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THE DYNAMICS OF ACCULTURATION STRESS EXPERIENCED BY AFRICAN STUDENTS STUDYING IN TURKIYE

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ABSTRACT

The increase in student mobility across countries has highlighted the importance of understanding acculturation stress among international students. Studying in a new cultural environment exposes students to various social, psychological, and academic challenges, making acculturation stress a significant area of research. This study aims to examine the levels of acculturation stress among African international students studying at Akdeniz University in Turkey and to identify the factors influencing this process. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected via a structured questionnaire. A total of 141 questionnaires were distributed. During the data cleaning process, 38 questionnaires were excluded due to missing, incorrect, or inconsistent responses, as well as comprehension difficulties related to language barriers. Consequently, analyses were conducted on 103 valid questionnaires. The findings indicate that students' levels of acculturation stress vary by academic year and are observed at higher levels during the early years of study. Correlation analyses have enhanced the theoretical depth of the research by providing significant insights into the interactions among variables. The observed relationships demonstrate that fear of change is closely linked to stress arising from cultural transition, revealing that acculturation is not merely a cognitive process but also a profound issue related to ontological security. These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of acculturation stress and emphasize the importance of considering social, psychological, and cultural factors. Universities should develop targeted policies and support programs to facilitate adaptation process of international students and mitigate the challenges encountered during the early stages of cultural transition.

KEYWORDS: Acculturation Stress, International Students, Cultural Adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of international students worldwide has been increasing rapidly from 2 million to 4.8 million between 2000 and 2016, and it is estimated that it will continue to increase exponentially, reaching fifteen million by 2025 (Gebregergis, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). In Turkey, the number of international students enrolled in higher education institutions has exceeded 300,000 as of 2022 (YÖK, 2022). Therefore, international students have become the focus of social science research, especially those studying in foreign countries (Aljaberi et al., 2021; Shafaei & Razak, 2018). International students are defined as guest students who move to other countries to pursue their higher education for a certain period of time (Gebregergis, 2020). The globalization of higher education has facilitated the mobility of numerous international students worldwide. (Safdar & Berno, 2016). International education has become a vital part of higher education, as students desire to achieve their personal, family, or career goals in other countries (Pinamang et al., 2021).

As the number of international students has doubled from 2 million to 4.8 million worldwide between 2000 and 2016, it is expected that this trend will continue to increase exponentially, reaching 15 million by 2025 (Gebregergis, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). In Turkey, the number of international students registered with higher education institutions is currently over 300,000 (YÖK, 2022). Therefore, international students have become a target population in social science research, particularly because they experience acculturation, a dynamic, complex, and multidimensional process of adjustment to new social, cultural, and educational systems, as they adapt to new environments (Berry, 2005). During this process, international students are required to adjust to local values, beliefs, traditions, and behaviours to survive, adapt, and thrive in the new environment (Berry, 2003). International students face both advantages and disadvantages during the acculturation process. They have the opportunity to engage in a broader international educational setting, enhance personal growth and autonomy, and cultivate more cultural understanding and competency. (Gebregergis, 2020). However, despite these benefits, international students also face various cultural challenges that can affect their emotional and psychological well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In this sense, international students experience acculturation stress, which refers to the stress that individuals or groups experience as they adjust to a new culture, resulting from the

acculturation process between two cultures (Al-Jaberi et al., 2018; Al-Jaberi et al., 2021; Berry & Annis, 1974; Berry, 2006). The term acculturation stress is used to describe the negative outcomes experienced by international students during this process (Berry, 2003).

Relocating to another nation might induce feelings of insecurity, increased anxiety, and confusion in individuals (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Therefore, international students are likely to experience much more difficulty in acculturation compared to established ethnic groups, as they have limited personal resources when entering the host country (Berry & Kim, 1988; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Poyrazli et al., 2004). Not only in these areas, but international students also face difficulties in academic matters. Despite being in a foreign environment filled with linguistic and cultural barriers, international students are expected to meet the same academic standards as local students (Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014; Kim & Cronley, 2020).

Looking at the literature, it can be seen that the two main sources of acculturation stress in international students are the environment and attitude (Desa et al., 2012; Poyrazli et al., 2004). Interaction with members of the host culture significantly affects international students' academic achievement and skills (Hammer, 1992). In this interaction process, lack of English language proficiency, lack of confidence (shyness, low self-esteem), academic concerns, and perceived discrimination (based on ethnicity, race, or cultural background) are potential barriers, while interests, desire to learn the new culture, and English language learning opportunities are potential motivators (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

This study aims to identify the factors related to cultural stress among international students enrolled in two state universities in Turkey and to develop a conceptual framework on the cultural stress experienced by international students. The significance of this study is to encourage research on acculturation stress among international African students experiencing cultural adaptation in Turkey.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Acculturation Concept

Concerns about the effects of Europe's domination over colonial and indigenous peoples have led to the emergence of acculturation research. Subsequent studies have focused on the changes that occur after the entry and settlement of immigrants into other societies. More recent research has focused on the changes that occur in culturally pluralistic societies

and the relationships established among ethnic and cultural groups (Berry, 2006). In early studies, acculturation was thought to improve health and well-being, but in many studies in the 1920s, it was confirmed that acculturation leads to mental illness and marginalization (Rudmin, 2009).

Acculturation is also linked to "culture," which is a difficult-to-define term (Olmedo, 1979). Culture is a fundamental context that shapes both the individual and the environment (Chun, Moos & Cronkite, 2006). Because acculturation refers to both an individual process and a supra-individual process, definitions are vague (Rudmin, 2009). "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). In other words, acculturation is the process of cultural change that occurs when two or more cultures come into contact. This cultural change involves the adoption of the cultural beliefs, traditions, behaviours, and identity of an alternative culture (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 1987; Gil et al., 1994; Mendoza & Martinez, 1981; Padilla, 1980; Williams & Berry, 1991).

Among various acculturation theories, two main approaches have emerged, one emphasizing assimilation and the other cultural pluralism (Feagin, 1984). According to the assimilationist approach, the non-dominant group tends to become more similar to the dominant group in contact situations (Donà & Berry, 1994). However, the approach that evaluates acculturation in a pluralistic framework considers acculturation as a cultural learning process and avoids stigmatizing it (Rudmin, 2009). In this sense, acculturation is seen as a facet of a broader concept of cultural change resulting from intercultural contact. Furthermore, it is recognized that it creates change "in one or both groups," which sets it apart from assimilation. It is essential to examine the cultural contexts of acculturation studies. From an ethnographic perspective, it is necessary to understand both cultures in contact to understand individuals in contact (Berry, 2006).

When examining the phenomenon of acculturation, it is necessary to first understand and accept the culture of the acculturating group in their own terms, rather than viewing it as a "minority" culture. Only in this way can an intercultural perspective be adopted. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that many instances of acculturation arise as a result of interaction between the two groups in contact (Williams & Berry, 1991). After

accepting these cultural diffusion assumptions, three possible outcomes exist. The first is "acceptance," which requires one group to assimilate to the other. The second is "adaptation," which requires a merging of the two cultures. The third is "reaction," which necessitates anti-acculturation movements (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936). Therefore, it seems impossible to separate these three possible outcomes from the subject context.

2.2. *Acculturative Stress*

Culture acculturation is a process in which individuals undergo cultural and psychological changes when integrating with two or more groups from different cultures (Berry, 2005). As such, there are many challenges in the acculturation process, and the outcome is not always positive (Gebregergis, 2020). One possible outcome that may accompany the acculturation process is acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987; Gil et al., 1994). In earlier studies, many researchers attributed stress to negative or traumatic experiences and used the term "culture shock" to describe the aspects of the acculturation process (Caplan, 2007). Various terms have been used to describe the psychological effects of adapting to a new culture, such as "culture stress," "culture fatigue," "role shock," and "language shock," in addition to the term "culture shock" (Smart & Smart, 1995). Later, the concept of "acculturative stress" was introduced as an alternative to these terms (Berry, 2006). All conceptualizations of culture and stress were united in the concept of "acculturative stress" used by Ausubel in a title for the first time in 1960 (Rudmin, 2009). Thus, the difficulties arising from the acculturation process began to be defined under acculturative stress (Berry & Annis, 1974).

When stress factors in the acculturation process exceed an individual's coping resources or agents, negative outcomes occur, and acculturative stress emerges (Gil et al., 1994). Acculturative stress is primarily defined as a significant deterioration in an individual's overall health status. It encompasses physical, psychological, and social aspects that are directly related to the acculturation process (Berry et al., 1987). For a stressor to be considered acculturative stress, these changes must be systematically linked to the known features of the acculturation process as experienced by the individual. The most commonly encountered features include confusion, anxiety, depression, marginalization, feelings of alienation, and identity confusion that led to a decline in mental health (Berry et al., 1987). Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) define acculturative stress as a decrease in the mental

health and well-being of ethnic minorities during the process of adapting to a new culture.

The level of acculturation is inversely related to the degree of acculturative stress (Caplan, 2007). The degree of acculturative stress a person experiences can range from mild stress that gradually improves as the individual adapts to the new culture, to debilitating stress that worsens over time (Berry et al., 1987). If a student is facing difficulties in a new culture and has a low level of acculturation, it is expected that the student will likely experience more challenges and have a higher level of acculturative stress (Shan, 2020). Factors that regulate the relationship between acculturation and stress include the type of acculturating group, acculturation forms, individual demographic and social characteristics, and psychological traits (Berry et al., 1987). In addition, the greater the cultural gaps between cultures, the greater the acculturative stress (Berry & Annis, 1974). Research on acculturation has demonstrated a relationship between acculturation and mental health. The relationship between acculturation and mental health is dependent on a range of factors, including acculturation attitudes, cultural continuity, acculturation experience, and values (Berry et al., 1989; Donà & Berry, 1994). Therefore, issues such as acculturation forms, including acculturation experience with the host community, cultural contact with the culture of origin, and individualistic values, have been examined to better understand the relationship of these factors with acculturative stress (Donà & Berry, 1994).

Acculturative stress has been found to be associated with a variety of negative outcomes for international students, including low self-esteem, higher depression and anxiety symptoms, inadequate university adaptation, and lower academic performance (Wang, Jin & Zamudio, 2021; Wei et al., 2007). International students are forced to deal with both general acculturation issues and academic stressors, as well as a lack of resources available to local students (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). According to Smith and Khawaja (2011), the acculturative stressors that international students generally face include language barriers, especially English proficiency; educational challenges, such as different teaching styles, academic stress, and mismatched expectations; sociocultural stress factors, such as loneliness, difficulty in making friends, and living away from family and friends; discrimination, including implicit or explicit feelings of humiliation, as well as verbal or non-verbal behaviors by members of the host society; and

practical stress factors, including financial, legal, or emotional problems.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Aim and Method

The main aim of this study is to determine the participants' levels of acculturation stress. To achieve this, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Do participants' levels of acculturation stress show significant differences based on various variables?

2. Is there a significant relationship among the subdimensions of acculturation stress?

In this context, the study has two main hypotheses.

H1. The level of acculturation shows significant differences depending on various variables.

H2. There are positive and significant correlations among the subdimensions of acculturation stress.

A quantitative research method was adopted for this study. In the fieldwork phase of the study, the survey technique was used as the data collection tool. To carry out the study, permission was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at Akdeniz University, as per Decision No. 564389 dated January 25, 2023, confirming that there were no ethical objections.

3.2. Research Model

Since the study aimed to describe the current situation, it was conducted using the correlational survey model, which is one of the survey models. Survey models are research approaches that aim to describe a situation—whether it occurred in the past or currently exists—as it is. In such studies, the individual, event, or object under examination is described within its natural context, while preserving its existing characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

The correlational survey model, a subtype of the survey model, aims to determine the existence of a relationship between two or more variables and the strength of that relationship. In this model, researchers examine whether the variables change together or the extent of their change. The correlational survey model is further divided into two types: correlation-based and comparison-based. In correlation-based studies, the co-variation between variables and the direction or degree of this variation are examined; whereas in comparison-based studies, it is investigated whether there is a significant difference in the dependent variable

between at least two groups formed based on the independent variable (Karasar, 2024).

Accordingly, the study was conducted within the framework of a correlational survey model, which includes both correlation and comparison analyses.

3.3. Population and Sample

This study was designed to determine the levels of acculturation stress among African students attending Akdeniz University and to identify the relationship between stress levels and various variables. With this aim, a survey-based field research technique using a descriptive research method was used. A questionnaire consisting of two sections was prepared and applied to the participants via an electronic platform. Consequently, the study population consists of African university students enrolled at Akdeniz University. It was reported that there were 141 African university students enrolled at Akdeniz University for the 2025–2026 academic year

(https://obs.akdeniz.edu.tr/oibs/public_stats/index.aspx#).

Since all participants could be reached, a sampling method was not employed. Within the scope of the study, the entire population was reached both electronically and in person. Prior to conducting the statistical analyses, the dataset was screened to ensure the accuracy and quality of the data. During this process, surveys that were incomplete or incorrectly filled out were removed from the dataset. In addition, responses containing excessive missing data, inconsistent response patterns, or uniform answering patterns were excluded. Some responses were also identified as problematic due to possible comprehension difficulties related to participants' language limitations, which may have affected their understanding of certain survey items. Furthermore, the dataset was examined for potential outliers and response irregularities. As a result of the data screening process, 38 surveys were excluded from the analysis, and a total of 103 valid surveys were retained for the final statistical analyses.

3.4. Data Collection Tool

A two-part questionnaire consisting of a total of 47 questions was used to collect data for the study. The first section of the questionnaire included questions designed to identify participants' sociodemographic characteristics, their feelings when speaking a foreign language, how often they speak Turkish, their educational experiences in Türkiye, and whether they have relatives living in Türkiye.

In the second section of the questionnaire, acculturation stress was assessed using the Acculturation Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS). The ASSIS (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; 1998) is a 36-item, 5-point Likert-type scale designed to measure international students' adjustment problems (1 = Strongly disagree, 3 = Not sure, 5 = Strongly agree). The scale consists of seven subscales: Perceived Discrimination (8 items, e.g., "Others are prejudiced against me"), Homesickness (4 items, e.g., "I feel sad because I left my relatives behind"), Perceived hate (5 items, e.g., "People show verbal hatred toward me"), Fear (4 items, e.g., "I feel unsafe here"), Stress Due to Change/Culture Shock (3 items, e.g., "I'm having trouble adjusting to new foods"), Guilt (2 items, e.g., "I feel guilty for living a different lifestyle here"), Miscellaneous (10 items, e.g., "I feel nervous when communicating in English").

The total score is calculated by summing the scores of the scale items, and this score ranges from 36 to 180; higher scores indicate greater acculturation stress. Internal consistency reliability coefficients obtained from various samples range from 0.87 to 0.95 (Constantine, Okazaki & Utsey, 2004; Duru & Poyrazlı, 2007; Franco et al., 2019; Poyrazlı et al., 2004; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998; Torun-Urhan & Bozkurt, 2019; Wei et al., 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). In the analyses conducted for this study, the reliability coefficients of the scale were determined as 0.88 for perceived discrimination, 0.90 for homesickness, 0.87 for perceived hate, 0.88 for fear, 0.87 for stress due to change and culture shock, 0.89 for guilt, and 0.87 for the miscellaneous dimension.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data collected through the survey method were coded in accordance with statistical software standards, and data processing was performed using the SPSS 24.0 software package. Descriptive statistical methods, such as frequency and percentage distributions, were used to identify the demographic characteristics of the participants, while measures such as mean and standard deviation were used to assess general trends regarding the scale items.

To examine the distribution characteristics of the items in the scale used in the study, skewness and kurtosis values were analysed. The results of the analysis showed that the skewness values for the scale items ranged from -0.489 to 1.656, while the kurtosis values ranged from -1.508 to 1.701. In the literature, skewness and kurtosis values ranging from -1.5 to +1.5 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) or, more broadly, from -2.0 to +2.0 (George & Mallery, 2010) in

social science research indicate that the data are normally distributed.

Since the skewness and kurtosis values obtained in this study fell within the relevant ranges, it was concluded that the data followed a normal distribution. Consequently, parametric test methods were preferred for the analysis of the data. To examine whether there were significant differences in scale scores based on the participants' demographic variables, an independent samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were applied, along with post hoc tests such as Tukey and LSD to determine which groups accounted for the significant differences. Correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between the factors of acculturation stress levels.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the results of analyses that examine the relationship between participants' sociodemographic characteristics and their experiences in Türkiye, as well as the factors influencing their level of acculturation stress, and the relationship between their level of acculturation stress and various other variables.

4.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 1 presents descriptive findings regarding the demographic characteristics of the study participants. According to the data, 54.4% (n=56) of the participants were women, while 45.6% (n=47) were men. This finding indicates that there were more female participants than male participants in the study group.

Table 1: Descriptive Findings Regarding the Study Participants.

| Socio-Demographic Characteristics | Number | % |
|-----------------------------------|--------|------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 56 | 54.4 |
| Male | 47 | 45.6 |
| Field | | |
| Social Sciences | 52 | 50.5 |
| Natural Sciences | 17 | 16.5 |
| Health Sciences | 34 | 33 |
| Grade | | |
| First grade | 31 | 30.1 |
| Second grade | 18 | 17.5 |
| Third grade | 20 | 19.4 |
| Fourth grade | 20 | 19.4 |
| Fifth grade | 14 | 13.6 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Single | 87 | 84.5 |
| In a Relationship (Single) | 12 | 11.7 |
| Married | 4 | 3.9 |

When the fields of the participants were examined, it was found that 50.5% (n=52) were studying social sciences, 33% (n=34) were studying health sciences, and 16.5% (n=17) were studying natural sciences. Accordingly, it was determined that

approximately half of the research group consisted of students in the social sciences.

When the participants' grade levels were examined, 30.1% (n=31) were in first grade, 17.5% (n=18) were in the second grade, 19.4% (n=20) were

in the third grade, 19.4% (n=20) were in the fourth grade, and 13.6% (n=14) were in the fifth grade and above. These findings indicate that first-grade students constituted the largest group of participants in the study.

An analysis of the participants' marital status revealed that 84.5% (n=87) were single, 11.7% (n=12) were single but in a relationship, and 3.9% (n=4) were married. This finding indicates that the vast majority of the study group consisted of single individuals.

Table 2: Participants' Ages and Grade Averages.

| Socio-Demographic Characteristics | N | Min. | Max. | X̄ | SD |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| Age | 103 | 18.00 | 32.00 | 24.84 | 3.06 |
| Grade averages | 103 | .00 | 100.00 | 39.03 | 38.43 |

Not. X̄ = Mean, SD = Standard deviation.

Descriptive statistics regarding the participants' ages and grade point averages are presented in Table 2. The ages of the individuals participating in the study range from 18 to 32. The mean age of the participants was calculated as $X̄ = 24.84$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 3.06$. This finding indicates that the study group consists primarily of young adults.

When the participants' grade point averages are examined, it is observed that the minimum value is 0 and the maximum value is 100. The mean grade point average was determined to be $X̄ = 39.03$, and the standard deviation was found to be $SD = 38.43$. The high standard deviation indicates that the participants' academic achievement levels are distributed across a wide range and that there are

significant differences in grade point averages within the group.

4.2. Education Experience in Türkiye

Table 3 presents the educational experiences, social background, and language use characteristics of the participants in the study. Among the participants, 41.7% (n=43) had previously had another educational experience in Türkiye, while 58.3% (n=60) had not. This indicates that a significant portion of the participants were entering the Turkish education system for the first time and may therefore be undergoing a process of academic and cultural adjustment.

Table 3: Participants' experiences in Türkiye.

| Experience | Number | (%) |
|--|--------|------|
| A Different Educational Experience in Türkiye | | |
| Yes | 43 | 41.7 |
| No | 60 | 58.3 |
| Living with Relatives in Türkiye | | |
| Yes | 22 | 21.4 |
| No | 81 | 78.6 |
| Duration of Stay in Türkiye | | |
| 1 -5 year | 68 | 66.0 |
| 5 year and above | 35 | 34.0 |
| Frequency of Speaking Turkish | | |
| Never | 17 | 16.5 |
| Sometimes | 56 | 54.4 |
| From time to time | 21 | 20.4 |
| Always | 9 | 8.7 |
| The Feeling When Speaking Turkish | | |

| | | |
|-------------------|----|------|
| Not comfortable | 3 | 2.9 |
| Comfortable | 75 | 72.8 |
| Quite comfortable | 25 | 24.3 |

An investigation of the participants' living arrangements with relatives in Türkiye revealed that 21.4% (n=22) lived with a relative in Türkiye, while 78.6% (n=81) did not live with any relatives. This finding indicates that a large proportion of the participants lived in Türkiye without the support of family or relatives. Limited social support networks can lead to various challenges, particularly for international students, during the process of cultural adaptation and acculturation.

Upon examining the length of time participants have spent in Türkiye, it was found that 66% (n=68) have been in the Türkiye for between 1 and 5 years, while 34% (n=35) have been there for 5 years or more. This finding indicates that a significant portion of the research group has gained experience in Türkiye over a certain period of time and may be at different stages of the cultural adaptation process.

The frequency of Turkish language use among participants was examined, revealing that 16.5% (n=17) never spoke Turkish, 54.4% (n=56) spoke it sometimes, 20.4% (n=21) spoke it occasionally, and

8.7% (n=9) spoke it always. These results indicate that a significant portion of the participants use Turkish only to a limited extent in daily life. The limited use of the language can be considered a significant factor that may affect individuals' ability to adapt to their social environment and their communication processes.

The participants' feelings when speaking Turkish were examined, revealing that 2.9% (n=3) did not feel comfortable, 72.8% (n=75) felt comfortable, and 24.3% (n=25) felt quite comfortable. This finding indicates that the vast majority of participants felt comfortable speaking Turkish. It can be concluded that a positive perception of language use may facilitate individuals' cultural adaptation processes and play a role in reducing acculturation stress.

4.3. Descriptive Findings Related to Dimensions

Descriptive statistics regarding the dimensions of the scale used in the study were examined, and the results are presented in Table 4. According to the analysis results, the scale items for all dimensions range from 1 to 5.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics regarding scale dimensions.

| Dimensions | N | Min | Max | X | SD |
|--|-----|------|------|------|------|
| Perceived Discrimination (B1) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.27 | 1.06 |
| Homesickness (B2) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 1.17 |
| Perceived Hate (B3) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.65 | 1.04 |
| Fear (B4) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.98 | 1.03 |
| Stress Due to Change/ Culture Shock (B5) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.51 | .99 |
| Guilt (B6) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.00 | 1.05 |
| Miscellaneous (B7) | 103 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.56 | .89 |

Not. X = Mean, SD = Standard deviation.

The responses of the participants in the study to the scale's subscales reveal that internal tensions and defense mechanisms are quite prominent in the group's overall psychological profile. According to the descriptive statistical results, the dimensions in which participants had the highest means were Guilt (X = 4.00, SD = 1.05) and Fear (X = 3.98, SD = 1.03); this finding demonstrates that individuals feel a deep sense of responsibility toward the social environment they left behind and act with a high perception of threat in their current environment. Similarly, the moderate-to-high scores on the Perceived Hate (X = 3.65, SD = 1.04) and Stress Due to Change and Culture Shock (X = 3.51, SD = 0.99) dimensions indicate that the process of adapting to a new cultural environment imposes a significant psychological

burden. In contrast, the relatively lower mean scores in the Perceived Discrimination (X = 3.27, SD = 1.06) and Homesickness (X = 3.00, SD = 1.17) remaining at relatively lower averages suggests that participants defined the difficulties they experienced not so much in terms of direct external aggression (discrimination) or feelings of longing, but rather along the axis of "fear" and "guilt" rooted in uncertainty and social insecurity.

4.4. Determinants of Acculturation Stress: Demographic and Experiential Differences and Cross-Dimensional Relationships

4.4.1. Demographic and Experiential Differences

The results of the independent samples t-test

analysis conducted according to the gender variable revealed that no gender-based differences were observed in the vast majority of the psychological and social factors perceived by the participants. However, the Perceived Discrimination dimension deviated from this general trend, showing a statistically significant difference ($t = -2.18$; $p = 0.03$). Upon examining the findings, it was determined that the mean Perceived Discrimination scores for male students ($\bar{X} = 3.57$) were significantly higher than those for female students ($\bar{X} = 3.12$) (Table 5). This finding demonstrates that the gender variable plays a decisive role in shaping individuals' perceptions of

social acceptance and exclusion within the study sample. Remarkably, male students perceive a higher level of discrimination than female students. This finding offers a notable nuance when compared to the general assumptions about "disadvantaged groups" in the literature. Although the hypothesis that women are more sensitive to discrimination due to their gender roles is widespread in the social sciences literature, this finding reveals that male students feel more marginalized in social interaction processes. No statistically significant differences were found across other sub-dimensions based on gender ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5: Comparison of Psychological Dimensions by Gender.

| Dimensions | Gender | N | \bar{X} | SD | t-value | Sig. |
|-------------------------------------|--------|----|-----------|------|---------|------|
| Perceived Discrimination | Female | 56 | 3.12 | .97 | -2.18 | .03 |
| | Male | 47 | 3.57 | 1.08 | | |
| Homesickness | Female | 56 | 2.98 | 1.15 | -.14 | .88 |
| | Male | 47 | 3.02 | 1.20 | | |
| Perceived Hate | Female | 56 | 3.57 | .94 | -.73 | .46 |
| | Male | 47 | 3.72 | 1.10 | | |
| Fear | Female | 56 | 3.98 | 1.09 | -.00 | .99 |
| | Male | 47 | 3.98 | 1.10 | | |
| Stress Due to Change/ Culture Shock | Female | 56 | 3.54 | .96 | -.02 | .97 |
| | Male | 47 | 3.55 | 1.11 | | |
| Guilt | Female | 56 | 3.92 | 1.03 | -.85 | .39 |
| | Male | 47 | 4.10 | 1.06 | | |
| Miscellaneous | Female | 56 | 3.49 | .86 | -.41 | .68 |
| | Male | 47 | 3.57 | .99 | | |

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were differences in acculturation stress dimensions based on participants' grade levels (Table 6). The results of

the analysis indicate that there were significant differences in some acculturation stress dimensions depending on grade level.

Table 6: Comparison of Psychological Dimensions by Grade Variable.

| Dimensions | Grade | N | \bar{X} | SD | F | P |
|--------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------|------|------|-----|
| Perceived Discrimination | 1st grade | 31 | 3.38 | 1.10 | 1.66 | .16 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 3.51 | 1.10 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 3.50 | .92 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 3.04 | .88 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 2.75 | 1.24 | | |
| Homesickness | 1st grade | 31 | 3.31 | 1.14 | 1.20 | .31 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 3.01 | 1.13 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 2.91 | 1.25 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 2.93 | 1.12 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 2.51 | 1.17 | | |
| Perceived Hate | 1st grade | 31 | 3.75 | .95 | 2.60 | .04 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 3.66 | .96 | | |

| | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|----|------|------|------|------|
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 3.96 | 1.03 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 3.72 | .96 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 2.87 | 1.23 | | |
| Fear | 1st grade | 31 | 4.08 | .98 | 2.82 | .02 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 4.06 | 1.04 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 4.32 | .77 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 3.98 | 1.02 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 3.20 | 1.21 | | |
| Stress Due to Change/ Culture Shock | 1st grade | 31 | 3.65 | .97 | 1.52 | .20 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 3.68 | .97 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 3.55 | .93 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 3.51 | .98 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 2.92 | 1.09 | | |
| Guilt | 1st grade | 31 | 4.01 | .97 | .16 | .95 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 4.02 | 1.00 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 4.12 | 1.04 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 4.00 | .97 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 3.82 | 1.44 | | |
| Miscellaneous | 1st grade | 31 | 3.80 | 0.86 | 3.38 | 0.12 |
| | 2nd grade | 18 | 3.75 | 0.91 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 20 | 3.64 | 0.84 | | |
| | 4th grade | 20 | 3.45 | 0.75 | | |
| | 5th grade and above | 14 | 2.85 | 0.96 | | |

When examining whether the level of perceived discrimination varied by grade level, no statistically significant difference was found between the groups ($F = 1.66$; $p = 0.16$). However, when average scores were examined, it was noted that the perceived level of discrimination was higher among 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-grade students, while it was relatively lower among 5th-grade and older students. This finding may indicate that students' perception of discrimination may decrease as the duration of education increases, or that individuals may adapt more to their social environment over time.

No significant difference was found in the level of homesickness across grade levels ($F = 1.20$; $p = 0.31$). However, upon examining the mean values, it is observed that the level of homesickness is higher among first-grade students in particular, while this feeling decreases relatively in higher grade levels. This finding suggests that homesickness may be experienced more intensely during the initial stages of the adaptation process to a new environment.

In terms of stress levels due to change and culture shock, no statistically significant difference was found between grade levels ($F = 1.52$; $p = 0.20$). However, when average scores are examined, it is observed that stress levels are higher in the lower grades and relatively lower in the upper grades. This suggests that students are able to adapt to the new

environment and cultural setting over time.

Finally, no significant difference was found in the dimension of guilt across grade levels ($F = 0.16$; $p = 0.95$). An examination of the mean values reveals that feelings of guilt remained at similar levels across all grade levels. This finding suggests that feelings of guilt may be a more general and individual emotional experience, independent of students' grade level in the educational process.

On the other hand, a statistically significant difference was found in the perceived hate dimension across grade levels ($F = 2.60$; $p = 0.04$). An examination of the mean scores reveals that third-grade students had higher levels of perceived hate compared to other grades, while students in fifth grade and above had the lowest mean scores. This suggests that the experiences students have during the middle stages of their education may increase negative emotional perceptions, but that these perceptions may diminish over time.

Similarly, significant differences in fear levels were found across grade levels ($F = 2.82$; $p = 0.02$). Based on mean scores, third-grade students exhibited the highest levels of fear, while fifth-grade students and above had the lowest levels. This finding suggests that academic, social, or cultural stress factors experienced during specific stages of the educational process may increase fear levels.

Overall, the research findings reveal that while certain dimensions of acculturation stress (particularly perceived hate and fear) differ significantly across grade levels, differences in other dimensions are not statistically significant. However, the trends observed in the mean values suggest that students' adaptation processes may strengthen as their education progresses, and that certain negative emotional reactions may diminish.

Furthermore, no statistically significant differences were found in the analyses conducted regarding sociodemographic and experiential variables examined in the study, such as age, grade point average, department, marital status, and the experiences of the participants ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, it was concluded that these variables did not have a significant effect on the study's main variables, and they were not reported in detail in the findings section of the study. This result suggests that the

levels of acculturation stress examined exhibit a more general and homogeneous distribution, independent of the participants' demographic characteristics or individual experiences. This indicates that the emotional responses in question may be related to the social context and environmental conditions in which individuals find themselves, rather than to individual characteristics.

4.4.2. Interdimensional Relationships

Pearson correlation analysis assessed the relationships among seven variables (Perceived Discrimination, Homesickness, Perceived Hate, Fear, Stress Due to Change/ Culture Shock (B5), Perceived Guilt, and Miscellaneous) (Table 7). The results of the analysis indicate that there are statistically significant positive correlations among all variables ($p < 0.01$).

Table 7: Interdimensional Relationships.

| Dimensions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| Perceived Discrimination | 1 | .49** | .71** | .52** | .57** | .38** | |
| Homesickness | .49** | 1 | .53** | .36** | .58** | .32** | |
| Perceived Hate | .71** | .53** | 1 | .53** | .62** | .56** | |
| Fear | .52** | .36** | .53** | 1 | .76** | .64** | |
| Stress Due to Change/ Culture Shock | .57** | .58** | .62** | .76** | 1 | .60** | |
| Guilt | .38** | .32** | .56** | .64** | .60** | 1 | |
| Miscellaneous | .77** | .55** | .69** | .59** | .74** | .51 | 1 |

** $p < .01$.

The correlation between perceived discrimination and perceived hatred ($r = 0.711$) indicates a strong relationship. This finding suggests that discriminatory attitudes significantly contribute to feelings of hatred. The relationships between perceived discrimination and fear ($r = 0.522$) and stress due to change and culture shock ($r = 0.575$) are moderate to high, suggesting that perceived discrimination may increase both fear and stress levels related to cultural change in individuals. The correlation between perceived discrimination and perceived guilt ($r = 0.387$) is moderate, indicating a significant link between social perceptions and judgments of guilt. Homesickness shows moderate relationships with other variables (perceived discrimination: $r = 0.494$; perceived hatred: $r = 0.535$; stress due to change and culture shock: $r = 0.584$). This finding indicates that homesickness interacts significantly with other negative emotions; however, the strength of this interaction is more limited compared to variables such as perceived discrimination or perceived hatred. Perceived hate perceived discrimination ($r = 0.711$), homesickness ($r = 0.535$), fear ($r = 0.535$), stress due to change and

culture shock ($r = 0.620$), and guilt ($r = 0.568$). These findings confirm that perceived hate is closely related to other negative emotions and social perceptions. The correlation between fear and stress due to change and culture shock ($r = 0.760$) shows the highest value among all analysed dimensions. This suggests that traumatic or negative experiences may trigger these two emotions simultaneously and intensely. Additionally, the relationships between fear and guilt ($r = 0.641$) and between stress due to change and culture shock, and guilt ($r = 0.607$) are also moderate to high; this suggests that emotional responses may develop in parallel with guilt. Guilt exhibits significant and moderate-to-high positive correlations with all the negative emotions analysed. This suggests that emotional experiences may influence individuals' social and ethical judgments.

According to Cohen *et al.* (2023), most correlations have moderate ($r = 0.30-0.49$) and large ($r \geq 0.50$) effect sizes. These findings indicate that the relationships between variables are both statistically and practically significant. Overall, the correlation pattern obtained reveals that emotional and social psychological variables have a mutually reinforcing

structure. Dimensions such as perceived discrimination, perceived hatred, fear, and stress due to change and culture shock can have significant effects on guilt.

5. CONCLUSIONS and DISCUSSION

In the context of a globalizing higher education landscape, Türkiye has emerged as a key destination for international students in recent years. However, this demographic expansion has also brought with it complex acculturation stresses and challenges related to social integration. Current findings indicate that students are engaged not only in academic struggles but also in a profound socio-psychological struggle for survival.

This study examines the educational experiences of international students in Turkey by synthesizing the presented quantitative data considering the current literature. The primary objective of the research is to identify participants' levels of acculturation stress and to investigate whether this stress varies according to various demographic and experiential variables. The relationships among the subdimensions of acculturation stress were also analysed. An overall evaluation of the research findings reveals that participants' levels of acculturation stress are below moderate, yet strong correlations exist between certain dimensions. Statistical findings indicate that student experiences do not show a linear improvement but rather include a "crisis" phase that intensifies particularly in the third year. The lack of social capital resulting from living without relatives (78.6%), the gap between language proficiency and practical usage, and the psychological burden caused by stigma stemming from digital media threaten students' existential security. Analyses indicate that the strong positive correlations between perceived discrimination, perceived hatred, and fear are indicative of the intense acculturation stress experienced by immigrant students during their adaptation process to the new country.

One of the remarkable findings of the study is that male students reported higher levels of perceived discrimination compared to female students. The fact that male students reported higher levels of perceived discrimination can be explained by social identity dynamics, the role conflict associated with being male—which heightens perceptions and emotional sensitivity—and the perception of male minorities as an out-group threat by society. The coding of male immigrants as a "threat" in the social environment is a multifaceted phenomenon that increases their levels of perceived discrimination.

Studies with men have found relationships between racial identity attitudes, masculine role norms, and perceptions of discrimination and prejudice. In female-dominated or specific cultural contexts, male minorities may be perceived as an outgroup in two ways—through both gender-based and racial/ethnic-based othering—which can reinforce perceived discrimination (Arndt, 2014). Male students may experience a conflict between their privileged identities and the critical content of the field, leading them to develop professional and emotional responses (Cespedes, 2016).

The most remarkable finding revealed by the ANOVA results is that perceived levels of hatred and fear peaked in third grade and dropped to their lowest level in fifth grade. In the literature, classic "U-curve" or "W-curve" models suggest that the adaptation process enters a crisis following the initial "honeymoon" phase and then recovers (Hatipler & Daşkıran, 2021). However, data from the Turkish context indicate that, contrary to expectations, this crisis does not subside in the second year but rather reaches a "saturation point" in the third year.

First-year students (30.1%), who are primarily concerned with logistical and basic adjustment issues face both increasing academic stress and the clarification of uncertainties regarding their future (such as staying in the country after graduation and finding employment) by the time they reach their third year. This phase is a period during which the student engages more deeply with the local community and is consequently exposed to more "micro-aggressions" (Alataş & Sayımer, 2025). Adaptation literature generally posits that the first year (the "honeymoon" phase followed by culture shock) is the most challenging period (Arslan & Polat, 2023). However, the data from this study reveal that the dimensions of "perceived hate" and "fear" peak among third-year students. This situation can be conceptualized as a "second shock" or "pre-graduation anxiety." The high levels of "homesickness" observed among first-year students align with the literature, reflecting the natural emotional cost of entering a new environment (Türel, 2021). However, the rise in perceived hate and fear in the third year may stem from the student now experiencing the host society not as an "outsider," but as an "insider-outsider" confronting structural barriers within the system (bureaucracy, anxiety about entering the labour market, social exclusion). The fact that this stress drops to its lowest level among students in fifth grade and above indicates a "mastery phase" that can be explained by the accumulation of learned coping strategies and

cultural capital. The decline in perceived hate and fear by the fifth grade can be explained by the internalization of “successful acculturation” strategies or the development of a defence mechanism/desensitization against these emotions (Koo, Baker & Yoon, 2021). However, no significant differences were found in acculturation stress dimensions across other demographic and experiential variables examined in the study (gender, age, marital status, educational background, etc.). This result suggests that acculturation stress may be more closely related to the social environment, cultural interactions, and the individual’s contextual conditions rather than individual demographic characteristics. The fact that international students share similar social and academic environments may have led to their stress levels manifesting similarly across these variables.

The fact that 78.6% of participants live without any relatives clearly highlights the lack of “social capital” among international students. Kocatürk et al. (2025) note that social support is the strongest buffer mechanism against acculturation stress. Students lacking support from family or close friends remain vulnerable when facing discrimination.

The language data, however, reveal a paradoxical situation: Although 72.8% of students reported feeling comfortable speaking Turkish, the fact that only 54.4% actually speak it “sometimes” points to a disconnect between “perceived proficiency” and “sociocultural participation” (Tekel et al. 2025). This situation suggests that students feel excluded not so much by the language itself, but by the social context of the language; they prefer to remain in “safe zones” rather than engage in deep communication with the local community. As emphasized by Arslan and Polat (2023), language proficiency is not merely a matter of grammatical knowledge but also a key to social acceptance; however, the feeling of social exclusion prevents this key from being utilized.

Correlation analyses between variables have provided the most significant data, enhancing the theoretical depth of the research. The high correlation of $r = 0.760$ between fear and stress due to change/culture shock associated with change demonstrates that cultural transition is not merely a cognitive process but also a profound issue of ontological security. Even more critical is the positive relationship between “perceived discrimination” and “perceived hate” ($r=0.711$) and “guilt” ($r=0.387$). This suggests that individuals exposed to discrimination may internalize this external pressure as a “sense of guilt” or a “social stigma.”

In the media, “stigmatizing” discourse directed at

migrants and international students (Abass & Halidu, 2024) appears to have become a source of stress in students’ own perceptions. Digital media platforms and social networks have become a medium where migrants and international students (particularly Syrian and African students) are frequently portrayed as a “security threat” or an “economic burden” (Bozkurt, 2025; Islam, 2022). These negative representations lead students to perceive themselves as “potential criminals” in the eyes of society. This perceived hate is not so much a result of an objective crime as it is a state of ontological insecurity stemming from being the “unwanted other.” This explains the 0.76 correlation between fear and culture shock: The student is not only trying to adapt to a new culture but is also attempting to defend themselves against that culture’s “perceived threat” toward them.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for future studies are proposed: International students in Türkiye experience significant emotional distress midway through their academic journey (in their third year), but over time they learn to manage this stress. The fact that socio-demographic characteristics do not make a significant difference in stress levels indicates that acculturation stress is a structural and environmental phenomenon rather than a result of individual vulnerability. It is critical for university administrations to expand adaptation programs beyond the “orientation” (first-year) phase and develop “second-wave adaptation and career support” modules tailored for third-year students. Additionally, the lack of social support networks should be addressed through hybrid models that enhance peer mentoring and interaction with local communities. Furthermore, future research could utilize broader samples that include international students from different universities and countries. This would allow for a more comprehensive examination of how acculturation stress manifests in various cultural contexts.

Acculturation stress is a process that can evolve over time. Therefore, longitudinal studies that collect data at different stages of students’ time in Türkiye can reveal the dynamics of the cultural adaptation process in greater detail. Qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, focus group studies, etc.) can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of acculturation stress on individuals. This approach allows for a more detailed exploration of their experiences. Future studies could explore the relationships between acculturation stress and variables such as psychological well-being, life

satisfaction, social support, and a sense of belonging. Applied research could be conducted to evaluate the impact of counselling services, social adaptation programs, and cross-cultural activities designed to support international students' adaptation processes at universities.

6. LIMITATIONS

As with any research study, this study also has certain limitations. Taking these limitations into account is important for a more accurate interpretation of the research findings and to provide guidance for future studies.

First, the study was conducted using data collected exclusively from African students studying at Akdeniz University. Therefore, the findings cannot be directly generalized to international students at other universities or to student groups from different countries. Studies involving international students from different universities and with diverse cultural backgrounds could yield more comprehensive and comparative results regarding acculturation stress.

Although a complete count was made, another limitation of the study is that the population was limited to 103 participants. The small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. In future studies, the use of larger and more diverse groups may contribute to a more robust evaluation of findings related to acculturation stress.

In this study, data were collected exclusively through the survey technique within the scope of

quantitative research methods. Since the survey method relies on participants' self-reports, social desirability bias or individual perceptual differences may influence the results. Therefore, the use of qualitative research methods (in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, etc.) in future studies could contribute to a more detailed understanding of students' acculturation experiences.

Another limitation of the study is that it employs a cross-sectional design. Since the data were collected during a specific time period, changes in acculturation stress over time could not be examined. However, the acculturation process is dynamic in nature, and individuals' adaptation processes to a new cultural environment may vary over time. Therefore, longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of changes in acculturation stress over time.

Finally, the variables examined in the study were limited in number. Variables that could influence acculturation stress—such as social support, psychological resilience, cultural identity, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being were not included in the study. Including these variables in future research models could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of acculturation stress.

Despite these limitations, the study presents important findings regarding the acculturation stress experiences of African students studying at Akdeniz University and contributes to the existing literature on the subject.

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