
Future-Oriented Stress and Coping Strategies among Vietnamese International Students: A Cultural and Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study explores multilayered factors contributing to Vietnamese international students' future-oriented stress and coping strategies through 24 online interviews. Findings reveal four major stressors: academic pressure, career-related challenges, immigration anxieties, and future uncertainty. Students applied proactive and preventive coping strategies to approach challenges and achieve future goals. Future research should investigate the influence of international students' identities on coping mechanism preferences and integrate cultural frameworks with stress and coping theories to capture the intersection of students' cultural values with contemporary approaches to stress management. Implications for educators and advisors have been discussed to better support international students in Canada.

KEYWORDS: Higher education, coping strategies, future-oriented stress, International Students, multicultural education

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Canada has become an increasingly popular destination for international students, offering high-quality education and diverse cultural experiences. While international education provides numerous opportunities (Li et al., 2025), it introduces considerable challenges. Adapting to a new educational system, overcoming language barriers, and integrating into a novel cultural context

significantly impact international students' mental health and academic performance (Le, 2022; Le & Pham, 2022; Xiong & Zhou, 2018). The pressure to succeed academically and professionally, coupled with the expectations from family and substantial financial investments further complicate their stressful experience.

Approximately 16,000 Vietnamese international students (VISs) were studying in Canada in 2023, with 51% choosing Ontario as their study destination (Erudera, 2022). Research indicates that VISs often experience higher levels of stress compared to their peers from other countries (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2018). While students from other Confucian Heritage Cultures such as China and Korea also experience pressure from collectivist cultural values, VISs face unique conditions that heighten these pressures. Firstly, Vietnam's distinct political and economic history, marked by late entry into global education markets and limited internationalization (Tran & Marginson, 2018), has resulted in minimal institutional preparation for study abroad. As a result, VISs often receive little structured guidance before departure, leaving them more vulnerable to academic and cultural adjustment stressors (Pham, 2018). Secondly, VISs have relatively less governmental support, both pre-departure and post-arrival, creating a wider cultural and systemic gap between their home and host countries (Le, 2024).

One of the common support channels for VISs is from social media groups, such as Facebook. While these communities can be helpful, they have some drawbacks. As these groups are open platforms where anyone can share perspectives, members may unintentionally provide inappropriate or misleading information. Regarding privacy and security, although these groups have moderators to maintain a safe environment, there is still a risk of privacy breaches or misuse of personal information. Students may feel uncomfortable sharing their vulnerabilities on public platforms where their personal information and discussions are visible to all members. These challenges make VISs' adaptation more intense compared to students from countries with more developed international education infrastructures.

This study explores future-oriented stress and coping strategies experienced by VISs in Canada. Specifically, it seeks to understand how these students perceive and handle the pressures associated with their academic and professional futures. By examining preventive and proactive coping, the study intends to identify the mechanisms these students use to mitigate future-oriented stress and achieve their goals. Focusing on future-oriented stress and coping strategies is crucial as it informs the development of targeted interventions and support systems that address the specific needs of VISs, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and academic success. The study addresses the following research questions to achieve these aims:

1. *How do VISs perceive and experience future-oriented stress?*
2. *In what ways do future-oriented coping strategies, including preventive and proactive coping, assist VISs in managing this stress?*

In what follows, we provide a conceptual framework for understanding future-oriented stress and coping. This is followed by a review of relevant literature and this study's contributions, methodology, a presentation of findings, and a discussion of implications for research and institutional support.

Conceptual Framework

To examine how VISs in Canada experience and manage future-oriented stress, this study draws upon an integrated conceptual framework that connects theoretical understandings of stress with culturally informed coping mechanisms. Central to this framework are models of future-oriented stress that emphasize anticipatory concerns in academic, career, and immigration domains, and future-oriented coping strategies, particularly proactive and preventive coping as proposed by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002). This framework is further enriched by incorporating insights from Vietnamese cultural values and Confucian heritage principles, such as filial piety and collective responsibility, which critically shape students' stress perceptions and coping behaviors. Recent Canadian policy developments (IRCC, 2023; CBIE, 2024) and reports of study permit caps announced in early 2024 (Gillies, 2024), a federal measure that limits the number of new international student study permits issued annually to address housing pressures and system capacity, have intensified immigration-related pressures. Further, recent qualitative studies on international students in Canada (Khalid et al., 2024; Le & Sarwar, 2024) and research on post-pandemic well-being (Wang & Liu, 2024) highlight the heightened uncertainty and adaptive strategies that frame the current context. Together, these conceptual lenses offer a culturally nuanced foundation for interpreting VISs' lived experiences and guiding the analysis of their coping practices.

Future-oriented Stress

Future-oriented stress is a significant concern for international students, particularly VISs. This stress stems from anticipation of future challenges and uncertainties in three key areas: education, career, and immigration.

Education

Research has shown that stress among international students can result from a mismatch between their expectations and actual performance (Kamardeen & Sunindijo, 2018). The significant financial investment and high family expectations associated with studying abroad often lead to anxiety and disappointment over academic underperformance (Kamardeen & Sunindijo, 2018). This stress can originate from the students themselves when they set

excessively high expectations, leading to depression if their academic achievements fall short (Tan & Yates, 2011).

Moreover, hybrid learning environments and shifts in pedagogical approaches after COVID-19 have added new sources of anticipatory stress (Wang & Liu, 2024). Beyond performance pressures, research in multicultural classrooms emphasizes the role of inclusive pedagogical strategies in mitigating such stress (Haas, 2019). Additionally, family pressure, particularly among Asian students whose parents value high achievement and educational success due to Confucian principles, can exacerbate acculturative stress (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Young, 2017).

The issue of high self-expectation is closely related to maladaptive perfectionism (Huang & Mussap, 2018; G. Lee et al., 2020). Maladaptive perfectionism refers to setting unrealistic and irrational standards for oneself and others, causing an overemphasis on minor mistakes and criticism (Slaney et al., 2001) and engagement in critical self-evaluation (Chang, 2000). Such negative behaviors can lead to adverse psychological outcomes due to the rigid belief that any discrepancy between expectations and actual performance signifies personal failure.

International students, including those from Vietnam, often experience future-oriented stress related to their high expectations for academic performance and adaptation to a new educational system. VISs may face unique challenges due to differences in teaching and learning styles between Vietnam and their host country. For instance, Wearing et al. (2015) showed that VISs from a Confucian Heritage Culture context may initially struggle with more autonomous learning approaches common in Western education systems. This anticipation of academic difficulties can lead to stress about future academic success and degree completion. Additionally, future-oriented stress for VISs can arise from high family expectations, substantial financial investments, and the pressure to secure employment post-graduation (Le, 2024; Thai et al., 2021). Research indicates that they frequently worry about meeting academic milestones and achieving the necessary qualifications to compete in a global job market (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2018). This compounded stress underscores the importance of developing targeted support systems that address both academic and career-related concerns, ensuring that VISs can navigate their educational journey with greater confidence and resilience.

Career

Concerns about work commitments and future careers have been found to increase stress levels among international students (Huang & Mussap, 2018; C. Lee et al., 2018). Survey data from the Canadian Bureau for International Education indicate that most international students in Canada experience stress related to employment and economic security (CBIE, 2024). In the Canadian

context, qualitative studies further document that international students manage career uncertainty through culturally mediated coping strategies, including reliance on community support and deliberate strategic planning (Le & Sarwar, 2024; Halpern et al., 2022). International students face more anxiety about securing employment and advancing their careers post-graduation compared to their local peers (Lin & Huang, 2014; Riaz & Rafique, 2019). This disparity in job opportunities stems from the significant financial investment required for studying abroad and the challenges international students face in networking and communicating with recruiters due to limited language proficiency. Stress can also arise from a mismatch between academic learning and job market requirements, which may negatively impact students' mental health and future career readiness (Kamardeen & Sunindijo, 2018). Compounding this issue, many international students struggle to balance study and work demands, often perceiving that part-time employment does little to enhance their long-term career prospects (Mahler, 2020; Ong & Ramia, 2009).

Within this broader context of international student experiences, VISs often view their overseas education as a pathway to enhanced career prospects globally and upon returning to Vietnam (Tran, 2011). This career-oriented motivation can also be a source of future-oriented stress. Lai et al. (2019) revealed that VISs frequently worry about securing employment that justifies their investment in international education. This stress is compounded by concerns about meeting family expectations for career success after studying abroad. The pressure to find suitable employment is particularly acute for VISs due to the cultural emphasis on filial piety and the expectation to contribute to family well-being. Nguyen (2021) noted that many VISs feel obligated to secure high-paying jobs after graduation to repay their families' financial sacrifices for their education.

Immigration

Immigration planning is a major source of future-oriented stress for international students, including Vietnamese students, as it is closely tied to their academic and career aspirations. For many, studying abroad is not only an educational pursuit but also a strategic pathway to long-term settlement and permanent residency in the host country (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2018). However, navigating the immigration system presents significant psychological and logistical challenges. Zhou et al. (2017) highlighted that international students without citizenship or permanent residency status often face systemic disadvantages in the job market, including limited networking opportunities and employment restrictions. These concerns are especially acute among VISs, who frequently report anxiety over meeting work permit criteria, navigating complex visa rules, and adapting to ever-changing immigration policies (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Yamashita et al., 2023). The unpredictability of post-graduation immigration pathways, such as permanent residency applications, adds a layer of chronic uncertainty, impacting students' ability to plan their futures with confidence. Similar

trends have been observed among other international student populations, where unclear or restrictive immigration policies have been linked to heightened stress, reduced academic focus, and weakened post-study career planning (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; McGovern, 2007). As a result, the immigration process becomes not just a bureaucratic hurdle, but a key psychological burden intertwined with students' broader goals of stability, success, and family fulfillment.

Moreover, the decision to immigrate can create internal conflict for VISs. Stepp (2018) found that, while many students desire the opportunities available in their host countries, they also experience guilt about potentially leaving their families and cultural roots behind. This tension between personal aspirations and familial obligations can be a significant source of future-oriented stress. It is important to note that these career and immigration stressors often intersect and compound each other. For instance, securing employment in the host country is often a prerequisite for immigration, creating dual pressure on students as they approach graduation (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; McGovern, 2007). Understanding these interrelated sources of future-oriented stress is crucial for developing effective support systems and coping strategies for VISs.

Coping Strategies

Coping theories have evolved significantly, from early general stress models to more nuanced frameworks focusing on the temporal nature of stress management. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model conceptualized coping as efforts to manage external and internal demands. Building on this, Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) proposed a future-oriented coping model comprising four strategies: reactive coping, anticipatory coping, preventive coping, and proactive coping. While reactive coping occurs after stressors, anticipatory coping targets imminent and specific future threats. Preventive coping focuses on building resources to mitigate potential future stressors, while proactive coping is aimed at goal management and self-growth. In this study, we focus primarily on proactive and preventive coping, as participants' narratives did not center on short-term, concrete stressors typically associated with anticipatory coping. Instead, they highlighted ongoing, generalized uncertainty, particularly around academic, career, and immigration outcomes, which aligns more closely with the proactive and preventive domains of future-oriented coping.

Proactive Coping

Proactive coping refers to efforts to build up resources that facilitate the achievement of challenging goals and personal growth (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002). This form of coping is particularly relevant for international students who face numerous challenges and opportunities in their host countries. Research has shown that international students who engage in proactive coping tend to adapt

more successfully to their new academic environments. For instance, Gan et al. (2007) found that proactive coping enabled international students to perceive demanding situations in college life as positive challenges to overcome rather than threats. In the context of VISs, students who actively sought out information about their host country's educational system and cultural norms before arrival were better prepared to handle academic and social challenges (Pham, 2018; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). This proactive approach helped them set realistic expectations and develop successful strategies.

Proactive coping has also been linked to better mental health outcomes among international students. International students who engaged in proactive coping reported lower levels of acculturative stress and higher levels of psychological well-being (Wang et al., 2020). For VISs, who often face significant cultural adjustments, this finding suggests that proactive coping could be a valuable tool for maintaining mental health during their study abroad experience. In terms of career preparation, proactive coping has been shown to be beneficial for international students (Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2015). Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2022) revealed that international students who proactively engaged in career planning and networking activities were more likely to secure desirable employment after graduation. While this study was not specific to VISs, it highlights the potential benefits of proactive coping in addressing future-oriented career stress.

Importantly, research has indicated that cultural factors can influence the effectiveness of proactive coping. Kuo (2014) found that collectivist cultural values, which are prevalent in Vietnamese culture, can shape how international students engage in proactive coping. This suggests that VISs might benefit from culturally tailored approaches to developing proactive coping skills.

Preventive Coping

Preventive coping involves building up resistance resources to reduce strain, mitigate stress consequences, and lower the likelihood of future stressful events (Reuter & Schwarzer, 2012). This strategy is particularly relevant for international students navigating potential challenges in new cultural and academic environments. Undergraduate students, including international students, who engaged in preventive coping were able to reduce the impacts of impending threats through increased planning and prevention of potential risks associated with their assignments (Raper & Brough, 2021). VISs who researched visa regulations and work permit requirements in advance experienced less stress related to future immigration concerns (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

International students employing preventive coping strategies, such as time management and early academic support-seeking, reported lower levels of academic stress and better overall academic performance (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Those who learned about the host country's culture and social norms before

arrival experienced smoother cultural transitions and lower levels of acculturative stress (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). The effectiveness of preventive coping can be influenced by cultural factors. Asian international students, including Vietnamese students, tend to engage more in collective coping strategies, which can be viewed as a form of preventive coping within their cultural context (Kuo, 2014). This suggests that VISs might benefit from culturally tailored approaches to developing preventive coping skills.

In many multicultural education contexts, students have been shown to rely on culturally rooted forms of resilience and community support when anticipating future challenges (Maurya, 2018; Haas, 2019). These patterns resonate with the preventive and proactive coping strategies emphasized in this study, illustrating how coping is both a psychological process and an educational practice shaped by intercultural settings.

Limitation on Literature

Although research explores stress and coping among international students, several significant gaps persist. Firstly, most studies (e.g. Bui, 2021; Tran et al., 2022; Tran & Le, 2024) examined past and present stressors. Limited qualitative research examines future-oriented stress and coping, particularly through a cultural lens. Secondly, there is a notable scarcity of research specifically addressing the experiences of VISs in Canada. While some studies have examined international students broadly, VISs' unique challenges remain underexplored (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2018). VISs with unique social, cultural, and educational contexts should not be treated as a homogenous group with other international students.

Thirdly, while some studies acknowledge the role of cultural factors in coping strategies, there is a limited in-depth analysis of how Vietnamese cultural values specifically shape future-oriented coping. The influence of cultural expectations, family pressures, and collectivist values on coping mechanisms warrant further exploration (Le, 2024; Kuo, 2014). Methodologically, existing research predominantly relies on quantitative methods (Le & Huyen-Nguyen, 2023), potentially overlooking the nuanced experiences that qualitative approaches can reveal. Qualitative methods are crucial for understanding subjective experiences and complex social phenomena that quantitative data might not fully capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, more research is needed to integrate theories of future-oriented coping with cultural adaptation models to provide a comprehensive understanding of VISs' experiences. Such integration can offer a more holistic view of how these students navigate future-oriented stress (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2022). Lastly, few studies have examined how unique aspects of the Canadian education and immigration systems influence stress and coping among international students. Context-specific research is necessary to understand the

challenges and opportunities presented by the Canadian environment (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

Contributions to the Field

VISs face a distinct set of pressures compared to peers from other Confucian Heritage Cultures, due in part to Vietnam's socio-political history, limited institutional support for outbound mobility, and stronger intergenerational expectations for upward mobility. This study contributes to the literature on international students by offering a culturally grounded and context-specific understanding of how VISs experience and cope with future-oriented stress. Theoretically, the study extends Schwarzer and Taubert's (2002) future-oriented coping model by contextualizing it within a collectivist, Confucian-influenced framework. It shows how cultural constructs such as filial piety, saving face, and obligation to family fundamentally shape how students perceive and respond to stress.

Canada presents a unique environment for international students: while its education system and immigration pathways make it a top destination, the associated uncertainties, such as competitive labor markets and evolving immigration policies, introduce stressors that extend beyond the academic domain. Practically, this research informs the design of culturally responsive support services that are attuned to both the psychosocial needs and cultural motivations of international students in Canada. This research calls for future-oriented support systems, promoting an equal and inclusive environment for international students in Canada, ensuring their personal development and future success.

Beyond identifying stressors and coping strategies, this study also speaks directly to the goals of multicultural education. By situating VISs' experiences within broader discussions of equity and intercultural pedagogy, this paper aims to highlight how culturally specific stressors can shape classroom engagement and participation. Understanding these dynamics can inform more inclusive teaching practices, for instance, designing learning environments that validate students' cultural values, creating equitable opportunities for participation, and embedding intercultural perspectives into curricula. In this way, the study not only contributes to the scholarly literature on coping but also provides practical insights for educators and institutions seeking to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Methodology

To examine VISs' future-oriented stress and coping strategies in depth, this section presents the study's qualitative methodology, including its research design,

sampling approach, data collection methods, analytic techniques, and procedures for establishing trustworthiness.

A Qualitative Study

This study is part of an explanatory sequential mixed-methods project, which began with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Le, 2024). The quantitative survey shows high levels of future-oriented stress, which the qualitative interviews were designed to explore underlying factors. This paper reports findings from the qualitative phase, which specifically provide deeper understanding of VISs' experiences of future-oriented stress and their coping strategies while studying in Canada. The qualitative design was strategically chosen to provide in-depth insights into participants' experiences, motivations, and contextual factors for the studied phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study received ethics approval from the first author's Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Twenty-four VISs enrolled in Ontario, Canada institutions were recruited for this research using purposeful sampling. This technique was chosen to select individuals who could offer rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives on the research topic (Bernard, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Demographic diversity was sought to capture a broad range of experiences. The sample included 14 females and 10 males, with varied educational backgrounds: doctoral (6), master's (6), undergraduate (6), and community college (6). Participants' length of residence in Canada ranged from under 0.5 to over 2.5 years, with the majority (12) having lived in the country for more than 2.5 years. Most were single (15), while others were married (5), in a registered partnership (1), or married but separated (1), reflecting diverse life circumstances and social support systems (see Table 1).

Table 1*Backgrounds of 24 VISs*

No	Pseudonyms	Gender	Educational level	Length of residence (years)	Marital status
1.	Tran	Female	Doctoral	1.5 to 2.5	Married
2.	Tuan	Male	Master	Over 2.5	Single
3.	Khanh	Male	Doctoral	Over 2.5	Single
4.	Manh	Male	Master	0.5 to 1.5	Single
5.	Dao	Female	Undergraduate	Over 2.5	Single
6.	Khiem	Male	Doctoral	Over 2.5	Married
7.	Hanh	Female	Master	1.5 to 2.5	Single
8.	An	Male	Undergraduate	Over 2.5	Married but separated
9.	Tinh	Male	Undergraduate	0.5 to 1.5	Married
10.	Lai	Male	Undergraduate	Over 2.5	Single
11.	Huong	Female	Undergraduate	Over 2.5	Registered partnership
12.	Thanh	Female	Community College	0.5 to 1.5	Single
13.	Bang	Male	Doctoral	Over 2.5	Single
14.	Thu	Female	Master	1.5 to 2.5	Married
15.	Lien	Female	Master	Under 0.5	Single
16.	Binh	Female	Community College	Over 2.5	Married
17.	Thy	Female	Master	1.5 to 2.5	Single
18.	Vinh	Male	Community College	Over 2.5	Single
19.	Huyen	Female	Community College	0.5 to 1.5	Single
20.	Hien	Female	Doctoral	Under 0.5	Married
21.	Ha	Female	Community college	0.5 to 1.5	Single
22.	Thuy	Female	Undergraduate	1.5 to 2.5	Single
23.	Dung	Male	Doctoral	Over 2.5	Single
24.	Tu	Male	Community college	Under 0.5	Single

Data Collection and Analysis

Participant recruitment was conducted through LinkedIn and Facebook, targeting potential individuals capable of providing rich and detailed insights into the research questions. Data were collected between late 2023 and early 2024 through one-hour semi-structured interviews conducted in Vietnamese via Zoom. The virtual format enabled flexible scheduling, geographic inclusivity, and participant comfort (Archibald et al., 2019). Interview questions were developed based on both the quantitative results and existing literature to capture a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of student experiences.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by the first author, and then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was selected for its flexibility and its capacity to capture experiences, thoughts, and behaviors of students (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The analysis followed six iterative steps: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings.

Both deductive and inductive approaches were employed to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the research questions while being open to unanticipated insights. Coding was facilitated using MAXQDA 24. Initial open codes such as “academic stressor” and “future job” were developed based on the interview questions and relevant literature. As new codes emerged inductively from the data, they were incorporated and subsequently organized into broader themes. These themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure conceptual clarity and alignment with the conceptual framework and existing literature, falling under two key themes: Future-oriented stress and coping strategies.

Our team comprises two native Vietnamese researchers with full professional proficiency in English. As international students ourselves, we bring invaluable first-hand experience to this study, complemented by our established expertise as researchers who have published on international student experiences (e.g., Le & Pham, 2022; Smith et al., 2025; Trinh et al, 2024;). This unique combination of lived experience and academic expertise positioned us to formulate culturally and contextually relevant research questions, interpret participants’ responses with appropriate cultural sensitivity, and conduct nuanced critical analyses of the complex stress patterns and coping mechanisms employed by VISs. To ensure linguistic and interpretive accuracy, representative excerpts were translated into English by the two bilingual authors. Regular meetings were held throughout the analysis and writing stages to discuss translation nuances, enhance intercoder reliability, and ensure consistency in meaning.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. An electronic database containing de-identified transcripts, interview notes, coding records, and analytic memos was securely organized and maintained to support transparency and potential future audits. Transcripts were reviewed to correct transcription errors. Reflexive thematic analysis provided a structured yet adaptable framework for rigorous qualitative inquiry. To further strengthen the credibility and dependability of findings, the first author served as the primary coder and analyst, conducting the full coding process, developing themes, and leading all analytic decisions, drawing on her prior training and experience analyzing the original dataset as part of her dissertation research. Throughout the analytic process, she engaged in regular reflexive memoing, iterative code refinement, and systematic comparison across transcripts to ensure consistency and interpretive depth. Author 2 contributed through regular discussions focused on translation accuracy and consistency in meaning. This collaborative approach facilitated triangulation, emphasized rigor, reflexivity, and systematic data exploration, supporting the development of coherent and analytically sound themes and providing a robust foundation for understanding VISs’ future-oriented stress and coping strategies.

Findings

This section presents two key themes in accordance with the study's research questions: (1) future-oriented stress related to education, career, immigration, and future uncertainty, and (2) strategies linked to proactive and preventive coping students use to manage stress.

Future-oriented Stress

This section describes four sub-themes related to VISs' future-oriented stress: Academic, career, immigration, and uncertainty.

Academic Stressors (Áp lực về thành tích học tập)

A majority of VISs aim to achieve good academic performance. Manh, a master's student in mechanical engineering, remarked, "I study diligently every day to avoid failing any courses and obtain a high GPA." Huyen expressed her concerns about not only academic performance but also her perceived lack of specialized knowledge and work placement opportunities, saying:

My program only provides a foundational background in economics without in-depth training in tax, economic laws, or practical skills such as preparing financial statements. It doesn't include a work placement component as well. I'm so worried about my future in a competitive job market.

She added,

Not only my family but also my relatives support my journey to study abroad. They always want me to excel academically and succeed in the future. I dedicate all time to studying to meet their expectations and to make both myself and my family proud.

The stress stems not only from family expectations but also from the pressure students feel due to their families' significant financial investments in their overseas education. As noted by Thanh, "I'm always under pressure because my sister has invested a large amount of money in my studies in Canada. It is my responsibility to study well and succeed in the future to justify their investment."

Another significant academic stress that most students face is their plan to transfer to higher education programs to meet their families' expectations and secure opportunities for stable and lucrative jobs in the future. For example, Thanh, a community college student, planned to pursue a bachelor's degree; Huong, an undergraduate in early childhood leadership, planned to pursue a master's degree; and Tuan, a master's student in education planned to pursue a doctoral degree. These educational aspirations require not only a high GPA, but thorough

preparations, as well as dedicated time and money, causing various stress levels to students.

Importantly, doctoral students face additional challenges related to their research and scholarship. Hien recalled, “There are so many skills and knowledge to learn for my research. I am not very confident with the comprehensive exam or completing my doctoral dissertation.” Tran expressed concerns about the financial burden if she is unable to graduate within four years: “If I cannot complete the dissertation research within the scholarship timeframe, I will have to cover all fees and expenses on my own, which is worrying as international students pay three times more than domestic students.”

Career-related Challenges (Áp lực về cơ hội và thách thức cho nghề nghiệp tương lai)

VISs commonly face significant career-related stresses, primarily driven by their own and their families’ aspirations for a successful career with a high salary abroad. Many students feel this pressure intensely, as once they embark on their studies overseas, their families expect them to secure prestigious jobs. As shared by Thy, “Having a child studying abroad is a point of pride in my family. They’ve sustainably invested and supported me, so they expect me to land a better job than my peers studying in Vietnam.” She added, “Studying abroad then securing a low-paying job would be seen as a failure.”

Another major concern is gaining expertise and work experience that will enable them to compete in a demanding job market. Thanh expressed his stress, saying, “My biggest worry while studying in Canada is finding relevant job experience, co-op placements, internships, or volunteer opportunities to build my CV.” Similarly, Tuan emphasized, “After reviewing some job descriptions in my field, I realize my coursework is inadequate and lacks practical knowledge. I struggle to broaden my expertise, enhance my skills, and accumulate practical experience for my future career.”

Students also acknowledge challenges resulting from cultural and language barriers. Tuan observed, “Many companies prioritize hiring Canadian citizens or permanent residents over international candidates. This makes the job seeking extremely competitive for us as international students, even when our backgrounds and skills match local candidates.”

PhD students specializing in a specific field for years encounter unique challenges in their future job search. Khanh expressed:

While others worry about being underqualified, I fear being overqualified or having unrealistic job expectations. PhD graduates are seen as experts with high salary expectations, making employers hesitant to hire us and concerned about our job satisfaction and commitment. Our specialized studies also limit job opportunities as employers often prefer master graduates with practical experience.

The pressure from a competitive job market and Canadian job recruitment policies compounds these future-oriented stresses. Tran, who aspires to a faculty position, worried about the scarcity and competitiveness of academia jobs in Canada: “I dream of becoming a professor at a Canadian university, but faculty positions are rare and highly competitive. I’m unsure about other options after graduation—whether to pursue a different career path or what my future holds.” These multifaceted challenges underscore the complex pressures faced by VISs as they navigate their academic and professional journeys abroad, striving for successful careers in competitive markets while overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers.

Pressure by Immigration Plan (Áp lực về kế hoạch định cư)

Most VISs plan to establish themselves as permanent residents and eventually Canadian citizens. Alongside the pressures of education and career advancement, these aspirations result in high levels of stress. Binh reflected, “Despite facing various challenges at work and not enjoying an unfriendly atmosphere, I must endure these discomforts because this job supports my future immigration application.” Vinh echoed a similar experience, revealing, “One of my family’s long-term goals for my education abroad is to settle in Canada. Navigating Canada’s immigration policies proves challenging with the complexity and frequent policy changes, causing confusion, anxiety, disorientation, and exhaustion.”

Feelings of Uncertainty about Future (Tương lai chệnh vênh)

A few VISs disclosed a persistent uncertainty about the future, being unable to decide whether to stay in Canada or return to Vietnam after graduation. Lai noted, “Balancing present stresses with concerns about the future adds to my anxiety. I am unsure where I will be, what I will do, and how I will manage.” Similarly, Lien expressed her struggle, explaining that her mentor “asks about my post-graduation plans, but I am torn between staying in Canada or returning to Vietnam. Without family support, and while facing policy changes, competitive job markets, and various academic and financial pressures, planning my future feels daunting.”

Future-oriented Coping Strategies

Guided by the conceptual framework, strategies employed by VISs are categorized into two groups: (1) Proactive coping, referring to actions students undertake to actively work towards achieving their future goals; and (2) Preventive coping, involving actions or resources students gather to mitigate future-oriented

stress, reduce the impact of stressors, and minimize the likelihood of encountering stressful events in the future.

Proactive Coping

VISs employ strategic planning and proactive measures to achieve their future goals. They establish short-term and long-term plans, meticulously manage their time, and prioritize tasks that align with their aspirations. For instance, those aiming to transfer to higher education programs concentrate on maintaining a high GPA, as emphasized by Huyen: “Prioritizing important tasks helps me focus completely on my studies.”

To enhance their competitiveness in the job market, students undertake several proactive actions. These include: (1) improving their language skills, such as Bang’s and Tran’s decisions to study French to increase their professional opportunities; (2) attaining certifications, such as Thu aspiring to become an immigration advisor and Lai, a master’s student in computer science, pursuing the Immigration Counsel of Canada and various computer science certificates to enhance their chances of securing a good job; (3) developing skills, as when Manh supplements his skills and expertise with additional courses; and (4) engaging extracurriculars, as when Manh actively participates in community service and extracurricular activities to build his profile and networks.

Seeking social support is another example of proactive coping used by many VISs for their education-, career-, and immigration-related stress. Thanh seeks career and academic guidance from her fellow nationals who have already navigated similar finance paths, saying, “I ask my friends about Co-op or work placement applications and extra courses I should take to develop my knowledge and skills. Their tips are very reliable as they have valuable experiences. I feel confident following their path.”

An reaches out to school services for his career preparation, explaining, “I booked appointments with career services to receive feedback on improving my resume. Thanks to their assistance, I landed a job after attending a job fair hosted by my university.” Similarly, Khiem emphasizes his supervisor’s pivotal roles in mentoring his doctoral and immigration dream:

I shared my plan to pursue a doctoral program and apply for permanent residency with my supervisor. With his extensive network, I have a research job to support my permanent residency and subsequently began my doctoral program. He is like my father in Canada. I deeply appreciate his unwavering academic and career support.

VISs strategically apply these proactive coping mechanisms to deal with their stress and achieve their future goals.

Preventive Coping

To manage their stress, VISs first share their feelings with parents and siblings, helping to balance their emotions amidst the challenges. For example, Dao noted, “My parents are knowledgeable about immigration policies and the complicated application process. Sharing my pressure with them helps alleviate my stress.” Thu emphasized her families’ motivation and emotional backing for her overseas studies “My family’s encouragement and financial support are crucial for me to stay focused on my goals and manage pressure.” Similarly, Tran explained, “Despite feeling lonely and stressed at times, I receive complete companionship from my parents and husband in Vietnam. We all recognize the long-term benefits of completing my program and applying for permanent residency. These significantly release my stress.” Beyond family, VISs also seek comfort and empathy from their peers and colleagues. Binh shared, “Sharing updates and strategies to advance our immigration plans with each other helps to navigate the complexities of educational and immigration journeys with mutual support and understanding.”

Apart from seeking emotional and informative support from family and peers, VISs also employ a variety of preventive coping mechanisms to reduce stress, including: (1) being flexible and modifying their expectations, as shared by Binh, who explained,

I used to be pressured with my immigration plan. Now, I prioritize an independent and fulfilling life, opening to living anywhere that provides stability, a comfortable environment, and opportunities for personal growth, not necessarily limited to Canada. This shift in perspective helps me to adapt positively to my circumstances.

(2) Practicing emotional maturity and management, Dao, who faces some difficulties with specialized knowledge in her field and aims to pursue a master program, disclosed her effective approach in regulating her negative feelings, stating,

When I feel overwhelmed, I ask myself several questions to uplift my spirits and bring myself back to the present, focusing on what truly matters in my life, whether it is worth worrying about things that have not happened yet, or if spending time dwelling on them solves my problems, and what actions I should take now to cultivate happiness.

(3) Applying problem-solving skills, Manh described his process of coping with challenges through logical analysis, saying, “I systematically identify issues, brainstorm multiple solutions, and then carefully decide on the best course of actions or solutions.” (4) Practicing self-care through “listening to music, watching movies, or hanging out with friends” (Vinh); “play[ing] sports or hit[ting] the gym” (Lai); “eat[ing] well and hav[ing] a walk for fresh air” (Bang); and “sleep[ing] well to feel more focused and optimistic” (Tran). Finally, (5) focusing on the present and having clear plans was a preventative coping strategy for students. Tran

exemplified this mindset, by saying, “I already have a solid plan for my future. Concentrating solely on what I need to accomplish in the present helps me overcome all the negative feelings.” Overall, VISs demonstrate positive mindsets through their cognitive strategies that involve analyzing circumstances and making informed decisions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research explores future-oriented stress and coping strategies that VISs apply to manage stress. Overall, the future-oriented stress experienced by VISs involves four key sources. Education-related pressure ranges from the rigorous pursuit of academic excellence driven by familial high expectations to significant financial investments. Results from previous studies (Huang & Mussap, 2018; Kamardeen & Sunindijo, 2018) show some congruence. An emerging finding from this study is that VISs aspire to transition between educational levels, adding a layer of stress to their international studies. These students also face a myriad of stressors navigating their career aspirations, such as their family expectations toward achieving a stable job with lucrative salary, perceived lack of specialized knowledge and work experience, required skills in the Canadian competitive labor market, and valid cultural and linguistic barriers at work. This career-relevant pressure aligns with findings from previous studies (C. Lee et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2017). Additionally, similar to other international students (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2018), VISs studying in Canada establish their immigration plan, which adds substantial pressure. Amid this education, career, and immigration stress, VISs undergo an uncertainty about their future, not being able to decide whether to stay in Canada or return to Vietnam post-graduation. The psychological impact of this uncertainty cannot be understated, as it can lead to anxiety and feelings of insecurity. The decision to stay or return is a significant choice that impacts not only the students themselves but also their families and future generations.

The results highlight not only the social and cultural, but also emotional and logistical challenges faced by VISs as they navigate their academic, career, and immigration journeys in Canada. These multifaceted challenges can only be understood by recognizing the strong cultural emphasis on education within Vietnamese context, where education and career success are highly valued and often seen as key to social mobility and family honor (Pham, 2012; Sun et al., 2019). Additionally, Confucian values, such as filial piety (*hiếu kính*), significantly influences VISs' perceptions of their responsibilities to meet family expectations during their overseas educational experience (Le, 2024; Nguyen-Phuong-Mai et al., 2012). Achieving academic excellence, securing a good job, or staying in Canada as permanent residents are evidence for VISs' studying-abroad success. This future success contributes to their feelings of pressure as they are saving face for their families, making their families proud, and bringing honor to their families, as shaped by the Confucian tenet of correct behaviors and rites (*cử xử đúng mực*). Behaving properly to avoid bringing shame or embarrassment to oneself and

others, especially family members, is a distinctive social and cultural value within Vietnamese society where children show respect to parents by prioritizing their parents' wishes (Trinh et al., 2024).

The desire to stay in Canada with a good job is driven by the perception of better opportunities and quality of life (*Định cư vì cuộc sống tương lai tốt đẹp*), but the uncertainties associated with immigration policies create a heavy burden. This burden can be explained by cultural differences between Vietnam and Canada. VISs in Canada must navigate a novel cultural context, which includes different social norms and career expectations. As international students, VISs encounter different work cultures from those in their home country, which can hinder their job opportunities. Additionally, in Vietnam, the strong emphasis on education motivates parents to provide their children with the best possible educational opportunities and resources (Pham, 2012; Sun et al., 2019). VISs' aims to seize good job opportunities and secure permanent residency are significantly shaped by these expectations as a way to justify their family's investment for international education (Lai et al., 2019; Tran, 2011). Their career and immigration aspirations in Canada are not only personal goals but evidence of familial pride, strongly influenced by the socio-economic context of Vietnam where economic stability is highly valued. Their future aspirations also highlight VISs' responsibilities to support their families financially and respect their families' investment, concepts shaped by respect authority (*tôn trọng bề trên*), one key Confucian principle.

The future-oriented stress experienced by VISs challenges existing acculturation theory and multicultural frameworks. While traditional acculturation theories, such as Berry's (2017) acculturation model, focus on present stress during the immediate cultural contact and adjustment process, this research reveals that future scenarios serve as primary stress generators. This result exposes a significant theoretical gap, as conventional models fail to account for how future projections and aspirations create unique psychological burdens that transcend immediate cultural adaptation challenges. Furthermore, multicultural theories often frame international student experiences through deficit models, focusing on what students lack in terms of cultural knowledge, language proficiency, or social networks (Banks & Banks, 2015; Tavares, 2023). The VISs' experiences disrupt this narrative by demonstrating that stress emerges not from cultural deficiencies but from competing and managing future possibilities and multiple life aspirations, simultaneously. These findings suggest that existing studies and frameworks overlook the sophisticated cognitive and emotional management required for international students to navigate multiple cultural, professional, and personal identities. This research, therefore, calls for new theoretical models that incorporate temporal complexity and recognize international students as active agents constructing multifaceted futures rather than passive recipients of cultural adaptation processes.

VISs effectively navigate the challenges discussed above through multiple future-oriented coping strategies. It is noticeable that to achieve future goals, the students tend to apply proactive coping skills such as seeking financial support from family and peers, taking initiatives for skill development, setting clear

academic and career objectives, and obtaining internships or work experience. Meanwhile, to avoid negative feelings and to prevent the possibility of future stressful events, preventive coping is employed, including being flexible, modifying expectations, managing emotions, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. VISs' coping strategies align with previous studies in the field (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Pham, 2018). These coping mechanisms underscore the strategic acumen, resilience, and determination of VISs as they strive to fulfill personal, familial, and professional aspirations in Canada (Le, 2024). They also demonstrate how VISs proactively manage their emotions and navigate challenges with resilience and clarity. These cognitive strategies highlight how VISs pragmatically approach challenges and ensure they are prepared for various outcomes in their academic and professional journeys abroad. Long-established Vietnamese culture significantly shapes these students' behavior abroad. Family honor and obligation (*Danh dự gia đình và lòng hiếu thảo*) serve as powerful motivators, with many VISs viewing their international education not merely as personal achievement but as fulfillment of filial duty. This explains their exceptional dedication to academic excellence, unwavering perseverance when facing academic obstacles, and their willingness to endure hardship for long-term gains.

It is noticeable that VISs' socio-demographic characteristics appear to shape both their stress and coping strategies. For example, students who had lived in Canada longer described lower stress levels, reflecting greater familiarity with the environment and increased adaptability. However, within the scope of this research, this aspect has not been deeply investigated. Future research should analyze how international students' socio-demographic backgrounds influence their stress and coping. Additionally, this research shows mixed evidence for relationships between future-oriented coping and personality constructs (Drummond & Brough, 2016). Particularly, the remarkable character traits exhibited by VISs reflect deeply rooted cultural values worthy of focused attention in international education research. Therefore, future studies should investigate the influence of international students' personality traits and their identities on their preferences of various coping mechanisms. Future studies should also integrate cultural frameworks with stress and coping theories by developing culturally adapted instruments that capture the intersection of students' cultural values with contemporary approaches to stress management.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for educators and mental health professionals to better support international students in Canada. For educators and institutions, orientation and support programs must be designed with cultural contexts in mind. Institutions should offer academic-related events, supporting students to achieve their educational aspirations. Career integration efforts should move beyond end-of-program services by embedding experiential learning, co-op placements, and industry partnerships throughout students' academic journeys.

Support services should be coordinated to address academic, career, and immigration concerns collectively, recognizing that these stressors are interconnected. Formalized peer mentorship programs can further strengthen support by linking students with graduates who have successfully navigated similar challenges.

For mental health professionals, culturally responsive care is essential. Practitioners should adopt flexible definitions of success that align with students' cultural values, thereby alleviating the pressure of perfectionism. Group programs tailored to international students can teach stress management strategies, including cognitive techniques for coping with uncertainty, emotional regulation, and practical problem-solving. Finally, therapeutic spaces should allow students to openly explore the tensions between personal aspirations and family expectations, supporting them in developing integrated and authentic identity pathways.

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