



© Authors, 2026

*Journal of International Students*

Volume 16, Issue 11 (2026), pp. 315-338

ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)

jistudents.org

<https://doi.org/10.32674/xcojqc37>



## Navigating Intimate Partner Relationships: A Study of First-Time International Students in Marital Relationships in the United States

Fatima Akmal Leghari, Ed.M.,<sup>1</sup>, Dhikrullah Mudathir, M.Ed.<sup>1</sup>, Teresa Ann Granger, PhD, CRC<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology, and Counseling; The University of Alabama*

<sup>2</sup>*Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center, Research & Development, 3701 Loop Road, Tuscaloosa, AL, 35404, USA*

**ABSTRACT: Background:** This qualitative study explored how first-time international graduate students in marital relationships navigate relational, academic, and cultural transitions while pursuing higher education in the United States. Grounded in ecological and cross-cultural adaptation frameworks, the study examined how students balance multiple roles and construct meaning within new social and institutional contexts. **Methods:** Twenty-five students from a large public university in the southeastern U.S. completed demographic surveys and 60-minute semistructured interviews focused on adjustment, coping, and support. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Six themes emerged, capturing how participants navigated relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions of adjustment. **Conclusions:** Marital relationships served as both resilience factors and stressors. The findings highlight the importance of support, culturally familiar networks, and family-inclusive institutional practices to promote international students' well-being.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural adaptation, cultural adjustment, higher education international students, marital relationships, qualitative research

**Received:** 20, February 2026 | **Revised:** 01, April 2026 | **Accepted:** 03, May 2026

**Correspondence Author:** This article should be addressed to Fatima A. Leghari Doctoral Candidate, The University of Alabama, Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology and Counseling,

Address: 1345 10<sup>th</sup> Ave E. Apt 1127, Tuscaloosa, AL. 35404.

E-mail: fatimaleghari10@gmail.com

Orcid ID: Fatima A Leghari 0009-0007-7091-6486

How to Cite (APA): Leghari, F.A., Mudathir, D., & Granger, T. A. (2026). Navigating Intimate Partner Relationships: A Study of First-Time International Students in Marital Relationships in the United States. *Journal of International Student*, 16(11), 315-338. <https://doi.org/10.32674/xc0jqc37>

---

© *Author(s)*, 2026..

This article is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

---

## INTRODUCTION

International students are individuals who leave their home country to pursue education abroad, often facing challenges such as language barriers, cultural adjustment, and social isolation (Andrade, 2006; Banjong, 2015). This population has grown rapidly within U.S. higher education, surpassing one million enrollees and increasing by 11.5% in 2022-2023 (Institute of International Education, 2023). While research has documented the academic, emotional, and social difficulties international students face, considerably less attention has been given to those who are also navigating marital relationships simultaneously. For married international graduate students, adjustment occurs not only at the individual level but also within an intimate relational context shaped by spousal responsibilities, shifting gender roles, visa constraints, and the demands of building a life together in an unfamiliar cultural environment (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2018; Yaacob et al., 2015).

This gap in the literature is consequential. Marital and relational contexts have been shown to significantly shape international students' psychological adjustment, academic performance, and sense of belonging, yet most existing studies treat these students as individuals rather than as partners within family systems (Ana, 2022; Soylemez-Karakoc et al., 2023). Given these gaps, this study explored the lived experiences of first-time international graduate students in marital relationships, examining how they balance academic, cultural, and relational stressors while maintaining well-being. By centering students' voices, this research contributes to scholarship on international student well-being and

offers practical implications for developing culturally responsive, family-inclusive support systems within higher education institutions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Married International Students: A Distinct and Understudied Population**

While research on international students has grown substantially, the majority of studies focus on individual adjustment processes, with limited attention to how relational and family contexts shape academic and emotional outcomes (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017). Married international graduate students occupy a particularly complex position, simultaneously managing rigorous academic demands, cultural adaptation, and spousal and familial responsibilities. Marital satisfaction is a significant predictor of psychological adjustment, with supportive spousal relationships buffering acculturative stress, while strained relationships, intensified by financial pressure, changing gender dynamics, and immigration restrictions, amplify mental health challenges and hinder academic success (Ana, 2022; Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017; Yaacob et al., 2015; Jiang et al., 2020).

Spouses accompanying international students on dependent F-2 visas face particular vulnerabilities. Employment restrictions limit professional engagement and social participation, contributing to isolation, loss of professional identity, and diminished self-worth (Bakhshalizdeh, 2024). Married international graduate students show reduced campus integration compared to single peers, reflecting structural barriers that compound relational stress (Soylemez-Karakoc et al., 2023), while home-country gendered, religious, and familial expectations continue shaping marital role negotiations even after relocation (Jiang et al., 2020).

### **Belonging, Community, and Institutional Support**

Social belonging and peer connection are consistently identified as critical factors in international students' adjustment and persistence. Students who establish meaningful ties with conational peers, faith-based communities, or cultural organizations report stronger emotional well-being and greater academic resilience (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). However, forming close relationships with domestic peers remains difficult for many international students, particularly those whose familial responsibilities, cultural backgrounds, or limited English proficiency constrain social participation (Rodriguez et al., 2024; Bethel & Fetvadjev, 2020), barriers further compounded for married students by the time and energy demands of maintaining a household and supporting a spouse (Soylemez-Karakoc et al., 2023).

Institutional support structures, including international student services, counseling centers, and orientation programs, represent a critical but frequently inadequate resource for this population. These services are designed primarily with single students in mind, failing to address the needs of those with spouses or dependents (Glass et al., 2021; Crider et al., 2024), leaving married international

students reliant on informal community networks to meet needs that campus services do not fulfill and underscoring the importance of both peer support and structural reform.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks to situate married international graduate students' experiences within a broader conceptual structure: Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) ecological systems theory and Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory conceptualizes human development and adjustment as occurring within nested, interacting environmental systems. For married international students, the microsystem represents the most immediate daily context, marital relationships, family interactions, academic departments, and peer friendships. The mesosystem captures interactions between microsystems, such as academic pressures spilling into marital dynamics or spousal support influencing classroom engagement. The exosystem encompasses broader institutional structures that indirectly affect students, including university policies, international student services, and visa regulations. The macrosystem reflects overarching cultural values and national policies such as U.S. immigration law and home-country cultural norms that shape expectations and constraints at all other levels. Finally, the chronosystem acknowledges that these systems evolve over time as students' adjustment unfolds across academic milestones and life events.

Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory describes the process by which individuals psychologically and functionally adapt to a new cultural environment, centering on a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic in which encountering the unfamiliar produces stress that prompts adaptive responses and gradually yields personal and intercultural growth. Key facilitating factors include personal predispositions such as openness and resilience, the receptivity of the host environment, and the availability of social support. For married international students, the marital relationship functions simultaneously as a support resource that may accelerate adaptation and as a relational context that introduces its own adaptation demands. Applied together, these frameworks allow this study to examine how married international students' experiences are shaped by overlapping personal, relational, institutional, and sociocultural forces and how adaptation unfolds as a dynamic, multilevel process rather than a linear or individual process.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design using semistructured interviews to explore the lived experiences of first-time international graduate students navigating marital or spousal relationships while studying in the United States. Guided by a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and

employing interpretive phenomenology (Burns et al., 2022), the study aimed to understand how individuals make meaning of their marital and academic lives within a cross-cultural context. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning within the data, allowing for both shared and unique experiences to emerge across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Although interpretive phenomenology and reflexive thematic analysis represent distinct philosophical traditions, they were employed as compatible and mutually informing approaches in this study. The phenomenological orientation shaped the entire analytic process by foregrounding participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to marital and academic life in a new cultural context. Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, thematic analysis was applied interpretively rather than merely descriptively, as coders sought not only to identify recurrent patterns but also to interrogate the underlying meanings and relational significance of those patterns held for participants (Tindall, 2009). To manage researcher subjectivity, both primary coders engaged in bracketing prior to and during analysis, consciously identifying and setting aside personal assumptions drawn from their own experiences as international students. Dialogic engagement among the research team further supported interpretive rigor, with coders regularly discussing emerging interpretations, surfacing alternative readings, and ensuring that theme constructions remained grounded in participants' own language and accounts.

### **Participants**

Participants were 25 international graduate students ( $N = 25$ ) enrolled at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Participant demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant demographic characteristics (N=25)

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Degree Level	Doctoral	20	80
	Master's	5	20
Discipline	STEM	16	64
	Non-STEM	9	36
Region of Origin	Asia	13	54
	Africa	7	28
	Middle East	3	12
	South America	2	6
Weekly Academic hours	21-30 hours	11	44
	40+ hours	8	30
	Less than 20	7	26

*Note.* Mean age = 31.6 years (SD = 6.01).

Table 2: Participant relational characteristics (N=25)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Shared Cultural Background with Spouse	Yes	16	64
	No	9	36
Marital Duration	Less than 1 year	3	12
	1-5 years	15	60
	6-10 years	6	24
	More than 10 years	1	4
Marital Conflict Frequency	Weekly or more	15	60
	Little to none	10	40

**Recruitment and Data Collection**

At the large public university in the United States, as of 2024, the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) served 1,102 active enrolled international students representing 92 countries, accounting for approximately 2.8% of the university’s total enrollment of 39,623 students. Among these, 276 were newly enrolled, including 214 first-time or internal-transfer graduate students, 51 first-time freshmen, and 11 first-time undergraduate transfers. Although marital status is not recorded, program observations suggest that many international graduate students arrive with spouses or families, highlighting the growing need for family-inclusive and culturally responsive counseling and support services.

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Alabama, participants were recruited through multiple channels to ensure diversity and accessibility. International graduate students in spousal or committed relationships at the university were invited to participate. Recruitment took place via the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) listservs, international student organizations at the university, and flyers shared at academic departments across campus.

A total of 25 international graduate students participated in 60-minute semistructured interviews exploring their experiences navigating spousal or marital relationships amid cultural and academic adaptation. Prior to the interviews, the participants completed an initial *Qualtrics* screening survey remotely to confirm eligibility and provide brief demographic information. Those meeting the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in an interview session conducted via encrypted videoconference or, when preferred, in a private room within the Counseling Lab at the university. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview.

All sessions were audio-recorded with participants’ consent. Videorecording was also conducted when feasible based on location and participant preference. All recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The semistructured interview protocol included open-ended questions such as “*How has your relationship with your spouse changed since you began your graduate studies in the U.S.?*”; “*What particular challenges or stressors have stood out for you*

*recently?”; and “How do you and your spouse cope with academic, financial, or cultural stress?”*

Probes were used to elicit elaboration on relational changes, cultural adaptation, and coping strategies. To acknowledge participants' time and contributions, interview participants received a \$20 e-VISA gift card upon completion. All procedures followed IRB institutional ethical standards and confidentiality safeguards. Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given that some participants were enrolled in the same academic programs or shared overlapping cultural and social networks, additional confidentiality measures were implemented to protect privacy. Identifying details were removed from transcripts during deidentification, and pseudonyms were assigned prior to analysis to ensure that no individual could be identified through their responses. Because the interview protocol addressed intimate aspects of marital life, academic stress, and cultural adjustment, the potential for emotional discomfort was anticipated. Interviewers were trained to recognize signs of distress and prepared to pause, redirect, or close interviews as needed. Campus counseling and mental health resources were provided to all participants at the conclusion of each interview, and debriefing was offered upon completion.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with the interpretive phenomenological design outlined above, interview data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore how married international graduate students made meaning of their marital and cultural adaptation experiences. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

A constant comparison process was carried out among the research team to ensure consistency and depth in coding. The sample size of 25 participants is consistent with phenomenological inquiry, which prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning the point at which new interviews yielded no substantively new codes or themes. The sample intentionally included participants representing variation in marital duration (ranging from less than one year to more than ten years), region of origin, academic discipline, and length of time in the U.S., providing a range of perspectives while maintaining the study's focus on shared meaning-making processes central to phenomenological analysis. Two graduate student researchers trained in qualitative research procedures independently coded the transcripts and then engaged in dual coding and collaborative discussions to reconcile differences and refine emerging patterns. Reflexivity was maintained through peer debriefing and reflective journaling to monitor assumptions and biases throughout the analytic process. NVivo software facilitated data management and organization. In addition to qualitative data, descriptive statistics were conducted using IBM Statistical Package for

Social Science (SPSS) Statistics to summarize participant demographics, including gender, degree level, marital duration, and spousal employment status.

### **Positionality**

The first author is a doctoral candidate who is an international student and has been studying in the U.S. for the past 8 years. This lived experience provided insider understanding of cultural adaptation, visa challenges, and academic pressures while also requiring reflexivity regarding aspects of participants' lives, particularly marital and family experiences that differed from the first author's own. Reflexive journaling and regular team debriefing were employed to examine assumptions and maintain openness to participants' diverse experiences.

The second author is an international student and doctoral student who has been studying in the U.S. for three years. As a married student and a father, he brings first-hand experience navigating cultural adaptation, family responsibilities, and academic demands simultaneously. This insider positionality enriched his understanding of participants' experiences while also requiring reflexivity to avoid assuming shared experiences, particularly given differences in cultural background, gender roles, and spousal circumstances across participants.

The third author is an Associate Professor who has taught, advised, and mentored international graduate students for the past eight years. Through this work, she has observed the diverse circumstances that shape students' academic and personal lives, including the varying spousal and familial obligations they manage, challenges related to student visas and funding, and the stressors that can influence academic performance, well-being, and engagement. Her prolonged engagement with this population informed her initial assumptions entering the study; specifically, many married international graduate students would have developed strategies to navigate competing demands of home, work, and school, while others would describe ongoing challenges in balancing these roles.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies to enhance credibility, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. The research team engaged in prolonged engagement with the data, including repeated review of transcripts and iterative team discussions throughout the analytic process. Peer debriefing was conducted regularly among the research team, with team members challenging interpretations and raising alternative readings to guard against confirmatory bias. Reflexive journaling was maintained by both primary coders to surface and interrogate their assumptions as international students themselves, ensuring that insider positionality was enriched rather than constrained interpretation.

## **RESULTS**

Analysis of the interviews revealed six overarching themes that describe how international graduate students navigated marital relationships amid academic and cultural adjustment in the U.S. These themes were (1) adjustment to a new environment, (2) cultural differences and social belonging, (3) marital relationships in transition, (4) stress and coping, (5) community and institutional support, and (6) quality of life and satisfaction. They illustrate a process of ongoing adaptation shaped by external stressors and internal resilience.

### **Theme 1: Adjustment to a New Environment**

Participants described the first months as a period of transition characterized by logistical hurdles, institutional unfamiliarity, and emotional strain. Adjustment required simultaneous learning across academic, cultural, and marital domains, a process that shaped both individual and relational well-being.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1 Practical and Daily Life Adjustments***

Securing housing, arranging transportation, and navigating healthcare or financial systems posed significant stressors, particularly for couples with children or limited local support.

“The most challenging thing is that you must have a car if you have a family. Medical treatment is expensive... what you take for granted at home, you cannot take for granted here,” one participant explained.

These practical barriers often intersected with emotional fatigue and the pressure to appear self-reliant. However, over time, participants described developing problem-solving routines that fostered a sense of partnership and competence within their marriages.

#### ***Subtheme 1.2 Academic Adjustments***

Students discussed demanding coursework, language barriers, and changes in academic mentorship that directly influenced household stability and emotional balance. “In my first semester, I was a [teaching assistant] ... the language barrier was the first challenge,” Participant 1 stated. Others reported that the dual identity of “scholar and spouse” created time-management strain, as stated by Participant 7: “Sometimes I’m so focused on research that I feel guilty for not spending enough time with my spouse.” These accounts illustrate how academic adjustment and marital well-being were interdependent, where difficulties in one sphere often reverberated in the other.

#### ***Subtheme 1.3 Trajectory of Adjustment***

Across interviews, participants described a gradual shift from initial culture shock toward increasing confidence and stability. Early uncertainty gave way to adaptive coping once social networks and routines were established. “In my first semester, it was very hard, it was very tough for me because the new culture I got through, I went through. However, now it’s easy for me to adjust,” Participant 5 said, capturing the developmental arc of adaptation.

For many, relational collaboration, such as shared planning, open communication, and mutual encouragement, was key to this transition. Participant 5 described deliberately carving out shared time despite academic pressures: “Have lunch and dinner definitely with my wife. In addition, do some activities together. Even just watching TV or just talking or walking.”

He acknowledged that this intentional connection kept the relationship stable, reflecting that without it, “*my wife will never be patient with my PhD stuff.*” As couples became more adept at navigating systems together, they reported feeling both more autonomous and more connected with Participant 3 noting, “If we are our best, then we can be the best in our relationship. Therefore, if there’s self-satisfaction within me, then I can be the best husband.”

Taken together, these subthemes reveal that adjustment to a new environment was not merely an individual academic process but a relational endeavor. The interplay between practical survival, academic integration, and emotional partnership shaped how couples negotiated early challenges. These early adjustment experiences reflect microsystem-level interactions between academic and relational contexts, consistent with the initial stress phase of Kim’s (2001) cross-cultural adaptation process.

## **Theme 2: Cultural Differences and Social Belonging**

This theme examines how cultural contrasts and belonging needs shaped international students’ marital and adjustment experiences, addressing the research question by showing how sociocultural dissonance influenced both emotional connection and relational functioning. Participants described encountering new social norms and individualistic lifestyles that contrasted sharply with the collectivist, community-based cultures from which many originated. These differences affected not only daily interactions but also how couples related to each other and integrated into their host communities.

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Culture Shock***

Most participants reported an initial sense of disorientation triggered by cultural differences in communication, social etiquette, and climate. The shift from community-oriented contexts to more individualistic norms was particularly striking, as Participant 6 stated that “People are more individualistic here... in my country I was always surrounded with friends and family”, and another participant further emphasized that “The culture shock for us was probably the weather—it was too hot.”

For many, the adjustment extended beyond environmental changes to altered expectations around gender roles, independence, and expression within marriage. Participant 15 reflected on how marriage shifted his sense of autonomy: “I was like on my own like when I was single. I do my homework whenever I want. I eat whenever I want. I hang out with my

friends whenever I want. However, now... you have someone living with you. She has rights.”

He also described how traditional gender role expectations intensified in the new context, noting, “especially in our culture I have to take care of my life and future kids and as a man, I’m responsible for that.” These early disruptions often set the stage for emotional strain and the need to renegotiate mutual understanding, as illustrated by the gradual process of learning to communicate: “Once she started talking, I feel like our disagreements, our fights are way less right now,” suggesting that emotional expression itself had to be consciously negotiated between partners.”

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Homesickness***

Separation from family, friends, and familiar traditions produced ongoing emotional distress, especially during seasonal or cultural holidays. Participant 2 noted, “When we got into winter... my wife was homesick.” Homesickness was intertwined with guilt and longing for extended family networks that typically supported marriage and childcare in their home countries. The absence of these networks placed new emotional weight on spousal relationships, intensifying reliance on one another for companionship and validation.

### ***Subtheme 2.3: Social Belonging***

Participants emphasized difficulties building meaningful friendships with domestic peers and navigating perceived social distance. “There are not so many citizens from Egypt... I’m not feeling comfortable stepping out of my comfort zone.” Limited opportunities for deep interpersonal connection heightened feelings of marginalization and reinforced dependence on ethnic or religious communities for support. For several, belonging emerged through culturally familiar spaces such as faith groups or regional student associations that provided understanding and inclusion absent elsewhere.

Culturally, these experiences reflect macrosystem influences, individualistic norms and host-country conditions, bearing directly on participants’ relational lives, representing the stress phase of Kim’s (2001) adaptation cycle.

## **Theme 3: Marital Relationships in Transition**

This theme explores how international graduate students experienced change, strain, and adaptation within their marital relationships while adjusting to academic and cultural demands in the U.S. It directly addresses the research question by showing how couples negotiated evolving responsibilities, stress, and emotional needs during their transition. Across interviews, participants described both deepened emotional intimacy and heightened tension, often within the same relational space.

### ***Subtheme 3.1 Emotional and Practical Support***

Participants consistently emphasized spousal support as a critical resource in navigating adjustment challenges. Emotional availability, empathy, and practical help were often described as the foundation of marital resilience.

“Thankfully, my husband was here, so he helped me a lot,” Participant 4 reflected. Another added, “The good thing here is that I’m getting more time to spend with my husband.”

These accounts highlight how mutual understanding and shared stress coping strengthened relationship satisfaction, especially when institutional or social support was lacking. Spouses provided encouragement, companionship, and a sense of continuity amid uncertainty.

### ***Subtheme 3.2 Strain and Conflict***

Despite these strengths, participants also reported tension related to financial instability, academic workload, and stress spillover. Limited time together and cultural differences in emotional expression sometimes magnified disagreements. “A lot of this stress reflects on your home with my wife, but we are trying to move on,” Participant 20 shared.

These conflicts often stemmed not from relational incompatibility but from systemic pressures such as visa restrictions or advisor demands that constrained couples’ ability to share responsibilities equally. For some, these strains temporarily weakened communication or emotional closeness, while others described finding growth through conflict resolution.

### ***Subtheme 3.3 Shifts in Roles and Responsibilities***

Adjusting to the U.S. context often redefined traditional marital roles. Many participants described gendered or functional role reversals prompted by differences in language ability, employability, or academic demands. “*When we came here, I became the translator because my husband doesn’t speak English,*” explained Participant 21. Another expressed frustration with economic restrictions: “I think it’s unfair that the spouse cannot work... it puts all the pressure on the *student.*” Similarly, a male participant noted, “As a man, I’m responsible for my wife and future kids... so I had to settle down.” These shifts reshaped relationship power dynamics and emotional interdependence. While some partners embraced new flexibility, others struggled to reconcile shifting expectations with cultural values learned in their home countries. These findings position the marital relationship as a central microsystem within which adaptation is negotiated, with role renegotiation reflecting Kim’s (2001) functional restructuring of relational patterns under cross-cultural pressure.

## **Theme 4: Stress, Coping, and Well-Being**

This theme captures how international graduate students managed the psychological and relational pressures of graduate study while navigating spousal relationships in a new cultural environment. Participants described a constant balancing act between meeting academic expectations, maintaining financial stability, and sustaining healthy marital dynamics.

#### ***Subtheme 4.1 Academic Pressure and Burnout***

Academic stress emerged as one of the most pervasive challenges shaping students' emotional and relational well-being. Participants frequently cited advisor expectations, publication demands, and financial limitations as ongoing sources of tension. "I submitted one paper and got reviews... that made me more stressed," Participant 16 noted, describing how academic evaluation and productivity pressures consumed much of their mental energy.

Several participants reported that these academic stressors indirectly strained their relationships, leaving little time or emotional bandwidth for their spouses. The dual demands of scholarly excellence and family life often blurred boundaries between professional and personal domains, leading to burnout symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, and withdrawal.

#### ***Subtheme 4.2 Coping Strategies***

Despite significant pressure, students developed diverse coping strategies rooted in both individual and relational resilience. Many described engaging in creative or physical outlets such as painting, exercise, or travel to restore balance. "When I feel stressed, I start painting," one participant shared. Another added, "Sometimes I go to counseling, sometimes I play football." Others relied on social and emotional coping by reaching out to mentors, peers, or faith-based communities. Participant 7 explained, "*I do workouts, biking, call friends or mentors... I speak out.*" For many, the spousal relationship itself became a key coping mechanism, serving as a stabilizing emotional base that buffered against isolation and academic stress.

#### ***Subtheme 4.3 Neglect of Self-Care***

Even with intentional coping, several participants acknowledged that academic priorities often overshadowed personal and relational well-being. The pressure to excel academically sometimes led to neglecting rest, nutrition, or leisure. "Sometimes I spend more time in the work, and I could not enjoy my personal life," Participant 13 admitted.

This neglect of self-care reflected a broader pattern of internalized expectations to remain productive and grateful for educational opportunities despite stress. The consequence was a subtle but persistent erosion of mental and emotional wellness that participants only recognized after prolonged strain.

The subthemes reveal that stress among international graduate students is a multifaceted phenomenon intertwined with academic, financial, and relational factors. It is important to distinguish this theme analytically from Theme 2, which focused on cultural and environmental stressors operating at the macrosystem and exosystem levels as in the broader societal norms, immigration structures, and host-country conditions that produce cultural dissonance and belonging difficulties. Theme 4, by contrast, examines the psychological and relational consequences of those pressures as they manifest within individuals and their intimate partnerships, for instance, the burnout, emotional withdrawal, and coping strategies that emerge within the microsystem of daily marital and academic life. This distinction reflects Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model: while

Theme 2 captures the sources and environmental conditions of stress, Theme 4 captures the individual and relational adaptive responses through which participants worked toward growth and equilibrium.

### **Theme 5: Community and Institutional Support**

This theme explores how access to community networks and university resources influences international graduate students' adjustment and relational well-being. While some students found belonging and advocacy through informal networks, others identified significant institutional gaps in addressing the needs of married or partnered international students.

#### ***Subtheme 5.1 Peer and Community Networks***

Most participants described informal community ties such as friendships, regional associations, or religious groups as central to their adjustment and sense of belonging. These networks offered both emotional comfort and practical assistance in navigating daily life. "We had the African Student Association here... a Nigerian picked me up at the airport," Participant 25 recalled, illustrating the immediacy of peer-based support.

For many, these connections functioned as "families of choice," compensating for the absence of extended family and familiar cultural systems. Such relationships provided safe spaces for mutual understanding and shared experience, reinforcing a sense of cultural continuity that institutional programs often lacked.

#### ***Subtheme 5.2: University Resources***

Experiences with institutional support varied widely. Some students described positive relationships with mentors and academic advisors who offered validation and flexibility:

"My advisor has an enormous role in making me comfortable," shared one participant.

Another explained, "I spoke to my Dean... they helped me resolve it."

However, many noted that university services were primarily student-centered, rarely considering spouses or dependents. Orientation events, counseling centers, and wellness programs often overlooked the realities of students who were married, leaving partners feeling excluded. This limited scope created invisible stress for couples navigating their transitions jointly.

#### ***Subtheme 5.3 Policy and Structural Barriers***

Participants also identified systemic constraints, particularly immigration policies and institutional structures, that compounded marital and financial strain. Visa restrictions prohibiting spouses on F-2 visas from working were described as demoralizing and inequitable. "If F2s can work... not just making money but having something tangible to do... that will ease the burden," Participant 24 asserted. Healthcare access, childcare, and housing affordability were additional barriers mentioned across interviews.

These structural factors reinforced power imbalances within marriages and restricted families' capacity to achieve financial stability or psychological well-being.

These findings illustrate how mesosystem connections, exosystem policies, and macrosystem immigration law together shape the structural conditions within which married international students seek support and how institutional gaps force informal community networks to fill the void.

### **Theme 6: Quality of Life and Satisfaction**

This theme illustrates how international graduate students evaluated their overall life satisfaction while balancing marital, academic, and cultural adjustments in the U.S. Participants' reflections revealed that quality of life was shaped by trade-offs between financial stability, independence, emotional connection, and personal growth.

#### ***Subtheme 6.1 Perceptions of Life in the US***

Participants frequently assessed their quality of life by weighing gains in opportunity and safety against losses in social connection and familiarity. Many expressed ambivalent appreciation for academic and professional advancement coexisting with feelings of isolation and stress. "If I go back home, I'll feel better in terms of social connection... but here the lifestyle is better," one participant noted. Another added, "Life here is stressing... but I feel settled somehow." For some, the U.S. environment offered freedom, structure, and resources unavailable in their home countries; for others, it introduced emotional distance and loneliness that required conscious management.

#### ***Subtheme 6.2 Sources of Joy***

Despite persistent stressors, participants identified multiple sources of happiness that enriched their daily lives and strengthened their relationships. Small rituals, family time, and exploration of local experiences served as restorative anchors. "Every weekend, we have a special meal we make as a family," shared Participant 19. Another mentioned, "I love to travel or explore new places—strawberry picking, hiking, camping." These moments of connection and recreation were described as protective factors that nurtured resilience, reinforced intimacy, and fostered gratitude amid broader adjustment demands.

#### ***Subtheme 6.3: Life satisfaction as a continuum***

Rather than viewing satisfaction as binary, most participants conceptualized it as a balance between sacrifices and achievements. Financial strain, distance from family, and cultural barriers were counterbalanced by educational progress and relational strength.

"I feel like it's 50–50... you are not financially stable, so you have to get the minimum of everything to let life go," one participant summarized. For many, the journey of adaptation itself became a measure of satisfaction, and success was

defined not by the absence of stress but by the ability to endure, grow, and sustain meaningful relationships through it.

Participants' capacity to find meaning and satisfaction amid persistent difficulty reflects the growth phase of Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model, in which sustained engagement with cross-cultural challenges yields deeper self-understanding and relational resilience.

## **DISCUSSION**

Interpreted through ecological and cross-cultural lenses, these findings demonstrate that married international graduate students adjust to life in the United States through an interplay of personal coping, relationship dynamics, and broader institutional and cultural forces. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, the marital microsystem provided emotional sustenance, university policies and visa structures imposed exosystem constraints, and cultural norms and immigration law shaped the macrosystem conditions within which all adaptation took place. Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model further illuminates how cumulative cultural transition stress, although disruptive, catalyzed both individual growth and deepened relational partnership.

The marital relationship emerged as central to participants' navigation of academic and cultural transition. Spouses functioned as emotional anchors and practical partners supporting daily tasks, cultural interpretation, and academic encouragement, consistent with prior research linking spousal support to positive international student adjustment (Bulgan & Ciftçi, 2017; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Critically, this study extends that literature by revealing support as mutual rather than unidirectional and extends Soylemez-Karakoc et al.'s (2023) work by showing that marital bonds generate significant internal resilience even within constrained institutional environments. Role shifts were paradoxical: while renegotiation sometimes deepened closeness, it also produced strain when one partner felt isolated or powerless, and one spouse's emotional state frequently influenced the other's academic performance, underscoring the value of a couple-level lens on international student adjustment (Ana, 2022; Lazarova et al., 2015; Mäkelä et al., 2018).

Academic opportunity and emotional strain existed in tension throughout the participants' accounts. Long hours, financial pressure, and limited personal time intensified by cultural adjustment, visa challenges, and absent family networks mirror findings documented by Tang et al. (2025) and Baba and Hosoda (2014). The burnout and self-care neglect described here reflect Kim's (2001) stress phase, in which cross-cultural adaptation demands temporarily exceed available coping resources before growth becomes possible.

Community belonging served a compensatory function when institutional structures fell short. Unlike Rodriguez et al. (2024), whose

participants faced barriers specific to stem contexts, our findings cut across disciplines, replicating and extending Soylemez-Karakoc et al.'s (2023) documentation of reduced campus integration among married students. Spousal isolation emerged as institutionally produced rather than individually chosen (Bakhshalizdeh, 2024), with university services consistently described as designed for individuals rather than families. Informal community networks thus became essential rather than merely beneficial, reinforcing that belonging is foundational to emotional adjustment and counters feelings of invisibility and cultural disconnection (glass et al., 2021; Bofo-Arthur & Bofo-Arthur, 2016).

Institutional barriers further compounded adjustment difficulties. Counseling services and student programming typically assumed that single students and dependent visa holders were excluded from many campus resources, and structural constraints limited spousal work authorization, high healthcare costs, childcare gaps, and visa-related stress directly affected both mental health and marital relationships, reflecting longstanding calls for more family-inclusive international student policies (chai et al., 2020). However, despite these challenges, participants described meaningful personal and relational growth, reframing well-being not as the absence of stress but as the capacity to find meaning, gratitude, and mutual support through hardship, consistent with the resilience literature emphasizing shared coping and positive reframing (Rahim, 2021). Taken together, these findings affirm that navigating marriage during cultural transition is a deeply relational and systemic process, demanding relationally informed, culturally sensitive, and structurally aware support from counseling and higher education professionals.

## **Implications**

These findings carry meaningful implications for professionals serving international graduate students and their families. ISSS offices should develop couple-oriented orientation programming that addresses practical adjustment challenges such as transportation, healthcare, and financial systems jointly for students and spouses, along with welcome events and resource guides specifically designed for F-2 visa holders to combat isolation. Campus counseling centers should expand offerings to include couples counseling and psychoeducational programming on stress, communication, and relational coping tailored to international student couples, with clinicians trained in cross-cultural communication, family systems, and immigration-related stressors (Arthur, 2017). Faculty advisors, although often unrecognized in this role, reduce stress spillover into students' home lives when they demonstrate cultural awareness, flexibility during family transitions, and clear communication about academic expectations. At the institutional level, university leaders should advocate for federal policy reforms that expand work authorization for F-2 visa holders, a significant source of financial strain and marital tension, while also prioritizing affordable childcare, expanded healthcare, and housing support for international student families. This study is limited by its single-institution, southeastern U.S. setting, which restricts transferability to other regional or institutional contexts;

the sample did not permit systematic comparisons across gender, visa category, or marital duration; and experiences of those with severe relational distress may be underrepresented. Additional limitations include a cross-sectional design that captures only a moment in evolving experiences and reliance on self-reported data, subject to memory and social desirability.

## CONCLUSION

This study illuminated the lived experiences of married international graduate students navigating academic and cultural transition in the United States, revealing a journey of tension and transformation marked by rigorous academic demands, shifting marital roles, and challenges of belonging within unfamiliar cultural systems. Despite isolation, financial strain, and institutional barriers, most participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, describing their relationships as both an anchor and an evolving partnership that sustained them through change. Adaptation for this population is inherently relational, and the well-being of one partner directly shapes the other's emotional and academic adjustment, with marital and community bonds serving as primary coping mechanisms where institutional support falls short. Ultimately, success for international graduate students extends beyond academic achievement and is measured in their capacity to create meaning, maintain connection, and grow within transnational life. For universities and counseling professionals, this calls for culturally responsive, family-inclusive approaches that acknowledge the intertwined nature of personal, relational, and academic wellness, ultimately enhancing retention, mental health outcomes, and affirming the humanity international students bring to academic communities.

### Acknowledgment

Funding for this project was provided internally by a research grant from the College of Education at the University of Alabama.

**Conflict of Interest statement:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research.

*In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:*

- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing**
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

*This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the introduction and discussion section of the manuscript. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.*

## References

- Alharbi, E. S., & Smith, A. P. (2018). Review of the literature on stress and wellbeing of international students in English-speaking countries. *International Education Studies*, 11(6), 22–44. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n6p22>
- Arthur, N. (2017). Supporting international students through strengthening their social resources. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(5), 887–894. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293876>
- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International student persistence: Integration or cultural integrity? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 57-81. [doi.org/10.2190/9MY5-256H-VFVA-8R](https://doi.org/10.2190/9MY5-256H-VFVA-8R)
- Ana, X. (2022). One family, different experiences of identity formation: International graduate students and their spouses. *Journal of International Students*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i2.2459>
- Baba, Y., & Hosoda, M. (2014). Home away home: Better understanding of the role of social support in predicting cross-cultural adjustment among international students. *College Student Journal*, 48(1), 1-15.
- Bakhshalizadeh, F. (2024). Structural vulnerability and social integration of F-2 visa holders in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 14(4), 664-678. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.6754>
- Banjong, D. N. (2015). International students enhanced academic performance: Effects of campus resources. *Journal of International Students*, 5(2), 132-142. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i2.430>
- Boafo-Arthur, S., & Boafo-Arthur, A. (2016). Help seeking behaviors of international students: Stigma, acculturation, and attitudes toward counseling. In *Global perspectives and local challenges surrounding international student mobility* (pp. 262-280). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-9746-1.ch014>
- Bethel, A., Ward, C., & Fetvadjev, V. H. (2020). Cross-cultural transition and psychological adaptation of international students: The mediating role of host national connectedness. *Frontiers in Education*, 5, 539950. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2020.539950>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Bulgan, G., & Çiftçi, A. (2017). Psychological adaptation, marital satisfaction, and academic self-efficacy of international students. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 687–702. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.570028>
- Burns, M., Bally, J., Burles, M., Holtslander, L., & Peacock, S. (2022). Constructivist Grounded Theory or Interpretive Phenomenology? Methodological Choices Within Specific Study Contexts. *International*

*Journal of Qualitative*

*Methods*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221077758>

- Chai, D. S., Van, H. T. M., Wang, C. W., Lee, J., & Wang, J. (2020). What do international students need? The role of family and community supports for adjustment, engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), 571-589. Doi: 10.32674/jis.v10i3.1235
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Crider, E. A., Dent, E., & Sullivan, J. C. (2024). Identifying and responding to gaps in services for international graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to enhance the graduate community and promote quality research outcomes. *Physiology*, 39(1), 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1152/physiol.2024.39.S1.2009>
- Glass, C. R., & Gesing, P. (2018). The development of social capital through international students' involvement in campus organizations. *Journal of International Students*, 8(3), 1274-1292. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i3.52>
- Glass, C. R., Streitwieser, B., Wood, L., & Gopal, A. (2021). *Toward greater inclusion and success: A new compact for international students* (ACE Monograph). American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Intl-Students-Monograph.pdf>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). SAGE.
- Institute of International Education. (2023). *International students by place of origin, selected years, 1949/50–2022/23. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/all-places-of-origin/>
- Jackson, M., Ray, S., & Bybell, D. (2013). International students in the U.S.: Social and psychological adjustment. *Journal of International Students*, 3(1), 17–28. <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis/article/view/515>
- Jiang, X., Soylemez-Karakoc, B., & Hussain, M. (2020). A new generation of 'incorporated wife'? Making sense of international students' spouses in the U.S. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 28(7), 933–954. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1760216>
- Khawaja, N. G., & Stallman, H. M. (2011). Understanding the coping strategies of international students: A qualitative approach. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 21(2), 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.1375/ajgc.21.2.203>
- Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. SAGE Publications.
- Kuzembayeva, A. (2020). Marriage among U.S. international students: Meanings and aspirations. *Marriage & Family Review*, 56(8), 689–714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2020.1728005>
- Larcombe, W., Ryan, T., & Baik, C. (2024). Are international students relatively resilient? Comparing international and domestic students' levels of self-compassion, mental health and wellbeing. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(2), 362–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2234315>

- Lazarova, M., McNulty, Y., & Semeniuk, M. (2015). Expatriate family narratives on international mobility: Key characteristics of the successful moveable family. In *Work and family interface in the international career context* (pp. 29-51). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. sage.
- Mäkelä, L., Suutari, V., & Mayerhofer, H. (2011). Lives of female expatriates: work-life balance concerns. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 26(4), 256-274.
- Moore, L., & Popadiuk, N. (2011). Positive aspects of international student transitions: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(3), 291–306. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0040>
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2023). *International students' economic value (2022–2023): United States* [PDF]. [https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/EconValue-2023\\_final.pdf](https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/EconValue-2023_final.pdf)
- Rahim, N. A. A. (2021). Adjustment experiences of international graduate students to life in the United States. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 29(4), 2433–2450. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.4.08>
- Rodriguez, M., Roman, B. Z., Mohamed, M., & Barthelemy, R. (2024). Social and cultural barriers reported by STEM international graduate students of color. *Journal of International Students*, 14(3), 276–302. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.6694>
- Soylomez-Karakoc, B., Jiang, X., & Hussain, M. (2023). Social exclusion and conversion factors: The case of married international graduate students at one U.S. university. *Journal of International Students*, 14(4), 367–385. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.5159>
- Tang, L., Zhang, C. A., & Cui, Y. (2025). The association between social connectedness and psychological well-being among international students: Social support moderates the mediating effects of loneliness and perceived stress. *Psychology in the Schools*, 62(5), 1434-1452. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.23405>
- Tindall, L. (2009). Review of *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* [Review of the book *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*, by J. A. Smith, P. Flower, & M. Larkin]. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 6(4), 346–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880903340091>
- Yaacob, S. N., Vaez, E., & Juhari, R. (2015). Addressing the problems faced by married international students. *Journal of Educational, Health and Community Psychology*, 4(1), 24770. DOI: 10.12928/jehcp.v4i1.3696
- Yellig, A. (2011). *The experiences of married international graduate students and their accompanying nonstudent spouses in U.S. culture: A qualitative study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Zhang, S., Li, C., & Unger, D. L. (2022). International Doctoral Students' Sense of Belonging, Mental Toughness, and Psychological Well-Being. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 14(2), 138-151.

Zhou, E. (2022). *International graduate applications and enrollment: Fall 2021*. Council of Graduate Schools. <https://cgsnet.org>

---

*Author bios*

---

**FATIMA LEGHARI**, Ed.M., is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology, and Counseling at the University of Alabama, USA. Her major research interests lie in the area of substance use and prevention, wellness intervention among international students and counselor burnout. Email: [fatimaleghari10@gmail.com](mailto:fatimaleghari10@gmail.com)

**DHIKRULLAH MUDATHIR**, M.Ed., is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology, and Counseling at the University of Alabama, USA. His major research interests are mental health, behavioral and technology interventions, mindfulness, minorities, and artificial intelligence in mental health. Email: [damudathir@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:damudathir@crimson.ua.edu)

**TERESA ANN GRANGER**, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology, and Counseling at the University of Alabama, USA. Her major research interests lie in the area of behavioral, psychosocial, and vocational interventions that promote well-being, functioning, and employment participation among individuals with chronic illness and disability. Email: [tagranger@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:tagranger@crimson.ua.edu)

---

## **APPENDIX**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire**

#### **College Adjustment (10-12 minutes)**

1. How would you describe your emotional experience since starting university?
2. Since starting university, how has your emotional well-being changed, if at all?
3. What has been the most challenging part of university life for you thus far?
4. How do you cope with academic pressure and other challenges?

#### **Stress (8-10 minutes)**

1. Can you share a recent situation where you felt overwhelmed, and how you managed it?
2. What particular stressors have stood out for you recently?
3. How do you typically cope with these stressors?

#### **Quality of Life (8-10 minutes)**

1. How would you describe your quality of life at the moment?
2. What factors contribute most to your current quality of life? (e.g., family, intimate relationships, finances, spiritual/religious life, social relationships, leisure/recreational activities, employment, etc.)
3. What activities do you engage in for leisure, and how satisfied are you with those opportunities?
4. How do you feel about your personal relationships right now? Are there aspects you'd like to change or improve?
5. What are your sources of support currently?

#### **Marital Status/Relationships (18-20 minutes)**

1. How has your relationship with your spouse changed since starting your graduate program in the US?
2. What specific challenges do you face in balancing your studies and personal life?
3. What expectations are most important in your relationship, and how do you and your spouse communicate about them? Have these expectations evolved over time?
4. Can you describe any recent challenges you have faced in your marriage or partnership?
5. How have you and your spouse addressed these challenges?
6. Looking ahead, how do you see your relationship evolving? What makes you feel optimistic or concerned about the future?
7. If you have children, how do you and your spouse share caregiving responsibilities?

**Final Thoughts (5-7 minutes)**

1. What advice would you give to other international graduate students who are married and planning to study in the US?
2. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for us to know that we haven't discussed yet?

Total Estimated Time: 50-60 minutes