Understanding the emotional experiences of Female International Graduate Students.

Esther Hinson

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UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

by

Esther Hinson

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

U.S. higher education is experiencing a continuous rise in international student enrolment, significantly among females. Studies have suggested that female international graduate students experience more difficulty during their early adjustment process which encompasses psychological and sociocultural. However, these studies often overlook the emotional impact on female international graduate students. This study uses the phenomenological approach to explore the emotional experiences of female international graduate students in the U.S. The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the emotional experiences of female international graduate students’ adjustment trajectories, such as excitement, sadness, anxiety, and fear during their adjustment process. By applying Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital, the research provides a valuable framework for understanding these emotional experiences and underscores the need to expand our understanding of cultural and social capital theory to address its impact on emotions.
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INTRODUCTION

U.S. higher education is experiencing a continuous rise in international student enrolment. As reported by the Institute of International Education (IIE), there were 1,057,188 international students in the USA during the 2022/2023 academic year, and this represents a 12% increase from the previous academic year (IIE 2023). In the 2022/2023 academic year, U.S. universities hosted students from more than 200 countries and territories, spanning all continents except Antarctica. The number of international students in the U.S. is mainly dominated by Chinese and Indians. Out of the 1,057,188 international students in 2023, Chinese students represented 27.4%, followed closely by Indians (25.4%), South Koreans (4.1%), and Canadians (2.6%).

The growth in international students includes a significant increase in female enrollment but at a slow rate. According to the IIE reports (2017), in 1979/1980, women accounted for 28% of international students in the U.S., however, this figure rose to 44% by 2014/2015. Despite the increase in female international students, male international students continue to be the majority across institutes of higher education. For example, data from the Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), which is an internet-based system used by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to maintain information on nonimmigrant students, indicates that in 2021, 44% (548,705) of F-1 (academic and language training programs) and M-1 (vocational and non-academic program) international students were female (SEVIS 2021). Additionally, according to the IIE, this trend is consistent with the regional trends as among the students from Asia, 44% are women with high proportions coming from Japan and Vietnam in 2015/2016. Similarly, among the students from Sub-Saharan Africa, 44% are women. Likewise, of the students from Latin America and the Caribbean, 46% are women with high percentages from Jamaica.
The gradual improvement in the academic movement for women has been due to equity in access and internationally acknowledged interventions to fill the gender gap at all levels of education (Bhandari 2017). Beyond the broader global trend toward gender equality, the increasing representation of women in international education owes much to targeted scholarship and fellowship programs (Bhandari 2017). Initiatives like the U.S. Department of State’s African Women’s Entrepreneurship Program and TechWomen Program, the Schlumberger Foundation’s Faculty for the Future Program, the Ford Foundation’s International Fellowships Program, and the Maternal Health Young Champions Program, actively support women and other underrepresented groups in pursuing advanced studies abroad.

Also, the U.S. Department of Commerce data has shown that international students contributed nearly $38 billion to the U.S. economy in 2022. Thus, higher education is one of the United States’ top service sector exports as compared to industries such as tourism. International students provide this revenue to the U.S. through expenditures like living expenses encompassing various costs such as accommodation, meals, educational materials, travel, medical coverage, assistance for accompanying family members, and other incidental expenditures (Le et al. 2016). International students are not only valuable financially but add cultural value to the U.S. with their distinctive lifestyle, knowledge, and skills from leading countries of origin like India, China, Vietnam, and Nigeria. Thus, as they gain higher education in the country, they exchange their intellectual capital as well, becoming assets to their host country (Berry 2005).

While all students in higher education deal with a myriad of challenges accompanying graduate school, scholars have reported that issues that affect international students are adjustment issues (Wu et al. 2015). Thus, international students deal with additional challenges, such as
language and cultural gaps (Bradley 2000). Research shows that the two major adjustment issues that affect international students for international students are psychological and sociocultural (Wu et al. 2015). As a result, international students need more support to adapt to the new environment (Bradley 2000). For instance, a great deal of literature stresses that a lack of English proficiency makes communication with people (classmates, acquaintances, and university personnel) problematic. Other studies have revealed that aside from international student’s lack of English proficiency, this group experiences cultural shock which is feelings of anxiety and frustration due to the unfamiliar culture (Fatima 2001).

Within the past two decades, research has indicated that female international students encounter greater challenges in adapting to new cultures compared to their male peers (Contreras-Aguirre and Gonzalez 2017; Manese et al. 1988). Thus, female international students navigate the stressors that come with graduate school and must simultaneously navigate the combined difficulties of being international, female, graduate students and endeavor to attain academic and social assimilation into the academic environment and society of the United States (Le et al. 2016). Literature highlights that these challenges are a potential situation of double jeopardy for female international graduate students (Fatima 2001).

What is known about the adjustment experiences of female international graduate students is the general adjustment issues that ultimately overlook the emotional aspect of the adjustment process. None of the studies on female international graduate students has explored the impact of adjustment experiences on the emotions of female international graduate students pursuing higher education in the United States of America. Using Bourdieu’s cultural and social capital theory as a framework to understand female international graduate students' adjustment needs, this study seeks
to investigate the adjustment experiences of female international graduate students and find out their emotional experiences.

This study provides a thorough understanding of the emotional aspect of the adjustment experiences faced by this group, serving as a piece of empirical information for international education stakeholders and especially for women who intend to travel to the United States to pursue higher education in the U.S. Also, using Bourdieu’s cultural and social capital theories, this study asserts that to understand female international graduate students’ emotional experiences, it is essential to consider how their accumulated cultural and social capital and their lack thereof influence their emotional experiences. In this regard, the study’s theoretical implication to the area of gender, immigration, and international education is its expansion of cultural and social capital theories to include the emotional aspects of the possession or absence of cultural and social capital. In the long run, serving as a framework for international education policymakers and researchers to better understand the experiences of female international graduate students and provide tailored support to cater to their needs.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Upon arriving in the United States, international students begin their process of acculturation which is a process of adjustment and adaptation to a new culture involving varying instances of cultural learning, maintenance, and synthesis (Berry 2005; Bista and Gaulee 2017; Chun, Chesla, and Kwan 2011). This process of adjustment encompasses the educational, cultural, and psychological domains. Thus, the acculturation process occurs not only within their academic sphere which encompasses activities such as studying in English, interacting with their American peers, and adapting to their professors’ instructional methods, but also extends to other domains, including food exploration, forging friendships with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, and coping with feelings of isolation, among other aspects (Yan 2020).

In addition, the acculturation process causes acculturation stress, which is the psychological and physical stress of acclimating to a foreign culture in a new country including factors such as depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (Berry 2005). For instance, a study found that international students who were found with higher levels of acculturative stress experienced depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues (Wu et al. 2015). Also, studies have found that the cultural differences an individual experiences upon arriving in the U.S.A., such as varying educational systems, social norms, and gender dynamics, can create a sense of disorientation and discomfort, leading to a profound adjustment process (Spencer 2016). Thus, in general, international students have been found to deal with a wide range of adjustment issues, such as cultural shock, cultural and language barriers, academic and financial difficulties, loneliness, racial discrimination, and others upon arriving in the U.S.A. (Yeh and Inose 2003).
The Adjustment Process

According to Lysgaard (1955), the adjustment process of international students over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve. He developed the U-curve hypothesis while investigating the adjustment problems of 200 Norwegians who had spent time in the USA. His study's findings suggested that international students experience a period of curiosity, expectation, and enjoyment at first. Also, other studies that adopted this theory have argued that this period is also marked by excitement and euphoria upon arriving in a new country (Fatima 2001). On the U-curve, this period is at the top of the curve. This is followed by a period of culture shock and adjustment difficulties representing the bottom of the U-curve. Then eventually a period of adaptation and integration (back up on the curve). Furthermore, while the experience of transitioning to a new country may be thrilling and full of exciting opportunities for certain international students, it may also be very anxiety-inducing for others (Gaulee 2018). Thus, the U-curve hypothesis does not always apply because some international students do not experience the typical U-curve adjustment process. It is not always exciting initially for some international students as there may be steep challenges and a slow rate of progress, but over time, as they gain familiarity and experience, adaptation becomes smoother. This establishes that there are always fluctuations in the students' subjective sense of success across different aspects of their lives (Le et al. 2016).

Subsequently, further research proposed a more nuanced view of the adjustment process, emphasizing that it is a continuous and ongoing process rather than one with a clear endpoint (Coles 2012). This model acknowledges that adjustment involves multiple dimensions (for example, cultural, academic, and social) and that progress may not follow a predictable trajectory. This recognizes that individuals may experience setbacks or regressions even after making significant strides in adaptation.
Adjustment experiences of female international graduate students

It is imperative to highlight that there are differing reports regarding the adjustment experiences of male and female international graduate students. On one hand, gendered research into male and female international graduate students’ experiences has established that both genders have similar transition difficulties. For instance, Sherry et al. (2010) discussed the experiences of international students at the University of Toledo and highlighted some psychological challenges that both male and female international students experience. This included the stresses of adapting to a new culture, feelings of exclusion, financial difficulties, and so on. Their study concludes in relation to their research question that regardless of gender, international students experience psychological challenges. Again, experiences of international students distinguishing male and female Korean students have reported that there is no significant difference between males and females regarding language proficiency (Lee et al. 2007).

However, other studies have reported that although both genders face similar difficulties, female international students face additional challenges on top of the stressors that come with being international students (Contreras-Aguirre and Gonzalez 2017; Hartshorne and Baucom 2007; Robertson and Nguyen 2020). Research has shown that female students have more difficulty in adapting to host cultures compared to male students (Le et al. 2016). This is highlighted in the complex interplay between individual, cultural, and institutional factors that shape their psychological well-being and academic success.

The adjustment experiences of female international graduate students are further complicated by the process of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation. As they immerse themselves in a new cultural context, these students must reconcile their pre-existing cultural norms and values with the dominant cultural practices of the host country (Carr et al. 2003; Zheng and
Ishii 2023). This can lead to a sense of dislocation and identity conflict, as they strive to maintain their cultural heritage while also adapting to the expectations and social cues of the host culture. Again, Inman et al. (2001) found that Asian women face value conflicts between their culture of origin and the American culture related to gender role socialization norms. When making decisions Asian international female students are faced with the pressure from their families to maintain and perpetuate traditional gender roles while simultaneously expected to be independent and assertive in pursuing their academic goals (Inman et al. 2001). This holds especially when one’s country of origin value system and the host countries’ values are distinct from each other, causing confusion, decisiveness, and stress while reconciling competing values.

Additionally, in a study on identity negotiation among female Chinese international students at a public university in the Midwestern United States, Hsieh (2006) suggested that the majority of participants faced challenges in establishing a positive social identity. This was due to the perception of the dominant society, which regarded their focus on interpersonal harmony as submissive and indicative of incompetence. Using tapped narrative individual interviews as part of their research design, Hsieh noted that female Chinese abroad students often adopt the meek and submissive female role advocated by Confucian ideology. Therefore, the cultural background of Hsieh’s participants served as an additional limitation on their development of the host country’s social identity. The attempt to negotiate both pressures would only amount to intensified stress, resulting in making the adjustment process more difficult.

Furthermore, Le et al. (2016) discovered that female international graduate students experienced a lower level of support from both their academic departments and families compared to their male counterparts. They actively seek out support services and social networks, both within their cultural communities and among the broader student population, to help ease their transition
and foster a sense of belonging. Many female international students turn to university-provided resources, such as counseling services and peer support groups, to address their adjustment struggles. For instance, a study on a women’s support group for Asian international students found that the group provided a safe and culturally sensitive environment (Carr et al. 2003). Mori (2000) asserted that such support groups provided a space where international students could network, socialize, and address their issues, which generally helped enhance their overall well-being. Similarly, research has emphasized the importance of accessible, targeted, and culturally sensitive mental health services for this population, as they are often at greater risk of psychological problems compared to domestic students (Skromanis et al. 2018; Mori, 2000; Carr et al. 2003).

Moreover, a prevalent reported adjustment issue is the language barrier among female international students, as many grapple with proficiency in English, which can impede their ability to effectively communicate, understand course materials, and engage with their American peers. This language deficit can also exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder their social integration, as establishing meaningful connections with domestic students becomes increasingly difficult (Spencer 2016; Barnes and Loui 2012; Araujo 2011). According to one study, Asian female students in New Zealand "often struggle with language difficulties, cultural differences, unfamiliar classroom dynamics, inadequate learning support, and difficulties making friends with local students, all of which can significantly impact their learning experiences and satisfaction" (Campbell and Li 2007). These challenges can lead to a pervasive sense of not belonging, further compounding the emotional distress experienced by these students.

While graduate school can be challenging for all genders, some factors such as heightened role strain, gender role socialization, and gender-based discrimination can exacerbate the stress experienced by women in particular. For instance, from a personal perspective, these include
breaking free from cultural stereotypes that block women’s academic and professional advancement, escaping from a boring profession to a meaningful life, and achieving personal goals to navigating societal expectations. Being an international student myself, these factors exert extra pressure to excel academically while fulfilling academic expectations and responsibilities, often balancing these demands with family obligations or cultural expectations. Being in a graduate program comes with overwhelming challenges. These include navigating a new horizon which requires handling new responsibilities on your own such as reading, understanding, and writing papers. This level of education is different from the undergraduate level. Reports reveal that for graduate students to achieve success, they must follow a series of steps (Baird 1995; Fatima 2001). These steps include comprehending the framework of their field, familiarizing themselves with the terminology and methodology of the field, acquainting themselves with the individuals and focal points of the program, forming a network of peers, identifying a suitable faculty mentor, and securing adequate financial support.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that there are different problems faced by different sets of people, and the difficulties can be long-term (Lee and Rice 2003). For instance, whereas students from Canada, Europe, and New Zealand, do not report incidences of racism, students from Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America emphasize racism as an important component of their experience (Sherry et al. 2010). Female international graduate students may also face unique challenges related to safety and security concerns, as they navigate a new environment with potential risks that may be unfamiliar to them (Akanwa 2015).

In this vein, focusing on international students in general overlooks the unique challenges faced by female international students, who must grapple with the intersection of cultural and gender-specific expectations (Wu et al. 2015). This intersectionality can lead to unique obstacles
that require a nuanced understanding of their adjustment needs to provide tailored support for this group.

**Bourdieu’s Cultural and Social Capital: Understanding Female International Graduate Students’ Adjustment Needs.**

Pierre Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital concepts have become relevant for sociological research in education in the last two decades (Claridge 2022). They offer unique insights into the adjustment needs of this population. To understand the emotional experiences of female international graduate students’ emotional experiences, we must first comprehend their adjustment needs within the context of cultural and social capital. Understanding these adjustment needs provides a foundation for grasping the emotional dimensions associated with possessing or lacking their adjustment needs.

According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 17), cultural capital refers to the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility such as education, intellect, style of speech, and appearance. In other words, it is the knowledge, skills, and dispositions cultivated through one's upbringing and education, that can significantly influence one’s ability to successfully navigate the academic and social terrain of, for example, graduate studies (Andrade 2006). Possessing cultural capital facilitates one's participation or movement in society, thereby bringing advantage in lifestyle or access to the valued institutions in society (Saha 2021). For example, Bourdieu argued that through university studies and experience, he was able to acquire knowledge of the “high” culture which enabled him to easily circulate and take advantage of opportunities such as securing a better job and promotions within the job. In connection with student migration, the decision to study in the U.S. is influenced by the desire to acquire or possess cultural capital which comes in the form of the prestige associated with U.S. universities, access to advanced research facilities, and
distinguished faculties. For international students, these are seen as assets that enhance their academic and professional trajectories.

Furthermore, cultural capital is also the cultural attitudes and shared values instilled in an individual that is constructive and therefore useful (Claridge 2022). For instance, in U.S. culture, there is a strong emphasis on fostering independence in children from an early age. Parenting attitudes and behaviors in the U.S. often encourage teenagers to make their own choices and solve problems independently, seek part-time jobs to earn their own money and move out of their parent’s homes after high school (Benito-Gomez 2020). However, in some other non-US cultures, offspring do not move into their own houses or get a job until after college, and female youths in particular, do not move out of their parents’ house until they get married after which they move straight into their husband’s home (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1988; Inman et al. 2007; Iacovou 2010). Such contrasting cultures of foreign students directly conflict with instilling the American culture that is needed for smoother adjustment. Also, the U.S. educational systems often emphasize independent thinking and self-directed learning through participation in discussions, expressing their opinions, and pursuit of their interests. Moreover, some cultural values predispose individuals to engage in more constructive and productive actions than other cultures and these values are referred to as cultural capital (Claridge 2022). Contrarily, most non-American cultures do not encourage women to be outspoken and encourage a more conservative and subtle approach to life activities, which could contribute to the difficulty of international students imbibing the cultural capital of the host country (Cheng and Erben 2012; Merkin et al. 2014).

Although cultural capital is present in all societies, it varies uniquely according to each society’s values. In this context, each student migrating for education brings with them cultural capital that is different in nature and significance. Thus, some cultural capital is uniquely distinct
only to the U.S. in both nature and value. That is, the education in the U.S. varies from each student’s country of origin such as India, China, and Nigeria. For this reason, students desire to acquire cultural capital with American education, which is seen as a prestigious and valuable asset.

However, as indicated earlier, this transition to a new educational environment often reveals significant gaps in their cultural capital. Like the language barriers that make communication challenging and hinder their ability to participate in academic and social activities fully (Ryan 2007; Bai 2022). Also, the educational norms and expectations in their new setting differ greatly from what they are accustomed to, creating further difficulties in adapting to the new educational system.

On the other hand, social capital as developed by Bourdieu (1986) refers to the resources that are obtained through social relationships and connections with other people, like family, community, work, or school. In simple terms, it involves the resources available through one’s social networks. Coleman (1988) defined social capital in an educational context as social resources that children and youth have available to them outside schools in their family or community. Deducing from these definitions, social resources include support, information, and opportunities that help individuals achieve their various life goals and navigate various challenges. For instance, support from friendships, family networks, mentorship, community organizations, professional networks, institutional support, online networks, and so on. Social capital plays a crucial role in the experiences of international students, impacting their ability to adapt and succeed academically and maintain emotional well-being (Neri 2008; Glass 2018). International students gain a sense of community through social interactions with the host country students, other international students, and co-national students (Reinties and Nolan 2014). Also, relationships with faculty and peers not
only assist with adaptation but are also the source of resources that facilitate adaptation (Glass et al. 2017).

**Sociological Theorization of Emotions**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the emotional experiences of female international graduate students, I will shed some light on the sociological perspectives of emotions. By doing so, this section emphasizes that emotions are not merely personal reactions, but are deeply influenced by social interactions, cultural norms, and institutional structures (Turner and Stets 2005). The sociology of emotions theories posit that emotions are reactions or constructs of social interactions or social processes and cultural norms, respectively (Bericat 2016). According to Plutchik (2001), emotions are reactions to situations often originating from social changes, such as shifts in social relationships or status. For female international graduate students, these emotional reactions are intricately linked to their daily interactions and experiences in a new cultural and academic environment. Their emotions are shaped not only by immediate social interactions but also by broader social structures and cultural expectations (Turner and Stets 2005; Bericat 2016).

In addition, according to Peterson (2006), culturally, men and women have been socialized to express their emotions differently and there are beliefs and rules governing emotional expressions. These are appropriate ways of feeling and manifesting emotions that are learned and reproduced through socialization, and are consistent with the emotional “vocabularies, beliefs, and norms” that have been culturally defined in a group or society (Peterson 2006: 118).

Hence, this study’s main research objective is to explore the experiences of female international students at the University of Memphis, focusing on their emotional experiences and the coping strategies they employ. Specifically, the research seeks to answer several key questions. First, what can female international students tell us about their experiences studying in the U.S.?
Second, what are the primary causes of emotions they have experienced that are associated with their adjustment needs as understood through the lens of cultural and social capital theory)? Lastly, how do they manage to overcome these emotional challenges in their daily lives? By addressing these questions, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional experiences faced by this group.
METHOD

To explore the emotional experiences of female international graduate students at the University of Memphis, I adopted a qualitative approach, which seeks to explore questions about what this group has experienced, how they felt about those experiences, and what coping strategies were used to overcome them. The phenomenological approach was chosen to investigate the shared interpretation of multiple persons regarding their own experiences of a phenomenon (Cresswell 2012, p.76). The phenomenological technique promotes thorough introspection from the participants and enables researchers to acquire a profound understanding of their experiences.

In order to investigate the main study inquiry of understanding the emotional experiences of female international graduate students through their lived experiences in the USA, I conducted in-depth interviews with female international graduate students. I used a list of semi-structured open-ended interview questions to gather information about each participant’s experiences. The semi-structured open-ended questions allowed for flexibility and depth responses. Narratively, the participants talked about their lived experiences starting with the question ‘Can you share the story of how you became a graduate student?’ Also, the interview questions were designed to touch on every aspect of respondents’ lives from their past, present, and future plans to understand the emotional framework that governed each aspect. The areas explored in the interview questions allowed the participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Participants were encouraged to express their feelings about some of the challenges they experienced.

Data Collection

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants for this study. Once ethical clearance was given by the University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, I contacted the Center for International Education Services, also known as the International Center, to assist with the
circulation of my recruitment message and flier. Also using snowballing, I contacted some acquaintances who fit the recruitment criteria. Recruitment criteria for participants were that they must be female, international (foreign), enrolled in a master's or doctoral program, must be above 18 years and whose native language is not American English. An email invitation was sent to all international students at the University of Memphis. This enabled for a diverse group of female international graduate students to provide rich insight into the topic of interest. For instance, their nationality, cultural background, academic discipline, length of stay, and their level of English proficiency varied to ensure a varied perspective. The message thoroughly explained the study's purpose and importance, outlined the participant criteria, and detailed the tasks participants would be asked to complete. My contact information was included in the message so that interested could contact me directly. Thirteen students who satisfied the criteria consented to take part in the study. Once participants were interested in participating, an informed consent form and a face sheet were sent to review, sign, and fill out, respectively. Before scheduling interviews, the informed consent form was read, understood, and signed. The study employed a one-on-one interviewing style both in person and on Zoom to pay closer attention to participant's expressions while they narrated their experiences about life in the U.S. Responses from participants were completely anonymous. Interviews lasted between 21 minutes to 2 hours approximately. All interviews were conducted in English, and audio recorded with the consent of participants. I also took notes during the interviews.

**Participants**

The participants were twelve (12) female international students who were assigned the pseudonyms Ruby, A.Y, Sey, Obi, Paj, Cynthia, Zichy, Chi Jay, Dya, Kutu, Maame Kay, and Jola Ade. The participants were from 6 (six) different countries which comprised six Nigerians, two Indians, two Ghanaians, one Australian, one Iranian, and one Bangladeshi. All 12 participants who
were interviewed shared some commonalities including their graduate student status from the University of Memphis, gender, and being international students. In this context, students who travel to a country different from their own for higher education. However, they are considered a heterogeneous group in terms of nationality, field of study, educational background, marital status, age, and length of stay in the US. Regarding the participant's marital status, only one was married and living with her husband, and one was a single mother. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 33 years. However, the stay length ranged from 4 (four) months to five (5) years. None of the participants were divorced.

**Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Length of stay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sey</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paj</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.Y</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maame Kay</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>&lt;1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obi</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi Jay</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zichy</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dya</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kutu</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jola Ade</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Audio recordings were transcribed, analyzed and coded. Transcriptions were done with the use of a transcribing app called Otter.ai. After gathering all my audio recordings from the interviews, I uploaded the audio files onto Otter.ai to be transcribed. While I read through the transcribed data,
I edited these transcripts and named each of them with the participants’ pseudonyms. I adopted segmented thematic coding, where key concepts of each interview were extracted and compared throughout the interview transcripts. The coding process started with familiarizing myself with the data by reading through the transcripts and notes multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding. While I read the transcripts, I highlighted key concepts and segments and wrote down my thoughts as I analyzed the texts. Through this process, I gained a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study by examining how participants articulated their emotional experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies. I then grouped the highlighted segments relevant to the research questions and assigned preliminary codes. These highlighted segments were compared across all transcripts to identify recurring patterns, themes, or variations in the data. After reviewing the initial codes for accuracy with highlighted segments, I further grouped related codes into themes to capture the overall patterns in the data. Also, I refined these themes by clearly defining their uniqueness and the specific meaning they add to the research.
RESULTS

This qualitative study provides a nuanced exploration of the emotional journeys undertaken by female international graduate students as they navigate the complexities of studying abroad and how they respond to these challenges.

Firstly, it is imperative to underscore that the findings in this study align with existing scholarly literature. For example, participants in this study articulated the profound significance of their decision to relocate to the United States, viewing it as a pursuit of their aspirations for academic and professional advancement. Their decision to migrate for education is often motivated by the desire for better opportunities and is influenced by push and pull factors. In education migration literature, push factors predominantly include limited opportunities in home countries, while pull factors involve the perceived quality of education and lifestyle in the host country (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Drawing on Bourdieu’s cultural and social capital theory, female international graduate students pursue the cultural capital of U.S. education, seeking to acquire the prestige and cultural knowledge that can enhance their social status and career prospects both in their home countries and globally. However, the process of accumulating this cultural capital is challenging, as it can reveal gaps in their existing cultural and social capital, such as differing norms, values, language barriers, and limited social connections. In other words, their pursuit of cultural capital highlights deficiencies in the cultural and social capital they brought from their home countries.

In the respondents’ narratives, they reflected on their experiences from the time they decided to pursue higher education in the U.S., their expectations about life and studies before coming, the realities they met which were accompanied by early adjustment challenges, and how they managed to overcome the challenges. Underlying these narratives are the emotions they experienced
associated with their adjustment needs. The respondents conveyed experiencing emotions encompassing anxiety, sadness, and fear and attributed these to various stressors including financial constraints, the dual demands of academic pursuits and graduate assistant responsibilities, building relationships and finding support, perceived instances of discrimination, and language barriers. Nevertheless, it is notable that a couple of respondents refrained from explicitly articulating their emotional struggles, potentially influenced by individual personalities and cultural backgrounds. However, while a minority abstained from expressing their emotional challenges, they acknowledged encountering certain difficulties.

**Reflections on their past lives, jobs, and reasons for pursuing higher education in the U.S.**

Coming to the U.S., respondents were excited at the life-changing opportunity of studying at a U.S. university. They acknowledged American universities’ prestige and access to cutting-edge research facilities, distinguished faculty members, and diverse academic programs are tailored to their interests. But before they made the move to travel, most respondents fondly reported that they had good and well-paying jobs that they quit to pursue independence, academic, and professional advancement. Although they all had different things going on for them, they reported feeling the need to do more with their lives by pursuing academic and professional growth. This represented their need to accumulate additional cultural capital in the form of doctoral and master’s degrees. Amidst the need for more, the participants shared mixed feelings about their satisfaction with their past jobs and lives. While some expressed satisfaction and happiness, others were dissatisfied and unhappy.

For instance, these respondents were dissatisfied with their jobs. Sey reported:

“Reflecting on my past life, it was really, really good in some ways like I was very comfortable with where I was living, you know. I was living with good people. I had a really
amazing community of friends, and I was dating someone who I really loved and I was really enjoying that. I had financial freedom. I got a car and an account, there's a lot that I had to leave behind and that was really hard. But I was overworking myself unnecessarily and not doing anything creative. I just felt like I wasn’t really doing anything for myself.”

Likewise, Zichy added:

“I felt my job was too restricting and I felt there was no space to really do my thing, to have time for myself. So, I just thought I needed a break, something else. I felt I was doing sort of the same thing around in circles and I wasn’t really satisfied with what I was getting.”

Paj is one of the respondents who shared their desire for independence and saw studying in the U.S. as an opportunity to achieve both their academic goals and personal freedom. She narrated:

“I was working back home. And I felt like, I need to experience something special. I thought of moving to another city, I wanted more independence from my family. And it's not this typical, like, if you're a girl, doesn't matter how old you are. Usually, you stay with your parents if you're in the same town. So, I wanted to go to another town. And then I realized that if I can go to another town, maybe it's more special if I go to another country. So, I started looking around for that and my best friend was studying here at the University of Memphis. So I applied.”

These align with findings in current literature, where female international students often seek higher education abroad not only for academic advancement but also for greater autonomy (Gomes, Berry, Alzougoool, and Chang, 2014). Similarly, other respondents revealed that their decision to study in the U.S. was influenced by a sense of restriction at their jobs at home, viewing their academic pursuit as a means of escape and self-fulfillment. This dual motivation is echoed in research by Lee
and Rice (2007), who found that international students frequently pursue education in the U.S. to break free from limiting circumstances in their home countries while achieving their educational aspirations. Such findings underscore the complex, multifaceted reasons behind female international students' decisions to study abroad, highlighting the intertwined nature of personal and academic goals (Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010).

On the other hand, one of the respondents shared her intense emotions as she reflected on the social position she held and the respect she commanded back in her home country. Her narration represents a significant shift in her social status which can lead to feelings of disempowerment and identity loss (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). The respect and recognition she enjoyed back home are not easily replicated in the host country, leading to feelings of sadness.

Chi Jay said:

“*My early experiences were bittersweet and in between. There are times that I cried myself to sleep, a lot of emotions that I mean, I know who I am. I was a top management staff in my office. And you having a lot of people say good morning, Ma’am to you every day. I mean, you having like a lot of interns take your bag, right around from when you get out from your car to you have a nobody. You’re alone. You having no car, I don’t have a car. You going everywhere, having to think about, oh, how am I going to move around. Its bitter at times that I cry myself to sleep. There are times that I wake up happy. There are times that my moods are all over the place. So it’s been a bittersweet experience. It’s been a hell of a ride. Let me put it that way. It’s been one hell of a ride.*”

Also, in Sey’s narrative above, she expressed her dissatisfaction with her job and highlighted the difficulty of leaving loved ones behind. This sentiment was echoed by several respondents who
shared similar challenges including struggling with loneliness. Their sense of nostalgia and fondness for the familiar comfort routines, memories of family, friends, and cultural traditions they left behind in their home countries often evoked feelings of sadness. This finding aligns with findings in the literature which emphasize the emotional strain of separation from their support systems (Mori 2000). Also, from the perspective of social capital theory, this reflects a significant reduction in respondents' social capital which was the networks and relationships that served as support systems in their home country. For instance, these quotes expressed the loneliness and homesickness some respondents felt during the early stages of adjustment:

Ruby reported:

“My mother is the most important person in my life. Whatever I do, I just do it for my mother’s better future, I took these steps and that’s why my mother feels happy at this time. Coming and being alone here was emotional for me. My mother is everything to me but I had to decide to figure out this decision for myself, for my family’s future, and better financial conditions. Yes, so at the start maybe for five or six months I used to cry missing my mother.”

Paj said:

“I mean, my early experience wasn't bad. I expected that it would take a while for me adjust to the new system, to the new environment, to the cold, and all of that but I didn't think it was going to be as lonely or as bad here. It is saddening”.

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**Expectations Vs Realities**

The data analyzed highlights that respondents’ expectations were primarily influenced by media portrayals, information from individuals already living or studying in the US, and the inherent anticipated challenges of adapting to a new country, culture, and set of values. Media portrayals often shape how international students envision life in the U.S., creating both positive and negative expectations. Brown and Brown (2013) indicated that media significantly impacts international students’ perceptions by highlighting both opportunities and potential hardships they might face. Moreover, information from people already in the U.S., such as friends, family members, and acquaintances plays a crucial role in forming these expectations. Studies show that international students often rely on first-hand accounts and advice from their social networks to prepare for their new environment (Glass et al. 2018). Also, inherently, international students anticipate encountering challenges stemming from the understanding that moving to a new country involves navigating unfamiliar cultural norms and values. Smith and Khawaja (2011) highlight that these narratives (information) can create unrealistic or biased expectations, impacting students' perceptions upon arrival. For instance, a student who hears predominantly positive stories about U.S. education might overlook potential challenges, while those exposed to more balanced or critical narratives may have a more realistic understanding.

Analyzing female international graduate students' pre-arrival expectations gives us deeper insights into their perceptions and adaptation to their environment. This is because these expectations have significant influence on how they perceive living and studying in America which can affect their adjustment process (Andrade 2006). For instance, studies show that mismatching expectations and realities can lead to feelings of excitement, satisfaction to feelings of disappointment, sadness, and anxiety (Ching et al. 2017).
The respondents had varying expectations and perceptions about life and studies in the U.S.A., while some shared that studies would be easier in America as compared to their home country, others were of opposing views.

About her expectations and perceptions about studies in the U.S, A.Y shared:

“"Oh, for studies I expected it to be easier, to be honest. And here's what I expected. So again, I'm Nigerian, a third-world country, for me, I went to a private school which is great, but first of all, sometimes you don't have electricity to do your research there, you don't have all the equipment to do your research there. Here it is different. You have everything you need or if not everything you need, most of the things you need to do research, and the US typically will promote research because I think the research-based country also the professors here nicer so everybody wants to see you like progress all of that. The curriculum is not as hard as it is in Nigeria because they just make it difficult for some reason. So, I think that's why a lot of Nigerians come here and shine a lot because we've been in the trenches. And so, it's easier to you know, just like shine, basically”

On the other hand, Ruby stated that she thought studies were going to be difficult. She shared:

“"Before coming here, I had thought studying would be difficult. So, I wouldn't match the level. But in the practical work, the professors are very good at teaching. So, they teach each and everything practically and with real-world examples. So, it makes it easy for me”

When comparing their expectations and their realities about life and studies, a respondent, Zichy also shared that “studies here are easier than expected & Life was not as tough as expected”. She recounted that her siblings were already in the U.S.A. might have exaggerated the difficulties in the host country and that influenced her perception.
Realities about life

The rest, however, highlighted that their initial challenges were the realities they encountered, making their experiences more difficult than they had expected. These challenges included high costs of living and healthcare, language barriers, adapting to a new curriculum, unfamiliar food, and transportation difficulties, among others.

Ruby said:

“The challenges as I mentioned, English is not our first language. So in my first semester, and as I mentioned, there are 99% students from India but they are not my state. So, there is a language barrier. So yeah, that was the difficulty that I faced in my first semester”

A.Y also said:

“I think money, I wasn't expecting to be ‘broke’. The realization that oh my God, you're a graduate student and you're broke. It shocked me. Oh, God, how can you tell me a PhD student that I'll be broke? Are you joking? I didn't expect to be broke at all and again, like I had a good job. I was decently paid. And then now I'm moving here, just like, what's going on? Yeah, it was a shift for me. And also because of the currency, there was no way to convert naira to dollars and you expect a lot of money, even if I had lots of money in Naira, you know. So yeah, I think being broke a lot “

Paj:

“I think it's been kind of what I have expected it in a way in terms of I had very vague like expectations. I didn't really know how it would feel to be here. But definitely not having a car has been hard, like my medication is expensive and things like that. There are things that I knew would be hard but I didn't necessarily know like how hard they would be, how
they would affect me, the feeling of living in Ghana, and suddenly going to live with people I don't know, it's been interesting and yeah living somewhere a like 30-minute walk, just not being able to have access to public transport. I knew that was going to happen but I didn't realize how isolated I would just really feel and how kind of trapped I would feel in the bounds of the university. So that's been interesting”.

As indicated at the beginning of this theme, this study indicates that mismatching expectations and realities can lead to feelings of disappointment and anxiety. Like Ruby, A.Y., and Paj their early adjustment challenges were not exactly what they expected.

**Positive Feelings Amidst Challenges**

Additionally, although respondents shared positive and negative expectations and perceptions about life and studies in the US, most of them had positive outlooks, ready, and enthusiastic about new experiences. Exploring these expectations sheds light on the ongoing process of socialization, highlighting how these students learn and adapt to new social norms and values, given some experienced negative events that defy their preconceived notions.

Sey had negative expectations stating that she knew it was going to be difficult because it's a different environment. Still, she reported that she also knew she would learn a lot personally about herself, America, and her program and was open to creating new connections. She reported: “It’s meaningful and exciting, working and meeting with amazing and beautiful people. I am very lucky”

Even though they faced several challenges, some reported being happier and satisfied here in the U.S when comparing what they have here to what they had back home.
When asked about her satisfaction, Paj said “There were a lot of things I liked and disliked about life back home but in general, I feel more satisfied now.” Likewise, Ruby added: “With my life back, I was happy, but now I am more than happy.”

Despite encountering negative experiences, many female international students demonstrate resilience and adaptability. However, it is noteworthy to point out that in the face of challenges, few respondents’ mindsets altered potentially leading to feelings of self-doubt, aimlessness, imposter syndrome, and others. These challenges are addressed to the themes of building relationships and finding support, combining academic and graduate assistant duties, perceived discrimination, coping strategies, and what’s next. Under these themes, few respondents shared the causes of their emotional challenges.

**Building relationships and finding support**

This theme emerged as a significant highlight of the interview data, consistently woven into their experiences, regardless of their age, country of origin, or length of stay. It underscores the critical importance of having an active social network, a key component of social capital when living far from home. All respondents acknowledged that most people in the U.S. are nicer than they expected, yet their views on building relationships varied. Some reported finding difficulty maintaining friendships both with the American Students and peers from their home country, while others found it easy to maintain these connections. They formed friendships primarily within the confines of the University, church, and student organizations. These formed connections provided kinds of support including getting car rides to run errands, securing accommodations, provision of food/grocery supplies, emotional support, and so on. These supports made their transitioning experiences easy.
However, among these respondents, a few respondents had bittersweet experiences with these connections. They shared how these experiences made them feel sad. A couple of them complained that the connections they made ended up being rude, disrespectful, and untrustworthy. For instance, in Ruby’s case, she complained that she was not getting the same effort she put into her friendships, saying:

“see I love making friends. But after coming here, I learned one thing that there is no friend. They are with you for some reason, so there is no best friend. Don't expect anything from any friend...When I am giving my 100%, I'm not getting 100% from the other person. People befriend you for what they can get from you. So, it hurts me a lot, and sometimes I don't have the guts to video call my mother and say this is happening. So, what I did is I just went to the restroom, I locked the room, and I cried a lot in front of the mirror”

Likewise, Chi Jay reported that she did not get that much support and shared her dissatisfaction and disappointment with the support she got from the connections she had made in the African community. The support she needed then was guidance on creating a bank account, getting her Social Security Number (SSN), and running errands, she told me that “A few people supported me with like accommodation and money when I was running out of funds during the few days I arrived in U.S. but at the end of the day, I got a lot of insults from it” And on how this and other initial challenges made her feel, she said” It's bitter at times that I cry myself to sleep. There are times that I wake up happy. There are times that my moods are all over the place”

The literature supports these findings, emphasizing the need for social networks to alleviate adjustment stress (Smith and Khawaja 2011; Gomes et al. 2014; Glass et al. 2015). However, this study shows that building and maintaining social relationships can be an additional stressor for Female International Graduate Students. Also, understanding this phenomenon through the lens of
the social capital theory highlights the dual nature of acquiring social capital (Bourdieu 1986). This is elaborated in the discussion and interpretation section.

**Combining Academic and Graduate Assistant Duties**

Combining academic and graduate assistant duties posed significant challenges for about 90% of respondents who were on Graduate Assistantship Scholarships, requiring them to work part-time within their respective departments. This dual role often resulted in difficulties adjusting to new responsibilities and balancing these demands with academic expectations, leading to emotional stress such as anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy.

Sey explained that she knew what she would be doing in her program as a graduate student and a Teaching Assistant during her first semester. She knew it would be interesting and at the same time challenging since it's at the graduate level. Talking about how she feels about her studies, she expressed that

“I suppose I knew coming in what classes I was going to do because they gave me the course descriptions before I decided to come in. So I knew I would, at least for the first semester, be able to study things that would be really interesting but challenging in terms of like, at the grad level. I think I thought that maybe I was not going to feel as much like imposter syndrome as I feel. Because I definitely feel bad. I definitely don’t feel like... I don’t know if I’m like competent enough to be here. I found it a lot harder to keep track of my studies than I expected”

Paj on stress from her academics, stated that: “Yeah, even though everything is like very good, I still, I’m challenging some stressful moments, some anxiety from my research that I’m doing”

The literature on international student experiences highlights the unique pressures faced by those on assistantships, with added responsibilities causing significant stress and time management
challenges (Kim 2011; Gardner and Barnes 2007). Also, from the cultural capital theory perspective, this phenomenon can be argued to result from the limited cultural capital that female international graduate students possess, which complicates their ability to navigate and adapt to the new academic and social environment effectively (Bourdieu 1986).

Perceived discrimination

Few respondents reported encountering discrimination within their academic department, thus among their cohorts and from their professors. For a couple of respondents, this had profound effects on their academic and emotional well-being. They further reported that the discrimination they experienced manifested in various forms, including unequal treatment, microaggressions, exclusion from opportunities, or biased evaluations of their work. Such experiences of discrimination contributed to feelings of alienation, affecting their self-esteem.

Paj reported the unfair treatment she received from her advisor. She narrated that instead of receiving a 20 working hours contract, she received a contract for 40 hours, with the same amount of pay. She reported and the feedback she got was mostly microaggression. Recounting one of these incidences, she said:

“Personally, when I get stressed, I am hard on myself. Yeah. So when I'm like working hard, and I get stressed. What I expect from my advisor is that they can support me, if I'm on the wrong path, they can tell me and try to guide me towards the right path. But saying that I'm working hard so let's assign her more tasks because if she can work this much, she might be able to work twice as it. I thought that was not what they expected. I was expecting more support and not constant criticism on everything. Every simple things like font size and colors”

On how this made her feel:
“I'm feeling sorry. I tried to fix this and talk with her a lot of times and she was open to talk, she was trying to. So I'm so sorry that that's just not how it worked. And the department is not doing anything about it”

Also, Cynthia narrated her incidences of unfair treatment and exclusion from opportunities. She said she was verbally attacked by one of her cohorts who was an American in public, adding that she felt embarrassed, disappointed, and heartbroken by this incident. Regarding exclusion from opportunities, she said:

“I know for a fact that my department is one of the departments that get awards for the most kind of the most diverse PhD program, but it isn't inclusive...they exclude people of color, or black women from the opportunity. I experienced it my first year, first semester, when someone cursed at me to my face in the Graduate Assistants Office with other Graduate Assistant students. So, we were in public and it was embarrassing. It was heartbreaking to be targeted.”

Chi-Jay expressing her experience of unequal treatment from her classmates:

“I've had to feel bad. You know, I cannot say this enough. I feel bad all the time, especially in class. When they say reply to one student, nobody replies to me. You know, for the whole first semester, no single person in my class, replied, and you know, every week we have discussions, every week, we have this, we talk about stuff. The whole fall semester, and mostly it was only one professor who will reply to me, or any other person, only my professor will say, ‘Oh, that's good. Tell us more’ No single person ever replies to me. So, I feel terrible about it.”
Paj, Cynthia, and Chi-Jay like a couple of other respondents who had experienced discrimination were students who had varying lengths of stay in the U.S.A. For instance, Paj and Cynthia were PhD students who had spent more than two years in America, but Chi-Jay had six months and yet they experienced discrimination but in different forms. Also, it is important to highlight that most of the respondents who reported discrimination were in PhD programs. The rest of the respondents, on the other hand, reported being satisfied with their respective departments, saying that everyone in their departments is welcoming, accommodating, and open.

**What’s next?**

For female international graduate students, the path toward their future goals and aspirations can be laden with fear and trepidation. Having uprooted themselves from familiar cultural contexts, they face immense uncertainty about what lies ahead after completing their studies abroad. Will they be able to secure employment or continuing education opportunities that justify the immense sacrifices made to pursue this degree? The looming concerns about their visa status and financial instability are worries for those hoping to remain in the host country. Thus, the intersecting pressures of academics, and employment prospects can induce fears about failing to live up to expectations - their own or those of their families. Current literature emphasizes the emotional toll of these uncertainties, underscoring the importance of institutional support to help navigate these complexities (Kim 2011; Smith and Khawaja 2011; Sherry Thomas, and Chui 2010).

One respondent, Dya recounted the emotional upheavals she experienced during her phase of job search:

“After or during summer, I started looking for jobs and the journey of looking for a job is the toughest phase, I could say. Because you work on different things like your resume and then you look at your LinkedIn, there’s no guarantee that even though you are updating
these things, or making things better, there is no guarantee that you will get a job...After
securing a job I received an email from the recruiter saying sorry, we can’t take you because
we don’t have the budget. I felt so bad.”

Similarly, Cynthia, who was about to complete her studies, talked about her ordeal searching for
jobs whilst finding ways to keep her visa status active. She stated in her words that “it is not a joke”.
It involved lots of planning and anxiety. Unlike these two, Ruby shared that she is excited about
her next phase, completing her program. At the time of her interview, she reported that she had
been job searching but did not disclose how that was going. Like her, respondents were excited
about their future when asked about their plans after school. Although most planned to continue to
stay in the USA after their studies, one respondent, Kutu, stated that she would like to work for a
couple of years to pay off her debt to her family, who had supported her financially, and after that,
she would like to go home. This is because she felt she did not connect with the US culture and the
people here, and that she does not see herself continuing to stay here alone without her family.

Again, Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital offer insights into these challenges,
highlighting how limited cultural capital and underdeveloped social networks can hinder their post-
graduation opportunities (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 2001).

Coping strategies

Female international students employ a variety of coping strategies to navigate the
challenges they encounter while studying abroad. This includes maintaining regular communication
with family and friends back home. This offers them a source of comfort and connection amidst the
distance. Some respondents reported that self-care practices such as exercising, pep talks, and
hobbies such as cooking and creating content on social media provided avenues for stress relief and
relaxation. A couple of the respondents reported seeking professional support through counseling
services in managing emotional distress and building resilience. Most respondents acknowledged that they call family, play music and dance, go out and make friends, and so on. Ruby, like many other respondents on how they coped told me that “I make Video calls with my family, then play music and dance”. Chi Jay gave herself pep talks, telling me that:

“So I am self-motivated. And I tell you this for free every day, I'm having my bath. I look in the mirror and I say, you know who you are. I look in the mirror and say, you know who you are, you are damn good at what you do. So keep it up. So I as much as I say doesn't affect me. It does, actually”

One coping strategy that I found peculiar was from Chi Jay. On how she managed to surpass loneliness, alienation, and financial instability, she added:

“What I'm telling you now is very strange is, as a psychologist, I know that this is an abnormal behavior, but it takes my mind off things, when things like this happen. I have very high anxiety levels, I tried to put some pain on my body, one of the things that I do is crazy, I'm not going to tell you the particular thing I do but when I put some pain in my body, it takes my mind off that worry, it puts my mind where the pain is. So, I'm trying to mask the pain. And it takes me straight takes my mind away from things like that. So emotionally, coming far away from family from friends is very, very draining. So that's why I tried to distract myself.”

Most respondents reported that they called family whenever they were stressed. In general, their personalities, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and values informed the coping strategies they used. Respondents with outgoing personalities reported going out to have fun with friends. Unlike this group, those with introverted personalities reported staying indoors, connecting with family, listening to music/hymns, and praying. Respondents with outgoing personalities and Christians
reported going out but still prayed to God when faced with challenges. Therefore, depending on their personalities, beliefs, and so on, respondents chose a combination of coping strategies that worked for them. Moreover, as pointed out earlier in the introduction of this theme, a couple of respondents utilized the counseling services provided by the University. Both respondents were of different nationalities and lengths of stay. Thus, this had no bearing on their backgrounds.

Also, from a social capital theory perspective, these strategies highlight the importance of both bonding and bridging social capital. Regular contact with family and friends back home reinforces bonding social capital, while engaging with university counseling services and forming new hobbies and connections in the host country build bridging social capital, crucial for adapting to a new cultural environment (Lin, 2001).
DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The adjustment process that female international graduate students undergo is framed by a sense of balancing many roles and cultures at the same time (Le et al. 2016). As such, they face a roller coaster of emotions such as excitement, disorientation, homesickness, loneliness, among others (Zheng and Ishii 2023). The beginning of their experiences is mostly characterized by positive feelings of growth and development, sometimes mixed with anxiety, then followed by the realization of different cultures and lifestyles in the new country. The analysis of participants’ reported emotions includes excitement, nostalgia, determination, self-doubt, aimlessness, imposter syndrome, anxiety, sadness, and fear. These were under themes that were categorized into reflections, expectations versus reality, building relationships and finding support, combining academics and graduate assistant duties, perceived discrimination, coping strategies, and what’s next in terms of post-educational plans for getting jobs. These findings resonate with existing literature on the emotional adjustment of international students. Studies have consistently highlighted the initial phase of excitement followed by significant emotional and psychological challenges.

However, from a sociological perspective, this study contributes to the complexity and variability of the adjustment process of female international graduate students. It aligns with a more nuanced understanding of the adjustment process that does not follow a predictable trajectory and encompasses cultural, academic, and social dimensions (Coles 2012). The respondents’ varying lengths of stay, which ranged from three months to seven (7) years, further point out this complexity. Thus, regardless of how long they had been in the U.S., respondents continuously faced challenges from initial settlement challenges to post-educational challenges. For instance, those new to the U.S. struggled with initial settlement issues like finding housing and navigating public transportation.
Conversely, those with longer lengths of stay faced post-educational challenges, such as securing employment, and dealing with visa issues.

Also, the study further emphasizes the role of social capital which is crucial in mitigating negative emotional experiences during the adjustment process. For instance, female international students who have access to robust social networks, including supportive friendships, and participation in cultural associations, report lower levels of anxiety and sadness (Le et al 2016). These networks provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, which are essential for successful adaptation (Contreras-Aguirre and Gonzalez 2017). Conversely, those with limited social capital experienced heightened feelings of isolation and stress. In other words, building and maintaining relationships-related challenges reflect a deficit in social capital, and the absence of the physical presence of family and friends who could provide emotional and practical support exacerbates their feelings of vulnerability. Although technology has facilitated social interactions and maintained social bonds through phone calls with family and friends with ease and convenience despite the physical distance, it does not compensate for the physical presence of family and friends of female international graduate students. Feelings of loneliness and isolation with a yearning for the presence of relatives still resonate in the narratives of this group. This study therefore highlights the importance of maintaining social bonds of female international graduate students with their family and friends which serves as a coping strategy for this group.

In addition, this study indicates that the connections formed by female international graduate students lead to additional emotional challenges. These emotional burdens compound the already significant stress of adapting to a new academic and social environment. For example, research by Gareis (2012) highlights that while friendships and social connections are crucial for emotional well-being, they can also be a source of stress when students struggle to balance
maintaining relationships and building new ones in a foreign context. This underscores the dual nature of social connections for international students, especially for female international graduate students who value social relationships (Fatima 2001). In short, this study implies that social connections as a form of social capital are likely to introduce additional emotional challenges for female international students. This calls for a more nuanced application of social capital theory to the context of female international graduate students.

Furthermore, it is imperative to indicate that female international graduate students reflecting on their past lives contribute to the emotional experiences of female international graduate students. These reflections of past experiences evoke a range of emotions, from nostalgia and homesickness to motivations, regret, longing for familiar surroundings, and sadness over leaving behind family and friends. For instance, participants reminisced about their home country especially when they were facing difficulties with their finances, academics, and relationships, among others as a reminder of the cultural and social capital they once possessed. Also, reflecting on the past possesses a dual nature, serving both as a source of comfort and as a poignant reminder of loss which evokes sadness and anger. This study shows that reflection on the loss of cultural and social capital either strengthens or weakens the mindsets of female international students by reinforcing their life objectives or causing them to question their personal growth, respectively.

Finally, emotions are part and parcel of everyday social interactions and female international graduate students’ adjustment experiences are not void of that. Using Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital and focusing on emotions provides a valuable framework for understanding their adjustment needs and the emotions involved. Thus, the acquisition and lack of cultural and social capital shape the emotional journeys of female international graduate students, and understanding the emotional experiences of female international graduate students through the lens of this
framework has practical implications for universities and policymakers. Institutions should prioritize the development of support services that enhance social capital, such as mentorship programs, cultural associations, and counseling services. Additionally, creating an inclusive academic environment that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by international students can help mitigate feelings of exclusion and discrimination. Enhancing social capital through supportive networks and inclusive policies is crucial for improving the overall well-being and success of these students.

However, the study's limitations include its single institution focus on the University of Memphis and a small sample size of 12 participants, limiting generalizability. Reliance on self-reported interview data may introduce subjective biases, suggesting future research could benefit from diverse data sources and explore demographic influences more systematically. Moving forward, there is a need for tailored support systems and further research into effective coping strategies and interventions. Longitudinal studies could track emotional trajectories over time, while comparative research across institutions could inform best practices and policies. Addressing mental health concerns with accessible and culturally sensitive services is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment and supporting the academic and personal growth of female international graduate students. Lastly, interdisciplinary efforts are essential to advancing our understanding and developing comprehensive support systems that address the multifaceted challenges faced by these students on their academic journeys.
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Fatima, Nasrin. (2001). International Female Graduate Students' Perceptions of Their Adjustment Experiences and Coping Strategies at an Urban Research University.


*Women on the Move (iie.org)*


APPENDIX A: Recruitment Flier

FEMALE INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH VOLUNTEERS NEEDED
(UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS IRB APPROVED)

We are looking for Female international graduate students to share their adjustment experiences in the United States.

Criteria:
Must be 18+
Must be female
Must be an International Student (Non-U.S Resident or Citizen)
Must be enrolled in at least one course at the University of Memphis
Must be enrolled as a Graduate Student

Interested?
Contact ehinson1@memphis.edu
More information:
+1 901 659 7350
APPENDIX B: Informed Consent for Research Participation

Consent for Research Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Understanding the Emotional Experiences of Female International Graduate Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher(s)</td>
<td>Esther Hinson, University of Memphis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers Contact Information</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ehinson1@memphis.edu">ehinson1@memphis.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below in the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 30 people to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary Consent:</strong> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong> The purpose of this research is to understand the emotional experiences associated with being a female international graduate student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration:</strong> It is expected that your participation will last between 45 minutes and 2 hours in an open-ended semi-structured interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedures and Activities:</strong> You will be asked to participate in a one-time face-to-face or Zoom interview to narrate your experiences as a female international student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risk:</strong> While there are no serious risks anticipated, it is possible you may experience reflecting on certain negative experiences you might have encountered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits:</strong> Participating in this research study has no direct benefits to you. However, we do believe this study will fill gaps in knowledge on female international students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternatives:</strong> If you do not wish to be in the study, you may decline to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who is conducting this research?
Esther Hinson of the University of Memphis, Department of Sociology is in charge of the study. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Simranjit Steel.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?
Once the Principal Investigator has been contacted by the participant, the Principal Investigator will then respond to their email, call or texts with dates and times to schedule an interview, either face-to-face or on Zoom, whichever is preferred by the participant. If the participant opts for Zoom, an email invitation to the Zoom interview will be sent to the participant, along with a passcode to enter the meeting. However, if the participant opts for in-person face-to-face interview, a preferred location will be mutually agreed upon for the purpose of safety and privacy. When the interview begins, recording will start, and participants will be asked if they have read and understood the Informed Consent for Research Participation form and to have their verbal consent audio recorded. Once the interview begins, it is expected that your participation will last between
45 minutes and 2 hours in a onetime face-to-face interview on Zoom or in-person. With the participant’s permission, interviews will be audio recorded. If the participant does not consent to being audio recorded, they will not be able to participate in the research, and their contact information will be destroyed. You will be asked demographic questions, such as your marital status and country of origin. After you have answered those questions, you will be asked to narrate your experiences as a female international student. Questions that may be asked include how you came about your decision to study in the US, your life beforehand, and your experiences as a graduate student here. If at any point you would like to skip a question, you may do so without worry or repercussions. If you would like a copy of the questions that you will be asked, please email the Co-PI at ehinson1@memphis.edu. Next, participants will be offered the opportunity to review their own interview transcription for accuracy when it has been completed.

What happens to the information collected for this research?
We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your identifying information private. The Principal Investigator will transcribe each audio recorded interview including the verbal informed consent portion of the interview using a software app called Otter. The Principal Investigator will de-identify (change or remove) any identifiable information during the transcription process. When the transcriptions have been completed, all the audio recordings will be permanently destroyed. Once the audio recordings have been transcribed, de-identified, and corrected if the participant chooses, the transcription will be coded.

The research team includes the Faculty Advisor (P.I) Dr. Simranjit Steel, and the Co-PI Esther Hinson. Information collected will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team. The only person who will have access to identifiable information (in the form of contact information) will be the Principal Investigator. The Principal Investigator will change and remove all identifiable information from the transcriptions. Contact information will be immediately destroyed after the interview for those who do not wish to inspect their transcriptions. Contact information for those who wish to inspect their transcriptions will be stored until the participant has reviewed the transcription for accuracy, after which it will be immediately destroyed. The de-identified information will be stored for three years on an encrypted flash drive. After three years, it too will be destroyed.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?
We will protect your privacy and security of your personal information to the best of our ability. The Zoom meetings will be passcode protected and in-person face-to-face meetings will be held at a preferred location agreed upon by both participant and researcher. If you choose to participate in the online video interview, it is not within the Principal Investigator’s ability to control the privacy within your physical location during the interview. The Principal Investigator will ensure that their side of the interview will be conducted in a private setting without interruption or distraction.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what that information is. The audio recordings will be kept in a secure file in an application on the investigator’s laptop. Only the principal investigator and the faculty advisor, Dr. Simranjit Steel, will have access to the transcriptions. All audio recordings will be transcribed by the Principal Investigator.
Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will keep your identity confidential.

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. We may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; this would include people from organizations such as the University of Memphis. The Institutional Review Board may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information, if they so require.

Research team members are required to report if a team member suspects child abuse or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion to be reported. In such a case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also acceptable to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researchers. The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the Principal Investigator decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

If you would like to stop participating in this research, please communicate that with the Principal Investigator immediately. If during the interview you change your mind, communicate that to the Principal Investigator and the interview will be stopped. Any information that you already gave will not be used if you request. If at any point after the interview you want to withdraw from the research, email the Principal Investigator at ehinson1@memphis.edu. If you are to withdraw from participating in the research after the interview, all your information will be destroyed and will not be used in the study.

**Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

**What if I am injured due to participating in this research?**

While no injuries are expected due to participating in this study, it is important for you to understand that the University of Memphis does not have funds set aside to pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. Also, the University of Memphis will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study. You do not give up your legal rights by participating in this study.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this research?**

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

**Who can answer my question about this research?**
Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Esther Hinson. ehinson1@memphis.edu or Dr. Simranjit Steel, s.steel@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

As described above, you will be Audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio recording will be used for transcription purposes. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio recorded as described.

____ I agree to the use of audio recording

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent and freely consents to participate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Signature of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Date</th>
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APPENDIX C: Face Sheet

(Feel free to skip any question you are uncomfortable with)

Pseudonym: ..............................................................................................................

Age: ..........................................................................................................................

Gender: ....................................................................................................................

Marital Status: ..........................................................................................................

Religion: ...................................................................................................................

Country of Origin: ...................................................................................................

Educational Background: ........................................................................................

Source of financial support: ....................................................................................

Number of years in the U.S: ......................................................................................

Number of years in the U.S as a student: ...............................................................  

Program of study: .....................................................................................................

What are your parents’ educational background?

What type of Visa do you have?

Do you have any relative in the U.S.A? Yes/No

What is your relationship with the person?
APPENDIX D: Interview Guide

FEMALE INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS’ ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for participating in this study. Just as a reminder, if you do not want to answer any of the questions, just let me know and we can move on to the next one.

Interview Questions

1. a. Can you share your story of how you became a graduate student?
b. Why did you decide to pursue higher education in the USA?

2. a. What was your life like before you became a graduate student?
b. Were you happy with that life? If not, why?

3. What does it mean for you to be here?

4. a. Before coming to the U.S., what were your expectations about life in the U.S?
b. Why do you think you expected that?
c. What were some good things you expected about living here?
d. Why do you think you expected that?
e. What were some difficult things you expected about living here?
f. Why do you think you expected that?

5. Now that you are here, how do your experiences living here compare to your expectations?

6. What were your expectations about your studies here?
(Refer to Q4b-f to probe further)

7. How do your experiences studying here compare to your expectations?

8. a. What was your experience transitioning/moving from your home country to the U.S.?
b. Were there any challenges that you were expecting?
c. Were there any challenges you were not expecting?
d. How did you tackle these challenges? (If yes)
e. Where did you find sources of support?
f. What sources of support were available for you to utilize?
g. How did you feel about those experiences?

9. Did you have/know anyone residing in the US before coming?

10. a. Do you know anyone who made the transition smoothly?
b. Why do you think that was the case?
11. a. Do you know anyone who had great difficulty with their transition?  
b. Why do you think that was the case?

12. a. Tell me about your department. (Remind them that this is interview is confidential)  
b. What were your expectations about the department before coming?  
c. Why do you think you expected that?  
d. Were your expectations met? If not, why was that the case?

13. a. What are your relationships with your professors like?  
b. How do you feel about them?  
c. Did you have any expectations about your relationship with them?  
d. Why do you think you expected that?  
e. Were they met? If not, why was that the case?  
f. When you reflect on your experiences how do you think professors perceive you?

14. a. What is your relationship with your supervisor(s)? (Supervisors: Graduate Advisors or and Research/Teaching Supervisors)  
b. How do you feel about him/her/them?  
c. What has been your personal experience with him/her/them?  
d. Were there any expectations prior to your assignment to him/her/them?  
e. Why do you think you expected that?  
f. Were they met? If not, why was that the case?

15. a. Have you ever felt like your professors treated you differently than other students?  
b. (If so) In what ways were you treated differently?  
c. If no, have you seen other students been treated differently?  
d. How did you react to such situations?  
e. Why do you think that was the case?  
f. How do you explain it?

16. a. Have you ever felt like your supervisor(s) treated you differently than other students?  
b. (If so) In what ways were you treated differently?  
c. If no, have you seen other students been treated differently?  
d. How did you react to such situations?  
e. Why do you think that was the case?  
f. How do you explain it?

17. Did you ever have unanticipated issues adjusting to the culture in the classroom?  
   (Probe further asking them to tell you more)  
b. (If so) Do you think there are things faculty could have done to help you adjust?

18. a. How are your relationships with the traditional American students?  
b. What has your experience with them been?  
c. How do you feel about that?  
d. Did you have any expectations of how your relationships would be like?  
e. Why do you think you expected that?
f. When you reflect on your experiences, how do you think the American students perceive you?
g. How do you react to such perceptions?

19. a. Have you ever felt like you were treated differently from other students because you were an international student by your colleagues (traditional American students)?
   b. (If so) In what ways were you treated differently?
   c. How did you react to such situations?
   d. Are there any other situations you can think of?

20. a. Do you have other international students from different countries in your classes (department)?
   b. What is your relationship with them?
   c. How do you feel about that?
   d. Reflecting on your experiences with them, how do you think they perceive you?
   e. How do you feel about that?
   f. How do you react to their perceptions?

21. a. Were they treated differently from other students because they were international students?
   b. If so, how different were they treated?
   c. How did they react?
   d. How do you think they should have reacted?

22. Tell me about your social networks.

23. a. Overall, how do you feel about the US culture?
   b. Does it compare to the expectations you had?
   c. If your expectations were not met, why is that the case?
   d. Tell me how different the new culture is from your home country.
   e. How do you respond to the new culture?

24. a. Adjustment (unexpected issues)

25. a. Are there ever times when you feel the need to conceal what you are feeling when you are dealing with others in your new community/environment? (Probe further asking – what about relationships that is, with Americans, with other graduate students, with their professors, in the classroom, etc.)

26. a. Have you ever sought institutional assistance (your department, the university, or police for instance) or counseling regarding your experiences as an international student?
   b. Were you satisfied with the outcome?
   c. Why or why not?
   d. Are there any form of support you wish you had?
   e. If yes, what are they
   f. Why do you wish that?
27. a. If you had to do it all over again, would you do anything different?
b. What things would you do differently?

28. a. If you were advising a friend or relative who was thinking of becoming a graduate student in the U.S., what advice would you give them?

29. What is the best possible outcome for you as an international graduate student?

30. Are there some unresolved concerns you have as an international student?

31. What does the future look like from here?

32. What are your educational plans?

33. What are your goals?

34. Where do you plan to live, ideally?

35. Are there questions you expected me to ask, that I did not ask you? (Get them to answer their own question if so).

36. Is there anything you believe that is important for researchers and policymakers to know about female international graduate students, that has not been discussed in this interview?

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN MY STUDY
EMAIL INVITATION

Dear [Insert Name/Category],

You are being invited to participate in a research project titled “Emotional Experiences of Female International Students: Understanding the emotional experiences associated with being a female international graduate student by observing their narrated lived experiences.”

This interview is part of a research project I am conducting as a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Memphis. Through this research, I hope to provide a holistic understanding into the challenges that Female International students may have to silently and independently tackle emotionally.

If you decide to volunteer in this project, you will be asked to narrate your lived experiences in the U.S.A. This interview will take about 45 minutes to 2 hours and will be conducted at a time and place of your convenience. Also, this study will be open to only females who identify as females and must be international students (Non-U. S Residents/Citizens). Additionally, they must be enrolled into at least one course at the graduate level in the University of Memphis. Interested volunteers must also be 18 years and above.

There are no risks anticipated from participating in this research and you may choose to withdraw from the interview at any point.

A detailed consent form is attached below according to the University of Memphis IRB guidelines. If you have further questions, feel free to contact me via email ehinson1@memphis.edu and +19016597350.

Thank you.

Esther Hinson
Principal Investigator
Graduate Student
University of Memphis
Email: ehinson1@memphis.edu
Institutional Review Board  
Division of Research and Innovation  
Office of Research Compliance  
University of Memphis  
215 Admin Bldg  
Memphis, TN 38152-3370  

October 24, 2023  

PI Name: Esther Hinson  
Co-Investigators:  
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Simranjit Steel  
Submission Type: Initial  

Title: Female International Students and Emotion work: A study that seeks to understand the emotional experiences of Female International Students in higher education in the United States.  

IRB ID: PRO-FY2024-77  

Expedited Approval: October 23, 2023  

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles.  

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:  

1. When the project is finished a completion submission is required  
2. Any changes to the approved protocol requires board approval prior to implementation  
3. When necessary, submit an incident/adverse event for board review  
4. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at citiprogram.org.  

Thank you,  
James P. Whelan,  
Ph.D. Institutional Review Board Chair  
The University of Memphis