

Family Separation and Mental Well-Being among International Students in the United States

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Abstract

This study explores the mental well-being of family separation among international students in the United States, focusing particularly on stress, anxiety, and homesickness. This is a qualitative study conducted based on in-depth semi-structured interviews. Five international graduate students were interviewed from two different universities. Findings of this qualitative approach suggest that students' emotional consequences are not uniform but differ from person to person. It depends on personal circumstances and life situations. The study also found that cultural difficulties initially hamper students, but these gradually decrease as they become more familiar with the new environment. A limitation of the study was its small sample size, but it has many insights. It contributes to the literature by providing information on how students manage emotional challenges while maintaining academic engagement.

Keywords

International Students, Stress, Anxiety, Coping Strategy, Homesickness

1. Introduction

The United States remains one of the leading destinations for international students pursuing higher education. According to *NAFSA Association of International Educators (2025)*, approximately 1.18 million international students were enrolled in U.S. schools and universities during the 2024-2025 academic year. These students come from diverse cultures and different backgrounds. Previous research has shown that nativity and immigrant background shape attitudes, behaviors, and experiences in the United States (*Islam, 2026*). These findings suggest that a migration background may shape how individuals perceive and respond to

challenges in the host country. In this context, family separation emerges as a significant emotional and psychological challenge for many international students who migrate to the United States, leaving their families in their home countries. Much of the previous literature examines students' academic performance, financial hardships, and cultural shock (González, 2017; Sindhu et al., 2023). Prior studies on internal migration in South Asia highlight significant disparities in health outcomes among migrant populations (Islam et al., 2025).

In this study, mental well-being refers to the psychological and emotional difficulties associated with prolonged separation from family members. These experiences may include homesickness, loneliness, stress, anxiety, mood changes, emotional distress, and difficulty maintaining concentration or academic engagement. However, there are limited studies that focus on the international students' emotional and psychological impacts on international students, such as stress, anxiety, homesickness, and their coping strategies.

International students are a growing population worldwide who migrate frequently from one country to another. The United States is one of the primary destinations for international students pursuing higher education. Students who migrate alone and live without their families often face challenges related to academic pressure and social adjustment. Previous research indicates that international students are at high risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness across host countries, including the United States (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Hyun et al., 2007).

A substantial body of literature has identified homesickness as one of the most common emotional difficulties among international students, caused by family separation, unfamiliarity with the environment, and cultural practices (Hwang & Ting, 2008). Homesickness is the feeling of isolation and stress, particularly in the initial stage of living in a new environment (Ward et al., 2020). Language difficulties are one of the core issues that cause those challenges. Berry (2006) shows that stress and anxiety-related emotional challenges are amplified by a language barrier, unfamiliar social connections, and perceived difficulties in formal social connections.

International students' coping experiences are also shaped by institutional and structural factors, including access to support services, campus peer groups, and border immigration policies (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). While universities often provide resources such as counseling services and an international student office, these services may not fully address students' emotional needs (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Therefore, it is important to examine how international students experience the combined pressure of academic life, cultural adjustment, and family separation. Such an approach can provide a clearer picture of the challenges faced by international students and help inform the development of more effective support systems.

This qualitative exploratory study aims to examine how international students in the United States experienced and responded to the emotions stemming from

family separation. In two ways, this study can contribute to the literature. First, it provides a nuanced understanding of how family separation influences emotional health, including stress, anxieties, and homesickness. Second, it tries to identify the coping strategies and support systems that international students use within educational institutions in the United States.

2. Methods

This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the stress- and anxiety-based mental well-being of family separation among international students and the coping strategies they adopt in their academic life. This study employed a qualitative, individual, semi-structured interview to collect data. As qualitative research does not necessarily require a predefined hypothesis, this study was designed as an exploratory inquiry into the phenomenon under investigation (Wilson, 1999). This design enabled a more in-depth examination of the phenomenon, allowing the researcher to explore participants' emotional experiences of family separation within a qualitative framework. Therefore, it will also be easy to understand how the international students personally interpreted these experiences.

Participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling from West Virginia University and the University of Pittsburgh. To be eligible, participants had to be international graduate students currently enrolled at one of the two universities, living in the United States while separated from their immediate family members in their country of origin, and willing to participate in an in-depth interview. Five students who met these criteria agreed to participate. The sample was intended to capture variation in gender, nationality, age, and educational background rather than to represent the broader population of international students. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations selected for participants' convenience and privacy, including university apartment buildings and a mosque. These settings provided a quiet environment with minimal distractions, allowing participants to speak openly about their experiences (Table 1).

Table 1. List of participants.

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Country of origin	Degree of study
Michel (22)	Male	Benin	Doctor of Philosophy
Abdullah (36)	Male	Bangladesh	Doctor of Philosophy
John (28)	Male	Nigeria	Doctor of Philosophy
Kathrin (33)	Female	Nigeria	Doctor of Philosophy
Suja (29)	Male	Bangladesh	Doctor of Philosophy

Note. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities. Ages are reported in parentheses.

The modes of communication were selected with participants' consent and in accordance with their schedules. All participants were provided with a clear ex-

planation of the study's goals. Before participation, they were also notified that their participation was completely voluntary. They were also given informed consent forms, which they read and verbally consented to before enrollment in the study and starting the in-depth interview.

The study questionnaires were designed to understand students' feelings about stress and anxiety and how those emotions affected their mental and physical health. This included exploring topics such as academic, social, and financial stressors; social connectedness and support; language proficiency; and culture shock. All participants were non-English speakers; however, three interviews were conducted in English, and two others were conducted in their own language (Bengali) and later translated into English. To protect the identities of each participant and promote confidentiality, pseudonyms were ascribed. At the outset, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to create a flexible interview environment and facilitate rapport during the relatively short interview.

Data collection occurred in two stages. First, one pilot interview was conducted to refine the interview guide. Second, five individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the study participants. Each participant completed one interview session lasting approximately one hour. The pilot interview was used only to improve the questions and was not included in the final analysis. Each interview lasted nearly an hour, and participants were guided by questions designed to elicit dialogue about their student life experiences. Three interviews were conducted in English, and two others were conducted in Bengali and later translated into English. The Bengali interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher, who is fluent in both languages. To preserve participants' intended meanings, the translated transcripts were compared with the original recordings and reviewed for consistency before analysis. After each interview, member checking was conducted to ensure credibility and accuracy by asking participants to confirm that their responses were correctly understood and represented in the appropriate context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This process helped me reduce bias and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

At the beginning of the study, thematic area-based ideas for the questionnaire were sent to participants via email to help them become familiar with the questions earlier. This study collected data through descriptive fieldnotes, and all interviews were recorded with participants' permission. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed several times to identify recurring experiences, similarities, and differences across participants. The researcher first highlighted segments related to emotional reactions, academic adjustment, cultural and language challenges, coping strategies, and sources of support. Similar responses were then grouped and compared across the five transcripts. Through this iterative process, the researcher developed three broader themes: initial adjustment and early emotional reactions, emotional distress and academic adjustment, and coping strategies and informal support. The themes were refined by returning to the transcripts and checking that each theme accurately represented participants' accounts.

3. Results

3.1. Initial Adjustment and Early Emotional Reactions

This section summarizes interview findings on initial adjustment-related strategies and their reactions to some common emotional questions. The questions included: 1) arriving alone and weather shocks, 2) new food habits and changing work routines while being separated from family, and 3) self-isolation in a new city or country as a newcomer.

Regarding the family members they are separated from and how often they communicate with them, they reported that their nearest family members are parents and siblings living in their home countries. One also mentioned that he has a wife and an 8-month-old baby, with whom he is currently living. When asked how they feel after separation and how often they communicate with their family after arriving in the U.S., Michel and Suja expressed their experience in a relatively normal way. They usually communicate with their parents and their siblings, who live in their home country. Using video calls on their mobile phones, they confirmed that they communicate daily despite their very busy schedules.

In contrast, Abdullah reported more emotional hardship, especially related to his 8-month-old baby. He mentioned that when he traveled to the U.S., his wife was pregnant, and it was challenging to leave her behind in his home country. The situation became even harder after his baby was born. As a father, he faced a significant emotional challenge in maintaining focus on his studies after his child's arrival. He noted that he spends most nights on video calls with his wife and baby.

He expressed strong emotional distress when talking about his child:

"I don't know, suddenly I feel like I did something wrong by coming here for my studies. I was living happily with my family, and I had a good job. Suddenly, I came to the USA for my studies, and now I feel so unhappy because of my child. I am a father now, but I can't touch my baby; it's very painful."

Before the baby was born, he communicated once or twice daily, but after the birth, he communicated multiple times a day, often spending several hours talking with his wife and baby.

3.2. Emotional Distress and Academic Adjustment

This section summarizes interviewees' responses, focusing on three thematic areas: (1) feelings of stress, anxiety, and mood swings, (2) influence on academic focus, and (3) cultural and language challenges.

When asked about stress and anxiety related to family separation, all the participants initially reported relatively stable and positive emotional conditions. However, Abdullah mentioned that although he generally felt stable, after the birth of his baby, he began to experience mood swings more frequently. Apart from this sudden emotional change, they stated that they did not experience strong or persistent stress or anxiety due to family separation. In response to these questions, Michel, Suja, and John appeared very confident and emotionally controlled. They

explained that they do not usually feel emotionally distressed and reported that he has been able to maintain a stable emotional state despite being away from their family.

Regarding academic focus and motivation, all participants reported doing well. Even though they are living alone and away from their families, five of them stated that they have not lost their academic engagement. Two of them explained that living without family is not a new experience for them. After school, they left their families and continued their studies independently throughout college. As a result, they mentioned that being without family has not negatively affected their academic performance. Abdullah also noted that even after college, during his working life, he lived apart from his family, and he and his wife worked in different cities. Although he expressed emotional difficulties from being away from his child, he emphasized that his academic career has not been hampered.

When asked how cultural or language differences made these emotional challenges harder to manage, Michel and Kathrin reported that most of the cultural challenges occurred during the first three to four months after arrival. Michel stated that, growing up in Benin, he found the cultural environment in the United States significantly different, which initially affected his academic performance and communication with professors. However, over time, he became accustomed to the new environment and is now quite stable within the academic setting. Regarding non-academic cultural experiences, all participants explained that their daily lives are mostly centered on the university and a small group of international students, particularly their lab mates, which has made their environment more comfortable.

In contrast, Abdullah expressed that the academic environment was great and had always been very supportive, and his communication with professors was also comfortable. He emphasized that professors in his department are very good at understanding and accommodating international students, especially regarding language and academic issues.

3.3. Coping Strategies and Informal Support

This section will cover coping mechanisms and support mechanisms related to common emotional strategies. When asked how they manage emotional challenges, they mentioned different strategies. Michel noted that although he did not experience significant academic or cultural stress, he sometimes feels homesick and lonely, which creates emotional pressure. He explained:

“I am the youngest son of my parents, and I have never lived at such a distance before. Nowadays, I miss my comfort zone where I grew up. As time passes, I miss my family, my relatives, and the home I lived in very much. To address this loneliness, I sometimes call my relatives who are very close to me. However, I did not find any solution to fully recover from the feeling of missing my birthplace, especially my village.”

When asked whether they had used any support services provided by the uni-

versity, all participants reported that they had not. However, they were aware that such support systems are available for students. Kathrin noted that she is closely connected with a student association from his home country. She noted that this association sometimes serves as an important support system for him and for other students from the same country. John explained that his personal and academic life at the University of Pittsburgh is largely surrounded by professors and peers. He mentioned that he has a close group of international students with whom he regularly spends time:

“I usually live alone, but I have a group of international students who are very close to me. In my class and cohort, there are some students from this country with whom I am not that close. If I need support regarding any issue, I especially depend on that international student group.”

4. Discussions and Conclusion

This study examined the emotional consequences of family separation among international students in the U.S., with a focus on stress, anxiety, and coping strategies. The findings suggest that emotional distress is not uniform among students; rather, it varies depending on personal circumstances. This contributes to the literature showing that family separation is not uniform but varies significantly across situations.

Another notable finding of this study is the relationship between emotional distress and academic performance. While previous research shows that such emotional challenges reduce academic performance (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), these findings suggest that students may have adaptive mechanisms to control emotional difficulties. These findings are consistent with those reported by Pidgeon et al. (2014). International students appear to prioritize academic success over personal hardships. This study also contributes to the literature by identifying initial challenges faced by international students, including language barriers and cultural difficulties. Additionally, it identified digital communication as one of the core coping strategies students used in response to family separation.

This study has some limitations, one of which is its small sample size of five participants, which limits the transferability of the findings to the broader international student population. Furthermore, all participants were graduate students at only two universities, and several were supported by graduate assistantships. Their experiences may differ from those of undergraduate, self-funded, or international students at other institutions. Third, the sample was recruited through purposive and convenience methods and may therefore overrepresent students who were comfortable discussing their experiences. Future studies should expand the sample size and include students from diverse cultural and financial backgrounds.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on international students' emotional difficulties of family separation. This provides insight into how students experience and manage these challenges and underscores the need for more tar-

geted support systems to address international students' emotional well-being. These findings should also be understood within the broader sociopolitical environment surrounding immigration in the United States. Public attitudes toward immigrants are influenced by religion and political partisanship (Islam, 2025), suggesting that the social context in which international students live may shape their overall experiences beyond the university setting.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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