Navigating Anxiety and Uncertainty: International Students' Challenges and Strategies to Cultural Adjustment

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Abstract

International students face unique challenges when transitioning from their home countries to another culture. Guided by Gudykunst's (2005) Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, the current research highlights how international students in the U.S. manage their uncertainty, anxiety, and cultural distance in academic and social settings. This study draws on ten in-depth interviews with international students (five males and five females) at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. We examined how they navigate the cultural adjustment process in a higher education institution located in a rural area of the United States. Thematic analysis of the in-depth interview revealed that international students experienced a variety of challenges such as pre-arrival expectations, navigating American communication styles, adjusting to academic expectations and campus culture, barriers to building social connections, and economic/time constraints. Despite these challenges, the international students managed anxiety and uncertainty by building support systems, engaging in campus involvement, taking on leadership roles, and practicing mindfulness and other strategies to manage stress. The current study highlighted the resilience of international students and identified ways in which institutions can strengthen their support.

Introduction

The U.S. has long been the leading destination for international students. In 2022–2023, over one million students were enrolled, a 12% increase from the previous year and the fastest growth in forty years. Their presence contributes $40 billion annually to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2023) and to the internationalization of the US campuses. The diverse classrooms enhance critical thinking, while international connections strengthen institutional reputation and global awareness (Arthur & Flynn, 2001; Gurin et al., 2004; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000).

At the same time, international students face barriers adjusting to new cultural and academic environments. Language differences, unfamiliar communication styles, and new classroom expectations complicate transitions (Berry, 2005; Liu & Huang, 2015). A key factor is perceived cultural distance—the extent to which an individual presumes the host culture as different from their own. Rooted in Hofstede's (1984) framework and applied by Kogut and Singh (1988), this concept highlights how perceptions of difference shape stress, involvement, and belonging (Yan & Berliner, 2010). Students may feel caught between adapting to U.S. norms and maintaining their culture. Assimilation risks

identity loss, while isolation limits integration, both underscoring the role of perceived cultural distance (Tang et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024).

Challenges International Students Face

International students may face many challenges when adjusting to a new country, including culture shock, discrimination, language barriers, financial stress, visa restrictions, and academic differences, all affecting well-being and success (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lorenzetti et al., 2023). Culture shock is unpredictable and unique to each student (Berry, 2005; Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2010). Discrimination lowers satisfaction and heightens stress (Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Studies show language barriers persist even among students with high English proficiency, who may struggle to keep up with lectures, readings, and social interactions (Chen, 1999; Dao et al., 2007; Neumann et al., 2018). Classroom expectations such as self-directed learning and participation can add stress when unfamiliar (Frambach et al., 2012; Wang, 2004). Together, these challenges restrict involvement and heighten isolation, making culturally aware institutional support critical for success (Gebhard, 2012; Glass et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2022).

Although well-documented, less is known about how these challenges play out in rural U.S. settings, where resources and cultural exposure may be limited. In light of global events and media influence, further research is needed. This leads to the first research question.

Research Question 1: What challenges do international students face in adapting to American campus life?

Anxiety Uncertainty Management Theory

Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, developed by Gudykunst (2005), explains how people communicate across cultures by building on Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). AUM suggests effective communication depends on keeping anxiety and uncertainty within optimal levels. Too much anxiety leads to withdrawal or poor judgment, while too little reduces motivation to adapt. Similarly, excessive uncertainty causes hesitation, while very low uncertainty can result in overconfidence (Gudykunst, 2005).

In intercultural contexts, individuals often experience anxiety in unfamiliar environments and uncertainty when they cannot predict others' behavior (Knowles & Olatunji, 2020; Ni & Wang, 2011). Moderate levels are most beneficial, motivating people to engage, seek information, and learn (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986; Presbitero & Attar, 2018). Strategies such as mindfulness, information-seeking, and building social networks help manage stress and improve adaptation (Kashima et al., 2017; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2015).

International Student Anxiety and Uncertainty

Studies show that international students who approach experiences with awareness of potential challenges can better manage anxiety and uncertainty, leading to stronger adjustment (Nahla, 2021). Szabo et al. (2016) found that difficulties often depend less on the new environment itself and more on how students respond. Those able to reframe anxiety adjusted more successfully, supporting AUM theory (Gudykunst, 2005). Finding cultural similarities with the host culture reduces apprehension and motivates engagement with peers (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986; Neuliep, 2012; Taniguchi et al., 2022). Recognizing anxiety as natural and actively managing it, allows students to focus on opportunities for growth (Szabo et al., 2016).

Supporting Adjustment

University resources, social networks, and coping strategies play important roles in adjustment. Academic support and faculty guidance mitigate differences in teaching styles, and positive faculty relationships influence student satisfaction (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lorenzetti et al., 2023; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Morin, 2007; Zhou & Cole, 2017). Social integration is equally critical; co-national groups provide comfort, but overreliance can limit broader connections (Rose-Redwood, 2013; Sheng et al., 2022). Students who participate in clubs, mentorships, or events often report stronger adjustment and better relationships (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Tieu et al., 2010).

Still, many students struggle with homesickness, loneliness, or family pressures (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Counseling and career services are available but often underused due to stigma or mismatched expectations (Dombou et al., 2023; King & Bailey, 2021; Mori, 2000). Mentoring is effective when culturally sensitive, with students valuing dependability and multicultural awareness (Nilsson et al., 2004; Zhang & Dixon, 2001).

Beyond formal services, many turn to self-directed strategies. Mindfulness, problem-solving, information-seeking, and campus involvement build resilience, manage stress, and create balance (Laboonchai, 2016; Mei et al., 2004; Presbitero & Attar, 2018). Meaningful activities help with coping and create opportunities for leadership and growth (Astin, 1984; Tieu et al., 2010; Zhou & Cole, 2017).

Although research identifies strategies that support adjustment, less is known about which factors matter in rural U.S. institutions, where resources and cultural exposure may be limited. This study examines how international students manage anxiety and uncertainty while adjusting to campus life in a rural setting.

Research Question 2: How do international students use resources, involvement, and engagement to manage anxiety and uncertainty during their adjustment to an American college campus? What other factors help facilitate their adjustments?

Methods

Participants

This study focuses on international students at a large public university in a rural area of the United States. Students were interviewed in the Spring of 2025. Five men and five women represented ten countries: Nigeria, South Africa, Norway, Pakistan, Nepal, Brazil, Colombia, Cyprus, Egypt, and Japan. Five were pursuing master's degrees, four were undergraduates, and one was in a PhD program. Time at the university ranged from three months to five years, offering both fresh and longer-term perspectives.

Procedure

Participants were selected as part of a larger study. The university's global affairs department assisted in soliciting participation of the international students on an F-1 Visa. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Participants were contacted through email to schedule a virtual or in-person interview. Those interviews varied between 20 and 60 minutes, depending on the participant's engagement. A semi-structured format allowed students to share experiences while focusing on key topics. The informed consent form was reviewed before each session, and pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

Measures

The interview questions were created based on the proposed research topics. The semi-structured interview had three sections: (1) introductory questions to build rapport (e.g., motivations to study in the U.S.), (2) cultural adjustment and challenges, and (3) campus involvement, resources, and suggestions for improvement. Closing questions invited additional thoughts.

Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Thematic analysis enabled a detailed examination of students' experiences, identifying common themes across the ten interviews. NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) was used to assist in organizing the data. The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2016) and Nowell et al.'s (2017) six-step guide. A deductive coding process was utilized; codes were developed based on research questions and existing literature on adjustment, involvement, anxiety, uncertainty, and cultural distance. Inductive flexibility was allowed to account for unanticipated but relevant patterns in students' responses. Themes were organized around two research questions. Six themes highlighted student challenges, and four themes described coping strategies that supported adjustment.

Results

International Student Challenges

The following section explores findings for Research Question 1. Six themes emerged regarding international student challenges: holding unrealistic expectations shaped by the media, navigating unfamiliar communication norms, adjusting to academic life, forming peer connections, managing financial and time constraints, and overcoming anxiety and uncertainty. These themes highlight how cultural distance, uncertainty, and limited

involvement influenced students' adjustment and shaped the challenges they faced day to day.

Theme 1: Media and Pre-Arrival Expectations

Theme one centered around how media consumption shaped students' pre-arrival preparations. Participants reported that they gathered information about American colleagues and cultures through various media, including movies and YouTube videos. Samir, from Nepal, explained: "I used to watch a lot of Hollywood films, so I kind of expected what kind of language people speak and how they behave." While some felt more prepared, others were taken aback. Marcus, from West Africa, expected skyscrapers and lots of snow, only to find neither.

AUM theory suggests that familiarity with a culture can reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 2005). Students use social media to learn about American culture and language, which can aid adjustment but also lead to misinformed expectations when portrayals do not align with reality (Yanagihara, 2017). Xie and Chao (2022) found that while social media platforms can ease emotional anxiety and help students stay connected to their home culture, they can also make it harder to build deeper connections within their host country.

Theme 2: Navigating U.S. Communication Styles

The second theme was how students adjusted to everyday communication, including politeness norms, level of directness, and casual interactions. Communication styles are tied to cultural expectations and differences in how Americans express friendliness, set boundaries, or approach conversation, which at times creates uncertainty for students. Peter noted that in Egypt, declining food is disrespectful, while in the U.S., "people take your word for it." Marcus shared a similar example that in West Africa, it is polite to decline an offer at first and only accept if it is offered again. "Here, you only get asked once, and people take your word for it. Some people say it is a respectful thing."

Such experiences highlight cultural differences in how relationships and boundaries are understood (Hofstede, 1984; Leotescu, 2024). In low-context, individualistic cultures like the U.S., personal space is often prioritized, which can leave students uncertain about how to build closer relationships. These communication differences were one layer of adjustment; students also described changes in academic expectations as another significant challenge.

Theme 3: Adjusting to Academic Expectations

The third theme that emerged was the differences in teaching styles and faculty-student relationships. In some countries, education is primarily lecture-based. American higher education institutions often expect students to engage in extracurricular activities, attend events, and utilize campus resources as part of their learning experience and grade. Ahmed shared, "The students are more involved, and the university organizes stuff for students; that's not common in Pakistan." For students focused on academic success over social opportunities, integrating coursework into campus life may be a solution.

In some cultures, professors hold an authoritative power distance, but participants found their U.S. instructors approachable. Marcus reflected: "Power is fluid… I am great friends with professors. That's different back home. Power is inaccessible for the most part." American professors tend to encourage open communication, participation, and self-directed learning (King & Bailey, 2021). For students unfamiliar with this style, hesitation may be misinterpreted as disinterest by faculty (Wang, 2004; Yildirim, 2017).

Participants also reported challenges outside the classroom, including difficulty connecting with American peers.

Theme 4: Barriers to Building Social Connections

Domestic students were reported to be generally polite, but participants said connecting required more effort. Camila, from Colombia, described her first weeks in the classroom: "They (classmates) seemed like they all knew each other… having to make your path in trying to make friends, was like, how do I get close to them?" Ana, from Brazil, shared similar frustration, noting that classmates often assumed she was an exchange student: "They don't want to make an effort on someone who is going to leave."

Language barriers added another layer. Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018) found that even motivated students face social constraints that limit connection. In addition to social constraints, one student felt that they adjusted well socially but still faced obstacles that were beyond their control. Emma, from Cyprus, explained: "It's a different thing to joke and be yourself in another language. I felt like all my relationships were at a surface level." She worried about missing chances to join conversations or that her jokes would be misunderstood. In addition to social hurdles, students explained that financial pressures and limited time made it harder to participate in campus life.

Theme 5: Financial and Time Constraints

Over half of the participants mentioned their biggest challenge was finances. Students described struggles affording study abroad and maintaining hobbies they enjoyed back at home. International students can work on campus, but hours are limited and rarely cover all expenses. Camila spoke of being constantly conscious of spending. "There's a lot more things to do. I am very grateful, but sometimes you have to say no to doing things, even though you want to (participate)."

Students also struggled to balance classes and social opportunities. Dewey et al. (2013) found that students' involvement and ability to build connections often depend on time and whether opportunities were accessible. Peter, a PhD student, acknowledged his desire to be a part of more but that it was not realistic due to his studies, "We are so busy to the point that even if you have a problem, you don't have time to think about it." Although the intensity of a PhD program is unique, undergraduate and graduate students expressed similar struggles, emphasizing that academics took priority. Beyond these pressures, students also described deeper challenges tied to anxiety and uncertainty.

Theme 6: Emotional Experiences of Anxiety and Uncertainty

For many students, uncertainty in a new environment creates stress (Huiwen et al., 2023; Oberg, 1960). Participants shared that anxiety extended beyond personal worries; it included their family back home and the distance between them. Peter expressed, "It's difficult to pinpoint, everything is new, and anxiety is becoming part of life. I'm living with it." Others struggled with a persistent mental battle of fitting in "the first year was fun and exciting, but it hit me the second year. It was affecting me more, homesickness, and the feeling that I don't belong here".

Students also raised concerns about post-graduation uncertainty and visa limits. Inez said, "Not knowing what comes next is frustrating. I didn't even get information about career steps until right before graduation." These reflections underscore that emotional stress, though less visible, can be just as impactful.

The participants described a range of challenges while adjusting to life on an American campus. These included mismatched cultural expectations shaped by media, unfamiliar communication styles, and differences in academic and social norms. Forming friendships with domestic students was especially difficult, often due to cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, or relationships that remained surface-level. Campus involvement was also limited by time and financial pressures, particularly for students in demanding majors or on scholarships who felt added pressure to perform. While each experience was unique, their reflections revealed how cultural distance, anxiety, uncertainty, and external barriers often intersect during the adjustment process.

Factors Supporting Adjustment

The following section summarizes the strategies that the international students used to cope with the challenges. To answer our second research question, we have asked how international students manage uncertainty and anxiety, and how they adjusted to American culture. Four themes emerged: building a support system, managing anxiety and uncertainty, finding meaningful leadership roles, and personal growth through mindfulness. The following sections highlight how these strategies supported students' adjustment.

Theme 1: Developing a Support System

The first theme that emerged was how participants relied on support networks, both on and off campus, to aid adjustment. Social support, including friends, mentors, and community members, can improve overall well-being (Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Participants described a variety of ways these networks formed. Ana joined a service sorority. "That was something different I wanted to do. You just start finding your people." James described finding the members of his church to be like a second home.

Support extended beyond campus; six of the ten participants applied to this university because this institution was personally recommended. For Ahmed, family influenced his decision, "My brother lived here, my mother only allowed me to go if I had gotten admission into the same school." Research suggests international students are more

likely to turn to peers, advisors, or informal support rather than counseling staff (Yakushko et al., 2008). Others relied on pre-established networks. Samir, who had classmates from Nepal studying in the U.S., explained "I talk to my parents every few days… I also have friends who are going through the same phase. If you don't have people to share what you are feeling, that makes people more anxious".

While many found support through campus life, faith-based communities, or personal networks, not all had the same experience. A couple of students gave brief responses about friendships, suggesting they may still be finding their place. These relationships are key to reducing isolation and preparing for adjustment, though the process varies for each student.

Theme 2: Involvement and Leadership Roles

Campus involvement is central to students' adjustment (Nguyen, 2016). Hearing students discuss their interests and involvement reflected that idea. Samir shared, "I didn't know what to expect, but I knew I wanted to get involved." Nine out of ten participants held student jobs, which provided both financial support and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Camila, a graduate student, reflected on her role as a teaching assistant: "I didn't have the same experience as them (undergraduate students). It is interesting to get to know them (undergraduate students), and hear the differences and small changes from home." Employment also improved awareness of campus resources; James noted, "As an RA, I get insight into resources I didn't even know we had during my first year."

Beyond employment, some students held leadership roles. Previous studies show peers with similar backgrounds improve psychological well-being and adjustment (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Similarly, Rose-Redwood (2013) emphasizes that friendships with other international students are important in the early stages. The International Student Association (ISA) is a primarily student-led organization created to connect international and domestic students. Many of the students spoke about their involvement. Marcus explained, "We became the voice of international students… a place to belong to, identify with, and say, hey, that's our people." Joining clubs, events, or peer groups helps students feel connected, less stressed, and more confident in academic and social life. (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Kaya, 2020). Finding a sense of belonging during times of change helps international students feel at home and balance the pressures of adjusting to a new culture (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Not all students took on leadership roles. Inez worked for financial stability, stating she had no desire to hold a leadership role outside of work. "We don't have time, so the only time we can have fun is during our break.". Employment helped students navigate campus life but was not always tied to leadership. For many, jobs were a necessity shaped by workload or finances, leaving little time for extra roles. Still, involvement, through work, leadership, or organizations, was described as essential to making the institution feel like home.

Theme 3: Managing Anxiety and Uncertainty

Following the experiences of anxiety and uncertainty discussed in theme five, participants shared the way they managed. Many found that staying productive helped them avoid feeling overwhelmed. Attending campus events provided distraction and relief: "When I'm there, I'm not stressed. I'm seeing people, talking, and interacting." Some students relied on mindfulness to regulate anxiety, an idea emphasized by AUM Theory, which highlights awareness and emotional management as key in uncertain situations. Ana reflected: "There are days when I'm crying… but you have to let yourself feel it. Then ask, what am I going to do after? How am I going to move forward?"

Managing anxiety early, rather than after it becomes unmanageable, can shape adjustment (Gudykunst, 2005). In this study, students who managed anxiety more effectively were more likely to report better psychological adjustment. Ahmed credited a class: "I had a stress management course, and they taught me the correct way to breathe to calm my nerves. I use that a lot." Controlled breathing and mindfulness regulate emotions, especially in stressful or unfamiliar situations (Misra & Castillo, 2004). These methods give students practical tools to calm themselves and feel more in control. Although all participants reported struggles with anxiety and uncertainty, only one used formal counseling. Emma stated, "I started counseling this semester. We made an appointment right away. I would suggest it for anyone thinking about it." Other students said they did not use counseling due to cultural norms, or belief they could manage it alone. Overall, these strategies helped students manage day-to-day stress and paved the way for deeper personal growth.

Theme 4: Personal Growth and Mindfulness

Over time, many students shifted from resisting uncertainty to embracing it. While some focused on adapting to American culture, others found ways to blend their culture to create a new sense of belonging. One student said they recreated familiar experiences to maintain a connection to home:

> "I miss home. I miss the feeling and touch of home and all those things, too. A lot of what I try to do is recreate some of those experiences and spaces here, which is why a sense of belonging and a sense of place are a huge part of the work I do here. Whether it's creating spaces for international student belonging, or helping increase and maintain a sense of positivity in this place."

Students recognized that although they were adapting, it was okay to express their cultural identity: "I try to adapt, but I also like certain things about my culture, I'm not going to change." Others accepted uncertainty as part of learning: "You learn from mistakes, and you feel a lot more comfortable with time."

AUM Theory suggests that as students learn to manage uncertainty, their confidence grows. This was reflected by Ana's self-acceptance: "I'm never going to be like them, and that's okay… I love being Brazilian." Practicing mindfulness involves self-awareness and recognizing stress triggers. Mindfulness allows individuals to reflect on their own and others' cultures, finding similarities and fostering respect for differences. Ting-Toomey

and Dorjee (2015) argue that mindfulness is central to intercultural competence, enabling cultural sensitivity, ethnorelative mindsets, and stronger communication.

Conclusion

The current study documents the challenges that international students may face: pre-arrival expectations, different communication and academic expectations, campus culture, barriers building social connections, and economic/time constraints. The study highlighted the resilience of international students and identified ways institutions can strengthen their support. Students managed anxiety by building support systems, engaging in campus involvement, leadership roles, practicing informal and formal stress-management strategies, and experiencing personal growth through mindfulness. Many discovered resources later in the semester or through word of mouth, suggesting a need for enhanced outreach and coordination among campus departments. Integrating the importance of wellness into orientation, advising, and everyday interactions, rather than relying only on traditional counseling, may make support feel more approachable, especially for students from cultures where mental health services are less common (Nilsson et al., 2004; Yakushko et al., 2008).

Peer mentorship stood out as a practical step. Orientation provided students with an initial connection, but many felt left alone afterward. Ongoing mentorship between international and domestic students could bridge cultural gaps, foster belonging, and reduce uncertainty (Bowman et al., 2024; Rose-Redwood, 2013). Simple initiatives like check-ins or group events could directly support students' adjustment.

This study is limited by a small sample size and reliance on self-reported narratives, which may exclude other perspectives or invite social desirability bias (Smeding et al., 2017). Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and methods that capture the perspectives of students less likely to volunteer. Still, the findings underscore the importance of intentional outreach, wellness initiatives, and mentorship programs in helping international students feel prepared, connected, and supported.

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