distance from family, academic pressures, unfamiliarity with available resources and facilities, and also cultural values, conflicts, and prevalent racism and ethnocentrism, as well as a lack of sufficient knowledge to access supportive resources (Sherry et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Kim, 2012; Campbell, 2015; Galdan, 2019).

Therefore, identifying such changes necessitates sampling from the target population and studying individuals who are somehow involved in the acculturation process, as these changes encompass a spectrum of behavioral alterations, ranging from simple behavioral changes (such as speaking manner, dressing, and eating habits) to more significant and problematic ones, leading to acculturative stress and ultimately eliciting reactions in individuals, especially if appropriate strategies to cope with this type of stress and necessary social support are lacking (Sam & Berry, 2010). In this regard, it is important to mention that various researchers have classified migrant groups based on their length of stay in the host society in order to analyze the consequences of intercultural interaction (Zlobina et al., 2006). They have presented the short-term versus long-term classification as a means of predicting outcomes and the nature of interaction with the host community as one of the fundamental dimensions of intercultural relationships (Bochner, 1982). International students have been described by Bochner et al. (2006) as "Student Sojourners," individuals who travel abroad for a limited period of time to achieve a predetermined educational goal (Rahman, 2018). Therefore, students, who mostly have temporary residency compared to permanent immigrants and refugees, strive to attain their educational goals while seeking temporary solutions and strategies for their acculturation (Rahman, 2018). Conversely, higher education institutions are primarily interested in how international students acculturate and adapt, as well as assessing support measures prior to the students' departure for international programs (Beaven, 2012).

Although academic and social interest in the consequences of this growing phenomenon has led to numerous studies in recent decades (Ninnes, 1999; Williams, 2005; Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Campbell, 2015; Mao & Liu, 2016; Pogorelova, 2016; Vulić-Prtorić & Oetjen, 2017; Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Rahman, 2018; Xu, 2019; Bu, 2019; Boateng, 2020; Lopez, 2021; Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022; Ra, 2023; Lashari et al., 2023); generally, the individual experiences of international students and their coping strategies, especially in terms of influential institutional and personal factors, have rarely been investigated in detail, particularly from the perspective of longitudinal research (Beaven, 2012; Galdan, 2019; Alghamdi, 2019; Pogorelova & Trenchs, 2018). It is noteworthy that most of these studies have also focused on newly arrived students in universities in the

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United States and other developed countries (Flournoy, 2018; Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Garza, 2015; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Gbadamosi, 2018), while the proportion of studies in Asian countries has been insufficient (Rahman, 2018; Singh, Schapper, & Jack, 2014).

However, thousands of students are still engaged in academic pursuits across various Asian countries, including Iran. What's intriguing is the recent surge in unexpected student migrations within Asia. Unlike before, these students are now seeking educational opportunities within their own regional context, sparking significant shifts in the global higher education landscape (Pawar et al., 2020). In fact, Asia, being the primary source region for international students worldwide, witnesses a shift in intellectual horizons and a distinct trend in student migration within the region (Chan, 2012). This necessitates an understanding of the needs, problems, and challenges of international students, particularly those from Asia, to aid initiatives aimed at their cultural adaptation and integration into the host society, facilitating their educational objectives. It is imperative that policymakers and decision-makers in the higher education sector prioritize these considerations (Chan, 2012). Given that higher education institutions still fall short in meeting the specific needs of international students and providing supportive services to facilitate their acculturation process (Rabia, 2015, as cited in Galdan, 2019).

According to Gbadamosi (2018), valuable research efforts are perceived as those that identify the responses and reactions of international students to the host cultural environment academically, socially, and culturally within the educational sector. As observed, a wide spectrum of studies and research endeavors, as mentioned above, has been conducted aimed at analyzing various dimensions of acculturation experiences, social adaptation, intercultural adjustment, and coping strategies of international students in developed countries. However, unfortunately, significant research in this area has not been undertaken in developing countries such as Iran. Given the novelty and emerging nature of this subject within the realm of higher education management and the absence of specialized, comprehensive analyses in Iran, conducting research in this area becomes essential for illuminating its obscure and unexplored facets.

Therefore, this phenomenological study aimed to fill the existing research gap by examining coping strategies of international students residing in Iran regarding their acculturation process. By providing insights to stakeholders, decision-makers, higher education experts, and the academic community of Iran; the present study sought to create conditions conducive to the development of multicultural perspectives. Alongside setting up efficient communication channels and providing ongoing support and counseling throughout the international students' stay, this research also sought to fully engage these students in the vibrant cultural tapestry of Iran, rooted in its rich and storied heritage. Certainly, policymakers in higher education, as well as managers and counselors in the international department of Iranian universities, benefit extensively from the results of the forthcoming research in formulating and directing specific supportive strategies and policies in this area. Accordingly, the main research question of the present study is as follows:

- What are the coping strategies employed by international students residing in Iran in their acculturation process, based on the analysis of their lived experiences?

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Acculturation

The systematic and scholarly study of acculturation dates back to the early 20th century, commencing with the research of individuals such as Park (1928), Yieh (1934), and Stonequist (1935). The classical definition of acculturation, as provided by Redfield, Lipton, and Herskovits (1936), is as follows: "Acculturation is a phenomenon resulting from the interaction of groups of individuals from different cultures who engage in direct and continuous social interaction with each other, and this interaction is accompanied by subsequent changes in the primary patterns of one or both cultural groups" (149).

Sam and Berry (2010) contend that acculturation is "the process of cultural and psychological changes that occur as a result of cultural contact and interaction between cultures" (p. 472). In fact, it represents a dual process of cultural or psychological change that takes place in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of an individual as a consequence of contact and interaction between two or more culturally diverse groups or individuals (Berry, 2005 & 2017; Gibson, 2001; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). In this regard, Schwartz et al. (2010) also assert that acculturation does not mean replacing the dominant culture with the original culture of the immigrant. As per the statements of Sam and Berry (2010), individuals experience affective change (stress, tension, well-being, satisfaction), behavioral change (cultural learning), cognitive change (social identity), and developmental change (cultural identity, personal growth, and family relationships) during the acculturation process.

Berry (1997) introduced four "acculturation strategies: Assimilation, Separation, Integration, and Marginalization" (p. 9) to provide a framework for aiding individuals and groups in a multicultural society. These strategies enable individuals to identify their acculturation methods in either dominant or minority cultural groups. According to Ward (2008, p. 196), such strategies can be briefly described as:

- Assimilation: Individuals may abandon their culture of origin and prioritize the culture of the receiving country.
- Separation: Individuals may have little interest with the new culture and may resort to retaining the culture of origin.
- Integration: Immigrants maintain their culture of origin and adopt their culture of destination at the same time.
- Marginalization: Individuals neither maintain their cultural identity nor build relationships with those of the receiving country.

Acculturative Stress

Berry (1997) posits that acculturative stress is "a reactive tension response to life events rooted in the acculturation experience" (p. 19). In his comprehensive definition of acculturative stress, he further elaborates that "it is a type of stress in which the sources of stressors become evident in the acculturation process, characterized by a specific set of tension-related behaviors that manifest during acculturation, such as disruptions in mental health status [especially distress, anxiety, and depression], isolationism, and feelings of alienation, increased psychosomatic symptoms, and a sense of identity loss" (Berry, 1995, p. 479). While these symptoms of anxiety and distress may resemble other stress-related reactions and common concerns or worries, in reality, acculturative stress has been identified as a type of stress resulting from migration and the experience of life in a new

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culture. This stress encompasses physical symptoms, depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

It is important to recognize that although the symptoms of anxiety and distress in acculturation stress may share similarities with other stress-related reactions and common concerns, it is indeed a distinct form of stress that emerges from the process of migration and living in a new cultural environment. This unique form of stress is characterized by physical manifestations, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and a decline in self-esteem (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In this regard, Organista et al. (2010) pointed out that acculturative stress emerges when individuals encounter difficulties and challenges stemming from changes in unfamiliar and intangible social and psychological conditions (Galdan, 2019).

For instance, Chen et al. (2008) found that acculturative stress results from psychological pressure, conflicts, and common disparities between an individual's original culture and the new culture. It is also influenced by the process of learning a new language, as well as a new set of social interactions and dialogues, norms, and cultural values. In this context, prior research suggested that certain acculturative stress factors, such as discrimination and psychological pressure in the realms of intercultural and linguistic relations, serve as predictors of cultural differences, influencing individuals' psychological well-being and mental health (Galdan, 2019). Hence, acculturative stress is considered a significant factor in the realm of international students, garnering substantial attention from many researchers (Constantine et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

In fact, international students, in addition to grappling with all the challenges and changes that their native classmates also encounter at the university, such as time management skills or academic responsibility and personal growth and development, face a wide range of potential new challenges, including: difficulty in grasping academic lectures, struggling to communicate effectively in class and express questions, facing obstacles in completing oral and written assignments and exams, and experiencing difficulties in forming friendships and engaging with others, all stemming from a lack of language proficiency. Educational stressors may arise from being unfamiliar with the university system, adapting to a new educational and socio-cultural environment, and facing a disconnect between their expectations and the realities of university life. Acculturation to a new culture presents additional hurdles, including the loss of close relationships with family and friends from one's home country. Interactions within the host community may further compound feelings of isolation and disconnection. Additionally, international students may feel pressure to embody the role of a "cultural ambassador" perpetuating a sense of obligation to represent their culture while adapting to a new environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Misra et al., 2003; Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Rasmi et al., 2009; Townsend & Poh, 2008).

Furthermore, international students may face financial difficulties, high university tuition fees, and limited job opportunities (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). This could potentially pressure them, as they are often reliant on financial support from both their families and their home country's universities. Consequently, they may feel compelled to demonstrate a high level of academic performance. Failure to meet these expectations could exacerbate the acculturative stress experienced by these students (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000).

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Additionally, studies such as Khawaja and Dempsey (2008), Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), and Hanassab (2006) have highlighted other stress-inducing factors, including discrimination, international students' dissatisfaction with receiving less social support compared to native students, the emergence of feelings of inferiority due to direct verbal insults, as well as the presence of unpleasant feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002).

Therefore, as clarified, the approach of international students towards adapting to a new culture differs from that of immigrants (Rahman, 2018), and it is reasonable to expect that an international student, due to being in a new cultural environment, faces a wide range of life changes and transformations, which can turn into stressors and, so to speak, challenges and dilemmas for them. However, it should not be overlooked that the impact of acculturative stressors varies depending on the assessment and coping strategies of each international student, their attitude towards the host culture, as well as the role of social support from the host community in their cultural experience (Pitts, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Research Methodology

The chosen approach for conducting this exploratory research is qualitative, as it provides researchers with the opportunity to "gain initial insights into less-studied topics or phenomena" (Leedy, 1989, p. 253). Husserlian phenomenology, as a selected research method in the present study, allows the researcher to delve into exploration and inquiry regarding the understanding, perspective, cognition, and feelings of individuals who have experienced or lived the phenomenon or situation under investigation. This can be particularly valuable for groups such as therapists, educators, healthcare providers, and policymakers (Creswell, 2007).

Accordingly, the present qualitative research strategy, aligned with the research objective, follows Colaizzi's seven-step analytical approach (Colaizzi, 1978), which relies on describing participants' experiences and includes the following stages: the transcription of recorded interview texts (transcribing interview texts and note-taking during interviews), identification of meaningful phrases (careful reading of interview texts and highlighting significant statements, sentences, and phrases), formulation of meaningful phrases or statements (deriving concepts from categories and clusters derived from meaningful statements), clustering of formulated meanings, and then creating themes from these clusters (generating themes that encompass concepts), detailed description of the phenomenon in narrative form, shaping the themes through reducing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (writing a descriptive account of the text and content influencing the formation of participants' experiences, and synthesizing and integrating descriptions to emerge the essence of the phenomenon), and validation of descriptions and participants' experiences.

The concept of "Epoche" in the Husserlian method is the first and highly significant step (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). It is the foremost conceptual element that necessitates special attention in the phenomenological research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 85). In other words, it entails "suspending any preconceptions or personal experiences that might unduly influence the researchers' perceptions" (Leedy, 1989, p. 256).

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The most crucial practical steps of the Epoche process in the current research, during the stages of data collection, data analysis, and research validity, are as follows:

- Suspending preconceptions, judgments, attitudes, beliefs, and the knowledge possessed by the researchers at the outset of the study.
- Comprehensive documentation and recording of the collected data during interviews, ensuring their accessibility, scrutiny, and potential reexamination.
- Researchers' note-taking and annotation during the interviews, as well as throughout the data analysis phase (reflective notes).
- Involvement of participants in the research during the data analysis stages.
- Benefiting from the collaboration of a second coder, an expert researcher, in the role of the secondary coder in the research process.

In accordance with the study's aims and the logic expounded, the research utilizes purposive sampling, specifically employing a snowball sampling technique. This method empowers the researcher to identify "individuals rich in knowledge and experience" who meet the primary interview participation criteria by requesting introductions from individuals who have previously engaged in research interviews. This sampling technique enables the inclusion of participants who can offer valuable insights and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, enhancing the overall richness of the data (Patton, 2002, p. 298). For each participant in this study, a "Research Participation Invitation" was provided. These invitations encompassed detailed explanations and information regarding the research, including its objectives, a brief description of the interview process, participation requirements, participants' right to withdraw from the interview without any penalty, the researchers' responsibilities in maintaining the confidentiality of their information, as well as the potential consequences, benefits, and risks associated with participation in the study. Furthermore, full consent of participants was obtained in both written and oral forms (ICF "Informed Consent Form for Participation in Interview-Based Studies" and "Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research Projects") following a thorough explanation of the research protocol, including data collection, interpretation, and presentation methods. This approach aligns with the perspective of Cox-White and Zimbelman (1998) who argue that informed consent empowers participants to make decisions based on their personal interests.

The selected participants of this research consisted of 40 international students aged between 21 and 42 years (19 males and 21 females), enrolled in undergraduate (12 individuals), master's (14 individuals), and doctoral (14 individuals) programs at universities including (University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University, University of Qom, Imam Khomeini International University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, University of Kurdistan, Urmia University, Iran University of Medical Sciences, University of Guilan, Alzahra University, and Tehran University of Medical Sciences). These students migrated to Iran from various countries including France, Russia, India, Italy, Indonesia, Hungary, Afghanistan, Germany, Tanzania, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, China, Armenia, and Iraqi Kurdistan to pursue their studies. They were continuing their studies in various academic fields under the umbrella of Humanities (Management, Linguistic, Persian Literature, Iranology, International Relations,

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etc.), Medical Sciences (Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, etc.), and Engineering Sciences (Civil Engineering, Computer Science, etc.). Their duration of study ranged from one and a half years to approximately six years.

The data collection instrument employed in this research was interviews (semi-structured in nature) aimed at eliciting the interviewees' narratives. Interviews, compared to other instruments, provide a faster data collection platform, facilitating more detailed exploration of issues from research participants and immediate clarification, thereby enabling researchers to gather important data inaccessible through mere observation or quantitative data analysis (Leedy, 1989; Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). Thus, interviews enable the researcher to discern "meaningful cues in participants' expressions, pauses, questions, and sometimes tangential remarks" (Leedy, 1989, p. 256).

The interview questions used in this research designed by the researchers, preceded by a pilot study examining the interview protocol draft in both Persian and English languages with two volunteer participants (one male and one female international student) who possessed a good understanding of the phenomenon under study and were proficient in both aforementioned languages; however, they were not part of the final research sample. Both pilot interviews were audio-recorded. Subsequently, researchers paid attention to the responses and feedback from these two volunteers to refine the interview questions in terms of conceptual clarity, sentence structure, and interview timing, ensuring clarity at each stage of the questions and making necessary adjustments. This was carried out in line with improving the interview process and ensuring the credibility and transparency of interview questions (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, the final interview protocol was provided in both Persian and English languages based on the preference and proficiency level of the interviewees in the aforementioned languages, available to the researchers.

On the one hand, it is crucial to note that qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data collection and analysis (Van Manen, 1990). Considering that the study revolves around exploring the experiences of international students' acculturation, which necessitates an inquiry into their experiences, perspectives, and opinions through interactive engagements, researchers, in addition to conducting interviews and field notes, presented reports derived from the interviews to reflect the research process. It is worth mentioning that researchers, in pursuit of data collection through interviews, implemented the three-stage interview process outlined by Seidman (2006), which comprises important and fundamental phenomenological principles as follows:

1. The first phase: Focusing on the life history (laying the groundwork for interviewee experiences).
2. The second phase: Elaborating on the experiential details (emphasizing the concrete particulars of interviewee experiences).
3. The third phase: Reflecting on meaning (eliciting the meaning of the experience from the interviewees).

By following this structured approach, the researchers aimed to facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. In total, 40 semi-structured, in-depth interviews (conducted in either Persian or English, depending on the interviewee's preference) were carried out face-to-face at selected

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locations convenient for the participants, ranging from 40 to 180 minutes each. It is noteworthy that to capture the interview texts, all conversations were recorded with permission, using an MP3 player, to facilitate data access for analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, meaning that all recorded utterances by both the interviewee and the interviewer, including every word and sentence, as well as emotional reactions such as silence, pauses, laughter, sobbing, and crying, were meticulously transcribed. Accurate translations of the interviews were provided by the researchers of the present study. In order to maintain the credibility of the translations and prevent any personal bias, two English language experts were also requested to review the interview transcripts and their translations. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times by the researchers, and all peripheral conversations (tangential discussions) or unrelated interactions were removed from the original interview texts. The final interview texts were then prepared for data analysis using the detailed thematic analysis method.

In order to preserve the participants' privacy and confidentiality of their information, codes were used instead of their real names during recording and reporting of the results and findings. Participants were informed that the audio files and written transcripts of the interviews (in Word or PDF format) would be securely stored on the research team's laptop and on a password-protected USB drive, exclusively accessible to the researchers. This access control measure will remain in place until the official publication of the research results in a reputable journal, ensuring the preservation and confidentiality of the data. The fundamental concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research involves attention to its validity and reliability (Cypress, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Colaizzi (1978) posits the final validity, grounded in the engagement with participants in the concluding phase and obtaining their confirmation regarding the comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. In this research, participant engagement is regarded as research collaborators, contributing to the review and verification of interview transcripts and obtaining their confirmations on the presented comprehensive descriptions of their statements.

Results and Discussion

Therefore, as revealed, the approach of international students towards the concept of acculturation and adaptation to a new culture differs from that of immigrants (Rahman, 2018). It is reasonable to anticipate that an international student, by virtue of being situated in a novel cultural environment, would encounter a wide spectrum of life changes and transformations. As previously mentioned, these changes have become sources of acculturation-related stress and, colloquially speaking, challenges and predicaments for international students residing in Iran. The only recourse for them is to employ coping strategies as a natural response to the stresses of acculturation (Park et al., 2017). These strategies include self-direction, networking, personal development, cross-cultural interaction, and social support, as acculturation and adaptation necessitate the acquisition of essential skills in intercultural communication and ultimately the manifestation of a sense of cultural unity or diversity (Pogorelova & Trenchs, 2018).

Although it should not be overlooked that the impact of acculturation-related stressors varies depending on the assessment and the approach of each international

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student and their attitude toward the host culture (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In fact, all participants in this study acknowledged that, in order to facilitate their acculturation process and to counter the stressors associated with acculturation, they employ their own specific strategies, tactics and coping mechanisms when facing these challenges, thereby delineating which approach was more beneficial for them. It is worth noting that they put forth greater efforts in the domains of self-direction, learning, personal growth, and development, which is in line with Chirkov's (2009) findings.

Self-direction encompasses a diverse spectrum of strategies aimed at enhancing these students' ability to cope with stressful situations, unforeseen changes, and their initial adaptation to events occurring throughout their acculturation process. In reality, international students, when confronted with the challenges of their acculturation in Iranian society, strive to employ resilience skills, stress management in the face of adverse events, foster a positive mindset as a desirable mental attribute, and exhibit the ability to transform automatic negative thoughts into positive ones. By doing so, they aim to enhance their self-confidence and belief in their capabilities in the pursuit of their goals.

Self-care activities such as engaging in physical exercises, ensuring sufficient sleep hours, and consumption of nutritious food, along with the utilization of relaxation techniques, were employed by these students as practices for the maintenance of both physical and mental well-being. This approach served to mitigate stress and enhance their overall resilience in facing challenges and difficulties. For instance, concerning the resilience skill, defined as the ability to confront stress-inducing situations and unforeseen changes, participant 29, while acknowledging the stress stemming from academic issues alongside other social responsibilities such as her role as a spouse and a mother, endeavored to endure and cope with the specific life conditions in her current situation in pursuit of her aspirations. She stated

> I leave home at 6 in the morning every day, and I return home no later than 9 at night because, in addition to university classes, I am obliged to attend English and Persian language classes. Essentially, I have no time for studying due to the university's inadequate scheduling. When I return home at 9 at night, I have to tend to my children and husband. Because our scholarship amount is meager, we only have a gas stove, a refrigerator, and a rug. We live with minimal amenities, much like the impoverished, so that I can bear the burden of my studies and, in the future, build a better life for myself, my children, and my husband. (Participant #29)

Participant 6, in reference to harassment and sexual advances by some Iranian men within society, highlights her momentary coping strategies for extricating herself from these unpleasant situations. She mentions actions such as taking a picture of the harasser and pretending not to be fluent in Persian, along with quickly leaving the scene when faced with such unforeseen events in an Islamic country. She stated

> There was a man who was over 50 years old. He said, 'You are very pretty. Can you come to my flat? You will have a great time with me there.' I was so frightened that I just ran and fled out of sheer terror. (Participant #6)

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Regarding the recurring power outages during the end-of-term online examinations at the university, Participant 40 emphasized the importance of maintaining composure and swift response in answering exam questions. He stated

> With composure and stress control, we wrote all the questions we knew and quickly uploaded them to prevent the dormitory's power and internet from being cut off. Otherwise, all our efforts in studying for the entire course could be wasted, as no one, not even the professors, could offer any assistance. It was truly challenging days. (Participant #40)

Networking, the establishment of a friendly network for international students residing in Iran to benefit from guidance and support, was of paramount importance. Consequently, these international students, apart from maintaining their pre-existing relationships after leaving their friends, family, and homeland, engaged in the creation of a social network of new friends and acquaintances in a novel environment. Connecting with individuals who share a common cultural background, forming academic communication groups (interactions with professors, university staff, and academic advisors or counselors), joining student organizations or associations, establishing close ties with local communities, and fostering positive relationships with peers and neighbors cultivated a sense of belonging and emotional attachment in these students. In fact, it was the development of such relationships that instilled qualities like resilience, consideration, and camaraderie in these students, all of which are significant components of adapting to a new environment (Garcia et al., 2014). It is worth noting that international students who experienced substantial friend-based support exhibited fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Such support aided them in better adapting to cultural differences, enhancing their cross-cultural communication skills and competence. This finding aligns with previous research (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Pan et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2013; Montgomery, 2010; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Gill, 2007).

Participant 38, referring to the difficulty in understanding the Iranian currency and the challenges posed by the transition from Rial to Toman during the initial days of his stay in Iran, mentioned the guidance he received from his Iranian friends. They imparted a valuable solution to him, enabling a better grasp of the local currency:

> Understanding the Iranian currency was quite challenging, and I couldn't make head or tail of the Iranian money. My Iranian friends advised me to remove four of its zeroes so I could comprehend it better. They practiced with me to teach me how to deal with this currency. (Participant #38)

Personal development was another strategy employed by international students to enhance their individual skills in dealing with acculturation challenges. This copying strategy has had a significant impact on their academic performance and self-confidence. International students residing in Iran have taken steps to reduce their social isolation by increasing their self-awareness through self-study and language skill acquisition. In reality, self-directed learning is regarded as a modern learning style and problem-solving skill that enables individuals to enhance their capacity to identify obstacles, find solutions, and evaluate the most appropriate problem-solving approaches. Consequently, self-directed learning is an effective method for acquiring knowledge and awareness in a short period,

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facilitated by the ease of accessing a wide range of websites and social networks in this digital age.

One of these issues was the development of language skills, with a lack of proficiency in this area being among the main contributors to acculturation-related stress experienced by international students in Iran. Chen (1999) maintains that anxiety stemming from a lack of proficiency in a second language is a stress-inducing factor directly associated with other stressors in both academic and socio-cultural domains. In the academic domain, a lack of language proficiency was found to impact the completion of coursework and class projects and assignments, comprehension of professors' instruction and academic lectures, success in both oral and written exams, as well as the ability to ask questions and participate in class discussions. On the social front, this language barrier was seen as a hindrance to international students' efforts to establish friendships and engage with the local people in the host community. This issue has been acknowledged in studies by Chen (1999) and Mori (2000). Hence, international students sought to enhance their language skills by participating in language courses, engaging in language exchange programs on social networks such as YouTube, Instagram, and the like, and also by interacting with local individuals. Furthermore, to align themselves with the Iranian calendar, they utilized practical date conversion applications.

For instance, participant 12, expressing unfamiliarity with the solar calendar, stated:

> I still find it difficult to work with the solar calendar. I have installed an application on my mobile phone that converts the date because I'm not very familiar with this date conversion, and this is how I solve my problem. (Participant #12)

Some other students, like participant 5, mentioned using social networks for better self-learning of the Persian language and gaining familiarity with Persian poetry, culture, and literature:

> I use many of these social networks for learning the Persian language, such as Instagram pages dedicated to Persian poets and poetry, or listening to speeches by various figures like Abdolkarim Soroush or Dr. Elahi Ghomshei. (Participant #5)

Cultural interaction undoubtedly reveals cultural differences upon initial entry and acquaintance with a new environment. This includes encountering various challenges and cultural shocks, which result from the diverse customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and social norms present in the new society. These cultural challenges, often associated with anxiety stemming from a lack of understanding of the emerging cultural phenomena, pose a significant impact on international students. During the process of acculturation, international students residing in Iran have endeavored to meet their daily needs while striving to adapt to the new culture. Concurrently, they familiarized themselves with the social values of Iranian society, aiming to achieve cultural adjustment.

In this regard, they, in order to align with the new cultural expectations, while challenging their cultural stereotypes and understanding cultural differences, engaged in interacting with the multicultural or multi-ethnic environment of Iran. This involvement

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encompassed active participation in cultural exchange activities, cultural events, festivals, and local community interactions, as well as learning intercultural communication. This allowed them to liberate themselves from feelings of isolation, frustration, and nostalgia, enabling them to exhibit a more effective performance, which corresponds with the findings of Gu et al. (2010). It is crucial to note that adaptation to a new culture is a time-consuming process. Throughout the acculturation process, individuals gain a mutual understanding of the unique cultural features of their own culture and the new culture they are embracing (Berry, 2017). Hence, it was crucial for international students to establish realistic expectations and approach the acculturation process by enhancing their cross-cultural understanding and patiently embracing differences. It is worth noting that the attitudinal and behavioral changes experienced by the majority of participants in this study were linked to their inclination to preserve their original culture while concurrently achieving cultural and social compatibility with Iranian society.

In reference to their awareness of differences in greeting etiquette in Iran, particularly during initial encounters, one of the participants expressed the following guidance received from their Iranian professor:

> I was told never to shake hands first with ladies. Because there, not everyone wants to shake hands, as some people are religious. And this might cause trouble for me. (Participant #34)

In an effort to enhance interactions with Iranians, another participant attempted to make use of common Iranian colloquialisms to better succeed in communicating with others:

> Well, I've learned to say 'ja`nam' and 'azizam' from you Iranians. So, sometimes when my friend calls me, I respond by saying 'ja`nam.' When our professors call or address us as 'azizam,' we understand that they genuinely care about us, and we also hold them in high regard. (Participant #6)

Social support is another copying strategy for overcoming and is one of the influential factors on the adaptation and acculturation of international students in the host community (Chavoshi et al., 2017). It refers to the "nature of interactions that occur in social relationships, particularly how individuals assess the benefits of the support received" (Mak & Kim, 2011, p. 60). Indeed, social support consistently correlates with lower acculturative stress (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) and better socio-cultural adaptation of individuals (Boruah, 2016; Mao & Liu, 2016). It is recognized as a predictor of the importance of psychological adaptation in international students (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Expanding relationships and interactions with the people of Iran through various channels, benefiting from some institutional and academic support, joining existing student organizations or associations, receiving counseling services provided international students with opportunities to gain awareness of Iranian culture, norms, and the expectations of Iranian society. This, in turn, helped them to experience lower acculturative stress and academic concerns to the best extent possible, fostering a constructive and fruitful adaptation to the new environment, and ultimately avoiding negative psychological adaptation issues. The provision of guidance, support, and coping strategies tailored to the needs of these international students by the International affairs advisors for international

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students at some of the universities studied in this research had a significant impact on enhancing their cultural and social familiarity. In general, the coping strategies mentioned earlier align with the findings of studies (Berry, 2006; Park, 2022; Bai, 2016; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Park et al., 2017), all aiming to reduce acculturative stress and foster the acculturation of international students.

For instance, participant 3, while discussing the ease of the Iranian police in handling his complaint against wrongdoers, referred to the support he received from one of his professors in resolving an issue that had arisen for him. He stated

> Due to the fraud that occurred during the registration process of my phone, I went to the police to file a complaint. However, the extensive questioning and interrogation by the police made me withdraw my complaint. Nonetheless, one of my professors helped me in asserting my rights. (Participant #3)

One of the international students described receiving financial assistance from one of his Iranian friends during a period when he was experiencing financial difficulties:

> I am on a scholarship, but I haven't received any money yet, and the authorities are not addressing this matter. However, my Iranian friend lent me money to help resolve my issues. (Participant #19)

Conclusion

This section provides a summary of the discussions regarding coping strategies employed by international students in Iranian universities. This section summarizes the discussions regarding coping strategies employed by working international students in Iranian universities, focusing on their experiences of acculturation and the shifts in their attitudes and behaviors resulting from interaction with the Iranian community. This group has remained, to this day, relatively underexplored and understudied. Indeed, these students' perception of their acculturation experiences is framed as a "new chapter" and a turning point in their lives. It can be described as an opportunity to understand a new and somewhat different world—a process akin to "shedding the outer skin," so to speak, which has been quite transformative for them.

Although each of the participants had embarked on a unique journey to pursue their education in Iran, the majority shared a common goal: to achieve academic excellence and carve out a brighter future for themselves. Along this path, they confronted unimaginable challenges and issues as they grappled with the new social environment, the life changes resulting from it, the distinct educational system, and the unique culture. Throughout their acculturation process, they had to apply psychological and socio-cultural adaptability strategies, and cope with the stressors associated with the daily life changes and cultural interactions. In their efforts to mitigate the stress-inducing factors of acculturation, each of these students employed various copying strategies to facilitate their cultural transition.

In order to address the stress-inducing factors related to acculturation, each of the participants in this study employed their own coping strategies. According to statements made by Park et al. (2017), these strategies significantly influenced their acculturation process and brought about notable changes in their attitudes and behaviors regarding cultural adaptation. Among the primary coping strategies employed by most participants in

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this study, self-direction (Bai et al., 2023; Sokolova et al., 2022; Karipek, 2017; Campbell, 2015) and networking (Nadeem et al., 2022; Pang & Wang, 2020; Wilton & Constantine, 2003) were prominent. These strategies aided them in enhancing their cultural competence, reaffirming their existential value in Iranian culture, and concurrently, by initiating self-initiated social interactions and connections with various Iranian groups, they sought alternatives for the organizational support they had been deprived of.

Individuals' understanding of their own acculturation process and the strategies they employ to cope with acculturative stressors necessitate not only the individual efforts of international students but also require coordination and action across various levels of policymakers, planners, administrators, and implementers in Iranian higher education institutions. This is in line with the viewpoint of Wu et al. (2015) who believe that, in addition to the students' efforts to overcome the challenges and stresses of acculturation, university faculty and staff should be informed about such matters to provide social and cultural support to these students.

Based on the obtained results, it can be suggested that the conscientious efforts of Iranian university authorities in cultural awareness and sharing the life experiences of previous international students, organizing orientation courses to familiarize them with Iranian culture, and providing intercultural education before these students embark on their studies in the cultural centers of Iranian embassies and improving facilities and providing material and moral support can play a significant role in reducing acculturative stress among international students.

Furthermore, regardless of the symbolic presence of some international student associations in certain universities, there is an apparent lack of an active communicative or organizational body that can act as an intermediary between international students and the relevant university units and social sectors. The establishment of a specialized student body for international students, chosen selectively from eligible male and female foreign students, would enable these individuals to efficiently address issues and challenges, facilitating their quick resolution through easier interaction with the relevant university departments.

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Human Participants

The ethical considerations for human participants in this study strictly adhere to the guidelines outlined by the journal's policies. Confidentiality was of utmost importance, and participants' wishes to withdraw from the study were respected at all times. Prior consent was obtained from participants before recording interviews, and transcripts were provided upon request. Participants were made aware that all discussions were coded using false names to ensure anonymity. Moreover, this article, resulting from a doctoral dissertation, has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research at Allameh Tabataba'i University, with the ethical approval code IR.ATU.REC.1399.025.

Originality Note

The authors declare that this manuscript is entirely their own original work. Proper citation and quotation methods have been employed for any references to the works of others.

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- Potential reviewers were identified and they received the revised version based on the comments.
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