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Acculturative Stress and the Psychological Well-Being of International Students: The Role of Social Support and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT: *International students are prone to experiencing acculturative stress as a result of cultural differences that impact their mental well-being. Studies have shown that people may successfully handle stress by using efficient coping mechanisms and seeking social support. Many studies have shown that social support strongly mediates the effects of experienced stress; however, the mediating effect of social support and the moderating effect of coping strategies (approach and avoidant coping) on acculturative stress and psychological well-being need to be explored. Data were collected from 100 international students*

online through opportunity sampling. The findings of the study revealed that acculturative stress impacts the psychological well-being of international students and that social support acts as a mediator between acculturative stress and psychological well-being, whereas approach and avoidant coping buffer the negative impact of acculturative stress. Education on coping mechanisms and stress management programs can enhance psychological well-being.

Keywords: Acculturative Stress, Psychological Well-Being, Social Support, Approach Coping, Avoidant Coping

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INTRODUCTION

International education is characterized by constant evolution and progress, driven by the aspirations of students worldwide to pursue their academic objectives in other countries to acquire additional skills, the opportunity to be exposed to various experiences, and the chance to interact with teachers who offer different perspectives and qualifications that might provide them with a competitive edge in the job market (Soufi Amlashi et al., 2024). The inclusion of these students contributes to a wide array of cultures, experiences, and perspectives, enriching the global diversity of higher education institutions (Tavares, 2021). However, underneath this rewarding experience lies a complicated web of challenges that overseas students must expertly manage to achieve their objectives. Students often find it difficult to adjust to a new culture while studying abroad (Riaz et al., 2025).

Culture refers to the collective behaviors, traditions, and values that are influenced by the political, social, and economic activities of a particular group or country (Le & Huyen- Nguyen, 2024). Acculturation refers to the process by which people adjust to a new culture while still preserving their native culture (van der Zed & van Oudenhoven, 2022; Tekel et al., 2025). It is also possible that both cultures exhibit similarities in certain aspects, although there may be significant disparities such as language and cuisine. Disparities between the two cultures lead to the emergence of a kind of stress known as acculturative stress (Azzazi, 2023).

International students have been operationally defined as individuals

who are citizens of one country and who travel to another country for the purpose of their tertiary education (UNESCO, 2015). International students are more susceptible to experiencing acculturative stress because of the need to adjust to a foreign culture (Aziz et al., 2022; Talwar et al., 2022). Upon arriving in a foreign country, individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural, social, and educational norms, which may present challenges for adaptation (Kee et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2020). As a result, several psychological problems occur, and adjusting to the situation can have a detrimental effect on mental health (Riaz et al., 2025; Shoaib, 2025).

Psychological well-being involves experiencing satisfaction (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Rimsha, 2024) and feeling competent in one's everyday life (Deci & Ryan, 2008). From the perspective of international students, they face several challenges, including the limited availability of information in their mother tongue, navigating the urban environment, inadequate resources for making their traditional food, and heightened security concerns, all of which can lead to adverse effects on their mental health (Li et al., 2019). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that various psychological factors, such as the student's geographical origin, ethnicity, level of language proficiency, and prevailing social and cultural views in their society, might impact how these problems are perceived.

Social support reflects the perception of the availability of help from important people (Samuel & Burger, 2020) and is considered an important factor in international students' adaptation to new cultures (Wang et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2017). International students need assistance in different areas to ensure that they are doing well overall. This is particularly crucial for students who decide to study abroad and encounter the challenges of language and cultural differences (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Having an excellent network of friends and acquaintances can be a real lifesaver for international students when they encounter unexpected and challenging situations in their new country. It helps students avoid the negative mental effects of adjusting to a new culture and improves their overall mental well-being (Bender et al., 2019). Studies indicate that when international students receive assistance from their peers, fellow students, or academic mentors, they feel a greater sense of empowerment and are more inclined to seek out counseling services (Liu et al., 2022; Muganga et al., 2025).

With the increasing number of students studying abroad, understanding and addressing the challenges that arise are crucial. Without adequate social support services, many international students face difficulties in adapting and finding success in their new environment. This research aims to thoroughly investigate the stress that international students experience when they adjust to different cultures. It also aims to assess the approaches they use to handle these challenges and keep their mental health in check. Moreover, coping strategies represent the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals deploy to manage internal or external demands that are perceived as taxing or exceeding their available resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Zeshan et al., 2026). In contemporary psychological frameworks, these behaviors are widely classified into approach and avoidant coping paradigms (Rehr & Nguyen, 2021). Approach

coping is an adaptive, active response style in which individuals directly confront stressors through goal-oriented problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and emotional processing (Ahmad et al., 2024, as cited in Price et al., 2025; Bakker & de Vries, 2021, as cited in Zeshan et al., 2026). This proactive engagement is consistently linked to enhanced meaning-making and long-term improvements in psychological adjustment and resilience (Price et al., 2025). Conversely, avoidant coping involves self-distraction, denial, or behavioral disengagement to bypass or suppress the psychological distress tied to a stressor (Bottomley et al., 2024, as cited in Price et al., 2025). While avoidant tactics may offer short-term comfort or emotional defense during the acute onset of a crisis, chronic reliance on avoidance is highly maladaptive and reliably predicts elevated levels of prolonged grief, anxiety, and occupational burnout (Price et al., 2025; Raasthøj et al., 2024, Zeshan et al., 2026).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturative stress emerges as a distinct psychological challenge when international students encounter profound cultural, behavioral, and economic disparities within a host country. This specific variant of distress is comprehensively conceptualized as an individual's psychological and behavioral response to taxing life events tied directly to the process of multicultural assimilation (Al-Krenawi et al., 2021). During cross-cultural transitions, international student populations face a complex web of unique stressors, including persistent language barriers, geographic disorientation, limited traditional nutritional resources, social isolation, and heightened security anxieties. When these systemic pressures overwhelm an individual's personal capacity, they directly negatively affect psychological well-being—a multifaceted construct encompassing subjective life satisfaction, personal fulfillment, environmental mastery, and positive interpersonal relationships (Jackson et al., 2019). Empirical evidence consistently underscores a robust, negative relationship between these cultural adjustment stressors and mental health outcomes. The inability to adapt successfully to foreign educational, social, or institutional norms reliably sparks severe psychological distress, presenting clinically as elevated rates of depression, acute anxiety, and chronic melancholy, ultimately lowering overall academic and life adjustment (Zhang & Li, 2022).

Social support serves as a crucial underlying mechanism that bridges the gap between the onset of cultural adjustment strains and an international student's ultimate state of mental well-being (Elshahat et al., 2022). Broadly defined as an individual's cognitive perception of the accessibility of tangible, emotional, and informational assistance from significant network contact, social support is a cornerstone of global cross-cultural adaptation (Riaz et al., 2025). Empirical pathways reveal that severe acculturative stress can trigger defensive social withdrawal or suspicion toward a host culture, which paradoxically threatens to reduce available environmental support when it is most critically needed (Aldawsari et al., 2018). However, when international students actively build reliable support networks—consisting of peer groups, family connections,

academic mentors, or fellow international compatriots—they experience enhanced psychological empowerment and are more inclined to utilize formal counseling resources (Bender et al., 2019). Structural mediation analyses demonstrated that social support partially mediated the link between stress factors and psychological adaptation. By acting as a transformative conduit, robust social resources buffer the adverse effects of environmental stressors, translating acute cultural strain into prosocial behaviors and enhancing relational safety, thereby preserving students' psychological well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wang et al., 2020).

The conditional boundary effects that govern the extent to which acculturative stress damages psychological well-being are largely determined by the specific cognitive and behavioral coping styles students employ (Berry, 2006). When international students confront the taxing demands of a novel environment, their self-regulatory behaviors generally bifurcate into approach-oriented or avoidant coping styles. Approach coping functions as an adaptive, active response pattern focused on direct problem-solving, cognitive reframing, and seeking structural solutions. Slope analyses confirm that when approach coping is utilized at high levels, the destructive impact of acculturative stress on psychological well-being is effectively minimized (Nazir & Özçiçek, 2023). Conversely, avoidant coping operates through denial, behavioral disengagement, self-distraction, or emotional suppression to bypass acute psychological pain. Although avoidant strategies might briefly reduce emotional distress during early cultural shock, an overreliance on avoidance is fundamentally maladaptive, accelerating feelings of loneliness, cultural alienation, and long-term distress (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Quantitative moderation evidence reveals that both coping modalities significantly interact with acculturative stress to alter well-being trajectories. High levels of approach coping act as an essential psychological buffer that weakens the negative stress–well-being link, whereas severe avoidant coping alters the statistical significance of the stress relationship, indicating that internal self-regulatory mechanisms directly dictate final psychological adaptation outcomes (Liu et al., 2022; Rehr & Nguyen, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for investigating the impact of acculturative stress on the psychological well-being of international students is fundamentally anchored in Berry's Model of Acculturation Stress and Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Acculturative stress represents the unique psychological strain—including language barriers, discrimination, homesickness, and deep cultural dissonance—encountered by students during cross-cultural transitions (Falavarjani et al., 2026; Jarrar & Nweke, 2025). When international students interface with an unfamiliar host environment, this stress operates as a disruptive catalyst that directly erodes fundamental internal psychological resources, such as an individual's perceived meaning in life (Soufi Amlashi et al., 2025). Meta-analytic evidence robustly confirms that unmitigated acculturative stress is strongly negatively related to favorable psychological

outcomes, driving elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and severe emotional distress while decreasing overall quality of life and general satisfaction (Ersoy & Akcaoglu, 2025; Soufi Amlashi et al., 2024).

The pathway connecting acculturative stress to psychological well-being is heavily contingent upon external systemic resources and internal self-regulatory mechanisms, specifically social support and coping strategies. Within this framework, perceived social support acts as a critical external environmental buffer; by providing emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance, it mitigates local structural barriers and significantly dampens the negative effects of acculturative stress on social and emotional adjustment (Jarrar & Nweke, 2025; Riaz et al., 2025). Concurrently, the specific coping strategies employed by students dictate how this stress is filtered internally. Active approach-oriented coping strategies (such as cognitive restructuring and target-oriented problem solving) allow students to constructively manage cultural differences, facilitating psychological adaptation and protecting mental well-being (Cao et al., 2021; Riaz et al., 2025). Conversely, an overreliance on maladaptive, avoidant coping strategies (such as denial or behavioral withdrawal) consistently exacerbates feelings of isolation, ultimately accelerating the decline of an international student's psychological well-being (Ersoy & Akcaoglu, 2026; Soufi Amlashi et al., 2025).

International students may encounter difficulties in adjusting to academic responsibilities and managing feelings of isolation. The development of coping skills becomes crucial in navigating these pressures. For example, students use avoidant coping strategies, in which they repress their cultural identity and values to assimilate into the host culture (Akhtar & KroenerHerwig, 2019). Avoidant coping strategies are indicative of poor psychological well-being among international students, leading to experiences of loneliness and cultural alienation, ultimately having a detrimental effect on their mental health (Sarada, 2024). According to Saravanan et al. (2019), students may effectively manage their stress by using approaches such as seeking social support and employing emotion-focused and problem-focused coping techniques. Szabo et al. (2020) studied international students' coping experiences. The results indicated that approach coping reduced stress and anxiety, whereas avoidant coping buffered their effects. This is because as the students tried to find a solution for every problem, it increased their stress, whereas if they accepted their situation, they found it easy to adapt (Singh, 2023). This study aims to explore the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being for international students during their acculturation process and the effects of mediator and moderator factors such as social support and coping techniques on this relationship. This understanding is crucial for providing effective support during the acculturation process to help students navigate their new environment.

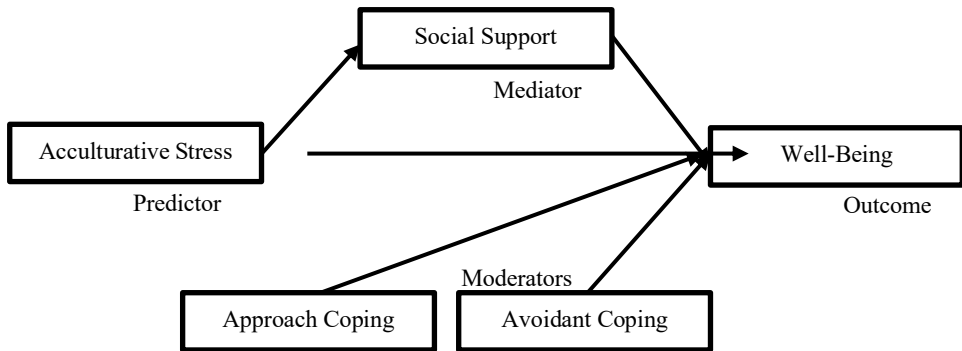


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework of the Study

Hypotheses

1. Acculturative stress negatively predicts psychological well-being among international students.
2. Social support mediates the relationship between acculturative stress and the psychological well-being of international students.
3. Coping strategies (approach and avoidant coping) moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and the psychological well-being of international students.

METHOD

It was correlational survey research based on a quantitative research approach. A correlational research design was selected to determine the mediating role of social support and the moderating role of coping strategies, with a focus on the outcome variable of psychological well-being.

Participants

International students (N = 100) were recruited through opportunity sampling by sharing a brochure detailing the study on various social media platforms. This brochure included the study's objectives, confidentiality assurances, an online survey form link, and a QR code for easy access. The determination of this sample size is based on the research conducted by Mutharintavida and Jethwani (2023). Students who had student visas for 1 year or 4 years and who were from various cultural, language, or ethnic origins (e.g., Shawly, 2023) were included in the study. Local students who were born in the UK, those seeking a second degree, and those who had been enrolled in universities for less than a year were among the exclusion criteria for this research. The sample size of 100 participants was determined using G*Power software a priori power analysis for a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.15$), an alpha level of $\alpha = 0.05$, and a power level of $\beta = 0.80$, which represents the standard statistical threshold required to minimize Type II errors in behavioral research

(Faul et al., 2009; Cohen, 1988). This target size is further justified by empirical precedents in comparable investigative designs, which demonstrate that a sample of 100 provides sufficient statistical power to detect meaningful multivariate relationships without compromising model stability (Mutharintavida & Jethwani, 2023; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1: Demographic Differences of Study Variables

Variable	Categories/Values	n	%
Gender	Male	44	44
	Female	48	48
	Nonbinary/Third gender	6	6
	Prefer not to say	2	2
Marital Status	Married	38	38
	Unmarried	62	62
Country of Origin	Pakistan	42	42
	India	28	28
	China	15	15
	Bangladesh	5	5
	Nigeria	3	3
	Japan	2	2
Financial Support	Family Support	46	46
	Self-Support	40	40
	Scholarship	14	14
Employment Status	Employed	65	65
	Unemployed	35	35

In sample 44 of the study participants, 48 were male, 6 were nonbinary/third gender, and 2 preferred not to say anything about their gender identity. Only 38 of the study participants were married, while the rest were unmarried. Forty-two of the participants were from Pakistan, 28 were from India, 15 were from China, 5 were from Bangladesh, 3 were from Nigeria, and only 2 were from Japan. With respect to financial support, the participants’ responses revealed that 46 were on family support, 40 were on self-support and the remaining 14 were on scholarships. Fifty-two of the participants were enrolled in the 1-year study program, 27 were in the 2-year study program, and 21 were in the 3-year study program. Among the 100 participants, only 35 were unemployed, while the rest were employed.

The study sample included international students from six distinct nations: Pakistan (n = 42), India (n = 28), China (n = 15), Bangladesh (n = 5), Nigeria (n = 3), and Japan (n = 2). These specific countries were selected primarily because of the use of an online opportunity sampling strategy, where a digital recruitment brochure containing the survey link was distributed across global social media platforms. From a theoretical standpoint, targeting participants from these specific geographic regions is highly informative for investigating cross-cultural transitions. Academic literature notes that international student adjustment, perceptions of stressors, and mental health outcomes are heavily

influenced by a student's precise geographical origin, ethnicity, and native language proficiency. The countries represented in this sample predominantly feature collectivistic cultural structures (such as Pakistan, India, China, and Bangladesh), where individuals historically navigate social support seeking and stress appraisal differently than those in individualist western environments do. Prior research has indicated that students moving from these specific backgrounds often encounter pronounced cultural, educational, and linguistic disparities in the host country, rendering them an ideal demographic for exploring the complex interactions between acculturative stress, coping strategies, and psychological well-being.

Measures

All the variables were measured by using standardized self-report questionnaires with prior permission from the respective authorities. The first section of the survey did ask for some personal information; it did not specifically ask for any identifying characteristics. Key demographic characteristics included some personal information (i.e., gender, marital status, degree program, and country of origin). Nevertheless, it did not specifically ask for any identifying characteristics.

Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students

The Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) was used to assess acculturative stress. The scale consists of 36 questions that are categorized into seven subscales: discrimination, homesickness, perceived hatred or rejection, fear, stress from shift or cultural shock, guilt, and general concerns. The rating for each subscale is measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. High scores are associated with increased acculturative stress. An alpha of .93 indicates a high level of internal consistency (Franco et al., 2019). The construct validity of the ASSIS is well established through foundational research, which has proven its efficacy in tracking cross-cultural adaptation challenges among overseas student populations (Riaz & Rafique, 2019; Riaz et al., 2025; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994).

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007a) consists of 14 items, each rated on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, ranging from “none of the time” to “all the time”. The cumulative score is determined by summing the points allocated to each question and ranges from 14 to 70. A higher numerical value indicates a more positive perception of one's well-being. It has an alpha coefficient of .94 (Marmara et al., 2022). The structural validity of the WEMWBS has been robustly confirmed across diverse demographic cohorts through extensive international validation studies (Marmara et al., 2022; Riaz et al., 2025; Tennant et al., 2007a).

Brief COPE Inventory

The Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997) assesses both successful and inefficient coping strategies in response to stressful life events. This self-report questionnaire comprises 28 items that evaluate two primary coping styles, avoidant coping and approach coping, each rated on a 1 to 5 Likert scale. The scale

includes 14 subscales, each consisting of 2 items. Six of the subscales (self-distraction, denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, venting, self-blame) assess avoidant coping, while another six subscales (active coping, emotional support, use of informational support, positive reframing, planning, acceptance) measure approach coping. None of the items are reverse scored. The scale's overall reliability exceeds .84 (DeDios- Stern et al., 2017). The factorial validity of the Brief COPE is documented by extensive clinical utility studies evaluating active approach and avoidant coping dimensions (Carver, 1997; DeDios-Stern et al., 2017).

Brief Social Support Scale

The Brief Social Support Scale (Beutel et al., 2017) was used to assess perceived social support among international students. It consists of six items with two subscales, i.e., Tangible support (e.g., If you need it, how often is someone available to take you to the doctor if you need it), and emotional-functional support (e.g., if you need it, how often is someone available to give you good advice about a crisis?). All six items are rated from 1 = never, 2 = occasionally, 3 = mostly to 4 = always available. None of the items are reverse scored. A high score indicates the availability of social support. The scale's overall reliability exceeds .86 (Beutel et al., 2017). The validity of the BSSS is supported by established psychometric datasets assessing tangible and emotional-functional support frameworks (Beutel et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2019).

Procedure

The present investigation was carried out using the online survey platform Qualtrics. Before starting the survey, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research. The participants were also informed that the main emphasis was on those who acquired student visas to study overseas. The participants were notified that the research had obtained ethical clearance from Sheffield Hallam University and would need approximately 25 minutes to complete. After their willingness to continue, detailed instructions for each questionnaire were provided in the survey. At the end of the survey, the participants were thanked for their participation.

Ethical Considerations

The study considered various ethical considerations outlined in the ethics form to ensure the well-being of the subjects' mental health. The study explicitly stated that ethics approval was obtained from Sheffield Hallam University. The information sheet emphasized that individuals had the option to decline participation and highlighted their freedom to leave without explanation. The importance of privacy in polls was emphasized, highlighting the irreversible nature of information once it is submitted. The privacy of the data was ensured by storing them on a laptop that was exclusively accessible to the lead detective through a password. The participants were required to carefully review the information sheet and subsequently complete an approval form to demonstrate their comprehensive understanding of the task. Although the study likely posed no physical or mental harm, participants were required to complete surveys that

prompted them to reflect on their stress levels and mental well-being. The feedback sheet provided contact information for support services to ensure that individuals could easily access assistance if needed. The participants were provided with expert contact information if they had any questions.

RESULTS

The following section explains the analysis of the data collected. To analyze the data's alpha reliability, correlation, linear regression, mediation, and moderation analyses were conducted by using Jamovi (version 2.5.7). First, the data were checked for normality using histograms/shapiro-wilk, and they were normal. The details of the results are explained below: Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of each scale by measuring the degree of association among the items within the same scale.

Table 2: Psychometric Properties of the Scales

Scales	k	M	SD	Range	Cronbach's α
Acculturative Stress Scale	38	113	23.7	43-183	.91
Warwick Edinbrough Mental Well-Being Scale	14	41.1	8.23	16-83	.74
Brief COPE	28	69.4	8.90	37-97	.70
Brief Social Support Scale	06	15.0	2.91	07-24	.43

Note: k= Number of items, M= Mean, and SD= Standard deviation

The psychometric properties of all the scales indicated that the measures were reliable ($\geq .7$) and that only the Brief Social Support Scale had poor internal consistency ($< .7$), indicating a weak correlation among the items. Therefore, deleting these items from the dataset was not feasible; they continued to be included in the dataset. Given that the data met the assumptions of the parameters, Pearson's bivariate correlation was conducted for the total score of each variable to determine the relationships.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations among the Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Acculturative Stress	113	23.7	--				
2. Psychological Well-being	41.1	23.7	-0.58***	--			
3. Social Support	69.4	8.90	-0.32**	0.40***	--		
4. Approach Coping	30.8	5.33	-0.40***	0.55***	0.50***	--	
5. Avoidant Coping	28.4	4.93	0.11	0.16	-0.23*	0.17	--

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The findings in the table show that acculturative stress is negatively correlated with psychological well-being ($r(98) = -.58, p < .001$), social support ($r(98) = -.32, p < .01$), approach coping ($r(98) = -.40, p < .001$) and avoidant coping ($r(98) = 0.11, p > .05, r^2 = 0.01$). Additionally, acculturative stress

explained 33% of the variance in psychological well-being ($r^2 = .33$), 10% of the variance in social support ($r^2 = 0.10$), 16% of the variance in approach coping ($r^2=0.16$), and only 1% of the variance in avoidant coping. Psychological well-being is positively correlated with social support ($r(98) = 0.40, p < .001, r^2 = 0.16$), approach coping ($r(98) = 0.55, p < .001, r^2 = 0.30$), and avoidant coping ($r(98) = 0.16, p > .05, r^2 = 0.02$). Furthermore, psychological well-being explained 16% of the variance in social support, 30% of the variance in approach coping, and only 2% of the variance in avoidant coping. The findings in the table also show that social support is positively correlated with approach coping ($r(98) = 0.50, p < .001$) and has a variance of 25% ($r^2 = 0.25$) and a negative correlation with avoidant coping ($r(98) = 0.23, p < .05$), with a variance of 5% ($r^2 = 0.05$). Consequently, social support is significantly correlated with acculturative stress and psychological well-being, which confirms that it is a potential mediator. Furthermore, it was ensured that none of the correlations exceeded .8 to assess multicollinearity. It was concluded that the data met the assumptions for multicollinearity; therefore, the assumptions for the mediation analysis were met. Table 4: Regression Coefficients of Acculturative Stress and Social Support on Psychological Well-Being

Variable	B	β	SE	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Constant	50.68***		5.57	39.62	61.75
Acculturative Stress	-0.17***	-0.50***	0.02	-0.23	-0.11
Social Support	0.68**	0.24**	0.23	0.21	1.15
R ²	.39***				

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

The above table shows acculturative stress as a predictor of psychological well-being. The R² value of .39 revealed that the predictor (acculturative stress and social support) explained 39% of the variance in the outcome variable (psychological well-being), with $F(1, 98) = 31.8$ and $p < .001$. The findings revealed that acculturative stress negatively predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = -.50, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = -0.23 - 0.11$) and that social support positively predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.24, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.21 - 1.15$).

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was used to determine the mediating role of social support in the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being.

Table 5: Mediation of Social Support between Acculturative Stress and Psychological Well-Being

Effect	Estimate	SE	95%CI		Z	p
			Lower	Upper		
Indirect	-0.027	0.012	-0.051	-0.003	-2.23	.002
Direct	-0.176	0.028	-0.232	-0.120	-6.18	<.001
Total	-0.204	0.028	-0.259	-0.148	7.23	<.001

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

The results show that the indirect effect of acculturative stress on psychological well-being through the mediation of social support (estimate = -0.027, $p < .01$) indicates a small but statistically significant mediation effect of social support ($Z = -2.23$). The direct effect of social support on psychological well-being is significant (estimate = -0.176, $p < .001$; $Z = -6.18$). By combining both direct and indirect pathways ($c+a \times b$), the total effect of acculturative stress on psychological well-being is also significant (estimate = -0.204, $p < .001$; $Z = -7.23$). The mediation effect was partial, as the direct effect was nonsignificant.

Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis was used to determine the moderation effect of approach coping and avoidant coping on the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being.

Table 6: Moderation of Approach Coping between Acculturative Stress and Psychological Well-Being

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		Z	P
			Lower	Upper		
Acculturative Stress	-0.151	0.025	-0.201	-	-	<
				0.101	5.99	.001
Approach Coping	0.531	0.111	0.313	0.750	4.76	<
						.001
Acculturative Stress	0.005	0.002	-0.259	-	1.84	<
* Approach Coping				0.011		.001
Acculturative Stress	-0.132	0.028	-0.189	-	-	<
				0.075	4.57	.001
Approach Coping	0.292	0.122	0.052	0.531	2.39	0.017
Acculturative Stress	0.017	0.003	0.009	0.024	4.67	<
* Avoidant Coping						.001

The above table shows the moderating effect of approach coping between acculturative stress and psychological well-being. The findings revealed that acculturative stress negatively predicted approach coping (estimate= -0.151, $Z = -5.99$, $p < .001$) and that approach coping positively predicted the outcome variable, i.e., psychological well-being (estimate= - 0.531, $Z = 4.76$, $p < .001$). The findings also reveal that the interaction effect of acculturative stress and approach

coping is statistically significant (estimate= 0.005, $Z= 1.84, p< .001$). The findings suggest that the impact of approach coping is positive, whereas acculturative stress has a negative effect. Additionally, the interaction between acculturative stress and approach coping has a small but significant positive effect, suggesting that approach coping can somewhat buffer the negative impact of acculturative stress. The above table shows the moderating effect of approach coping between acculturative stress and psychological well-being. The findings revealed that acculturative stress predicted avoidant coping (estimate= -0.132, $Z= 4.57, p< .001$) and that avoidant coping predicted the outcome variable, i.e., psychological well-being (estimate= 0.292, $Z= 2.39, p=0.017$), which revealed a statistically insignificant effect of avoidant coping on psychological well-being. The findings further reveal that the interaction effect of acculturative stress and avoidant coping is statistically significant (estimate= 0.017, $Z= 4.67, p< .001$).

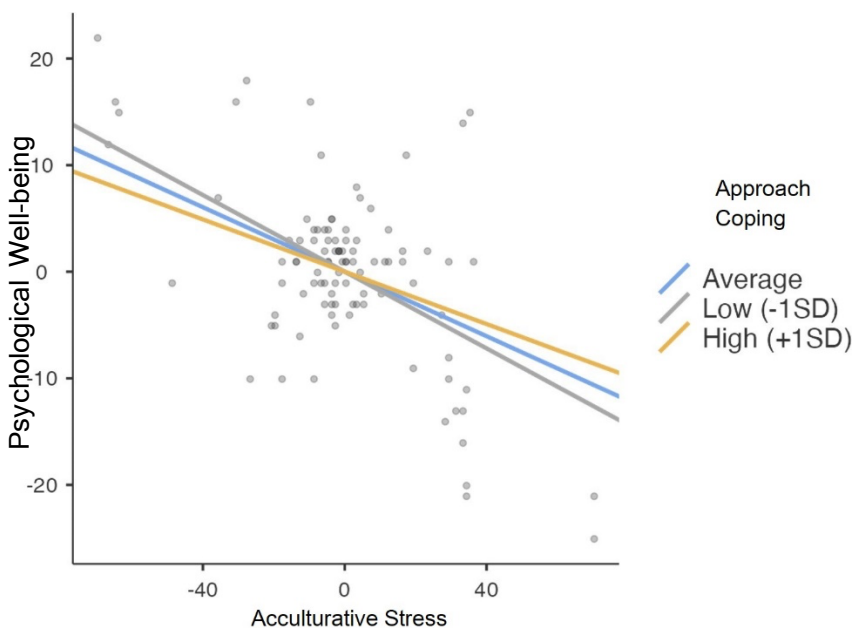


Figure 2: Moderation of Approach Coping between Acculturative Stress and Psychological Well-Being

The above slope shows the different levels of moderation of approach coping between acculturative stress and psychological well-being. When approach coping is at an average level (estimate= -0.151, $Z= -5.95, p< .001$), acculturative stress has a negative effect on psychological well-being, and this negative effect further increases when approach coping is at a low level (estimate= -0.151, $Z= -6.24, p< .001$). Conversely, when approach coping is at a high level,

the negative impact of acculturative stress is at its lowest level, which shows that the use of approach coping moderates the adverse effects of acculturative stress on psychological well-being.

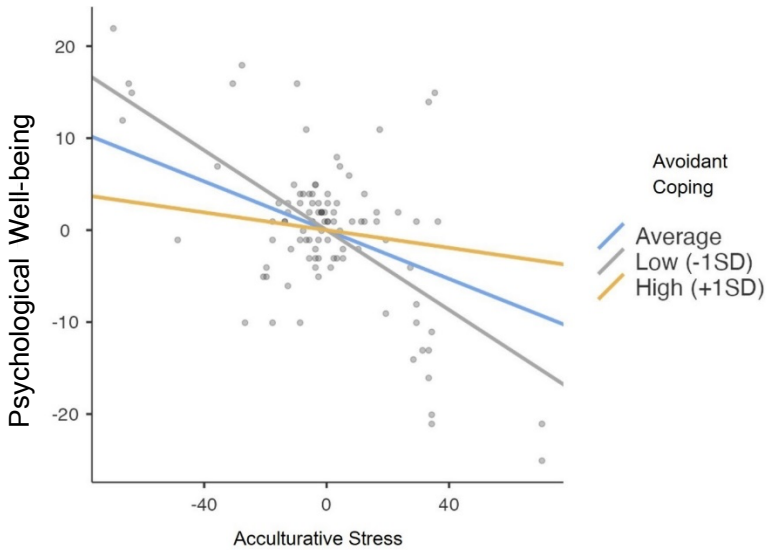


Figure 3: Moderation of Avoidant Coping between Acculturative Stress and Psychological Well-Being

The above slope shows the different levels of moderation of avoidant coping between acculturative stress and psychological well-being. When avoidant coping is at an average level (estimate= -0.132, $Z= -4.39$, $p < .001$), the impact of acculturative stress decreases, and psychological well-being increases further when avoidant coping is at a low level (estimate= -0.216, $Z= -7.80$, $p < .001$). Conversely, when avoidant coping is at its highest level, the impact of acculturative stress on psychological well-being is not statistically significant, indicating a weaker and insignificant relationship (Estimate= -0.048, $Z= -1.14$, $p= 0.254$).

DISCUSSION

For international students, among many of the challenges, acculturative stress can be overwhelming. For instance, the transition from one culture to another can impact their psychological well-being, which could be the result of a lack of social support and ineffective use of coping strategies. Consequently, the results of the current study highlight the importance of examining the potential role of social support and coping strategies in managing and reducing acculturative stress to enhance the psychological well-being of international students.

A correlational survey study conducted on 100 international students revealed several interconnected findings regarding their psychological health during cultural transitions. First, acculturative stress significantly and negatively predicts the psychological well-being of international students, indicating that higher cultural strain directly undermines their mental health and satisfaction. Second, social support serves as a statistically significant partial mediator in this relationship, meaning that having an available support network actively mitigates and reduces the adverse effects of acculturative stress on student well-being. Finally, both approach and avoidant coping strategies function as significant moderators that alter how stress impacts well-being. Specifically, high levels of approach coping act as a positive buffer that maintains the negative impact of acculturative stress at its lowest level. Conversely, while low levels of avoidant coping are linked to decreased stress and increased well-being, the negative impact of acculturative stress becomes statistically insignificant when avoidant coping is utilized at its highest level.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the role of acculturative stress in predicting psychological well-being, using social support as a potential mediator and coping strategies (approach coping and avoidant coping) as a moderator. The results of the analysis revealed that (i) acculturation stress negatively predicted psychological well-being and that social support positively predicted psychological well-being, (ii) social support mediated the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being, and (iii) the interaction between acculturative stress and approach coping was significant positive, suggesting that approach coping can buffer the negative impact of acculturative stress. When approach coping is at an average level, acculturative stress has a negative effect on psychological well-being, and this negative effect further increases when approach coping is at a low level.

The 1st hypothesis, “Acculturative stress negatively predicts psychological well-being among international students”, was supported in the current study. The results of the current study reveal that acculturative stress significantly affects the psychological well-being of international students. Past studies have provided evidence that when individuals experience higher levels of acculturative stress, their psychological well-being tends to decrease (Kim & Suh, 2021). According to a previous study, the well-being of international students can be negatively impacted by the stress of adjusting to a new culture. These factors can lead to feelings of discontent toward professors and classmates, decreased academic achievement, challenges in managing study schedules, and an overall negative perception of the educational institution (Aziz et al., 2023). The international students came from different ethnic backgrounds. Several factors contribute to determining this conclusion. Some factors to consider are the development of a dual cultural–ethnic identity, adjusting to various social environments, facing high parental expectations, and dealing with discrimination (Chaudhry, 2024).

As anticipated in the ^{second} hypothesis, social support acted as a mediator in the relationship between psychological well-being and acculturative stress. The results of this study align with research that emphasizes how stress may facilitate social engagement and improve well-being by expediting the process of

acculturation (Kadir, 2024). According to Mancini (2019), international students who undergo acculturative stress are more inclined to engage in social activities and form connections, leading to an improvement in their overall well-being. International students who are stressed tend to seek out and engage in more prosocial activities, such as making friends and helping others. This behavior helps to decrease stress levels and improve overall well-being (Riaz et al., 2025).

The 3rd hypothesis, “Coping strategies (approach and avoidant coping) moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and the psychological well-being of international students”, was also supported by the current investigation. The study’s findings also suggested that the utilization of various coping strategies can moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being. The findings align with those of prior research, indicating that approach coping encompasses constructive actions such as acquiring resources and establishing future objectives. Past research has shown that the majority of international students who are adapting to different cultures tend to use approach coping strategies, while a smaller group of students rely on avoidant coping strategies (Nazir & Özçiçek, 2023; Ngwira et al., 2020). Xie and Ridley (2024) proposed that engaging in positive activities has the potential to enhance psychological adaptability and overall happiness. Engaging in these activities can help individuals cultivate the necessary skills to effectively manage stress and overcome forthcoming obstacles.

Studies conducted on international students have indicated that employing approach coping strategies is associated with enhanced performance, adaptation, and overall life satisfaction (Struthers et al., 2000). However, employing avoidant coping strategies can negatively affect both the physical health and mental well-being of international students (Akhtar et al., 2024). Understanding and addressing how international students cope with challenges is crucial for fostering positive emotions, well-being, and a satisfying life. However, consulting with a professional during the adaptation process can be highly beneficial (Chudzicka-Czupala et al., 2023). Encouraging the use of counseling services in a persuasive manner can effectively increase student engagement, diverting them from harmful ways of coping that often result in feelings of loneliness and distress.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the impact of acculturative stress on the psychological well-being of international students. The study also investigated how social support mediates this relationship and how effective coping strategies (i.e., approach coping and avoidant coping) moderate the effect of acculturative stress on psychological well-being. This study was designed to keep in mind that the study findings might be used to create treatments, interventions, or support services aimed at reducing acculturative stress and enhancing the well-being of international students. Although the hypotheses of the current study were supported, the data were thoroughly examined and connected to existing

knowledge through reasonable interpretations.

Limitations

Additionally, several limitations have been highlighted, along with suggestions for future study. Overall, the results of the current study suggest that further research should be conducted to provide more in-depth explanations and solutions to the challenges faced by international students. Educational institutions that have international students should prioritize helping them adapt to their new surroundings by offering maximum counseling and support services to make their transition into the new culture easier.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide critical theoretical insights into the mechanisms underlying international students' cross-cultural adaptation by validating complex pathways within stress and coping paradigms. First, the study advances the current literature by confirming that social support acts as a significant partial mediator, illustrating that the detrimental impact of acculturative stress on psychological well-being is heavily transmitted through and mitigated by interpersonal relationships and perceived help. Second, the empirical evidence extends the contemporary understanding of cognitive-behavioral efforts by establishing approach coping as a highly adaptive moderator that actively buffers the negative effects of acculturative stress. Interestingly, the significant interaction of avoidant coping introduces nuance to standard frameworks, while chronic avoidance is typically viewed as maladaptive, the findings suggest that high levels of avoidant coping can make the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being statistically insignificant, indicating a temporary or protective neutralizing effect during cultural transition.

From a practical perspective, educational institutions can use these findings to design targeted interventions and systemic support structures to ease the cultural transition of international students. Universities should establish structured stress management programs and cultural transition courses that explicitly train students in approach-oriented coping strategies, such as goal-oriented problem solving and positive cognitive reframing, while warning against a chronic reliance on harmful behavioral withdrawal. Additionally, institutions should leverage preorientation programs, digital platforms, university events, and social groups to proactively expand students' social circles and foster strong connections with their native peers. Finally, student affairs professionals should integrate clinical modalities such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) into campus counseling services, helping international students transform feelings of pessimism into attainable personal goals and safely adapt to host country traditions.

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