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Turkish Students' Intercultural Challenges and Aspirations in U.S. Universities: A Social Media Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a study of Turkish international students' experiences in the U.S. by examining data from EksiSozluk, a Turkish social media platform. Drawing on social-emotional learning as a theoretical foundation, we investigated the types of challenges Turkish international students faced in the U.S. and the coping strategies and information they shared with each other. Adopting a thematic analysis, we analyzed the collected data, including 157 entries made by Turkish students about their study abroad experiences in U.S. higher education institutions between 2002 and 2023. The findings suggest that Turkish international students primarily struggle with social and emotional challenges, followed by financial, academic, and cultural issues. The main coping strategies employed by the students were building social relationships through interactions with other Turkish students on social media and seeking cultural knowledge through American pop culture.

Keywords: Turkish international students, international students, social-emotional learning, social media

The United States is currently the top destination for international students, and the international student population has consistently been on the rise for the past decade. (Dyvik, 2023). It is a popular destination for international students from many different countries. Top three origin countries with the most international students in the U.S. are currently China, India, and Korea with a variety of countries following (Korhonen, 2023). Besides being the popular choice, studying

in the U.S. also brings up challenges for international students ranging from cultural to academic to many others (Hansen et al., 2018; Hernandez Castenada, 2008). Although the research regarding challenges that international students face is plenty, the focus tends to remain on the students from top origin countries.

Although a high percentage of international students come from China, India, and Korea, there are certainly many others from different countries, one of which being Turkiye. According to Korhonen (2023), Turkish students come as the 18th in the rankings of international students in the U.S. and have been on the rise in the recent decades. Turkish American Scientists and Scholars Association (TASSA) states that Turkiye sends more students to the U.S., than any other European country (2018). This trend highlights the growing academic and cultural exchange between Turkiye and the U.S. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this specific demographic to better understand their experiences.

Turkish people often use EksiSozluk, a popular social media platform in Turkiye, for that purpose. This is a popular Turkish social media platform, operating as a forum where users contribute by creating entries about a wide range of topics including but not limited to current events, pop culture, everyday life, and more. Users share their opinions, experiences and stories using a blend of colloquial language, cultural references, and slang. This platform has been a significant part of Turkish internet culture since 1996, and continues to be one of the most popular sites in Turkiye. Recognizing the value of this social platform as a key to Turkish students' experiences, we intended to utilize the entries from EksiSozluk on the topic of "being a student in the U.S." as our data to gain a better understanding of Turkish international students in U.S. universities. In doing so, we aim to explore the authentic insights of Turkish students through EksiSozluk, and answer the following research questions:

1. What kinds of challenges do Turkish international students in the U.S. face?
2. What kinds of coping strategies and information do they share with each other?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on international students and the challenges they face focused mostly on the origin countries aforementioned. There has also been some exploration regarding social media use among international students. Even though the literature on Turkish students' experiences in the U.S. is minimal compared to those of the top three origin countries' students, several studies explored the trends regarding Turkish students' challenges, studying in U.S. universities.

Experiences of International Students in the U.S.

Looking at international students in the U.S., several studies have explored the differences in the mental health of these students compared to non-international students (Ogunsanya, et al., 2018; Paralkar, 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). When compared to their American counterparts, international students had lower mental health scores according to Ogunsanya et al. (2018). Similarly, Hamamura and Laird (2014) stressed the significance of paying attention to perfectionism and acculturative stress in their study focusing on East Asian international students.

Language has been a crucial topic of discussion regarding challenges faced by international students as well. Huang (2014) showed that Chinese students were afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, causing them to have high levels of anxiety. Korean international students reported experiencing difficulty in speaking English when talking about their studies (Choi, 2015). Lack of self-confidence caused by language barriers is prominent in the literature as well. The feelings of self-consciousness or embarrassment are common when it comes to communicating in English, especially in academic settings such as presentations (Liao & Liang, 2021). Mukminin and Macmahon (2013) also reported a lack of self-confidence caused by instances when international students had to speak up in front of peers from the host country.

Challenges are not limited to language and mental health. Another challenge explored numerous times in the literature is the issues regarding adjusting to a new culture and the associated emotional distress. Adaptation to a new culture can cause stress in international students, also known as acculturative stress (Berry, 2006), which can cause many different issues. Differences in educational cultures can make it challenging to speak up in class, therefore affecting student activity in the classroom (Rajendram et al., 2019). At the same time, acculturative stress also interferes with emotional adjustment of international students (Bastien et al., 2018). The diverse challenges faced by international students highlight the need for better support systems and research targeting specific populations among international students, allowing a deeper understanding of their unique challenges within various cultural, socioeconomic, and educational contexts.

Experiences of Turkish International Students

Although more research is needed to fully understand the experiences of Turkish international students, a review of the existing literature offers some valuable insights. For instance, when it comes to the wellness of Turkish international students, Avcı and Montilla (2022) found Turkish students had lower wellness scores compared to domestic students. This finding aligns with other studies examining the well-being of international students from different populations, such as Koo et al.'s (2021) study on Korean international students, which reported lower mental health scores compared to their domestic peers. Bektas et al. (2009) also explored the well-being of Turkish international students,

focusing on acculturation factors and psychological adaptation. They highlighted the significance of self-esteem levels and social support as essential factors influencing successful adaptation. This is consistent with Yang et al.'s (2006) study on international students, which suggested a direct relationship between higher self-esteem and fewer adjustment issues.

Turkish students demonstrated similar traits to other international students when it comes to well-being. However, they differ regarding challenges related to educational environments. While previous studies predominantly focused on the silence of Asian students in classroom settings, Turkish students uniquely experienced participation challenges primarily when surrounded by fellow Turkish students (Tatar, 2005). This phenomenon was closely linked to aspects of Turkish culture where making mistakes was associated with a loss of prestige. This study demonstrates the unique challenges international students face when looking at specific populations with the same ethnic background. Another educational challenge unique to Turkish students was relationships with their professors. The study about rapport by Frisby et al. (2017) found Turkish students had lower rapport with their professors than domestic students due to the different power structures in the classroom in *Turkiye*. Classroom culture differences were also explored in a study by Yildirim (2009). His findings revealed that students commonly reported difficulties in adapting to teaching approaches, understanding professors' criteria and meeting their expectations. These studies collectively demonstrate the unique challenges that Turkish students face in U.S. educational settings.

The challenges that Turkish international students encounter are not limited to academic ones. Yildirim (2009), for example, points out the collectivist nature of Turkish people rather than the individualistic nature of western societies. He discusses how Turkish students are often accustomed to working together and helping each other. Having a collectivist nature could cause social struggles in adjusting to individualistic societies. Another social challenge is regarding socializing in a foreign country. Burkholder (2014) reported that Turkish students found the domestic students to be kind and polite but did not necessarily make friends with them. They also mentioned that they had to deal with microaggressions on a regular basis because they were Turkish. These challenges highlight the nature of the social adaptation process of Turkish students in foreign settings.

Although the information available is not extensive, existing studies do offer some insight into the coping strategies of Turkish students. Yelken et al. (2020), for example, found that Turkish students sought help significantly more often than other international students when faced with stress. Moreover, compared to other international students, Turkish students showed notably higher scores on the social support subscale of the stress coping scale. Duru and Poyrazli (2007) further highlighted the significance of interactions and social connections in managing stress among Turkish international students. The literature, although somewhat limited, shows how Turkish students tend to seek assistance more actively, and highlights the importance of social connections in their approach to

handling stress while studying abroad. As such, integrating social-emotional learning into academic support systems is crucial in further enhancing academic success and fostering student well-being (Durlak et al., 2011) It is necessary to further explore Turkish international students' experiences within the framework of social-emotional learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2024). SEL provides a structured lens to explore the socio-emotional aspects of students' experiences, emphasizing the development of social and emotional competencies for academic success and overall well-being. CASEL's framework outlines the fundamental components of SEL, encompassing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. First, having *self-awareness* means recognizing one's own beliefs, thoughts, and emotions as well as knowing their impact on behaviors through a forthright evaluation of one's own strengths and weaknesses. Second, *self-management* refers to solving stress, controlling impulses, and maintaining self-motivation for achieving personal and academic goals. Third, *social awareness* emphasizes empathy towards others and respect for individuals from various backgrounds and cultures. Fourth, *relationship skills* involve abilities to maintain positive relationships, managing conflicts in a constructive manner, and asking for assistance when necessary. Finally, *responsible decision-making* is centered on making constructive choices for personal and social actions.

SEL is necessary for personal growth and academic success, given that students with strong SEL skills tend to have fewer emotional, social, and behavioral problems while contributing to a better learning environment. It is critical for schools/universities to incorporate SEL into curricula and culture to better support students. Furthermore, SEL should be a lifelong process since these skills benefit individuals from childhood through adulthood in personal, social, and professional contexts (Conley, 2015; Mahoney et al., 2021). Based on this framework, the study aims to explore the various socio-emotional aspects of Turkish international students' experiences in U.S. universities shared through EksiSozluk entries. This approach offers a comprehensive analysis of students' challenges, aspirations, coping strategies, and social connections within the academic context, aligning with the principles of SEL for a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

METHOD

Traditional academic research tools, such as surveys and interviews, have been foundational in understanding the experiences of international students, providing valuable insights into their experiences. However, with the emergence of social

media, we now have another tool to explore these experiences, shared openly and instantaneously by individuals, providing a continuous perspective on their lives (Darvin, 2022; Lam, 2009).

This qualitative study uses insights from EksiSozluk, a Turkish social media platform and its entries to gain insight into the experiences of Turkish international students in U.S. universities. The data collection process involves systematically gathering and reviewing entries on the platform specifically, discussing the challenges, aspirations, and coping strategies related to being a student in the U.S.

EksiSozluk is an online platform where the content is user-generated. It is a forum-like platform where users can open discussion pages or post under the discussion to share opinions, anecdotes, and reflections in an informal and sometimes humorous manner. Topics of discussion can range from pop culture to politics, covering anything and everything users want to discuss. Entries can vary in length; some may consist of just a few sentences or a brief explanation, while others are quite lengthy, similar to essays or comprehensive discussions. When first posed, the discussion topics appear on the dashboard, and remain on the home page depending on the activity under the discussion. This is the time frame where the discussion topics get the most attention. After a while, they get replaced with new discussions if they are no longer receiving activity from the users. However, old discussion can become popular again depending on user activity.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Eksisozluk Home Page



One of the discussion platforms on this website is a discussion called “Studying in the U.S.” with 156 entries at the time of the data collection. This discussion topic consists of entries from 2002 to 2023. Many Turkish students with U.S. study abroad experience have posted under this discussion topic by sharing their experiences through response comments and providing advice regarding the topic. The analytical framework for our analysis included Turkish students’ challenges, coping mechanisms, and advisory information that were shared among students.

Thematic analysis forms the base of this data analysis, using a detailed examination of these entries to identify patterns, meaningful segments, and themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Initially, we reviewed, open-coded, and categorized the collected entries to display the patterns and themes in a data extraction matrix. Through a process of selective coding, we then organized these preliminary themes into a thematic framework that demonstrates Turkish students' experiences in U.S. universities. This methodological approach aims to extract genuine insights and offer a comprehensive understanding of Turkish international students' academic journeys, encompassing their challenges, coping mechanisms, aspirations, and informational needs within higher education in the U.S.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal distinct themes about Turkish students' experiences in the U.S. The highest reported challenge, as mentioned in 43% of the entries, centered around social-emotional struggles, including feelings like homesickness, social difficulties, isolation, and emotional exhaustion. Financial concerns followed closely, mentioned in 21% of the entries, characterized by the need to manage with limited resources, currency difference, and socio-economic differences. Academic challenges, reported by 19% of the entries, included sub-themes such as educational differences between the U.S. and Turkiye, language barriers, and aspirations linked to studying in the U.S. Additionally, cultural adaptation difficulties were mentioned by 15% of entries, including microaggressions, culture shock, and the journey to assimilate into a new cultural environment. The remaining 2% of entries provided guidance for newcomers, covering aspects such as visa procedures, settling in the country, and utilizing university resources. User entries were translated from Turkish to English by the first author, aiming to capture the original meaning accurately.

Social Emotional Challenges and Coping Strategies

Under the social-emotional theme, students discussed many challenges and aspirations related to social interactions, feelings of isolation, homesickness, and many more. According to a study on international students by Poyrazli and Lopez (2019), international students experience homesickness at higher levels than their domestic peers. The results of this study also demonstrated homesickness to be one of the top topics discussed among students, reminiscing their life in the home country as well as their relationships with their friends and family.

Entry 1

Bir odul mu yoksa surgun mu amerikada ogrenci olmak? Anneler gozu yasli kaliyor geride, babalarin gogsu kabariyor cocugu buyuk adam olacak diye. Ogrenci oluyoruz amerikada kolay degil, basliyoruz marotana. Bayram oluyor evi

ariyorsun, annenle babani evde yanliz otururken buluyorsun. Garip hissediyorsun, suclu hissediyorsun kendini onlari yanliz biraktigin icin.adetlere ve gorenelklere olan saygin artiyor uzakta. Amerikanin yozlasmisligini gorup, bir kez daha gulumsuyuyorsun iyiki Turk'um diye. [Is being a student in America a reward or a curse? Mothers are left teary-eyed, fathers proud, thinking their child is going to be a big man, so we become students in America. It is not easy. We start a marathon. When it is time for holidays, you call home, find your parents at home all alone, you feel weird and guilty because you left them on their own. You start respecting the traditions more when you are far away. You see the corruption in America, and you smile once more, feeling lucky for being a Turk.]

As seen above, feelings of homesickness are described quite in detail by a Turkish student who studied in the U.S.; however, this is not the only challenge they face. Social and romantic relationships are also one of the prominent struggles according to many of the entries. Many of the entries discussed the genuineness of friendship back in their home country and being unable to build relationships with their American peers.

Entry 2

Ilk ders mutlak yalnızlıktır. Durup dururken kac gundur kimseyle adam gibi sohbet etmemis oldugunuzu saymaya calisabilir, sarkilari bile artik icinizden soylemeye basladiginiz icin kendinize kizabilirsiniz. Tekduzeligi normal bir yasam formu kabul eden Amerikalılara kufrederken, kabul etme kısmi haricinde onlardan bi farkiniz kalmadigina uzulursunuz. Turkiyedeleyen yaptiginiz seyleri, yalnız olmak uzere, burada da yapmaya devam edersiniz. Yalnız icki icmek, yalnız sigara icmek, etrafinizdaki yapay gulumsemeli insanlara ragmen, yalnız gezmek, yalnız eglenmek. [The first lesson is profound loneliness. You may count the days without meaningful conversation and criticize yourself for silently singing. You'll criticize Americans for their monotony, only to realize you're not much different, aside from accepting it. You continue your habits from Turkiye alone: drinking, smoking, walking, and having fun, despite the insincere smiles around you.]

Difficult Social Relationships and Isolation

Social relationships and isolation when studying in the U.S. are significant topics of discussion as seen in the entry above. Furthermore, the entry also shows the student blaming themselves for losing an identity and becoming more like Americans in the process. Building friendship is also a challenge in itself. Turkish students often feel isolated because they are unable to connect with their peers. The entry below highlights the difficulties of making friends. This student went abroad to study in a commuter-style university that does not have a campus, and struggled with making friends.

Entry 3

Bu sure içerisinde hiçbir arkadaşlık kuramadım. Zaten New York'ta oyle bir Türk çevrem de yok(olanlar da zaten bes para etmiyor, çoğunluk hep kendi menfaatinde. Genelleme yapmak istemiyorum ama bana hep boyle denk geldi) ve bir iki tanışabildiğim yabancı da hali hazırda arkadaş çevresi olan kişiler olduğu için, bir arkadaş çevresi kurmak gerçekten çok zor. [I could not make any friendships during this time. Besides, I did not really have a Turkish circle in New York (those I met were not worth much, most were always self-serving. I do not want to generalize, but that has been my experience). The few foreigners I met already had their own circle of acquaintances, making it really difficult to form a friend group.]

Coping Strategies for Social Emotional Challenges

All these difficulties can lead to students feeling disconnected and lost. This feeling was also mentioned in the entries about studying in the U.S., where students talked about how draining it was emotionally. The next entry summarizes many of the social-emotional challenges discussed across many entries, and categorizes the reasons why one needs physical health, willpower, and psychological well-being to be able to tackle challenges in studying in the U.S.

Entry 4

En saglamından bir bunye irade ve ruh sagligi gerektiren surectir. Cok saglam bunye soguk kis gunlerinde hastalandiginizda yaninizda sicak bir yemek yapip verecek biri olmadigindan daha cabuk atlatmak icin. Cok saglam irade sizi orada hayata egitiminize baglayan yegane neden kendi kendinize gelistirdiginiz motivasyon ve kayboldugunda ki uzun sürmez size gaz verecek kimsenin olmadigi icin gereklidir. Cok saglam ruh sagligi kişiye karsilasacagi altini cizerek soylemek istiyorum her turlu zorluklarda pes etmemek icin gereklidir. [The process requires strong physical health, willpower, and psychological well-being. Physical health helps you recover faster during cold winter days without someone to cook for you. Willpower keeps you motivated to connect with life and school, especially when you're lost with no one to guide you. Lastly, psychological well-being is crucial for not giving up in the face of adversity.]

This entry shows the mixed emotions and many challenges that Turkish students experience studying in the U.S. It, again, displays feelings of missing home with complaints about not having anybody to look after them when they are sick as well as the dissatisfaction regarding friendships or other relationships built in the U.S. Along with listing the challenges and issues that come with studying in the U.S., it also offers advice for new students to adapt to their new environment while seeking ways to improve themselves.

As mentioned above, social-emotional struggles make up almost half of the entries made by Turkish students. It is a top challenge for Turkish students to

adjust socially, build new relationships, and deal with the many responsibilities that come with studying abroad. The top struggle regarding social-emotional challenges is homesickness, followed closely by the difficulty in building lasting friendships and other relationships among these students, who often compare their relationships in the U.S. with those they had in Turkiye. There is some advice regarding these issues ranging from downloading skype or other video chat applications to keep in contact with family and friends to trying to make friends with Americans instead of just socializing with other Turkish students.

Financial Challenges and Exchanged Advice

Turkish students discussed financial challenges many times in these entries, ranking them second on the list of entries. They shared experiences regarding studying on a scholarship versus family money, currency differences, and having to juggle many responsibilities to receive an education in the U.S. According to the user below, possessing one of these qualities is necessary to be able to study in the U.S.:

Entry 5

a. Hali vakti az cok yerinde bir aileye sahip olmak demektir. b. Caninizi disinize takip is/okul goturmek zorunda olmak demektir. c. Super inek olup burs almisi olmak demektir. [a. Having parents that are doing well financially. b. Putting your heart and soul into it, studying and working at the same time. c. Being a super nerd and getting a scholarship.]

Some users also discussed Option B, mentioned by the user above, highlighting that a great deal of effort was required to afford to study in the U.S. without family support or a scholarship. Many users described their daunting struggles in sustaining their studies, frequently reporting feelings of burnout, depression, and exhaustion as a result. Others discussed the financial struggles caused by universities themselves. As shown in this user's entry:

Entry 6

Parasi olmayan icin pismanliktir. Uc kurus icin her tur sacma isi yapmak gene de gecinememek ve ac yasamak, ogrenciligin uzadikca uzamasi ve iskence halini almasi. Saglik sigortasiydi, kredisiydi, susuydu busuydu diye okulun para istedikce istemesi ve her sene bunlara zam yapmasi. Fakir ogrencilere "fakirsenez okumayin, bize ne" muamelesi yapmasi. [It (studying in the U.S.) is a cause for regret if you do not have money. It is, just for a couple of bucks, doing every trivial work you can find but still not being able to get by and being hungry. As being a student here prolongs, it starts feeling like torture. Health insurance, loans, school asking for more money for this and that while the fees increase every year.

Schools are treating poor students in a “if you are poor, do not study, we do not care” manner.]

Another user shared their experience of taking eight years to complete their degree. They described the first four years, detailing what they had to do to sustain themselves, especially considering the laws in place for international students in the U.S.:

Entry 7

Ilk dort sene boyunca haftanın alti gunu restoran tarzi mekanlarda masa altindan maas aldim. Yasal bir calisma iznim yoktu, yurtdisindan gelen ogrenciler yasal olarak zaten calisamiyorlar. [For the first four years, I received my salary under the table, working at restaurant-style places, six days a week. I did not have a legal work permit; students coming from abroad could not work legally anyway.]

As seen in the entries six and seven, the students felt the need to do trivial jobs or jobs where they can receive payment in cash to survive in the U.S. They felt restricted and unwelcome due to laws in place or the treatment they received from their universities. These entries highlight severe financial struggles as one of the main challenges faced by these students while studying in the U.S., underscoring the need for greater financial support.

Financial Advice

The presence of financial struggles regarding studying in the U.S. is imminent from these entries but the users do not refrain from giving advice to newcomers or Turkish students planning to study in the U.S. Below, is an excerpt from an entry written as advice to newcomers, though not a positive one. This entry is long and detailed, discussing what a student needs to have or be willing to do in order to study in the U.S. He provided a one-sentence summary at the end of the entry as seen below:

Entry 8

Ozet: paran yoksa gelme, burs alamiyorsan gelme, guzel bir okulda okuyamiyorsan gelme. Degmiyor. [Summary: if you do not have money, do not come. If you can not get a scholarship, do not come. If you can not study at a good school, do not come. It is not worth it.]

Regarding further financial advice, there are also entries on saving money through careful insurance and vehicle purchases. Yet, some perceive having to buy a car as an added expense. One entry pointed to this dilemma, discussing the lack of public transportation in the U.S. and the necessity of owning a car, which brings additional expenses. Furthermore, other discussions revolved around the ongoing difficulties, particularly for those lacking financial support from parents. Users advised newcomers to prepare themselves for the necessity of working multiple jobs, sometimes two or three, to make ends meet. Overall, these entries

captured the ongoing financial challenges students face, offering advice on how to deal with these struggles.

Academic Challenges and Aspirations as Self-motivation

Following social, emotional, and financial challenges associated with studying in the U.S., Turkish students also face academic challenges. Users mentioned language barriers, educational differences between Turkiye and the U.S., and their aspirations for getting an education in the U.S. Many of the entries pointed to the educational differences and the struggle of adjusting to them. One major difference between studying at a U.S. university and a Turkish university is the requirement to pay tuition in order to study at the U.S. institutions. The following entry points to Turkish students' impressions of this major difference:

Entry 9

Genel olarak bakıldığında parayı veren dudugu calar hesabi olandir. Baba parasiyla git, ingilizce bilme, onu da orda ogren, sonra yazılım mühendisi ol gel. [Generally speaking, it is a no pay no play situation. Go with daddy's money, do not know English, learn it there, then come back as a software engineer.]

The entry above highlights the perception among Turkish students that money takes precedence over merit when it comes to studying in the U.S. However, not all the differences mentioned by users are financial. For example, the educational culture in the U.S. is noted to be distinctly different from that in Turkey. In the following entry, one user discusses the differences in the student-teacher relationship:

Entry 10

Hocayla kanka olmama ragmen hatta ismimle hitap et demesine ragmen hala el pence divan durmaktır. Sebebi niye mi? Turkiye'deki egitim sisteminden kaynaklanan universitelerdeki kral-kole iliskisindedir. [Despite being buddy-buddy with the professor, even when he asks me to call him by his name, still feeling the need to show the utmost respect. Why, you ask? It is because of the king-subject relationship derived from the education system in Turkiye's universities.]

Some entries reveal that Turkish professors tend to have a more authoritative relationship with their students, in contrast to the friendlier rapport seen among U.S. university professors. Conversely, there are students who described professors in U.S. universities as tough and stress-inducing. One entry describes experiencing such extreme stress that it led to suicidal thoughts:

Entry 11

Gun gelebilir hocanız gotunuzden kan alirken "dur oyle bir sey yapayim da ibreti alem olsun, bir daha kimseye boyle bir sey yapmasin"! nidaları ile lab'in ortasına kendinizi asmayı düşünebilir (sakin ha!, kimse için değmez!) [A day comes when your professor is giving you an extremely hard time, you sometimes think "I'm going to do something so drastic that he can never do this anybody else" considering hanging yourself in the middle of the lab shouting this thought. (do not ever do that! It is not worth it for anybody!)]

The experiences with professors vary significantly among individuals; however, these disparities in education extend beyond faculty interactions, as highlighted in other issues mentioned. The prevailing impression among Turkish students, based on their entries, is that passing classes in the U.S. tends to be easier for them, as discussed in the following entry:

Entry 12

Hicbir zaman sinifta kalmamak ve notlarının hep iyi olmasi demektir. (Amerika'ya gidip te basarisiz olan kac kisi gordunuz? Okulun en en vasat tipleri bile orada basarili olurlar). [It (studying in the U.S.) means never failing a class and always having good grades (How many people have you seen fail after going to America? Even the most average types at school succeed there).]

Other entries align with previous remarks regarding the difficulty levels of classes, indicating that they become manageable once students adjust emotionally. However, some students also expressed concerns about the demanding schedules.

Entry 13

Bos vaktiniz olmamasina alışmaktır. Bir haftada iki sunum, uç vize, bes rapor, yedi odev yapmayı rutin haline getirmektir. [It is getting used to having no free time. It is having two presentations, three midterms, five reports and seven assignments as a routine in a week.]

Relying on Aspirations for Self-motivation

Despite the challenges associated with studying in the U.S., there are clear motivations and various aspirations driving these students' choices. Many believe that graduating from a U.S. university will open up more opportunities for them. For instance, one entry describes it as "guaranteeing your future through studying in the U.S.", while another discusses the valuable experiences gained from studying at a U.S. university in the entry below:

Entry 14

Lisans için gitmeye fırsat ve imkan varsa kesinlikle değerlendirilmesi gerekir. Çünkü kisi genç yaşta çok kültürlü bir ülkede edineceği tecrübeyi, Türkiye'nin en iyi en parmakla gösterilen vakıf üniversitesine bedava gitse bile edinemez. [If possible, pursuing a bachelor's degree should be considered, as the experience gained at a young age in this cultured country is unmatched, even by Türkiye's top private universities.]

As highlighted in this entry, studying in the U.S. is perceived as a significant opportunity, yet the entries also contain warnings. Some emphasize the importance of choosing the right university, cautioning against what one entry calls “signboard universities”—those that may have the name but lack high regard or accreditation. Additionally, other entries advise on the importance of internships and part-time jobs as crucial steps in launching a career in certain fields.

Cultural Challenges and Appreciation of Diversity

Lastly, Turkish students discuss a range of cultural challenges associated with studying in the U.S., including culture shock, adjusting to a new culture, gaining new perspectives, experiencing microaggressions, and making comparisons between the two countries. Cultural differences between Türkiye and the U.S. are evident in several of these entries. Many discuss how Americans socialize differently and the adjustment required for this. The U.S. is considered to be an individualistic society, which presents a significant cultural shift for Turkish students coming from more collectivist backgrounds. For example, this entry compares the two socializing styles:

Entry 15

Amerikada öğrenci olmak güc de olsa amerikalıların her yere beraber giden türklere farklı olarak kafasına esince seninle görüşeceğini kabullenmektir. [Being a student in America means accepting that, unlike Turks that go everywhere together, Americans will meet up with you when it is convenient for them.]

Microaggressions are another cultural challenge these students face, as mentioned in several entries. Examples of these microaggressions and stereotypes include the frequent misconception of Türkiye being an Arab country, inquiries about whether Turks always wear harem pants, comments implying that Middle Easterners are less intelligent, and a professor asking a student if women in Türkiye can walk around without a hijab. One entry describes the last incident in this way:

Entry 16

Sayisiz makalesi bulunan, saygi duyduğunuz, 50 yıllık bir profesörün size "bir şey merak ettim, ülkende de basın acik gezebiliyor musun? degisik bir tecrube olmalı" demesidir, zira bazılarının gerçekten de dünyadan haberi yoktur. [It is (studying in the U.S.) when a professor with countless articles, whom you respect, and who has been teaching for 50 years, asks you, "I'm curious, can you freely walk around with your head uncovered in your country? It must be a different experience." Because some really have no idea about the world.]

Appreciation of Diversity

Although students often face challenges in adjusting to a new culture, Turkish students view embracing diversity and gaining new cultural perspectives as positive aspects of studying abroad. Many discussed making friends from around the world and learning about various cultures. One entry poignantly describes the moment it becomes time to return to Türkiye.

Entry 17

Donme vakti geldiginde arkadaslarinizdan ayrılmak istemez ve "ulan 17 ayri milletten arkadasim oldu, hayatimin bir kismini beraber gecirdim, cok ozlicem" diyerek, hepsine havaalaninda teker teker sarilip salya sumuk aglarsiniz. [When it is time to leave, not wanting to part with your friends, you say, "Man, I made friends from 17 different nationalities, spent a part of my life with them, I'm going to miss them so much," while hugging each one of them at the airport, crying your heart out.]

It is evident that Turkish students studying in the U.S. encounter a range of challenges as they adapt to a new culture. However, amidst these difficulties, they also find positive experiences, notably in embracing diversity and gaining new perspectives.

DISCUSSION

We examined the entries that Turkish international students posted regarding their study abroad experiences in the U.S. on *Eksisozluk* a Turkish social media site, drawing on the theoretical framework of SEL (CASEL, 2024). The findings showed the primary challenge faced by international students as social and emotional struggles, closely followed by financial and cultural challenges. Among the five domains of SEL, Turkish students particularly struggle with *social awareness* and *relationship skills*. Homesickness and difficulties in building social relationships with Americans highlight these challenges. This demonstrates a difference between Turkish international students and other international students mentioned in the literature review, reinforcing the relevance of SEL in understanding their unique social and emotional experiences. While East Asian students highly struggled with English language proficiency (Choi,

2015; Huang, 2014; Liao & Liang, 2021), Turkish students' entries had limited mention regarding language struggles.

It is worth discussing the significance of social media and American pop culture (e.g., movies, TV shows) for Turkish international students in seeking coping strategies, as they turned to these media for information. In addition to using the Turkish social media platform: Eksisozluk, Turks are highly involved in American media since American social media platforms are popular among Turkish users. Today, 85.5% of the Turkish population use Facebook and 67.9% use Instagram according to Napoleoncat (2024). Youth in *Turkiye* is also involved in American media when it comes to TV shows according to O'Neil and Guler (2010). Their study indicates that American movies dominate many theaters, while Turkish TV channels and radio stations broadcast a significant amount of American shows and music. This also means more exposure to the English language and American culture through media. These could be contributing factors to why Turkish students did not express as many struggles with the English language as other international students.

Turkish international students grappled much more with social-emotional challenges as demonstrated by this study. This points to a difference in need to support Turkish international students' success in U.S. universities. These students need more support regarding social-emotional issues. One cause for this could be the lack of a support system present in Turkish students in U.S. universities. As the leading international student populations in the U.S., countries like China, India, and Korea often have environments where students can be with people from the same backgrounds, such as clubs or student associations founded for these populations. Addressing the lack of community support for Turkish students and their social-emotional challenges through the lens of SEL could foster their social awareness and support the development of their relationship skills.

As it is often the case with international students, cultural and financial struggles need to be addressed as well for academic success. Many international students struggle with managing tuition and living expenses, worsened by limited access to loans or scholarships and restrictions on foreign students working off-campus (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The findings show that Turkish international students frequently raised concerns about work hour limitations, finding themselves in situations where they had to work for unreported income or cut back on essential expenses, as mentioned in entries six and seven. Echoing recent literature (Guo et al., 2019; Mbous et al., 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023), the current study highlights this issue as one of the primary struggles faced by international students that still require attention.

CONCLUSION

Through a textual analysis of social media entries, this study highlighted a range of struggles that Turkish international students faced while studying in the U.S. Findings showed that although students were distressed by financial difficulties

and microaggressions stemming from a lack of intercultural understanding on campus, they suffered most from social-emotional difficulties related to homesickness and making friends with U.S. students. Although the study was based solely on social media data from Turkish students who attended or are currently attending U.S. institutions, its findings have implications for supporting Turkish students and for future related research. The findings suggest that Turkish students need social-emotional support foremost for their academic success. It is clear that there is a necessity for providing more comprehensive training for Turkish international students that goes beyond linguistic and cultural awareness training. Additionally, universities can provide differentiated support for diverse groups of students, avoiding a monolithic view of international students. Future studies can explore both inter-group and intra-group diversity among international students, utilizing multiple sources of data beyond social media.

Given that Turkish international students sought coping strategies from social media and pop culture, the critical role of these online resources in supporting them cannot be overstated. Alongside in-person services, universities could provide online services that promote social awareness and relationship skills among social-emotional skills, drawing on the SEL framework (CASEL, 2024). Future research can investigate the impact of students' development of social-emotional skills on their ability to cope with a variety of challenges beyond social-emotional ones.

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