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Article

Exploring Academic and Sociocultural Experiences of South Asian Doctoral Students at a Midwestern U.S. University

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Abstract

International doctoral student enrollment in the United States includes a substantial number of students from South Asian countries, yet limited research has examined their academic and sociocultural experiences in U.S. institutions. This qualitative descriptive study explores how South Asian international doctoral students at a Midwestern public university make meaning of their academic and sociocultural experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six doctoral students and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three interconnected themes emerged from the findings: (1) pedagogical differences and academic adjustment; (2) cultural and social adjustment; and (3) emotional adjustment and identity transformation. While participants encountered difficulties with communication styles, cultural norms, and institutional support systems, they also highlighted intellectual development, greater autonomy, and increased self-confidence. The findings suggest that universities should consider strengthening academic guidance and mentoring and providing culturally relevant mentoring and counseling to ensure inclusive doctoral education environments.

Keywords: *S*outh Asian, doctoral students, sociocultural experiences, U.S. universities, qualitative study

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized academic landscape, pursuing a graduate degree in the United States has become an aspiration for international students (Topliceanu et al., 2026). Research universities in the United States are considered one of the most prominent destinations for international students. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2025), approximately 1.2 million international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities during the 2024-25 academic year.

International students bring a wide variety of perspectives, experiences, and aspirations, enriching the academic community with diverse intellectual and cultural contributions. Many students pursuing PhD degrees in the United States are drawn to highly ranked academic institutions, advanced research infrastructure, diverse scholarly networks, and vibrant intellectual communities that define American higher education (Grineski et al., 2026). Nevertheless, amidst their quest for academic achievement and personal development, international students frequently face a plethora of sociocultural and academic challenges that significantly influence their academic journeys (King & Bailey, 2021).

South Asia is a diverse region with distinct cultural, social, and educational histories, comprising countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. The sociocultural and academic landscape of the United States is different from that of South Asia in terms of culture, religion, economic status, educational context, and language competency (Asif et al., 2024). There are growing concerns regarding the extent to which American higher education institutions are willing and able to embrace internationalization and foster intercultural competence on their campuses. For international students, pursuing PhD studies in a foreign country is a substantial undertaking that presents both benefits and obstacles to them. The cultural adaptation process for international students is complex and demands not just adaptation to academic standards but also the negotiation of social and cultural complexities in everyday encounters (Lai et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2026).

These cultural and academic obstacles, particularly for doctoral students, are a leading reason for withdrawal from doctoral programs (Alves et al., 2024). International doctoral students are bound to confront multiple responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges in a globalized academic space (Gao, 2026). However, their voices have been largely absent from attempts to understand the complex influences of sociocultural dimensions of globalization on doctoral education. As a result, many international doctoral students are left to independently construct and make meaning of their educational purposes, experiences, and identities in environments that are unfamiliar to them (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Although most international doctoral students demonstrate strong academic credentials before they are admitted into U.S. universities, their struggle revolves around issues related to navigating cultural differences, communication difficulties, and different academic environments from those in their home countries (Khawaji, 2023).

Despite a growing body of research on international student experiences in higher education, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific experiences of South Asian international doctoral students in the United States, particularly at public universities (Chen et al., 2026). Existing studies have examined international students' cultural and academic adaptation, socialization, and language and communication challenges (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023; Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Some research has specifically focused on South Asian students' experiences, including their transitions into doctoral education (Asif et al., 2024). However, limited attention has been given to how South Asian international doctoral students experience and make meaning of the interconnected academic, sociocultural dimensions within a particular institutional context. This study addresses this gap by exploring: **How do South Asian international doctoral students make meaning of their academic, sociocultural experiences at a Midwestern public university in the United States?**

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

International doctoral students in the United States have attracted growing scholarly attention due to their increasing presence and contribution to higher education. The experience of international students often involves navigating interactions with diverse cultures, developing proficiency in a second language, building intercultural competence, and acquiring personal and academic growth (Yu et al., 2025). During the transition to a new culture, students also face challenges related to climate, lifestyle, homesickness, isolation, and stress (Sadewo et al., 2020). Moreover, international students engage in knowledge acquisition, socialization, problem-solving, and adaptation to new environments that ultimately contribute to their identity development (Kaya, 2020). They face transition-related challenges that differ from those faced by domestic students, including financial constraints, socio-cultural differences, distinct educational atmospheres, and language barriers (Katsumoto et al., 2023). Despite the challenges, studying in the U.S. provides opportunities for collaboration, engagement with diverse cultures, and access to advanced academic resources, broad networking, and career opportunities (Kamran & Awan, 2024).

Language and Communication

The host country and the international student can mutually benefit from intercultural engagement. Research suggests that navigating a new cultural context can increase adaptability, flexibility, and cross-cultural interactions. However, language barriers often create significant challenges for international students' cross-cultural adjustment, social integration, and friendship formation (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). International students in the United States also have difficulty adapting to American accents and integrating into the U.S. culture (Yan, 2024). Although most U.S. universities provide resources to support international students, differences in language and communication continue to shape their experiences. At the same time, rigorous academic expectations encourage international students to gradually improve their communication skills as they are required to write academic papers and participate in class discussions (Yu et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, language challenges can hinder international students from actively participating in classroom discussions and their ability to maintain relationships with peers (Bound et al., 2021). Although universities provide spaces for developing cross-cultural interactions, studies suggest that international students often build cross-cultural friendships while they maintain limited contact with domestic peers (Salerno et al., 2024). Such limited social engagement may affect students' sense of belonging and opportunities to build meaningful peer relationships and professional networks (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Despite the challenges, research shows that with institutional support and a multicultural environment, international students gradually overcome the language barriers and excel in their academics over time (Oduwaye et al., 2023).

Cultural Adjustment

International graduate students in the U.S. encounter multiple cultural challenges that impact their academic success, social integration, and overall well-being. Living and studying away from home requires them to build social networks while navigating new environments and culture (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Crider, 2026). Everyday experiences such as food habits, religious traditions, and social norms also change when moving to the U.S. (Zhang et al., 2022). Such cultural juxtapositions between the home nation and the destination nation have been the basis of

adaptation, which poses a tremendous challenge for many international students (Su et al., 2021).

However, exposure to new cultures can also increase intercultural understanding and global awareness. Research shows that interaction with diverse cultures broadens the perspectives and global awareness of international students (Hassan, 2025). Furthermore, intercultural engagement has been associated with increased cultural knowledge, cross-cultural communication, self-awareness, and reduced prejudices (Asif et al., 2024). Conversely, a dearth of awareness and understanding of cultural differences can contribute to experiences of disappointment or loneliness (Su et al., 2021). Social connections and interpersonal relationships with American students can also influence international students' social and cultural integration and sense of belonging within U.S. higher education (Rivas et al., 2019). Scholars have highlighted the need for institutional reforms to provide structural support for international students (Bound et al., 2021).

Academic culture

Classrooms in the United States vary considerably from those in different countries, particularly in terms of learning styles. Many international students feel the curriculum does not sufficiently incorporate cross-cultural perspectives, and they struggle to adapt to continuous assessment and academic writing in Western institutions (Chauhan, 2021). The differences in rhetorical structures, referencing traditions, and reasoning styles can create additional challenges when producing scholarly work according to U.S. academic standards (Gokpinar-Shelton & Pike, 2022).

Academic institutions may not always provide culturally responsive academic support for international students. Similarly, there is limited access to more approachable academic advisors and mentors with cultural empathy, which often hinders international students' academic experiences (Yuan et al., 2023). Despite the challenges, a collaborative learning environment amongst students from various cultural backgrounds increases the sharing of knowledge and cross-cultural communication, which enhances the breadth and depth of academic inquiry. Interactions with peers, faculty members, and professionals from different cultural backgrounds also broaden students' professional networks and improve their career prospects (Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024).

International students often contribute distinct perspectives and research approaches, which can extend the area of academic inquiry and lead to novel discoveries (Bound et al., 2021). Rigorous academic work and study pressure also reduced social interaction and networking, especially with both international and domestic peers (He, 2024). Moreover, Studies show that students who receive mentoring in academic, personal, and diversity-related areas report higher levels of satisfaction and confidence in their doctoral journeys (Naidoo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023).

Socialization

Many international doctoral students often socialize in communities through volunteering, community service, and cultural exchange programs, which build their sense of global citizenship and societal responsibility (Fakunle, 2021). Their sense of belonging is highly shaped by their social networks within and outside of the academic domain (Paik & Braxton, 2026). Similarly, research indicated that social support plays a crucial role in the well-being and cross-cultural adjustment of international doctoral students at U.S. universities (Gao, 2021). Moreover, some international doctoral students continue to experience social isolation and express the need for more institutional programs and events that support engagement and community-building (Yuan et al., 2023). Overall, these studies show that

international doctoral students experience complex linguistic, cultural, and academic adjustments in the U.S.

3. Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the experiences and perceptions of South Asian international doctoral students (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach provided greater flexibility in obtaining an in-depth understanding of experiences and perspectives from the participants (Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Six international doctoral students enrolled in a public university in the United States participated in this study. The university has approximately 28,000 students, including domestic students and international students. A recruitment email was sent by university marketing services that included the details of the study and a Qualtrics survey for interested and eligible participants. Based on the responses received, six doctoral students were purposively selected to provide information-rich cases relevant to the research question and provide variation in participant backgrounds and experiences (Gaihire et al., 2021). The sample size was appropriate as the study aims to provide in-depth information about student experiences within a specific setting and context, rather than generalizing findings to a broader population (Malterud, 2016).

The six participants represented India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh and ranged in age from 33 to 42 years. Table 1 presents the relevant participant characteristics. Data were collected through semi-structured in-person interviews, which enabled participants to describe their experiences in depth while allowing the researcher flexibility to explore additional perspectives (Khanal & Ghimire, 2024). All interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, on-campus settings to promote participant comfort and minimize disruptions. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

An interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions allowed participants to reflect on their academic and socio-cultural experiences (Glesne, 2016). The first section included questions related to demographic information. The second section explored participants' experiences as international students, with a focus on their experiences related to language, academics, and sociocultural experiences. The final section examined strategies used by participants to navigate any differences or difficulties they encountered. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify responses and explore in-depth reflections. Verbal and written consent were obtained before audio recording.

A software application was used to transcribe the recordings, and the transcripts were thoroughly reviewed. The recordings were repeatedly listened to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. The transcripts were then read multiple times to develop a deeper understanding of the data. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher engaged in an iterative process of coding transcripts line by line and paragraph by paragraph to identify meaningful segments of data relevant to the research question. Related codes were then reviewed to identify patterns across the data. The researcher iteratively developed, reviewed, and refined the codes and developed three major themes.

This study was carried out in compliance with the Institutional Review Board's ethical criteria for research on human subjects. The participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected by not disclosing identifying information and assigning pseudonyms (Patton, 2015). The researcher also acknowledged their positionality and reflected on how their prior educational experiences, cultural

understandings, and perspective might influence the research process and interpretation of findings. To address potential bias, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research and analysis process using a reflective journal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher revisited the reflections throughout the analytic process and critically reflected on how prior understandings of South Asian educational and sociocultural contexts might shape interactions with participants and interpretation of the data and ensured that the emerging themes were grounded in the data.

4. Results

Three interconnected themes were developed through the analysis: (1) pedagogical differences and adjustments; (2) cultural and social adjustments; and (3) emotional adjustment and identity transformation. Together, these themes show how international South Asian doctoral students navigated unfamiliar academic responsibilities and sociocultural environments while adopting new ways of learning, relationships, and personal well-being.

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

Name	Country	Age	Year in Doctoral Program
Participant 1	Pakistan	33	Third
Participant 2	Nepal	42	First
Participant 3	Sri Lanka	41	Third
Participant 4	India	33	Second
Participant 5	India	34	Third
Participant 6	Bangladesh	34	First

Pedagogical differences and adjustments

Participants described a transition from lecture-based, teacher-centered learning to student-centered, dialogic, and participatory approaches in the U.S. These experiences helped them become more confident, self-directed, and independent as learners. However, the academic environment in the U. S. required them to make significant adjustments in terms of learning practices. The students reported the need to adapt to pedagogical approaches that required active participation, critical thinking, and independent learning. These adjustments were experienced across multiple aspects, including classroom interaction, academic independence, faculty relationships, and broader research culture.

One key aspect of difference was their shift from lecture-based pedagogy to discussion-based classrooms in U.S. universities. Participants stated that the pedagogical approaches in the U.S. required them to move from passive learning to active participation. One participant reflected:

"In my country, the classrooms are mostly unidirectional in the sense that instructions are mostly given by professors or teachers. They come into the class, have lectures prepared, and talk on a topic, and then students are supposed to learn from there. But here in the U.S., the classrooms are pretty participatory. Students have to do quite a lot of reading and writing and have to be prepared before they go to class. Since the class is participatory, professors make sure that students get enough chance to discuss in the class and share their own opinions" (Participant 2).

Participants also shared their expectations for independent and self-directed learning. They said that the U.S. education system required them to think critically

and confidently express their opinions while also providing them with more freedom to explore concepts beyond a specific curriculum.

"There's a lot of innovative academic learning here. But in my country, this is a little different. We have a pre-planned curriculum designed for specific degrees, and you don't *have the option to go and see further beyond what is already designed" (Participant 4).*

Another participant mentioned,

"U.S. academic culture is more dialogic, more reflective, and more student-centred. *In my class, students are encouraged to question and offer their own perspectives, and professors expect active participation and independent thinking" (Participant 3).*

Participants emphasized the importance of faculty professionalism, responsiveness, and research culture in their academic experiences, which they felt was different from their home country.

"I really like the way Americans work – they work on time, they're punctual. The email culture … when you write an email, you get a reply within 24 hours. Compared to my country, here it's really academic, *and the research is productive, even though the teaching style is different" (Participant 5).*

Another participant stated:

"When everybody shares their idea on the topic, the learning gets enhanced, and also professors give significant inputs while things are being disc.sed in the class" (Participant 1).

Cultural and Social Adjustments

All participants discussed cultural and social adjustments they made to integrate themselves into the U.S. environment. They described differences between social norms in their home countries and those they encountered in the United States, particularly in terms of independence and personal space, and community relationships. These references required ongoing negotiation and sometimes were accompanied by feelings of isolation and cultural distance. At the same time, participants experienced self-reflection and development of intercultural competence in the process.

One participant explained:

"Yeah, certainly there are some noticeable differences. *U.S. culture emphasizes individual choice,* independence, *and personal responsibility, whereas in my home country, my culture is more* family-oriented and, *let's say*, community-centered. *In the U.S., people are very* open; *they communicate directly. But in my home* country, *communication* tends *to be more indirect" (Participant 6).*

Another participant described U.S. society as being based on privacy and personal space.

"Yeah, people actually in the United States are generally more private and maintain more personal space and have more individualistic social interactions than in my home country's context. For example, in community life in my home country, it is more

interconnected, but in the U.S., it is more, let's say, dispersed. Learning how society functions here has been an ongoing process of observation for me" (Participant 3).

While some individuals described the differences in relatively neutral terms, others felt feelings of isolation from their social context. A participant shared a more emotional response to societal and cultural differences.

"Society here is really, you know, specific to their own lives. They do not interfere in other people's lives; they do not care. I would say this is a harsh world. They don't even *care if you are on the* road or *if you had an* accident. *Everything was collective back* home, *but here it's not collective. It's individual* here; *everybody wants to be alone and needs the space" (Participant 4).*

Emotional Adjustment and Identity Transformation

Participants described emotional adjustment as a critical dimension of the doctoral experiences. The academic load and the social and cultural differences all together resulted in more emotional adjustments and transformation while also providing opportunities for resilience, increased self-efficacy, and meaningful identity transformation. Participants emphasized the need for culturally responsive mentoring and advising, and institutional awareness that recognizes international doctoral students not merely as contributors to institutional diversity but as individuals with complex social, cultural, and emotional needs.

They expressed the need for culturally responsive counseling for international students. One participant stated:

"There are mental health clinics here where you can jump in, *but I always emphasize that if a graduate student has a mental health problem and he is going for an appointment with a mental health specialist, then there is always a culture that influences and that plays a part in not being comfortable for international graduate students. Do mental health specialists understand the culture he grew up in? So how can they go from that lens to help this guy or this girl? So, culture plays a part in those mental health issues" (Participant 2).*

Participants also expressed the need for institutions to recognize their emotional needs alongside their academic responsibilities.

"Because we are also humans, we are TAs, we are GAs, we are not machines, and we have emotions. We are working for the betterment, and we are a simple part of nuts and bolts for the entire machinery of the academic institution. So, we are still worthy of attention in the academic institution" (Participant 4).

Despite the adjustments and challenges, some participants also highlighted emotional growth, self-reflection, and identity transformation. Their accounts suggested that integrating into a new academic and social environment made them more resilient.

Another participant expressed,

"It's not easy, but it has shaped me into a better person. I have learnt *how to take care of myself, manage my emotions, and focus on what really matters" (Participant 3).*

Another participant gave a similar opinion.

"My experience has been meaningful, but this semester remains just full of adjustments. I found the academic environment to be supportive, *collaborative, and intellectually stimulating. At the same* time, *navigating* a new *culture,* a new *system and new ways of learning have required some patience and resilience. For example, transportation, communication styles and academic expectations were somewhat unfamiliar in the beginning, but over time* I've become *more confident and independent nowadays" (Participant 6).*

5. Discussion

This study explored how South Asian international doctoral students made meaning of their academic, sociocultural, and emotional experiences at a public Midwestern university in the United States. The findings provide insights into participants' experiences of academic adjustment, sociocultural differences, and emotional experiences during their doctoral studies.

One of the central findings was participants' adjustment to a new pedagogical culture and unfamiliar social and cultural environments. However, participants did not describe these adjustments as solely barriers; rather, they reported that the pedagogical adjustments contributed to their learning. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that international students encounter academic and pedagogical challenges when adapting to an unfamiliar academic environment (Bayati et al., 2025; Park, 2022). The findings suggest that academic adaptation is not only about learning new classroom practices but also about understanding students' contributions to classroom participation and knowledge production and developing their identities as scholars. This interpretation is consistent with broader research on the experiences of international graduate students, for whom academic adaptation is an important aspect of cross-cultural adjustment (Gao & Wesely, 2024).

Sociocultural adjustment was another significant finding of this study. Participants described U.S. social environments as more individual-oriented than the community-oriented environments they experienced in their home countries. They expressed mixed views about these societal differences. Some participants interpreted these differences as challenging or emotionally isolating, whereas others viewed them as opportunities to develop intercultural competence and broaden their perspectives**.**

These experiences align with research by Asif et al. (2024), who found that South Asian international students transitioning into PhD programs in the United States experienced challenges related to cultural differences and communication, social isolation, and mental health. For participants in the present study, adjustment was not simply a process of adapting to a new environment; it was also a process of learning through their experiences, through which they developed broader perspectives and greater self-awareness. Participants' accounts of emotional challenges and cultural adjustment suggest the need for culturally responsive counseling and mentoring, as well as increased opportunities for peer and community connections. This aligns with research by Sakiz and Jencius (2024), who examined components of culturally responsive support for students' mental health.

The findings also indicate that participants' emotional well-being was connected to their broader institutional and cultural experiences. Recent research on international doctoral students has identified cultural isolation and disconnection, support systems, and mentorship dynamics as important aspects of students' mental health experiences in U.S. doctoral programs (Crider, 2026). These findings show the importance of culturally responsive mental health support and counseling practices that recognize students' diverse sociocultural backgrounds. For participants in this

study, such approaches may help to address emotional needs and well-being and strengthen their broader sense of belonging.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how six South Asian international doctoral students made meaning of their academic, sociocultural, and emotional experiences at a Midwestern public university in the United States. By centering their voices, it calls on institutions to move beyond surface-level internationalization and adopt intentional, inclusive practices that promote belonging, well-being, and scholarly growth. In doing so, doctoral education can become not only a site of academic achievement but also a transformative space in which international students' identities, voices, and aspirations are valued and supported.

This study has several limitations. It focused on a small sample of doctoral students from a single university, which limits the transferability of findings to a larger population of international doctoral students. The study relied only on participants' accounts of their experiences but did not explore the perspectives of faculty members or institutional staff. Hence, the findings reflected accounts of participants' experiences in a specific context rather than generalized claims about all South Asian international students. Moreover, by focusing primarily on South Asian participants, the research might overlook the different experiences of international doctoral students from other regions. Future research could examine experiences of doctoral students from other regions or academic levels to explore how academic level might influence the adaptation and adjustments of students in a new environment.

Research involving a larger and more diverse sample could provide broader understandings of these experiences. Furthermore, this study focused primarily on academic and sociocultural experiences with limited exploration of emotional experiences examined through participants' reported accounts. Future studies might explore the mental health and psychological adjustment and challenges of South Asian students in U.S. higher education.

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