

## Acculturative Stress, Interpersonal Support and Social Adjustment Problems in International Students

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**Abstract:** This study was carried out to assess the relationship among acculturative stress, interpersonal support and social adjustment problems in international students. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a positive relationship between acculturative stress, and social adjustment and a negative relationship between interpersonal support and social adjustment problems in international students. It was also hypothesized that interpersonal support is likely to moderate acculturative stress and social adjustment problems in international students. The sample was comprised of 100 international students. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from different private and government universities and hostels. Pearson product moment correlation showed that acculturative stress had negative relationship with interpersonal support and a positive relationship with social adjustment problems and interpersonal support had a negative relationship with social adjustment problems. Moreover moderation through PROCESS analysis showed that interpersonal support significantly moderates the relationship between acculturative stress and social adjustment problems. The findings of the current study will be useful for student service organizations and offices of student affairs at university campuses to offer special counseling programs for international students.

**Keywords;** Acculturative Stress, Interpersonal Relationships, Social Adjustment Problems, International Students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of learning beyond indigenous boundaries is quite old. Leaving home to attend college is an important milestone for college students (Sullivan & West, 2015). However, the transition from home to an international university can be challenging, especially for students who never leave their houses. It is well known that the presence of international students in abroad provides an opportunity to promote cultural and international understanding. In addition to the achievement of their personal goals, adventure, joy, and stimulation in a foreign land, these cultural ambassadors enhance international understanding and collaboration to tackle problems which no country can solve alone (Bai, 2016). However, the reality of being an international student makes living hard in a strange land when a person has to make a number of personal, social, and environmental changes upon arrival.

Despite their educational and economic potential, international students often demonstrate poor academic and social integration at their host institutions. They often encounter adjustment problems and beyond the typical difficulties associated with academic life (Yu & Wang, 2011). Adjustment represents a transitional process that unfolds over time as students learn to cope with the exigencies of the university environment (Shu et.al, 2020). While the typical student may face institutional, academic, and personal emotional challenges from a new college environment, international students may face additional challenges in terms of social, linguistic, and cultural challenges from their geographical relocation (Yuan, 2010). There is a linkage between acculturative stress, interpersonal support and social adjustment in international students.

In Pakistan, acculturative stress is believed to exert a negative impact on the education of international students (Tariq & Adil, 2020). This disparity has raised considerable concerns. It is imperative to examine all the hindrances face by international students in the host country. It is also necessary to shed more light on the challenges faced by international students while enrolled in host institutions of higher learning. The need for research into the effects of acculturative stress on social adjustment problems cannot be overemphasized. The students' inability to adjust well and quickly enough to the new environment could also hinder effective learning (Bornstein, 2017). Although the challenges that international students face in the host country is well-known, studies into the effects of various stressors on the educational attainment potential of these students have been scant (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). The findings of this study will be applied in planning for change by addressing the difficulties of international students, which are specifically associated with acculturative stress. The present study narrowed the gap in the literature by examining the role played by acculturative stress in the social adjustment problems of international students in Pakistan.

Previous studies explored international students' adjustment and adaptation processes through examining the factors associated with acculturative stress among international students before they come to the host country (Tung, 2011). Some studies associated acculturative stress levels with their social support systems and examined whether social support could mitigate international students' acculturative stress (Thomas & Sumathi, 2016). Other studies tested the relationship between international students' acculturative stress level and depression as an indicator of psychological well-being (Crocket & Hays, 2007). However, studies to explore the association among acculturative stress, interpersonal support and social adjustment problems in international students studying in the Pakistan were limited and there is no

indigenous studies held in Pakistan for international students. Therefore the current study enriches the field through exploring this relationship.

This study has the potential to make several contributions. Specifically, this study has the potential to identify role of interpersonal support on social adjustment problems of international students. First, the result of this study shows how international students under high acculturative stress (e.g. language problems, academic pressure, discrimination and so on) have high level of adjustment problems. Second, this paper concentrates on the role of interpersonal supports of international students with respect to social adjustment problems.

Finally, it is necessary to investigate how and to what extent these interpersonal supports based on a multidimensional approach can relieve acculturative stress among international students.

When it comes to literature review it was revealed that acculturative stress had a strong relationship with social adjustment problems (Shan, Hussain & Sargani, 2020). Further acculturative stress and perceived social support were significant predictors of social adjustment in international students (Cura & Negis, 2016). Researchers reported interpersonal support is one of the most supportive factors to lessen social adjustment problems in international students (Iorga et.al 2020). Interpersonal relationship is the significant moderator in personality and social adjustment problems in international students (Vittengl, 2018). In Pakistan various researches on acculturative stress and social support have been directed and much work in progress but there is no specific study on social adjustment problems of international students. One of the studies revealed that social adjustment is the significant predictor of stress in international students (Bashir & Khalid, 2020).

Stress in international students executes numerous restraints on a student's life and affects their academic performance. They have restricted life style, role changes, academic burden and their emotional burden after they go to abroad for study. These factors cause lot of distress in an international student's life. The present study attempted to fill the gap in the current research by meeting its objectives to know whether stress is imposed upon them when they are in new environment, whether they are able to adjust and adapt to the new environment or not.

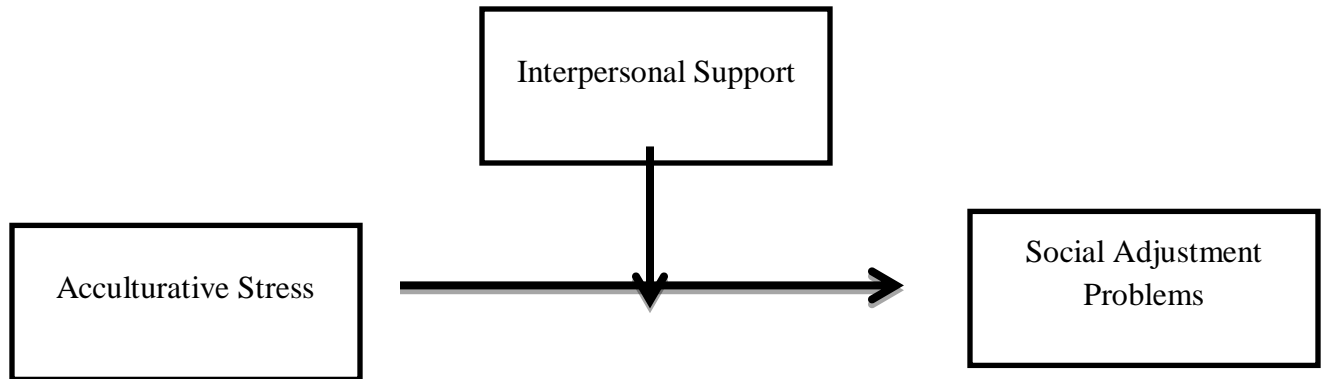
## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This section outlines the procedure that was used for conducting this study. Cross sectional research design which is a type of correlational research design was used to assess relationship between acculturative stress, interpersonal support and social adjustment problems in international students. The data was collected from the sub group of a large population therefore it was a cross sectional study. Sample size was 100 international students estimated through G-Power and drawn on the basis of exclusion and inclusion criteria. Non probability purposive sampling technique was used to gather data from participants.

### **2.1 Research Model**

This research is aimed to investigate the relationship of acculturative stress, interpersonal support and social adjustment problems in international students. The main objective of this study was to identify

the moderating role of interpersonal support between the relationship of acculturative stress and social adjustment problems. Hypothetical model for the current study is following here.



**Figure 1.** Interpersonal support is likely to moderate the relationship of acculturative stress and social adjustment problems.

## 2.2 Data Collection Tools

Demographic sheet was formulated to inquire information about age, gender, education level, field of the study, nationality, mother language, relatives in Pakistan (Yes, No), relationship status, number of friends, length of residence in host culture and residence place of the research participant. Acculturative stress scale for international students (ASSIS) was used to collect data for acculturative stress. It is 36-items scale in likert format, designed to measure the acculturative stress of international students. The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The total scores range goes from 36 to 180 on this scale. The relationship questionnaire (RSQ) was used to measure individual's interpersonal relationships. The adjustment inventory developed by Bell (1938) was used to measure social adjustment. The reliability of acculturative stress scale, relationship questionnaire and adjustment inventory was .77, .93 and .87 respectively for this study.

## 2.3 Data Collection

First of all permission was taken from the authors of the measures to use their tools in the current study. After that researcher contacted participants and request them to take part in this research. Written informed consent was taken from all the respondents and they were clarified to them that it is a voluntary participation. Participants were assured that they have the right to withdraw the research at any moment when they feel uncomfortable or due to any

personal reasons. Instructions were given about how to fill the questionnaires. When the questionnaires were given back by the participants researcher paid thanks them for their cooperation. Response rate for data collection was 84%.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Statistical package for social science version 22 was used to analyze the data. The data was analyzed in three key steps. First of all normality tests were performed for the data and reliability tests for scales were done. In the second step correlation analysis was done to investigate the relationship between demographic and

study variables. in the third step moderation through PROCESS was done to explore the moderating role of interpersonal support. Independent sample t-test was done as an additional analysis for investigate the gender differences in acculturative stress, interpersonal support and social adjustment problems.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting data analyses linearity assumptions were tested. Scatter plot for the independent variables (acculturative stress, interpersonal support) and dependent variable (social adjustment problems) indicated that assumption is satisfied. To check the assumption of normality unstandardized errors were examined. Review of the S-W test for normality for Acculturative stress was assessed (SW = .97, df = 100, p = .04 ) along skewness (-.30) and kurtosis (-.61); for interpersonal support (SW = .91, df = 100, p = .00 ) along skewness (.04) and kurtosis (-1.44); and for social adjustment problems (SW = .91, df = 100, p = .00 ) along skewness (-1.16) and kurtosis (1.79) suggesting the normality of data (Lomax &Hahs-Vaughn, 2013).

#### 3.1 Results

The result of descriptive statistics demonstrated that sample consisted of 67% males and 33% females and mean age of the participants were 26 years. Further, 39% of the

participants were middle born and most of the participants did not have any relatives in Pakistan. 43% of the participants had in some interpersonal relationship. As shown in Table 1, the results show that there is a significant negative relationship between acculturative stress and interpersonal support which means that with the increase in interpersonal support acculturative stress decreases. Moreover acculturative stress has a positive relationship with social adjustment problems which revealed that when acculturative stress increases social adjustment increases. In addition to this interpersonal support has a negative significant correlation with social adjustment problems which depicts that with the increase in interpersonal support social adjustment problems in international students decreases (Table 1).

**Table 1 Inter Correlation among Acculturative Stress, Interpersonal Relationships and Social Adjustment Problems (N = 110)**

Variables	1	2	3
1 Acculturative Stress	-	-.18**	.22*
2 Interpersonal Support	-	-	-.24*
3 Social Adjustment Problems	-	-	-

Note. \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Before conducting moderation analysis assumption of independence of errors was tested, the Durbin Watson statistic was computed and the value of 1.29 supported the assumption. For testing the assumption of multicollinearity, tolerance values were assessed which should be < 10 and > 0.1; for the present study, the values were in the specified range for all variables and no multicollinearity was observed in the data (Lomax &Hahs-Vaughn, 2013).

After assumption testing moderation through PROCESS was run for finding the predictors of social adjustment problems (Table 2). The overall model explains 12% variance in social adjustment problems,  $F(3, 96) = 4.72, p = .06$ . When interpersonal support (centered) is added in Block 1 as a moderator, it explains 6% variance,  $F_{change}(1, 98) = 6.49, p = .01$  in

social adjustment problems. Interpersonal support is a significant predictor of social adjustment problems. In Block 2, when acculturative stress (centered) is added, Model 2 explains variance 9% with  $F_{change}(1, 97) = 3.53, p = .07$ . Acculturative stress is a non-significant positive predictor of social adjustment problems. After interaction term is included in Block 3, the Model 3 further explained 1.2 % variance in social adjustment problems,  $F_{change}(1, 96) = 3.70, p = .09$ . The interaction term acculturative stress and interpersonal support does not significantly predict social adjustment problems. Hence, hypothesis is confirmed as interpersonal support weakens the relationship between acculturative stress and social adjustment problems.

**Table 2 Moderation of Interpersonal Relationship between Acculturative Stress and Social Adjustment Problems (N = 110).**

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	$\beta$	LL	UL	$\beta$	LL	UL	$\beta$	LL	UL
1 Interpersonal Support	-.24*	-.45	-.05	~	~	~	-2.02	~	~
2 Acculturative Stress				.18	-.00	.28	-.34		
3 Acculturative Stress X Interpersonal Relationship							1.80	.00	.03
R <sup>2</sup>	.06			.09			.12		

Note. \* Moderation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

After moderation analysis independent sample t-test for comparing the differences between male and female students was run as an additional analysis (Table 3). The results suggest that there is no significant gender difference in acculturative stress, interpersonal relationships and social adjustment problems in international students.

**Table 3: Independent Sample t Tests and Descriptive Statistics for Acculturative Stress, Interpersonal Support and Social Adjustment Problems Gender (N=110)**

Variable	Males (67)		Females (33)		T	p	95% CI
	M	SD	M	SD			
Acculturative Stress	121.46	14.07	119.30	11.46	.76	.44	[-3.44, 7.76]
Interpersonal Support	25.13	9.64	25.09	9.92	.02	.98	[-4.06, 4.15]
Social Adjustment Problems	38.04	9.74	37.27	10.15	.36	.71	[-3.39, 4.48]

Note. Equal variances assumed

### 3.2 Discussion

There has been much discussion about the acculturative stress and social adjustment problems in international students. This interest is reflected in a variety of studies of acculturation that have appeared in the social adjustment literature. There have been many studies suggesting that adaptation to the host culture is very difficult and stressful (Sumra, 2012). The following section thoroughly discussed the relationship among acculturative stress, interpersonal supports and social adjustment problems in international students in accordance with the previous literature.

It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a positive relationship between acculturative stress, and social adjustment problems in international students. Inter correlation among acculturative stress and social adjustment problems showed that there is a significant positive relationship between acculturative stress and social adjustment problems. Findings supported the study hypothesis and suggest that high levels of acculturative stress are associated with high levels of social adjustment problems. Students who decide to study in another country might experience practical or lifestyle acculturative stressors. When transitioning from their home country to their host country, international college students face various perceived threats and challenges. Among them are the lack of knowledge of the host culture, difficulty in adapting to the host country customs and lifestyle, and maladjustment to the physical environment (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004).

It was also hypothesized that there is likely to be a negative relationship between interpersonal support and social adjustment problems in international students. Inter-correlation among interpersonal support and social adjustment showed that there is a weak negative correlation found between social adjustment problems and interpersonal support. Results states that if someone was in some kind of interpersonal support he or she has low social adjustment problems. Literatures supports the results that the benefits of social relationships are crucial for

the students' adjustment as well as their families (Connor, 2019), especially relationships with friends from the host nation. Furthermore, acculturative stress and social adjustment problems can be reduced to a greater extent if the students have social support when they live in abroad (Thomas, 2013).

Moreover there are many sources of social support including academic peer groups (Dao et al., 2007), informal interactions with faculty, personal tutorials (Rienties et al., 2012), social networks, student support services and intimate relationships with close friends and family (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). They provide individuals with the resources to cope with stress. For example, behaviors such as listening and demonstrating warmth and empathy support an individual' s affective well-being and facilitate international students' academic, behavioral and emotional adjustment. Hence, support sources help to reduce stress and assist international students in their psychological adaptation (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010)

It was also hypothesized that interpersonal support is likely to moderate acculturative stress and social adjustment problems in international students. Moderation through PROCESS analysis showed that interpersonal support significantly weakens the relationship between acculturative stress and social adjustment problems. Students who have established social relationships would experience low levels of acculturation stress (Andrade, 2006; Singh, Zain, & Jamil, 2011) and would find it less challenging to cope with new academic demands; hence they would perform better academically, social support seems to be

more instrumental in positively affecting their psychological adjustment compared with academic adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Social support is an indicative buffering factor to cope with the deleterious effect of acculturative stress as it lowers susceptibility to psychological illness (Finch & Vega, 2003), which in turns enhances adjustment(Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Olivas & Li, 2006)

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the moderating role of interpersonal support between acculturative stress and social adjustment problems by using quantitative method to generalize the findings to a large population. The study confirms the view that interpersonal support weakens the relationship between acculturative stress and social adjustment problems. This study is important in the area of acculturation and social adjustment problems. Study limitations explained that the sample was taken only from one region it should

be taken from different countries so can be more generalized. In future longitudinal research using present study's variables will help to understand the acculturative stress and social problems etc. In depth interviews will help better understand the acculturation and related

factors. Moreover this study will contribute in indigenous literature and highlights role and the present research will provide guidelines to universities managements and authorities to make appropriate strategies for international students, so that they can live and adjust better. Finally different strategies of adjustments will develop for the betterment of international students.

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