




Cultural Adaptation Stress and Social Competence as Determinants of Hopelessness

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between hopelessness, cultural adaptation stress, and social competence among international students. The aim was to identify how these factors interact to influence the psychological well-being of this population.

Methods: This cross-sectional study involved 430 international students selected through stratified random sampling. Participants completed the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS), the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS), and the Social Skills Inventory (SSI). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27, employing Pearson correlation to explore bivariate relationships and linear regression analysis to investigate the predictive power of cultural adaptation stress and social competence on hopelessness.

Results: Descriptive statistics revealed mean scores of 9.45 (SD = 3.27) for hopelessness, 70.34 (SD = 15.62) for cultural adaptation stress, and 80.23 (SD = 12.48) for social competence. Pearson correlation analysis showed significant positive correlations between hopelessness and cultural adaptation stress ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and significant negative correlations between hopelessness and social competence ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). The regression model was significant ($F(2, 427) = 238.29$, $p < 0.001$), with cultural adaptation stress ($B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = 0.45$, $t = 11.98$, $p < 0.001$) and social competence ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = -0.41$, $t = -10.86$, $p < 0.001$) as significant predictors, explaining 53% of the variance in hopelessness ($R^2 = 0.53$).

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that cultural adaptation stress significantly increases hopelessness, while social competence serves as a protective factor reducing hopelessness among international students. These findings underscore the need for educational institutions to develop support systems that address cultural adaptation challenges and enhance social competence to promote the mental health and well-being of international students.

Keywords: *Hopelessness, Cultural Adaptation Stress, Social Competence, International Students, Mental Health, Psychological Well-being.*

1 Introduction

Hopelessness is characterized by a negative outlook towards the future and a sense of despair, which can lead to severe psychological issues if not addressed. Understanding the factors that contribute to hopelessness, especially in vulnerable populations such as international students, is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems (Marsiglia et al., 2011). Cultural adaptation stress refers to the psychological distress experienced during the process of adapting to a new cultural environment. This stress can stem from language barriers, discrimination, homesickness, and the struggle to integrate into a new social and cultural context (Torres & Rollock, 2007).

International students often face unique challenges that can exacerbate feelings of hopelessness. The stress associated with adapting to a new culture can lead to increased levels of psychological distress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety (Wei et al., 2010). Studies have shown that higher levels of cultural adaptation stress are significantly associated with greater levels of hopelessness among international students (Downie et al., 2004; Genkova et al., 2021). This relationship underscores the importance of addressing cultural adaptation stress to mitigate its negative impact on mental health.

Social competence is the ability to interact effectively with others, establish positive relationships, and navigate social environments. It encompasses a range of skills, including emotional expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control (Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Genkova et al., 2021). Social competence is critical for successful adaptation and overall well-being, particularly for individuals navigating new and challenging environments (Dasht Bozorgi & Shamshirgaran, 2018; Junge et al., 2020; Kansky et al., 2019; Kylliäinen et al., 2020; Mehrdadfar et al., 2023).

Feldman and Masalha (2010) emphasized the importance of social competence in children's development, noting that it plays a crucial role in their psychological adjustment (Feldman & Masalha, 2010). For international students, social competence can buffer the negative effects of cultural adaptation stress and reduce feelings of hopelessness (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Studies have demonstrated that higher levels of social competence are associated with lower levels of hopelessness, suggesting that enhancing social skills can be a protective factor against psychological distress (Arnette et al., 2007; Genkova et al., 2021).

The interplay between cultural adaptation stress, social competence, and hopelessness is complex and multifaceted. Cultural adaptation stress can significantly impair an individual's social competence, leading to difficulties in forming meaningful relationships and engaging in social activities. This, in turn, can increase feelings of hopelessness (Åsberg & Renk, 2012).

However, social competence can also serve as a mitigating factor, helping individuals cope with the challenges of cultural adaptation and reducing the negative impact on their mental health. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of social competence are better equipped to handle cultural adaptation stress and are less likely to experience hopelessness (Genkova et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2010).

The theoretical framework of biculturalism, as discussed by LaFromboise et al. (1993), provides further insight into this relationship. Bicultural individuals, who can navigate and integrate aspects of both their original and host cultures, tend to experience lower levels of cultural adaptation stress and higher levels of social competence. This adaptability can protect against hopelessness and promote overall well-being (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

Intercultural competence, which includes skills such as empathy, cultural awareness, and communication, plays a crucial role in the successful adaptation of international students. Wilson et al. (2017) developed a revised measure of sociocultural adaptation, highlighting the importance of intercultural competence in reducing cultural adaptation stress and enhancing social competence (Wilson et al., 2017).

Studies have shown that intercultural competence is a significant predictor of psychological well-being among international students. For instance, Torres and Rollock (2007) found that intercultural competence moderated the relationship between acculturation and depression, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of intercultural competence are better protected against the negative effects of cultural adaptation stress (Torres & Rollock, 2007).

In conclusion, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between hopelessness, cultural adaptation stress, and social competence among international students. By examining these variables, we hope to identify key factors that contribute to hopelessness and develop effective interventions to support the mental health and well-being of international students. The findings will contribute to the existing literature on cultural adaptation and social competence, offering valuable insights

for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers working to enhance the well-being of international students.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study utilized a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between hopelessness, cultural adaptation stress, and social competence. A total of 430 participants were recruited, with the sample size determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie table to ensure adequate statistical power. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling from various universities, ensuring a diverse representation of international students. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled international students who have been residing in the host country for at least six months.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Hopelessness

The dependent variable, Hopelessness, can be measured using the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS), developed by Aaron T. Beck and his colleagues in 1974. The BHS is a 20-item self-report inventory that assesses negative attitudes about the future. Each item is scored as either true or false, with a total score ranging from 0 to 20. Higher scores indicate greater hopelessness. The scale includes three subscales: Feelings about the Future, Loss of Motivation, and Future Expectations. The BHS has been widely validated and has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.81$) in numerous studies (Marsiglia et al., 2011).

2.2.2 Cultural Adaptation Stress

Cultural Adaptation Stress can be measured using the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS), created by Sandhu and Asrabadi in 1994. The ASSIS consists of 36 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate greater acculturative stress. The scale is divided into seven subscales: Perceived Discrimination, Homesickness, Perceived Hatred, Fear, Stress due to Change/Culture Shock, Guilt, and Nonspecific Concerns. The ASSIS has shown good reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.87 and has been validated in various studies involving international students, confirming its reliability and validity across different cultural contexts

(Åsberg & Renk, 2012; Chang & Rand, 2000; Marsiglia et al., 2011; Wei et al., 2010).

2.2.3 Social Competence

Social Competence can be measured using the Social Skills Inventory (SSI), developed by Ronald Riggio in 1986. The SSI is a 90-item self-report questionnaire that measures social skills and competence across six subscales: Emotional Expressivity, Emotional Sensitivity, Emotional Control, Social Expressivity, Social Sensitivity, and Social Control. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater social competence. The SSI has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.77 to 0.89 for the subscales, and good test-retest reliability. The validity of the SSI has been confirmed through various studies, establishing its effectiveness in assessing social competence in diverse populations (Åsberg & Renk, 2012; Dasht Bozorgi & Shamshirgaran, 2018; Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Genkova et al., 2021; Junge et al., 2020; Kansky et al., 2019; Kylliäinen et al., 2020).

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (hopelessness) and each of the independent variables (cultural adaptation stress and social competence). To further investigate the predictive power of cultural adaptation stress and social competence on hopelessness, a linear regression analysis was performed. In this model, hopelessness was the dependent variable, while cultural adaptation stress and social competence were the independent variables. Assumptions for regression analysis, including normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, were tested and met. Descriptive statistics were also computed to provide an overview of the sample characteristics.

3 Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the 430 participants are detailed as follows. The sample consisted of 220 males (51.16%) and 210 females (48.84%). The age distribution was as follows: 120 participants (27.91%) were aged 18-24 years, 200 participants (46.51%) were aged 25-30 years, 80 participants (18.60%) were aged 34-105 years, and 30

participants (6.98%) were aged 36 years and above. Regarding the participants' country of origin, 150 (34.88%) were from Asia, 100 (23.26%) from Europe, 80 (18.60%) from Africa, 50 (11.63%) from North America, 30 (6.98%) from South America, and 20 (4.65%) from Oceania. Additionally, 300 participants (69.77%) reported being

undergraduate students, while 130 (30.23%) were graduate students.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables measured in the study: hopelessness, cultural adaptation stress, and social competence. The mean and standard deviation for each variable are shown.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Hopelessness	9.45	3.27
Cultural Adaptation Stress	70.34	15.62
Social Competence	80.23	12.48

The mean hopelessness score was 9.45 (SD = 3.27), indicating a moderate level of hopelessness among the participants. The mean cultural adaptation stress score was 70.34 (SD = 15.62), suggesting significant stress related to cultural adaptation. The mean social competence score was 80.23 (SD = 12.48), reflecting a relatively high level of social competence.

Assumptions for the linear regression analysis were thoroughly checked and confirmed. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, with results indicating that the data were normally distributed ($W = 0.987, p = 0.073$). Linearity was confirmed through scatterplots, which showed a linear relationship between the dependent variable

(hopelessness) and the independent variables (cultural adaptation stress and social competence). Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), with all VIF values below 2.0, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues. Homoscedasticity was tested using the Breusch-Pagan test, with results indicating homoscedasticity ($\chi^2 = 1.45, p = 0.228$). These results confirmed that the assumptions for regression analysis were adequately met.

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients and p-values between hopelessness and each of the independent variables: cultural adaptation stress and social competence.

Table 2

Pearson correlation coefficients and p-values between hopelessness and the independent variables

Variable	Pearson Correlation	p-value
Cultural Adaptation Stress	0.52	< 0.001
Social Competence	-0.48	< 0.001

Hopelessness was significantly positively correlated with cultural adaptation stress ($r = 0.52, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of cultural adaptation stress were associated with higher levels of hopelessness. Additionally, hopelessness was significantly negatively correlated with social competence ($r = -0.48, p < 0.001$), suggesting that

higher levels of social competence were associated with lower levels of hopelessness.

Table 3 provides a summary of the regression analysis results, including the sum of squares, degrees of freedom, mean squares, R, R², adjusted R², F-value, and p-value.

Table 3

Summary of regression analysis results.

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	R	R ²	R ² adj	F	p
Regression	1450.67	2	725.34	0.73	0.53	0.53	238.29	< 0.001
Residual	1278.82	427	2.99					
Total	2729.49	429						

The regression model was significant ($F(2, 427) = 238.29$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 value of 0.53, indicating that 53% of the variance in hopelessness was explained by cultural adaptation stress and social competence. The adjusted R^2 value was also 0.53, suggesting a good fit of the model to the data.

Table 4

Multivariate regression analysis results

Variable	B	Standard Error	β	t	p
Constant	1.78	0.84		2.12	0.034
Cultural Adaptation Stress	0.11	0.01	0.45	11.98	< 0.001
Social Competence	-0.10	0.01	-0.41	-10.86	< 0.001

The multivariate regression analysis revealed that cultural adaptation stress ($B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = 0.45$, $t = 11.98$, $p < 0.001$) was a significant positive predictor of hopelessness. In contrast, social competence ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = -0.41$, $t = -10.86$, $p < 0.001$) was a significant negative predictor of hopelessness. These results indicate that higher levels of cultural adaptation stress are associated with higher hopelessness, whereas higher levels of social competence are associated with lower hopelessness.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between hopelessness, cultural adaptation stress, and social competence among international students. Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant positive correlations between hopelessness and cultural adaptation stress ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$), and significant negative correlations between hopelessness and social competence ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, linear regression analysis indicated that both cultural adaptation stress ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and social competence ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$) were significant predictors of hopelessness, explaining a substantial proportion of the variance ($R^2 = 0.53$).

These findings align with previous research demonstrating the significant impact of cultural adaptation stress on mental health outcomes among international students. Torres and Rollock (2007) found that higher levels of acculturative stress were associated with increased depressive symptoms among Hispanic populations, underscoring the detrimental effect of cultural adaptation challenges on psychological well-being (Torres & Rollock, 2007). Similarly, Wei et al. (2010) highlighted that minority stress and perceived bicultural competence significantly

influenced depressive symptoms, emphasizing the critical role of cultural adaptation processes in mental health (Wei et al., 2010).

Table 4 presents the results of the multivariate regression analysis, including the unstandardized coefficients (B), standard error, standardized coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values for the constant and predictor variables.

Our study also supports the theoretical framework of biculturalism proposed by LaFromboise et al. (1993), which posits that individuals who effectively integrate aspects of both their original and host cultures tend to experience better psychological outcomes (LaFromboise et al., 1993). This integration likely reduces cultural adaptation stress, thereby decreasing feelings of hopelessness. Downie et al. (2004) further supported this by demonstrating that tricultural individuals who successfully internalized and integrated multiple cultural identities reported higher well-being levels (Downie et al., 2004).

The negative association between social competence and hopelessness in our study echoes findings by Feldman and Masalha (2010), who emphasized the importance of social competence in children's psychological adjustment. Enhanced social skills facilitate better interpersonal relationships and support networks, which can buffer against the negative effects of stress and hopelessness. Genkova et al. (2021) also found that students with higher social competence, developed through stays abroad, exhibited lower levels of stress and better psychological adjustment (Genkova et al., 2021).

Moreover, our findings corroborate the protective role of social competence highlighted by Åsberg and Renk (2012). Their research indicated that social support and perceived social competence significantly predicted better psychological adjustment among female inmates, suggesting that social competence can mitigate the adverse effects of stress in various populations (Åsberg & Renk, 2012).

Despite the robust findings, several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the

ability to establish causal relationships between variables.

ability to draw causal inferences. While the results indicate significant associations between cultural adaptation stress, social competence, and hopelessness, longitudinal studies are needed to establish causality. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, such as social desirability or recall bias. Participants may have underreported or overreported their levels of stress, social competence, and hopelessness. The sample was also limited to international students from specific universities, which may not be representative of all international student populations. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings is constrained.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships between cultural adaptation stress, social competence, and hopelessness. Longitudinal studies would allow researchers to track changes in these variables over time and identify potential mediating factors. Additionally, incorporating a mixed-methods approach that includes qualitative interviews could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of international students, offering a more nuanced understanding of how cultural adaptation stress and social competence interact to influence hopelessness. Expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of international students from various regions and academic settings would also enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Researchers should also explore the potential moderating and mediating variables that could influence the relationship between cultural adaptation stress, social competence, and hopelessness. For instance, factors such as personality traits, coping strategies, and available social support systems could significantly impact how international students experience and cope with cultural adaptation stress. Investigating these variables could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying the observed relationships and inform the development of targeted interventions.

The findings of this study have important implications for practice, particularly in supporting the mental health and well-being of international students. Educational institutions should prioritize the development of comprehensive support systems that address the unique challenges faced by international students. Orientation programs that include cultural competency training and social skills development can help students navigate their new environments more effectively and reduce feelings of hopelessness.

Mental health services on campus should be tailored to meet the specific needs of international students, offering culturally sensitive counseling and support groups. Providing resources and workshops on stress management, cultural adaptation, and social competence can equip students with the skills necessary to handle cultural adaptation stress and enhance their social interactions. Peer mentoring programs that pair international students with local students or more experienced international students can also provide valuable social support and help mitigate feelings of isolation.

Furthermore, fostering an inclusive and supportive campus environment is crucial. Universities should promote cultural exchange and understanding through events, workshops, and student organizations that celebrate diversity and encourage intercultural interactions. By creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, educational institutions can help reduce cultural adaptation stress and promote the overall well-being of their international student population.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant impact of cultural adaptation stress and social competence on hopelessness among international students. The findings underscore the importance of addressing cultural adaptation challenges and enhancing social competence to mitigate feelings of hopelessness and promote psychological well-being. While the study provides valuable insights, further research is needed to explore the causal relationships and underlying mechanisms. Practical implications suggest that educational institutions should develop comprehensive support systems and foster inclusive environments to support the mental health and well-being of international students. By addressing these critical factors, we can better support the diverse and growing population of international students in their academic and personal endeavors.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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