

A Literature Review of International Students’ Emotional Responses, Coping Strategies, and Tobacco and Alcohol Use: Implications for Counseling Practice in Taiwan

Abstract

Research Overview

This study reviews literature on international students’ emotional responses, coping strategies, and tobacco and alcohol use during cross-cultural adaptation. It synthesizes key findings and discusses implications for counseling practice in Taiwan, with particular attention to stress, adjustment, health-risk behavior, help-seeking barriers, and culturally responsive student support.

Purpose

This study aims to examine international students’ emotional responses, coping strategies, and tobacco and alcohol use during the process of cross-cultural adaptation. It also seeks to synthesize relevant literature in order to understand how emotional distress, coping behavior, and substance-related behavior are interconnected. In addition, this study discusses how these findings may serve as a reference for counseling professionals and student support practitioners in Taiwan. By integrating these themes, the study provides a broader understanding of international students’ adjustment experiences and the practical challenges faced by higher education institutions in supporting them.

Methods

This study adopted a literature review method. Relevant domestic and international studies on international students' emotional adjustment, coping strategies, tobacco and alcohol use, and counseling needs were collected, organized, and analyzed. The selected literature covered topics such as cross-cultural adaptation, acculturative stress, psychological well-being, stress management, health-risk behaviors, and help-seeking experiences. Through comparison and thematic synthesis, this review identified common stressors, major emotional reactions, coping patterns, possible functions of tobacco and alcohol use, and implications for counseling practice. The goal was to construct an integrated perspective on the relationship between emotional challenges, coping processes, and support needs among international students.

Results and Discussion

The literature shows that international students often experience significant challenges while adapting to a new academic and social environment. Common stressors include language barriers, unfamiliar teaching styles, academic pressure, cultural differences, homesickness, financial burden, interpersonal difficulties, and inadequate social support. These challenges often contribute to emotional responses such as anxiety, loneliness, frustration, sadness, depression, and acculturative stress. For many students, these reactions are shaped not only by academic demands but also by the ongoing effort to adjust to new cultural expectations, social relationships, and daily life routines.

To deal with these pressures, international students use different coping strategies. Problem-focused coping includes seeking academic assistance, improving language ability, learning local customs, and building support

networks. This type of coping is generally associated with more positive adjustment because it helps students address stressors directly. Emotion-focused coping includes emotional regulation, religious or spiritual practices, and maintaining contact with family members, friends, or peers from similar backgrounds. These strategies may help students reduce emotional tension and preserve a sense of belonging. Avoidance-oriented coping, however, includes withdrawal, denial, emotional suppression, and disengagement from stressful situations. The literature suggests that this coping pattern is more likely to be associated with prolonged distress, poorer adaptation, and reduced willingness to seek help.

Another important finding is the possible relationship between emotional distress, coping style, and tobacco and alcohol use. Some international students may use smoking or drinking as a way to relieve stress, reduce loneliness, escape negative emotions, or facilitate social interaction with peers. In this context, tobacco and alcohol use may function as both emotional coping tools and social participation behaviors. However, although such practices may provide temporary relief or help students feel included in certain social settings, they may also increase physical and psychological health risks. Over time, reliance on tobacco or alcohol may reinforce maladaptive coping patterns and complicate the adjustment process. Therefore, substance use should be understood within the broader context of cross-cultural stress and behavioral adaptation.

The literature also indicates that international students often have substantial counseling and support needs. Many students need assistance with emotional adjustment, stress management, social connection, and adaptation to unfamiliar environments. Nevertheless, help-seeking is often limited by stigma related to

mental health, low mental health literacy, lack of familiarity with counseling systems, language difficulties, and concerns that professionals may not fully understand their cultural background. These barriers show that student support services must be more than simply available; they must also be accessible, culturally responsive, and clearly communicated.

For counseling practice in Taiwan, these findings suggest the importance of a more integrated and preventive approach. Universities should strengthen multilingual and culturally sensitive counseling services, improve mental health education, promote healthy coping strategies, and establish early support systems for students experiencing adjustment difficulties. Peer support, outreach programs, and collaboration among counseling centers, faculty, and student affairs units may also enhance service effectiveness. Overall, a holistic support framework that addresses academic, emotional, social, and health-related needs is essential for improving the well-being and adjustment of international students in Taiwan.

Keywords: International students, emotional responses, coping strategies, tobacco and alcohol use, counseling practice