

Not All Acculturative Stressors Are Equal:

Differential Effects of Acculturative Stress Dimensions on International Students' Adaptation in Hungary

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Background And Problem

6.4M+

students pursuing degrees abroad by 2022 (UNESCO, 2025)

↑18%

increase in OECD international student mobility, 2018–2022

11.4%

International students in Hungary increased from 4.4% in 2008 to 11.4% in 2017 (Vincze & Bács, 2020)

This surge in international student enrollment made **cross-cultural adaptation and the challenges associated with it** a cornerstone of modern higher education.

Acculturative stress is associated with students' experiences while **negotiating a new cultural and academic environment** (Berry, 2006; Shafaei & Razak, 2016; Torres-Arends et al., 2025).

- It involves **cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses** to **cultural, academic, and social demands** (Sam & Berry, 2010; Xu & Chai, 2025)

Background And Problem

- It is shaped by **cultural differences, academic expectations, and institutional practices** (Kristiana et al., 2022; Xu & Chai, 2025).
- Rather than **one general feeling of stress**, it includes several stressors, such as **homesickness, perceived discrimination, and cultural shock** (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Koo et al., 2021).
- Examining **separate** dimensions helps identify which stressors are most **influential for adaptation** (Zhang & Jung, 2017; Ali et al., 2024).
- Higher acculturative stress \square psychological and social difficulties (**depression, anxiety, identity confusion, and daily adjustment problems**) (Cipolletta et al., 2024; Koo et al., 2021; Oduwaye et al., 2023).

1. Variation Across Students



Personal resources



Host reception context



Duration of residence



Social integration



Demographic factors

(Chen, 2025; Torres-Arends et al., 2025;
Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Ali et al., 2024)

Research Gap



Conventional View

- Acculturative stress is treated as a **single, unified construct** (Koo et al., 2021)
- All stressors assumed to contribute equally
- General interventions applied broadly
- Oversimplification of students' lived experiences



This Study



Multidimensional View

- Acculturative stress as a **complex system** of distinct stressor dimensions
- Not all stressors are **equal** (Zhang & Jung, 2017).
- **Dimensions contribute differently** (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Ali et al., 2024).
- Targeted insight for better interventions

Study Aims

01

Identify Key Stressor Dimensions

Examine **which dimensions** of acculturative stress contribute strongly to the higher-order construct.

02

Map Effects on Adaptation

Assess how acculturative stress **predicts** negative psychological adaptation, positive psychological adaptation

03

Inform Practice

Provide universities with **evidence-based** insight to develop targeted, dimension-specific support programs for international students.

Methodology

Sample

121

International students

60.3%

Female

24 yrs

Mean age (SD = 5.33)

Szeged, HU

University of Szeged

Google Forms

Data collection

Design & Instrument

Design: Quantitative, cross-sectional

Instrument:

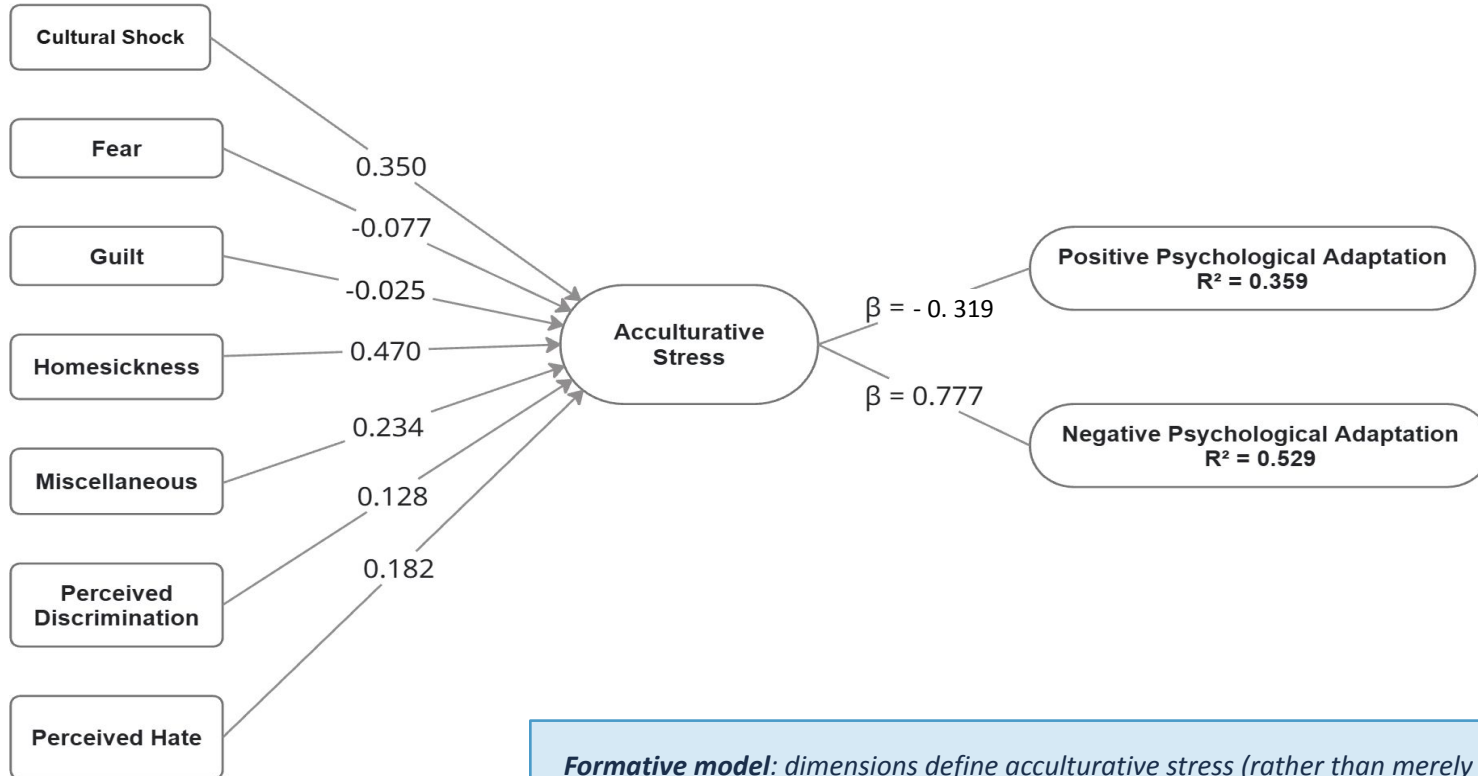
- Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994)
- The Brief Psychological Adaptation Scale (BPAS) (Demes & Geeraert, 2014)

Analysis Strategy

- **PLS-SEM** (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling)
 - ✓ Formative higher-order construct approach
 - Outer weights** interpreted as each dimension's contribution to the overall acculturative stress construct

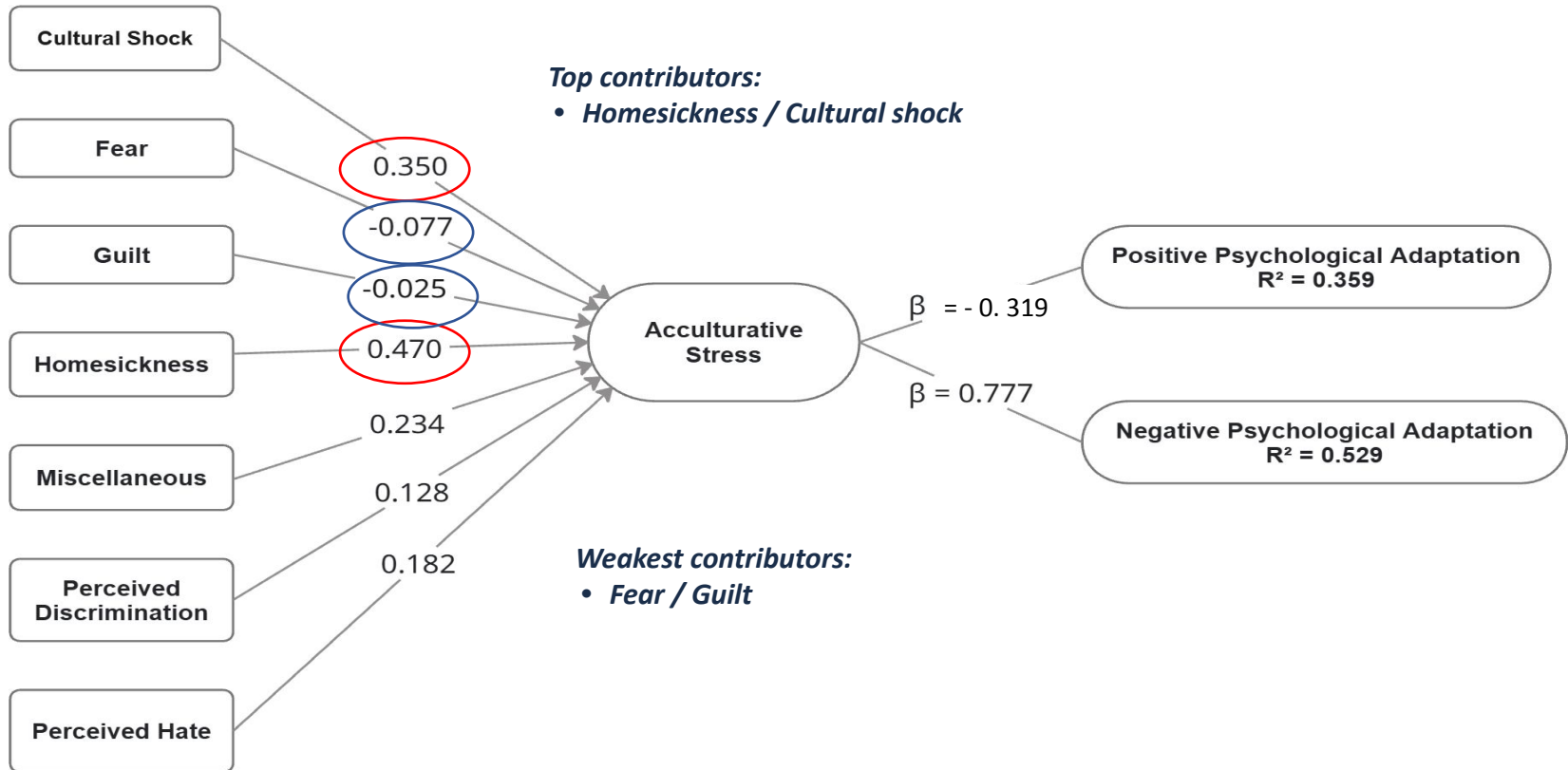
Measurement Model: Dimensions of Stress

Acculturative stress modeled as a second-order formative construct with 7 dimensions:

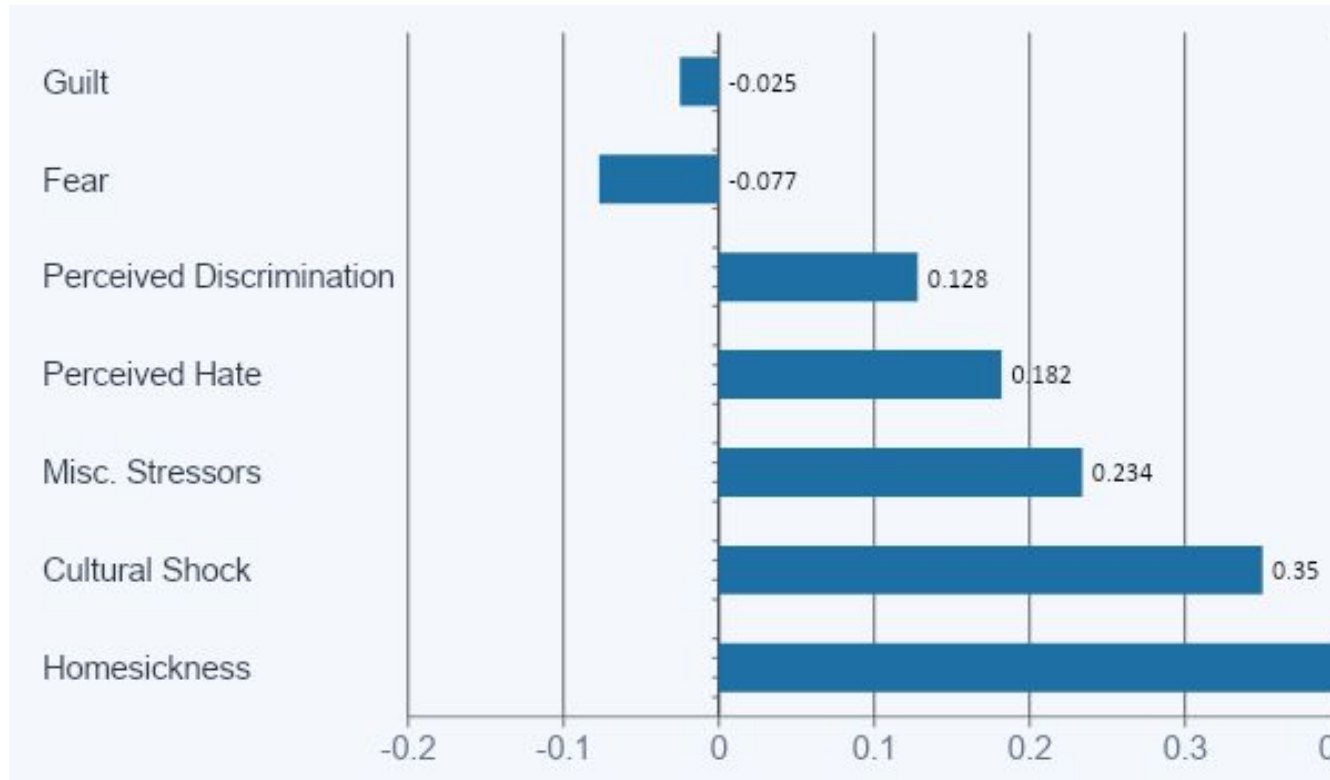


Formative model: dimensions define acculturative stress (rather than merely reflecting it).
Outer weights indicate each dimension's relative contribution to the higher-order construct.

Key Result 1: Unequal Stressor Contributions



Formative Weights of Acculturative Stress Dimensions



Analysis reveals a clear hierarchy: emotional and cultural transition factors have the strongest influence on overall acculturative stress

Note: Outer weights are extracted from the PLS-SEM Measurement Model.

Interpreting the results

Highest contribution: Transition-Related Stressors

- Emotional separation and cultural unfamiliarity dominate the stress experience
- Separation from family, unfamiliar social networks, and Cultural unfamiliarity create sustained psychological friction (Berry, 2006; Shafaei & Razak, 2016).

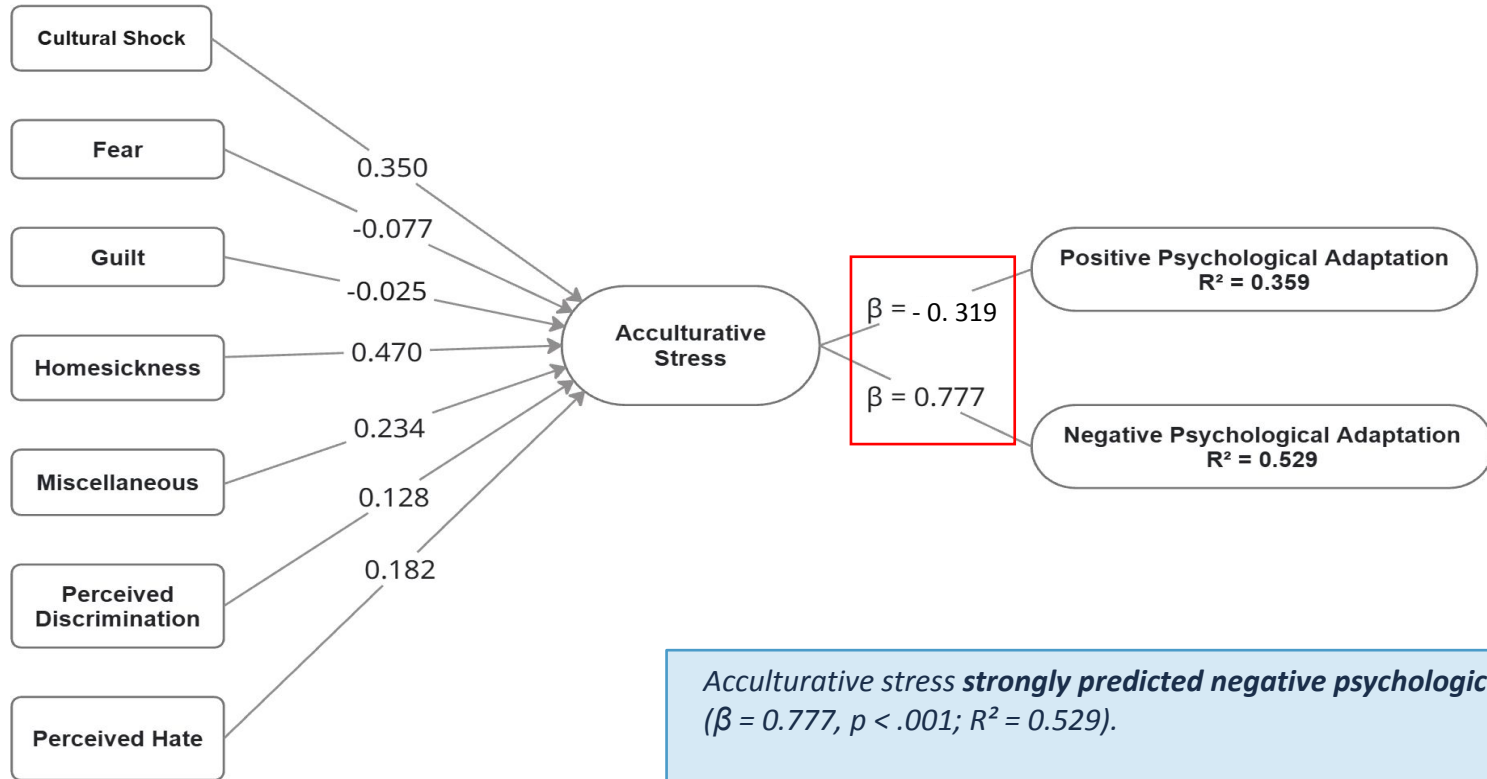
Moderate contribution: Everyday Adjustment Stressors

- Language barriers, academic, institutional, and social demands shape daily adjustment stress (Koo et al., 2021; Kristiana et al., 2022; Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Ali et al., 2024)

Lowest contribution: Internal Affect-Based Stressors

- Fear and guilt were less salient than external and social stressors, suggesting that **internalized stress is less salient than external/social stressors**

Key Result 2: Effects on Adaptation Outcomes



Acculturative stress **strongly predicted negative psychological adaptation** ($\beta = 0.777$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.529$).

Acculturative stress **negatively predicted positive psychological adaptation** ($\beta = -0.319$, $p = .001$; $R^2 = 0.359$).

Interpreting the results

Psychological Distress

- The strongest effect ($\beta = 0.777$) points to stress as a powerful **driver of anxiety, emotional difficulty, and maladjustment**.
- The finding supports the view that psychological adaptation is **strongly shaped by stress-and-coping processes** (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

Reduced Positive Functioning

- Acculturative stress **suppresses positive psychological adaptation** ($\beta = -0.319$)
- This means that stress not only increases distress but also weakens students' **well-being, emotional balance, and positive functioning** (Amlashi et al., 2024; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ali et al., 2024; Chen, 2025).

Conclusion

- Acculturative stress is a **multidimensional, hierarchical construct** where not all stressors carry **equal weight**.
- Among the seven dimensions studied, **homesickness and cultural shock** emerge as the **primary drivers of stress**, significantly overshadowing factors like fear or guilt.
- Elevated stress levels function as a powerful predictor of **maladaptation**, drastically impairing **psychological well-being**.
- Understanding the specific dimensions of acculturative stress helps universities design more **effective and targeted support systems** for international students.

Practical Implications for Universities

1 Move from One-Size-Fits-All

Universities should design interventions targeting specific dimensions, especially homesickness and cultural shock.

2 Prioritize Targeted Support Programs

Orientation weeks, cultural mentoring, peer buddy systems, and adjustment workshops should centre emotional transition and cultural unfamiliarity.

3 Strengthen Mental Health Services

Counselling and mental health resources must be adequately provided and culturally responsive.

4 Foster Social Integration

Address social adaptation through structured intercultural events, international student communities, and inclusive campus environments.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Category	Limitation	Future Direction
Study Design	Cross-sectional data prevents definitive causal inferences between stress and adaptation.	Implementation of longitudinal designs to track stress trajectories over time.
Sampling Scope	Single-site sample (University of Szeged) may limit global generalizability .	Expansion to multi-institutional and diverse geographic cohorts for broader validity.
Methodology	Modest sample size (N=121) and reliance on self-report measures (common method bias).	Utilization of larger samples and mixed-method approaches (qualitative + quantitative) .

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Thank You for Your Attention