Migration and Acculturation: a Qualitative Exploration of Foreign Students' Resettlement in Istanbul

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Abstract. This qualitative study explores the acculturation challenges foreign students face in Istanbul, Turkey, along with their coping strategies. The research aims to identify key challenges in acculturating to Turkish society, examine students' adaptive strategies, and evaluate the roles of universities, local communities, and support services in facilitating their acculturation process. 25 international students from diverse backgrounds were interviewed using a purposive sampling method, ensuring representation across nationality, gender, academic discipline, and duration of stay in Istanbul. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis using NVIVO software, the study uncovered prominent challenges such as language barriers, cultural adjustment issues, and social integration difficulties. Coping strategies identified included seeking social support, learning the language, and engaging in artistic activities. Findings highlight the importance of tailored support systems and policies to enhance the acculturation experience of international students in Istanbul, offering practical recommendations for improving their integration into Turkish academic and social environments.

Keywords: Acculturation, Coping strategies, foreign students, Higher education, Istanbul

The world is in a constant state of transformation and globalization. People from around the globe are crossing national boundaries for some purpose, like a job, resettlement, or studies. These purposes can be the results of "push factors" in their country, like political instability, limited job opportunities, family problems, or lack of educational facilities. In this increasingly globalized world, education turns out to be a critical channel for cultural exchange and international cooperation. Higher education institutions play a significant role in bringing diverse cultures together by providing a rich intellectual environment and opportunities for students to study abroad through various scholarship mediums or cultural exchange openings.

Turkiye is not much behind, it is also a part of this race welcoming a huge number of international students from all around the world. In Europe, Turkiye stands among the top 5 countries and top 10 worldwide for hosting international students (Aldirasa Platform, 2022). Turkey's Council of Higher Education (YÖK) stated that over the past decade, the number of international students in Turkey increased significantly. In 2023, approximately 260,000 foreign students from 182 countries enrolled in Turkish universities, a huge rise from just 48,000 foreign students in 2012 (YÖK, 2023). Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara seemed to be the major hubs for international students. The universities that host a large number of international students include Istanbul University, Anadolu University, Karabuk University, Bursa Uludag University, and Ondokuz Mayis University (Can, 2021).

Istanbul is considered to be a dream city for many people around the globe. A fortunate city due to its strategic location linking Europe and Asia. This city was privileged to emerge as the biggest hub for higher education for many international students by hosting approximately 50,000 international students alone in the 2020-2021 academic year. The following year, Istanbul

University solely hosted almost 8722 international students (Aldirasa Platform, 2022). Istanbul attracts students from diverse regions, including the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Europe. The city was marked as the home of more than 70,000 international students, nearly 27% of the total foreign student population in Turkiye (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023).

Studying abroad brings various opportunities for students, which in another manner are termed as "pull factors". These factors include a chance to learn a global perspective and exposure, gaining new skills, expanding their intellectual horizons, and helping them in seeking personal, professional, and academic growth. However, this increasing level of foreign educational migration brings various kinds of challenges, particularly in terms of acculturation challenges in the host country that impact their academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Acculturation is a process by which an individual belonging to one culture adopts the values, beliefs, and behaviors of another cultural group (Ramírez-Ramírez et al., 2018).

This process of adapting to a new culture can be a critical aspect of the experiences of foreign students in Istanbul. There is a dire need for the understanding of these acculturation challenges by the universities in Istanbul to provide adequate support and resources to facilitate the successful integration of these foreign students. This study aims to explore the acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul, focusing on their lived experiences, observations, and perceptions of the acculturation process mainly related to language barriers, social integration, cultural adjustment, academic adaptation, navigating daily life, identity negotiation, discrimination and prejudice, homesickness and loneliness, financial challenges.

Various existing studies highlighted that acculturation is a tough and multidimensional process that includes various factors like proficiency in language, cultural differences, and social interactions. Frequent studies have shown that local languages turned out to be the biggest hurdle for international students, specifically during the early stages of their arrival in the host country (Morey et al., 2022; Tutar, 2023). Although conversation is a hurdle for these foreign students but in addition, non-native speakers face huge difficulties in performing their academic writings and research tasks due to these language barriers (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020). Moreover, studies also revealed that culturally and linguistically diverse students with zero or less competency in the English language experienced more isolation and inadequate support that affects their learning experience(Jeong et al., 2011). All in all, language barriers can lead to detachment, stress, and anxiety, which affect their overall well-being and performance.

Furthermore, cultural difference is another challenging barrier in a foreign country. The world is made up of diverse cultures with similar to opposite norms and values followed by every country. Every new person experiences cultural shocks and ethnocentric behaviors in a host country so as foreign students do, which leads to misunderstanding and creates difficulties in adjusting and adapting new environment (Saputra, 2019). This socialization process of foreign students often involves sociocultural barriers, for example, the lack of support and cooperation, inadequate academic preparation, and difficulty in becoming a part of a new cultural environment (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020).

Cultural adaptation is quite broad. Usually, it relates to learning the local language, but it is more than just a language issue. Cultural adaptation includes mingling with local customs, traditions, and social norms. A study by Güven & Halat (2015) revealed that ample efforts have been made by Turkish institutes to teach Turkish culture to foreigners, highlighting the significance of cultural competence in the acculturation process.

Social Integration and interactions are another critical challenge in the acculturation process. International students mostly face the difficulty of getting involved and making new friendships with the locals due to a communication barrier, which in turn gives them a sense of isolation and loneliness. Study revealed that these foreign students can only feel a sense of belonging by being able to interact with local peers and making themselves mixed with them (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Existing literature also revealed that foreign students prefer to make friendships and find co-national communities to cope with these feelings of isolation. This, in turn, creates more distance and isolation between foreign and domestic students (Can, 2021).

Apart from all these challenges, a prominent challenge one foreigner as a student faces is the adaptation to a new academic culture and expectations. A study revealed that graduate students face extreme anxiety in their transition phase while dealing with new academic curriculum, different medium of instruction and teaching, publishing pressures, and professionalization in the process of adapting to the norms of the host institution (Stouck & Walter, 2020). Like any other country, Turkiye also has a unique academic environment, having both similarities and differences from other countries, like variation in teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic expectations, which brings adjustment challenges for foreign students (Yılmaz et al., 2020). International students may also face additional pressure to perform well academically while managing acculturation stress (Lin & Scherz, 2014).

Moreover, the acculturation process is also influenced by the student's characteristics, such as the willingness to study abroad, selection of any particular country, their expectations from that country as well as from their degree. Also, it depends on the coping mechanism they choose to deal with these challenges. Various studies have raised the importance of understanding these personal factors to deal with these acculturation challenges and to provide proper support to these international students (Tutar, 2023).

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to explore challenges specifically the acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul. Primarily, focusing on their lived experiences and perceptions of the acculturation process. The aim of the present study is to get a vivid understanding of the specific challenges these foreign students face and the coping strategies they employ to these challenges through a phenomenological approach.

The incursion of international students in Istanbul from all around the world in past few years made this a dire need to understand the difficulties they face during their acculturation mainly related to adapting to the new culture and environment. This study intends to shed light on the critical and multidimensional aspects of acculturation, including language barriers, social integration, cultural adjustment, academic adaptation, navigating daily life, identity negotiation, discrimination and prejudice, homesickness and loneliness, and financial challenges.

By employing qualitative methods, the study aims to grasp the rich in-depth insights of the lived experiences of foreign students in Istanbul. Through findings, this study intends to share the valuable perspectives on the unique challenges faced by this population and the coping strategies they develop. Findings will further help in developing more effective support systems and interventions to help international students successfully in the acculturation process, not only in Istanbul but in the whole of Turkiye.

In addition, this qualitative inquiry not only intends to document the challenges but also to give voice to the experiences of foreign students in Istanbul. Through analyzing their unique perspectives and stories, this research will contribute to a better understanding of the acculturation phenomenon and its impact on the lives of international students. Finally, the goal is to provide recommendations for universities, policymakers, and support services for the betterment of foreign students in Istanbul.

Scope of the study:

The scope of the present study encompasses various key dimensions to deeply understand the acculturation process of international students in Istanbul. The study targeted a diverse sample of foreign students enrolled in different universities across the city, belonging to different countries, levels of study, and disciplines. By specifically focusing on Istanbul, a significant cultural and educational center in Turkey, this research highlights the distinctive cultural, social, and academic environment that shapes students' acculturation experiences.

Key areas of investigation include language barriers, social integration, cultural adaptation, educational challenges, financial challenges and psychological well-being. The study used qualitative methods mainly in-depth interviews and participant observations to collect detailed data on students' lived experiences and narrations. Study employed thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of acculturation challenges.

The research covers an extensive period, monitoring the changes and developments in students' acculturation experiences over time, and takes into account both short-term and long-term adjustment processes. Moreover, this study also explores the availability and effectiveness of institutional support systems like language learning programs, counselling services, support networks, or identifying any other areas or support centers, activities, and communities that provide prompt support to international students.

Finally, this study will be helpful in providing actionable recommendations for university administrators, policy makers, and government officials to better support the acculturation and integration of international students in Istanbul, as well as provide a path for other cities in Turkiye. By addressing these dimensions, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges encountered by international students and propose practical solutions to enhance their overall experience and success in Istanbul.

Conceptual and theoretical framework:

This study on acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul intends to employ a multidimensional acculturation model and theories related to migration and resettlement. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the process and strategies involved in adapting to a new cultural environment. Parks and Miller's unidirectional model of acculturation focuses on leaving your home country culture and accepting the foreign land culture (Park & Miller, 1921). John Berry's Social Identity theory and bidirectional acculturation model, including strategies of acculturation including assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation between the new culture and the old culture, served as theoretical resources for the study. Collectively, they offer an insight into how international students went through these complexities of cultural adaptation, identity formation, and social integration.

Park and Miller's unidirectional model is one of the earliest model used for acculturation. The model depicts that acculturation is a linear process in which an individual slowly and gradually abandons their own country's cultural norms and values and completely adopt the host country's cultural norms and traits. This model provides grounds for investigating the degree to which foreign students abandon their cultural identity in favor of adopting Turkish culture. It also helps in understanding the instances where students do not preserve their original cultural ties and instead they shift towards a homogeneous cultural identity that allows them to get align with their new environment.

This model suggests the importance of assimilation, where the targeted goal is to make these immigrant students indistinguishable from the native population regarding language, behavior, and cultural practices (Park & Miller, 1921). According to this model, the international students in Istanbul went through a process of adapting Turkish cultural norms progressively while leaving their own original cultural identities. Moreover, this model identifies the challenges linked with such transformation, including identity conflicts, loss of cultural heritage, and the psychological stress of trying to become a part of a new culture and environment. Overall, this unidirectional model provides the grounds for understanding the acculturation process.

In contrast to Park and Miller's unidirectional model, there is another model helpful for this study, i.e., John Berry's bidirectional model. This model emphasizes that acculturation is a two-way process where individuals keep their original cultural identity as well as manage to adapt to the host culture (Berry, 1997). Berry's framework proposed four acculturation strategies individuals may adopt. Assimilation is the first strategy where an individual wants to quit their own cultural identity to become a part of a new cultural environment. For international students in Istanbul, assimilation means getting themselves completely involved in Turkish society, becoming part of local customs, adopting social norms, trying to speak Turkish, and minimizing their connection to their home culture.

Individuals who opt separation strategy keep their bond with the original culture and avoid connecting to the host culture. In the context of Istanbul, international students who adopt this strategy would mainly interact with their compatriots and maintain their native cultural practices, resulting in minimal engagement with Turkish society. Then there is an integration strategy which suggests maintaining a balance between an individual's own cultural identity and, at the same time, engaging with adopting aspects of the host culture. In the case of international students in Istanbul, integration means learning Turkish, participating in local culture and traditions, and trying to engage with Turkish people and communities while preserving their local ties. Then there is a marginalization strategy which occurs when an individual gets disassociated from both original culture and host culture resulting in feelings of alienation and loss of identity. International students experiencing marginalization may face significant challenges with acculturation, feeling disconnected from both their home and host cultures.

Berry's bidirectional model is particularly relevant for this study as it recognizes that acculturation is not a uniform process but is influenced by personal choices, societal acceptance, and institutional support. This model is instrumental in understanding the diverse experiences of international students in Istanbul and how they negotiate their cultural identities. By employing Berry's acculturation strategies, this study aims to explore how these students adapt to a new culture and the challenges they face, such as stress and social identification. Berry's theory incorporates the concept of acculturation stress, which may arise during the adjustment process,

providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing the adaptation experiences of foreign students.

Overall this theoretical framework combining both unidimensional and bidimensional models to explore the acculturation experiences of foreign students in Istanbul helped in delving into the complex and dynamic nature of these experiences, affected by various factors like socio-culture distance, personality traits, and the nature of acculturation setting in the host country (Saylag, 2014).

Research Question:

What are the major acculturation challenges experienced by foreign students in Istanbul, and how do they cope with these challenges?

Research Objectives:

To identify the key acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul.

To explore the coping strategies used by these foreign students to deal with these acculturation challenges.

Examine the role of universities, local communities, and support services in facilitating the acculturation process of these foreign students

Offer suggestions for enhancing support systems and policies to improve the acculturation experience of international students in Istanbul.

Methods:
Research Design:

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to identify the acculturation challenges faced by foreign students. An interpretive approach was utilized to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research topic under consideration (Silverman, 2013). The study intends to understand and interpret the lived experiences of international students undergoing acculturation in Istanbul. Phenomenology is well-suited for exploring experiences from the perspective of those who live them, providing a deeper understanding of the acculturation process and the strategies they used to get mingled in Turkish culture.

Participant selection:
Sampling:

The purposive sampling method was used deliberately to select international students who have direct experiences central to the phenomenon of acculturation. Also, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of nationality, gender, religion, academic discipline, and duration of stay in Istanbul. 25 in-depth interviews including 12 male and 13 female international students were conducted by the researcher belonging to different countries including Venezuela, Bosnia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Colombia, Palestine, Nigeria, Lebanon, and India, religion majority were Muslims and few were Christian (Catholic), studying in various disciplines and universities in Istanbul. Participants were selected based on their consent to participate and their experience related to residing and studying in the city for at least six months.

Recruitment:

For recruiting participants, researcher used social media groups as well as through using snow ball technique where one friend referred another friend for in-depth interview. This technique helped the researcher to approach specific individual who meet the criteria of the study while leveraging existing networks to reach potential participants. Interested participants were first went through a pre-screening by asking few questions to check whether they meet the study criteria.

Informed Consent:

Before starting all the in-depth interviews researcher ensured that all participants provided informed consent, fully understood the study's nature, their rights, and how their data would be utilized.

Data Collection:
Semi-Structured Interviews:

Data was gathered through an in-depth and semi-structured interview guide with a set of open-ended questions through the literature review and theoretical framework pertaining to acculturation theories. All the interviews were conducted one-on-one to ensure flexibility and depth. The medium of communication during interviews was English, as per the preference of participants.

Procedure:

The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable environment, lasting around 60-90 minutes. With the participant's consent, each interview was recorded for accuracy. A digital voice recorder was employed to capture uninterrupted and comprehensive details of the conversations during interviews.

Fieldnotes:

During and after each interview, thorough notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and initial impressions of the participant.

Data Analysis:
Transcription:

The researcher transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. The transcripts were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

Coding and theme development:

A thematic analysis approach was used for the analysis of data. The researcher keenly identified the patterns and coded the themes and sub-themes derived from the data. The coding process entailed a systematic and iterative approach of reading, coding, and categorizing the data. First, initial codes will be generated, followed by identifying and reviewing themes, and finally defining and naming the final themes.

Data Management:

Although the data was already in English, transcription of the data was not that difficult or time-consuming. The researcher utilized NVIVO data analysis software to assist in organizing raw data and generating codes and themes during the analysis process.

The table below depicts the generation of codes, sub-themes, and themes:

Table 1: List of themes, sub-themes, and codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Major codes
AnticipatingIstanbul: Preconceptions vs. Early Encounters	Background Pre-arrival expectations Personal growth Support system	Country of origin, previous education, family background Expectations vs. actual experiences Changes and growth since coming to Istanbul Family, friends, university services
Cultural Convergence in Istanbul: From Language to Lifestyle	Language barriers Social Integration Cultural adjustment Navigating daily life	Experiences,learning Turkish, communication strategies Making friends, interactions with Turkish peers, social activities Challenges, cultural shock, adopted practices Daily challenges, managing tasks, accessing services
Learning in a new city: Academic challenges	Academic Adaptation	Academic expectations, challenges, support systems
Identity struggles and survival	Identity negotiation Discrimination and Prejudice Homesickness and Loneliness Financial challenges Reflection on experiences	Changes in identity, adopted cultural practices Experience, coping strategies Frequency Financial issues, management strategies Additional challenges

Findings:

The respondents narrated their transformational stories, lived experiences, some deep fears, and also some exciting incidences that they went through in this acculturation process. The majority of them were eager to explain their journey's moments. They highlighted various factors that played a significant role in determining the acculturation challenges they faced in Istanbul as an international student. Also, they shared some unique coping strategies to deal with this challenging process. Factors include language hurdles, cultural shock, academic challenges, loneliness, and isolation. Keeping into consideration the goals of this research, 100 codes were developed from 15 themes. To streamline the data analysis, the study's findings were categorized into the following key areas anticipating Istanbul, cultural coverage in Istanbul, learning in a new city, and identity struggles and survival.

Anticipating Istanbul: Preconceptions vs. Early Encounters

It's human nature that whenever we plan to move to another area, city, or country, or even if there is a new beginning in life, we often pre-assume the situation of how this new journey will going to be. The same was with these international students who were planning to move to Istanbul, they set some preconceived notions about what life in the city would be like. These preconceptions might be influenced by various sources like social media, personal research, stories from friends and families, and also due to the "pull factors" like better educational facilities, personal and professional growth, and international exposure. However, the reality of their early experiences upon arrival often differs significantly from these initial expectations. This theme delves into the journey from anticipation to the reality of life in Istanbul, highlighting the surprises, adjustments, and adaptations students go through as they acclimate to their new surroundings.

Background:

The majority of the participants belonged to small towns or cities. Few of them were from middle-class families. All were from diverse cultural backgrounds with more or less financial struggles. All of them belonged to educated families from villages, small towns, or cities, and also got their family support to pursue their education and good academic careers. The majority of them chose Istanbul for better opportunities, diverse culture, and high-quality education. Few of them came to Istanbul by choice, few came because of their country's unstable situation, and they wanted to escape, whereas few came to Istanbul because they missed another opportunity to study in Europe or other developed countries. Almost all the participants belonged to economically struggling countries lesser than Turkiye. One of the participants said:

" I opted Istanbul deliberately because Istanbul has a rich history of diverse culture, famous for the Ottoman Empire's history, and being a student of social sciences I always wanted to explore life in Istanbul" (P2)

Few students came here on scholarships, so they shared that it was a privilege for them to study in a country that chose them based on their academic merit. One participant shared with joy:

" I didn't choose Istanbul, Istanbul chose me, and it is an honor for me to be there, explore their rich culture, and to pursue my studies funded by the Turkish government. I was always waiting for an opportunity in my life back in my country, so when I got this scholarship, I was so happy and I thought, let's try something new and explore a new world". (P5)

Another participant with a similar view shared:

"Honestly speaking, there wasn't any serious plan to come to Istanbul; it was all a matter of faith. I got admission in New Zealand in 2019, but due to COVID, borders got closed and it opened quite late in 2022. Meanwhile, as a matter of luck, I applied for a Turkish scholarship and I got that, so I came here. I came here because of Istanbul, not because of Turkiye. If I had been admitted to any other city, maybe I wouldn't have availed of this opportunity. Istanbul was always my dream city because of it's historical and cultural richness and the sacred value of this land since the time of the Ottomans" (P8)

Pre-arrival expectations:

Istanbul is undoubtedly one of the most famous cities all across the globe due to its nature of welcoming diversity and liberalism, a blend of different cultures, modernism, and rich spiritual history, so everyone has the option to choose whatever lifestyle they want. Almost all the participants shared that they had heard a lot about Istanbul and always got mesmerized by the lifestyle in Istanbul, so the pre-arrival expectations were high and positive. One participant shared his feelings:

"I watched a lot of videos about Istanbul, and it seemed like such an interesting city with lots of beautiful places. Also, Istanbul is an open-minded city compared to the rest of Turkiye because coming from Latin America, I didn't want to end up in such a strict society in terms of religion". (P20)

Few participants shared that their pre-arrival expectations were extremely different, especially in terms of language. One female student responded:

" My actual expectations were 100 percent different than what I thought, especially in terms of language. For instance, before coming here, I thought Istanbul was a tourist city, so a lot of people must speak English like my country but people here are barely known to English language and even if they know, they are not comfortable talking in English." (P18)

Personal Growth:

Leaving your personal space and comfort zone is always challenging, but worth it in terms of personal growth. The majority of the respondents shared that coming to Istanbul is a life-changing experience for them. In the beginning, it was extremely hard to get adjusted to a new environment, place, and culture, but it turned out as a positive personal growth for all of them. Regardless of gender difference, all participants felt that it was really hard for them to survive in this new environment, but it made them more strong, independent, and motivated. One female respondent answered:

" Coming from a patriarchal society where girls are dependent on male counterparts, I believe living on my own is a major personal growth for myself." (P16)

Another participant with similar views shared:

" After moving to Istanbul, I found that my social nature has flourished even more. Now, I'm more open to making friends from different countries, broadening my cultural horizons, and enriching my social experiences, so yes, this city has changed me positively". (P21)

One more participant shared:

" Leaving your country and your comfort zone at the age of 19 with no prior knowledge about life challenges, yes I can say Istanbul has shaken my whole personality and now I become more responsible, aware, and self-dependent in terms of taking life decisions". (P12)

Support System:

Friendship is something that doesn't come like blood relations. It is a bond you didn't deliberately choose, it is unexpected, yet the most important and reliable relation. Almost all the participants are of the view that peer groups are their biggest support system here in Istanbul. Living a life far from your family when you can't share your ups and downs with family because

they will get stressed out, so the only support system you have is your peer groups, who went or are going through the same situation as you. A few participants highlighted that there are some communities in Istanbul for foreigners to make friends and become aware of the local culture. The majority of them shared that they joined social media communities and groups to find friends belonging to their own country, other countries, as well as Turkish. Some respondents shared that they are fortunate enough to get good Turkish friends, whereas, few shared that the majority of their peer group is based on friends belonging to their own country or other foreigners like them, but no Turkish friends.

One of the Pakistani respondents shared her experience:
"One of my language instructors, who was almost my age fellow and very much fond of Pakistan, we turned out as good friends and now she is like a family to me here in Istanbul. She is my biggest support system here as through her I got the chance to learn a lot about Turkish people and society". (P11)

One Kazakhstani respondent shared his experience:
"My support system here is my Kazakh community, it's like we have a mini Kazakhstan here in Istanbul. We all are going through similar situations so we have each other's back here but unfortunately, I don't have any Turkish friends, I have friendly classmates but they don't want to be my friends so with them I feel isolated if I don't have my people's community here it would be really difficult for me to survive here". (P13)

Cultural Convergence in Istanbul: From Language to Lifestyle:
Istanbul is a unique city where East meets West, which offers vibrant and unique experiences for International students. While there are many positive aspects of living in Istanbul, it also brings a lot of challenges and new experiences for the foreign students in the journey of acculturation. This theme highlighted their acculturation challenges and lived experiences while navigating through the complexities of learning a new language, striving to integrate socially, adjusting to cultural norms, and managing everyday tasks that shaped their daily and academic life in Istanbul. Almost all the participants shared that living in Istanbul encountered both obstacles and opportunities for growth.

Language barriers:
The majority of the participants were of the view that the biggest challenge they faced here in Istanbul was the language barrier. Few participants were of the view that it was difficult in the beginning, but later on, as they learned the language it became easy for them to communicate with Turkish people. Whereas, a few shared that learning a different language was extremely stressful for them. One participant shared her experience:
" The language barrier squeezed my whole energy and enthusiasm to live and study in Istanbul in the beginning, it also suffocates me sometimes especially in academic setup but it was really helpful to learn the language as I feel confident now when I have to move around in city but before I felt like an Alien". (P15)
Almost all the participants are of the view that language plays a crucial role in this transformational journey, acting as both a bridge and a barrier. The struggle to master the Turkish

language and the need to understand and be understood in academic and social settings form a central aspect of their experience. Most of them shared that it's crucial to learn the Turkish language not only in terms of successful communication but also to feel a sense of belonging in their new environment.

Social Integration:

Participants shared that social integration added another level of complexity and enrichment to their living experiences in Istanbul. Creating social ties, making Turkish friends, and participating in Turkish community activities require good Turkish linguistic skills, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. Some participants shared that the more time they spent with Turkish people, the easier it became for them to create strong social ties here. One respondent highlighted:

"After living in Istanbul for more than 2 years, I have started spending more time with Turkish people and less with my nationals, so I can say I got well integrated into Turkish society because I don't have many friends belonging to my country I have more Turkish friends and few are from other nations. I speak Turkish like a native because I have completely devoted myself to this culture, language, and people". (P14)

Another participant shared a different opinion:

" For me, it's very difficult to get mixed up in Turkish society. It's not like I didn't try, I did I have learned the language, and I do participate in their cultural activities, but it's like they just don't like me as part of them. I think it's reciprocal, they don't feel comfortable with me, I prefer to be more active and comfortable when I am with my Nigerian friends". (P16)

Cultural Adjustment:

The majority of the participants stated that cultural adjustment was never easy for them in terms of getting mixed up with Turkish people. It's a continuous fluctuation between your own cultural identity with the host country's cultural demands. Participants shared that getting deeply involved in the customs, traditions, and everyday practices of Turkish society was quite a difficult yet interesting process. One respondent shared sarcastically:

"It's funny that after coming to Istanbul, I am always confused between "Merhaba", "Selam", and "Hello". Even now, sometimes I have started saying "Merhaba" to my parents and friends back in Argentina". (P24)

Navigating daily life:

Almost all the participants shared that surviving in Istanbul while dealing with daily life struggles is itself the biggest challenge because all of them came here after leaving their comfort zone. A few participants shared that in the beginning, it was extremely difficult for them to use public transport or do groceries because of cultural differences and a language barrier. Whereas, a few shared that it is still difficult for them because they came here to study in an English-medium university, so they didn't get a chance to learn the language, and dealing with daily activities in Istanbul is difficult for them.

One participant shared her weird experience:

" It's a weird as well as interesting incident for me, before coming to Istanbul I heard that it's a liberal city so I went to a grocery shop to buy frozen nuggets and as I am Muslim I wanted to be sure that it was Halal so it was quite difficult for me to ask so I use translator but when I asked the shop keeper he became angry and start saying something in Turkish loudly I got afraid then one foreigner in shop told me that he is saying that they are all Muslim here so everything is Halal here. I felt ashamed and afraid that I asked that question, but now I laugh a lot while memorizing that incident". (P12)

Another participant shared her unique experience:

" I went to a cafe to drink coffee, unfortunately, I sat at a dirty table where there was one empty cup already. So when I went to pay my coffee bill, they asked me to pay for two cups when I drank only one. They didn't know English, and I didn't know the Turkish language at that time, so it was difficult to make them understand. I had to pay for two cups, but now that I have learned the language so it is quite easy for me to deal with the daily life issues". (P22)

Learning in a new city: Academic challenges
Academic Adaptation:

Adapting to academic life in Istanbul presents a unique set of challenges for foreign students. The process of academic adaptation involves not only understanding and meeting the expectations of a different educational system but also integrating into a new cultural and social academic environment. This theme explores the multifaceted experiences of foreign students as they strive to succeed academically in a foreign city. Students shared their unique challenges while dealing with academic adjustment, as it is their main purpose of coming to Istanbul. Almost all the participants shared that there are variety of academic challenges they faced in their acculturation process that including class participation, teaching styles, assessments, and learning about the new curriculum. Few participants shared that they are more than satisfied with the academia here because they are studying in English-medium universities. While few shared that although they are studying in English-medium universities but their lectures are in Turkish, and also their teachers don't understand much English, so they face discrimination and difficulty and which indirectly affect their performance and results. Some participants face extreme difficulty in studying here because of turkish medium universities. One participant shared:

" I am under extreme stress because I am barely passing my exams because of not having a good command of academic Turkish, also all my classmates are Turkish, I felt so isolated and inferior among them because I couldn't perform well like them. I feel everyone is making fun of me whenever I present in Turkish in class. Also, no teacher wants to supervise my thesis as they want me to go back to the language learning center and learn Turkish for a few more years. This gives me extreme anxiety that sometimes I want to go back to my country". (P17)

Another participant shared her story:

" Although I am studying at a Turkish medium university, my teachers know English very well, they allowed me to perform in English till I became better in advanced Turkish, also they tried to make me comfortable whenever I speak Turkish so that I feel more involved and positive. This helped me a lot in mixing with them". (P13)

Identity Struggles and Survival:

The experience of foreign students in Istanbul is not only an academic journey but also a profound personal transformation. This theme dug into the experiences of foreign students in terms of navigating through complex identity negotiations, dealing with discrimination, coping with homesickness and loneliness, and managing their financial challenges, all while trying to get adjusted to a foreign land.

Identity Negotiation:

Almost all the students shared that it is a continuous struggle for them to keep their individuality as well as get involved in Turkish society. Participants shared that to be a part of Turkish society, they are mostly involved in adapting Turkish habits and attitudes while striving to maintain a sense of their original identity. One participant explained:

"Living in Istanbul made me feel like a global citizen. Now I don't just have my own national identity but also a mixture of many other nations' cultures, including Turkiye. It is an opportunity for me to share my culture as well as discover others". (P19)

Discrimination and Prejudice

Talking about discrimination and prejudice, every participant had different opinions. Few shared that they faced discrimination in terms of their nationality and ethnicity, and a few shared that they faced discrimination in terms of having different religions. Some feel they found Turkish people a little conservative, so they faced discrimination in terms of gender. Whereas few participants shared positive opinions and experiences, they felt Turkish society was more accepting, and they didn't face any discrimination.

One student has a view:

" I have heard about cases of assaults and racism in the country especially to the Arab community but luckily I have never been a victim of such assaults or discrimination". (P10)

Homesickness and loneliness:

The emotional toll of homesickness and loneliness is another significant aspect of identity struggles for foreign students. Being away from family and familiar surroundings can lead to nostalgia and longing. Students shared mixed experiences in terms of this matter. Almost all participants shared that they went through extreme anxiety and isolation in the beginning, but as soon as they developed some connections here, it became easy for them to survive. Few participants shared that homesickness and loneliness are continuous feelings for them. One participant shared:

"It's my third year in Istanbul and I am thankful to Allah that my country is nearer to Turkiye, so whenever I feel homesickness, I visit my parents, it's like fresh air for me" (P13)

Another shared:

" I have a family like friends here, so whenever I feel lonely, I spend quality time with them, they are like medicine for me to survive here". (P20)

Financial challenges:

Financial challenges added another layer of complexity to the identity struggle of foreign students. Many foreign students shared that they face significant financial burdens, including tuition fees, living expenses, and adapting to a new city. Some share that they have health issues due to financial stress, and it also affects their academic performance and overall well-being. A few students shared that it was not very difficult for them in terms of financial challenges due to family support or because of scholarships. Few shared that they have to do odd jobs, but for survival, they have to do.

One participant shared:

" Inflation is one of the biggest challenges living in Istanbul these days. Prices are always going up, and sometimes, it's almost impossible to survive as a student here." (P22)

Overall, findings indicate that foreign students' lived experiences are a blend of both opportunities and challenges.

Discussion:

The findings of this study reveal a rich tapestry of experiences among foreign students in Istanbul, characterized by both opportunities and challenges. These narratives reflect the dynamic process of acculturation and adaptation, encompassing many factors including language barriers, cultural adjustments, social integration, academic challenges, identity negotiation, discrimination, homesickness, and financial struggles.

Theme one indicated that pre-arrival expectations of international students were shaped by various sources such as social media, personal research, and stories from friends and family. Many students had high and positive expectations about living in Istanbul, primarily due to its reputation for diversity, liberalism, and rich cultural history. However, the reality often differed, particularly regarding language barriers and cultural adjustments. This finding is in line with previous studies by Titrek et al. (2016) & Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu (2020) who highlighted that communicatıon is the central challenge faced by international students in Turkiye. These early encounters were crucial in shaping their initial experiences and subsequent adaptation strategies.

Theme two highlighted that the language barrier emerged as a significant challenge, impacting daily interactions and academic performance. A study by Özoğlu et al. (2015) Similarly endorsed these findings by stating that language difficulties may significantly impact social interactions and academic success. While some students managed to learn Turkish and found it eased their communication and integration, others continued to struggle, feeling alienated and stressed (Gökalp et al., 2021). Social integration also posed difficulties, with students needing to navigate cultural sensitivities and adapt to new social norms. Many students found solace in forming peer groups with other international students or engaging with local communities, which facilitated a sense of belonging and support. Cultural adjustment required continuous negotiation between maintaining their own cultural identity and adapting to Turkish customs and traditions. Zhou et al. (2008) also identified that cultural adaptation involves navigating through various dimensions, including social and behavioral adjustments, which resonate with the experiences reported by students in Istanbul. Despite the challenges, students found the process enriching, offering opportunities for personal growth and broader cultural understanding. These findings go in line with the findings of previous studies by Can, 2021 & Bashir et al., 2021.

Theme three indicated that academic adaptation was another significant area of challenge. The need to understand and meet the expectations of a different educational system, coupled with language barriers, often creates stress and anxiety among students. This finding relates to Acar's (2016) and Anderson & Guan's (2017) studies that emphasized adjustment issues related to the educational system and time management. Alpaydin (2018) echoed similar findings of this study, which stated that some students reported positive experiences with supportive faculty and flexible academic environments, while others faced discrimination and felt isolated. The varying teaching styles, class participation norms, and assessment methods required substantial effort to adjust, impacting their academic performance and overall experience.

Theme four explored the journey of identity negotiation, marked by a continuous struggle to balance their original cultural identity with the demands of the host society. This negotiation process was often complicated by experiences of discrimination and prejudice based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, or gender. While some students felt welcomed and accepted, others encountered significant barriers. A recent study by Bianet (2024) endorsed the same issues where students described instances of exclusion and mistreatment in various social contexts. The study indicated that homesickness and loneliness were common emotional challenges, with many students experiencing anxiety and isolation initially, which is consistent with findings from previous research indicating that culture shock can severely impact psychological well-being (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Developing social connections and finding support systems were crucial in mitigating these feelings. Financial challenges further compounded their struggles, with some students resorting to part-time jobs to manage their expenses, which was often against local regulations.

Conclusion:

Overall, the study highlights that the lived experiences of foreign students in Istanbul are a complex interplay of opportunities and struggles. Multiple factors, including language proficiency, cultural adaptation, social integration, academic challenges, and personal identity negotiations, influence the acculturation process. Despite the difficulties, many students demonstrated resilience and adaptability, employing various coping strategies to navigate their new environment. This study is in line with Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, which posits that the acculturation process involves both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. The narratives of foreign students in Istanbul reflect the interplay between maintaining their original cultural identity and integrating into the host society. The challenges related to language barriers, cultural adjustments, and social integration underscore the importance of both individual and contextual factors in the acculturation process.

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