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## Intercultural perspective on happiness in international female university students: a qualitative study

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The number of international students is gradually increasing, and the lack of adaptability they experience affect their happiness. This study aimed to examine the happiness of international undergraduate students using a qualitative method.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 international undergraduate students studying at the university.

**Results:** The themes identified as a result of the content analysis were as follows: components of happiness, the meaning of being a happy university student in another country, and the meaning of unhappiness.

**Discussion:** Students' perspectives on happiness vary according to collectivist and individualist social characteristics. The most important sources of support for students are friends from societies similar to their own cultures. Students from collectivist societies are more reserved and, therefore, unhappy academically and socially. Mental health professionals serving university students and other professionals working in this field need to plan therapeutic interventions to increase the well-being of international students, taking into account risk factors.

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### KEYWORDS

Culture; cultural difference; happiness; international student; qualitative research

## Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly globalised, and this transformation is also affecting the field of education and training, leading to an increase in international student mobility at universities. In a global context marked by the proliferation of internationalisation in higher education, Turkey has witnessed a consistent rise in the number of international students. While the number of international students in Turkey was 48,183 in 2013, the current figure stands at 337,119 students studying at universities in Turkey. This figure indicates that the number of international students studying in Turkey has increased sixfold over the past decade. According to data from the Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK) for the year 2025, the majority of international students were enrolled from Syria, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Kazakhstan. According to data from 2025, the number of students from Syria is 54,794, and students from Syria rank first among students studying at universities in Turkey with this high frequency (YÖK, 2025).

The phenomenon of international students migrating to different countries to pursue superior educational opportunities is referred to as “educational migration” (Işık, 2009). Migration is a social phenomenon with social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions that affects society and requires the migrant to adapt to society in all aspects of their life. International students who migrate for educational purposes also encounter various difficulties during the process of adapting to their new environment. The national literature has identified these difficulties as language problems, financial problems, interpersonal relationship problems, lack of social support, culture shock, and isolation (Altun & Murat, 2022). The study indicated that language barriers, social exclusion, feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and differences in cultural elements such as seasons and food experienced by international students are factors that increase culture

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shock. It was further noted that culture shock negatively affects the academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being of foreign students (Mulyadi et al., 2024). A study examining culture shock among international students in Turkey found that students with low self-efficacy experienced culture shock more frequently. The study also found that Christian students experienced more culture shock than Muslim students, and life satisfaction and sociocultural adaptation were effective in reducing culture shock (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024).

A comprehensive review of the extant literature on the acculturation process of foreign students reveals a preponderance of emphasis on academic elements, cultural factors, language, financial status, religious practices, education system, and personal characteristics (Muganga et al., 2025). The study found that international students' motivations to adapt to a new culture were influenced by a number of factors. These factors included previous experience as international students, language difficulties, the learning environment, friendship networks, and the role of teachers in facilitating intercultural contact (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022). According to the extant national literature, foreign students' acculturation problems result in a variety of psychological and emotional problems, including depression, aggression, anger, interpersonal conflicts, stress, loneliness, and hopelessness (Dere & Demirci Dölek, 2023).

One of the most significant factors influencing psychological and sociocultural adaptation in international students is happiness. According to Veenhoven's conceptualisation, happiness is defined as "the degree to which an individual can evaluate their life as positive and their quality of life as good" (Veenhoven, 2012). Happiness is a subjective concept closely related to subjective well-being (Akduman, 2020). Three categories of components are identified as integral to the determination of happiness: emotional, social, and cognitive components. The emotional component refers to the individual's experience of positive emotions, the social component refers to the establishment of positive social relationships, and the cognitive component refers to the individual's optimistic interpretation of events. The presence of any adverse event within these three domains has been demonstrated to induce unhappiness in the individual (Mehrdadi et al., 2016). The hedonic and eudaimonic approaches are foundational to theories of happiness. According to the hedonic approach, happiness is predominantly characterised by the pursuit of pleasure and the experience of short-term, momentary pleasures, which are sought to alleviate tension. Conversely, the eudaimonic approach posits that happiness is more closely associated with values and meaningful objectives. This approach emphasises a longer-term, more fulfilling conception of happiness (Diener, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2001). As demonstrated in the extant literature, values appear to predict hedonic well-being with greater efficacy than eudaimonic well-being. The cultural environment in which an individual lives determines which values are important to them and, consequently, how these values relate to their happiness. (Joshnloo & Ghaedi, 2009). In individualistic cultures, the values of the individual, such as personal success and hedonism, are given primacy. Conversely, in collectivist cultures, the values of relationship building, loyalty, consideration for others, and the pursuit of collective interests are prioritised. Consequently, values are theorised to be associated with happiness (Ratzlaff et al., 2000).

Depending on the country in which they live, individuals possess different cultural values, a concept defined as "national culture" (Saylık, 2019). One of the most widely used models regarding national culture is Hofstede's National Culture Model (Öncül et al., 2016). In this model, culture is examined across four dimensions. The first dimension is power distance, which is the extent to which a society accepts unequal power distribution. The second dimension is individualism versus collectivism, which is the extent to which a society prioritises individual versus group interests. The third dimension is uncertainty avoidance, which is the extent to which a society tolerates ambiguity. The fourth dimension is masculinity versus femininity, which is the extent to which a society prioritises traditional versus egalitarian values. Individualistic cultures tend to view people as separate and independent from others, while collectivist cultures view people as important parts of society who do not prioritise their own interests.

A study conducted in China, a country with a collectivist cultural structure, indicated that physically healthy, young students with positive family relationships who are able to establish close, loving relationships and achieve high academic success are happier (Jiang et al., 2022). Another study of university students in Europe, a society with an individualistic cultural structure, found that happiness is determined by social life outside of university, security, comfort, academic achievement, the climate of the country, housing, transportation, and economic opportunities (Van Kleef & Hejhal, 2018). A study on happiness among Turkish university students found that happiness is related to values. The same study found that

gender does not predict happiness (Özdemir & Koruklu, 2011). No study has examined happiness among international students in Turkey. However, international students in Turkey have reported facing problems such as economic difficulties, language inadequacy, and exclusion. This situation negatively impacts students' happiness and academic achievement (Sönmez & Aluç, 2024). Another study found significant gender differences in Syrian students' adaptation to Turkey, with girls experiencing more difficulty with social adaptation and feeling more marginalised and socially excluded than boys (Erciyas & Anati, 2021).

International students who migrate to different countries for educational purposes often experience various adaptation problems that affect their happiness. Happiness is an important indicator of mental health and a subjective concept. Harmony between an individual's cultural values and those of their community can affect their happiness. The influence of culture on happiness is well-known to be complex and multifaceted (Özdemir & Koruklu, 2011). Therefore, this study will investigate the happiness of international students using qualitative methods rather than quantitative methods. Studies examining the happiness of international students using qualitative methods have been conducted in the Netherlands (Burgos-Watkinson, 2020) and Sweden (Van Kleef & Hejhal, 2018). However, no such studies have been found in the national and international literature regarding the happiness of international students in Turkey, whose numbers are increasing every year. Therefore, it is believed that the results of this study will contribute to national and international literature by providing insight into international students' happiness perspectives while studying in Turkey. At the same time, the findings are expected to inform education psychology and mental health experts when planning therapeutic interventions aimed at increasing international students' happiness. Therefore, this study aims to examine female international university students' perspectives on happiness in Turkey using qualitative methods. To this end, the study aims to answer the following question: "What does happiness mean to international university students?"

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

In this study, the content analysis method was used as a qualitative research method.

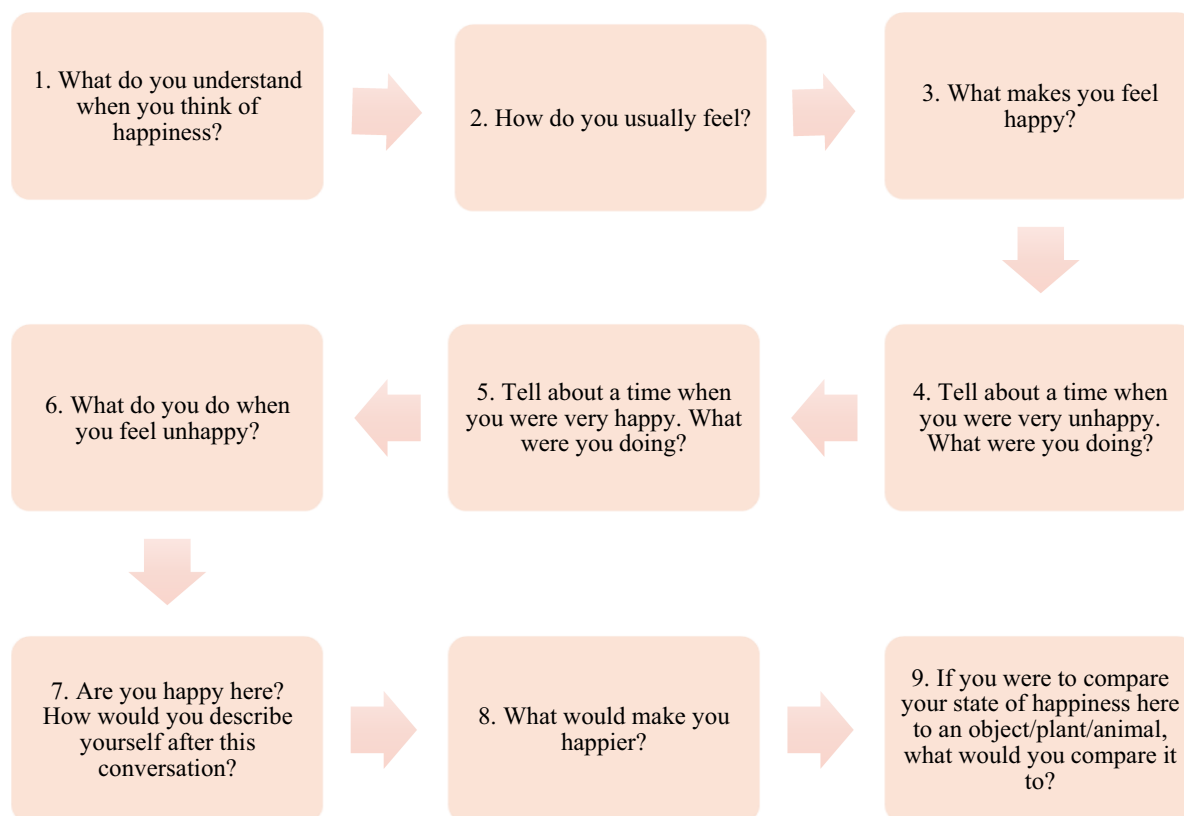
### ***Research location and characteristics***

The research was conducted at a private university in a major Turkish city. During the 2023–2024 academic year, the university where the research was conducted had a total of 1,007 students, including 123 international students from 27 different countries around the world (YÖK, 2025).

### ***Participants***

There are a total of 123 undergraduate international students at the university where the research was conducted, including 91 female and 32 male students. The population of the research consisted of 91 female international undergraduate students. Considering that women have greater emotional awareness and expression skills than men, this study primarily sought to understand the happiness perceptions of female students. The criterion (measurement) sampling method was used to determine the sample. The criteria for inclusion in the study were determined in line with the literature (Altun & Murat, 2022; Ana, 2020; Bulut et al., 2020; Jamaludin et al., 2016; Oberg, 1960). In this context, the criteria were determined as "having lived in Turkey for at least two years" and "having sufficient proficiency in understanding and speaking Turkish." The importance of determining the criterion of having lived in Turkey for at least two years can be explained by the fact that foreign students encounter different cultures during this process and can recognise the impact of these experiences on their happiness.

A total of 25 female international students participated in the study. The decision to conclude the study was made when data saturation was achieved. When the students' responses to the questions began to repeat, the researchers decided that data saturation had been reached. Supervision was also obtained from



**Figure 1.** Semi-structured Interview questions examining the characteristics of international students' happiness.

experts in the field, who confirmed that the study could be concluded with 25 participants. All 25 female participants were undergraduate students. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30. The students came from Syria, Ukraine, Dubai, Kazakhstan, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Germany, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt. The duration of their studies at the university ranged from 1 to 3 years.

### **Data collection**

Before proceeding with data collection, ethical committee approval and institutional permission were obtained. Before the interview began, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. They were also informed that their personal details would be kept confidential. Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from each participant. The interviews were conducted between October and July of the 2024–2025 academic year in the form of face-to-face individual interviews. In-depth interviews were used to collect data. A semi-structured interview form was used as the data collection tool. The interview questions included in the form were prepared by the researchers in line with the relevant literature. While preparing the interview questions, care was taken to ensure that the questions reflected the scope of the research and that the language used was clear and understandable to international students. The student input to the questions was assessed by an expert in the field of qualitative research as a result of preliminary interviews with four students. Based on the expert review, the interview questions were revised and the last version of the interview form was prepared.

The interview form consists of two sections and a total of 17 questions regarding the general characteristics and happiness of the students. The first section of the interview form contains questions about general characteristics. These questions include the students' age, country of origin, department and class, length of stay in Turkey, how they evaluate their interaction with the community they live in, what problems they are currently facing, and how they find being an international student in Turkey. The second

section includes questions that examine the characteristics of international students' happiness. These questions are presented in [Figure 1](#).

Each interview lasted for approximately 60–75 minutes. Each participant was given a number, and the number card was placed in front of the participant before the interview, and the participants were called by their numbers during the interview. The research findings were transcribed in the article with participant numbers, and the identities of the participants were not disclosed. The interview data were recorded on a voice recorder with permission from the participants.

### **Data analysis**

Content analysis was used to analyse the research data. Transcription was carried out by listening to the audio recordings of each interview and transferring the participants' statements to a Word file.

Initially, certain themes were developed in accordance with the content. The theme development process, which is an important stage in content analysis, contributes to the more systematic and effective conduct of data analysis (Metin & Ünal, 2022). Following this, the research data were evaluated in line with the developed themes and coded.

In the analysis of the research data, content analysis approach was used (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Within this approach, the data were evaluated within the framework of pre-determined themes, and open coding was performed under each theme. During the open coding stage, participant statements were coded into meaningful units and similar content was grouped together; at this stage, 452 open codes directly related to the data were identified.

The relationships between the codes were examined, and similar or overlapping codes were combined to perform focused coding. Focused coding enabled the identification of fundamental conceptual patterns in the data. Subsequently, semantically coherent structures were grouped under these focused codes to form themes. In determining the themes, attention was paid to ensuring that the meanings represented by the codes were holistically consistent with the research questions.

In the content analysis process, 12 themes and 452 codes were constructed in the first stage. Necessary reduction and consolidation processes were carried out by taking expert opinions into consideration, and 3 themes and 184 codes were obtained at the end of the study. To ensure internal consistency during content analysis, attention was paid to ensuring that the codes under each theme formed a meaningful whole, and to ensure external consistency, attention was paid to ensuring that the themes themselves formed a meaningful whole, i.e., that they could meaningfully explain the data obtained in the study.

### **Validity and reliability**

This study was conducted and reported based on the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) checklist. Both of the researchers work as academic staff at the university. The first researcher is a faculty member in the field of psychiatric nursing and has conducted qualitative studies in different fields. The second researcher has intercultural communication competence and continues her doctoral education in the field of psychiatric nursing. The first and second researchers conducted the interviews. Before the questions were asked, the participants were contacted and informed about the research. If they voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, an interview appointment was made by agreeing on a suitable date and time (the researcher who conducted the phone interviews did not participate in face-to-face in-depth interviews with the participants). The interviews were conducted outside working hours in a noiseless and well-lit meeting room at the university where the students were studying.

In the transcription, participants' statements were converted into text in a Word file, preserving the original meaning. A total of 131 Word pages were obtained, with an average of 5–6 pages per participant. The transcription was carried out by the first researcher and completed in an average of 11 days. To ensure the validity of the research findings, the coding process was conducted within the framework of the research questions, and data outside the scope of the research questions were excluded from coding. When

coding participants' repeated statements, in vivo coding was used in accordance with the philosophy of content analysis.

Triangulation is a frequently used method for enhancing validity in qualitative research (Yıldırım & ve Şimşek, 2011). This method is defined as looking at something from multiple perspectives to increase accuracy (Neuman, 2014). In this study, the opinions of three experts with experience in qualitative research were sought to enhance validity in data analysis. When multiple experts are involved in data analysis, coding reliability must also be calculated (Yıldırım & ve Şimşek, 2011). Especially in content analysis, minimising differences between coders is of great importance for the validity and reliability of the research (Metin & Ünal, 2022). In this study, to determine coding reliability, similarities between the codes identified by the experts were compared numerically, and it was found that the reliability percentage was above 70%.

While the research data were reorganised according to developed themes, the nature of the data was faithful to the nature of the data, and the researchers' comments were not included. To increase transferability, the findings were conveyed to the reader without comment, and direct quotations and participants' statements were included.

## Ethics

Ethics committee permission was obtained from the Uskudar University Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee (reference no. 61351342/020–657) before starting the implementation of this study. Institutional permission was also obtained from the Rectorate of the University where the study was conducted.

## Findings

The participants are between the ages of 18 and 30, and all are female. Ten participants are from Syria, four from Saudi Arabia, three from Dubai, and one each from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Eritrea, Kuwait, Germany, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt, for a total of 11 different countries. Eighteen participants are at the undergraduate level, while 7 are at the associate degree level. Nineteen participants are in their first year, 3 are in their second year, and 3 are in their third year. The duration of residence in Turkey ranges from 2.5 to 12 years. The descriptive characteristics of international students are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive characteristics of international students.

Participant	Age	Country	Department/programme	Classroom	Life duration in Turkey (years)
S 1	22	Syria	Nursing	2	12
S 2	20	Ukraine	Nursing	1	2,5
S 3	20	Dubai	Nursing	3	6
S 4	30	Kazakhstan	Child development	1	4
S 5	21	Eritrea	Anaesthesia	2	8
S 6	21	Syria	Nutrition and Dietetics	1	9
S 7	19	Syria	Nutrition and Dietetics	1	10
S 8	21	Dubai	Nutrition and Dietetics	1	10
S 9	18	Syria	Nutrition and Dietetics	1	9
S 10	18	Saudi Arabia	Nutrition and Dietetics	1	7
S 11	20	Syria	Nutrition and Dietetics	1	10
S 12	22	Germany	Psychology English	1	11
S 13	18	Syria	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	1	9
S 14	22	Palestine	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	1	6
S 15	19	Saudi Arabia	Computer Programming	1	6
S 16	20	Dubai	Psychology English	1	5
S 17	21	Saudi Arabia	Anaesthesia	1	4
S 18	21	Kuwait	Psychology Turkish	3	4
S 19	21	Saudi Arabia	Psychology Turkish	3	4
S 20	21	Syria	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	2	11
S 21	18	Egypt	English Language and Literature	1	4
S 22	22	Iraq	Oral and Dental Health	1	7
S 23	20	Syria	Oral and Dental Health	1	10
S 24	24	Syria	Oral and Dental Health	1	12
S 25	21	Syria	Anaesthesia	1	11

**Note:** S1, S2, ..., S25 are the numbers used instead of participants' names.

**Table 2.** Categories and sub-categories resulting from the content analysis.

Categories	Sub-categories
1. Components of happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional component</li> <li>• Cognitive component</li> <li>• Success component</li> <li>• Livability component</li> <li>• Love component</li> </ul>
2. The meaning of being a happy university student in another country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being respected</li> <li>• Peace environment</li> <li>• Career building</li> <li>• Cultural traces</li> <li>• Geography of the country</li> </ul>
3. The meaning of unhappiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language problem</li> <li>• Alienation</li> <li>• Feeling of imprisonment</li> </ul>

Three themes have been identified regarding international students' perspectives on happiness. These themes are "Components of Happiness," "The Meaning of Being a Happy University Student in Another Country," and "The Meaning of Unhappiness." The themes and sub-themes obtained in the study are presented in Table 2.

### **Components of happiness**

The components of the happiness category consist of the sub-categories of "Emotional Component," "Cognitive Component," "Success Component," "Livability Component," and "Love Component."

#### **1.1. Emotional component**

International students associated feeling positive emotions with happiness, whereas feeling negative emotions meant unhappiness. One student mentioned that happiness is long-lasting rather than short-lived, and that true happiness is achieved when one lives according to one's values and goals. The students' statements are as follows:

*"Sometimes I feel very energetic and sometimes I have no energy. Unhappy happy, so it is mixed." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"I think it is happiness when people feel good. A good feeling is different for each person." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"There is a difference between having fun and being happy. Having fun is momentary, but happiness is something that lasts..." (S15: 19, Saudi Arabia)*

#### **1.2. Cognitive component**

Meeting the need to know and understand comes at the forefront of international students' perspectives on happiness. It is noteworthy that students equate understanding and sharing knowledge with happiness.

*"Understanding everything, being able to explain everything." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"For example, I am happy when I have received a piece of information and I understand it." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

Students with an optimistic perspective experienced more happiness. The following are the students' statements.

*"If you are an open-hearted person, you can meet everyone and find a middle ground." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"Even when I am unhappy, I don't stay very unhappy. I mean, I don't allow myself to be unhappy." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"I can call myself a cheerful person because I don't worry too much, I let life take its course, no matter what happens, so I look at it from the good side." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"I am worried, but I am trying to look at things more positively..." (S12: 22, Germany)*

Students were also associated with having goals and realising them with happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"For example, I do sports, it makes me happy, it is very important. When I came to Turkey, I lost 25 kilograms, I did something very big." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"For example, I set goals, and when I achieve them, it is a great happiness." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"Reaching my goals is happiness for me..." (S16: 20, Dubai)*

### 1.3. Success component

International students associate being successful with happiness. In particular, students perceived high academic achievement as happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"When I don't understand in class, I feel lazy, I say I'm not like this, then I say I'm hardworking, I'm happy to work and stuff like that." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"The happiest time was when I received my diploma. When I finished university there, I said I now have a bracelet." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"Seeing that I got high test scores at school is a very happy thing..." (Ö8: 21, Dubai)*

The students also stated that being a good person, being useful to society, and being remembered in a good way is also an achievement, and associated this achievement with happiness:

*"Humanity is very important there, you have to take care of animals and the elderly, and you have to be a good person, then you are happier." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I think it is happiness to be remembered in a good way." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"I feel happy when I have a positive impact on people..." (Ö15: 19, Saudi Arabia)*

### 1.4. Livability component

Definitions of a livable environment have come to the fore in international students' expressions of happiness. Students associated living in a safe, free, and peaceful environment with happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"Living in a safe place is very important. Living in a place where there is no fear, you are happy if you are in a place where you can express yourself." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"To be free, to live in a place that is not restricted, not to be dependent on someone." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"I think freedom. For example, there they cannot leave the country. They don't give passports to anyone. Men and women have to join the military since the age of 18. The state gives them any job they want. They work in agriculture in summer. People in my country have seen a lot of racism. The president expels Christians and other religions." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

International students argued that having financial power, earning money, and meeting their needs are necessary conditions for a livable environment and bring happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"Madonna has a saying 'A material girl lives in a material world.' Our world is also very material so it is very important to think about money." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"A person who is doing well at work, who can bring home all his needs, is happy." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

### 1.5. Love component

International students associated with love and being loved with happiness. It is noteworthy that students associate love and being loved with happiness, especially in romantic relationships, while failures in romantic relationships cause unhappiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I think you cannot be happy without love. Loving and being loved with the opposite gender would make me happy." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"We were going to get married, maybe that was the most unhappy thing for me. It is different for everyone, but that was my difficult moment." (T4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

International students consider being together with people they love and feel loved by, such as family, relatives, neighbours, and friends, as happiness. Spending time with family and friends stands out as a source of happiness for students, but one student mentioned that they are happy even when alone and do not need their family or friends to be happy. The students' statements are given below:

*"I think something about the family really makes me happy. Happiness for me is my family. I think hanging out with my friends is also happiness." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"Being with family is very important because we are foreign and alone here..." (S13: 18, Syria)*

*"It is good for me to be alone in everything. It is better for me to feel alone, to live alone." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

Students also associated the death of loved ones with unhappiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"My relative is dying, so this is the worst thing. You can change something else, but you can't change death." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I was most unhappy when my grandmother died." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"When I lost my mother, I went through a very difficult time..." (S8: 21, Dubai)*

## **The meaning of being a happy university student in another Country**

The category of the meaning of being a happy university student in another country consists of the sub-categories of "being respected," "peaceful environment," "career building," "cultural traces," and "geography of the country."

### **2.1. Being respected**

International students mentioned that living in a country where they live freely, making their own decisions, expressing their opinions freely, and being valued as women bring happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I like the rules of Turkey. Turks seem to be careful for women, women are valued." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"If I were there, I wouldn't be experiencing the freedom here. I feel happier here, for example, we sit in a cafe here and no one interferes with us, even if we are men." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"For example, my happiness right now is to be free. I am speaking in terms of women, here no one closes you, no one restricts you, you can express yourself, you can protect yourself." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"I am very happy in Turkey because I can go anywhere by myself. There are many people in prison there, for example, they can take and put whoever they want without any problems, as they want." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"Here, I can live according to my own beliefs without being pressured, which is important to me..." (S16: 20, Dubai)*

International students feel respected when they live in a society that treats their culture with tolerance and associates it with happiness. In particular, it is noteworthy that they equate their Turkish friends' helping them in their classes, their caring and tolerant approach, and even their efforts to get to know them and spend time with happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I don't understand something in class, but I can ask, I have friends and they always answer me and help me. Also, everyone looks at me "Foreigner, foreigner, which country are you from, how is life in your country?" I chat very easily." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"For example, my Turkish friends also like me a lot and they always call me and say come on, you haven't come already, hang out with us." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"My Turkish friends are very helpful. They are also very good people..." (S8: 21, Dubai)*

Students' emphasis on the association of happiness with the tolerance and warm-bloodedness of people in the society they live in and respect for human and religious values stands out. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I like Turkey very much because people here are very warm. This is an important thing for me because for example in Ukraine people are colder, it is more difficult to meet." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I think the people in Turkey are nice too, aunts and all. All the people we met were nice." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"In the house where we live, our neighbours are very good, the administrators visit us, they invite us for coffee, we invite them." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"When I came here, I saw how helpful and warm-hearted Turkish society can be..." (S18: 21, Kuwait)*

The fact that international students themselves adopt a tolerant and respectful approach to the culture and religious values of the society in which they live and adapt to it, and even their desire to get to know new cultures, is also noteworthy as an indicator of their happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"We are also very different in terms of beliefs. But when I came, maybe after a year, I understood everything. It doesn't matter which religions you have, Muslim, Buddhism, Christian, there is no problem for me." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I don't discriminate between Turks, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, I accept them all as human beings. We are human beings, so I don't discriminate." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"Living in a different society, a different culture, can develop a person's views and ideas..." (S15: 19, Saudi Arabia)*

## 2.2. Peace environment

It is noteworthy that international students associate living in a country without war with their happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"When we first arrived, sometimes I dreamt that there was a war and we were running away. Now I don't have such dreams because I feel safe." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"I am happy because there is no war in Turkey. Everything is very good here. People are happy." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"Happiness is a place where there is no war. For example, right now in my own country, happiness has disappeared..." (S9: 18, Syria)*

## 2.3. Career building

It is noteworthy that international students state that quality education is necessary for career development. Students also associated happiness with receiving quality education in a safe educational environment, faculty members being professional and having a positive attitude towards them, a university climate open to different cultures, and affordable education. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I won my university, I am going to my school, I am happy because I feel safe. There is a good education here. I talk to a lecturer whenever I want, so there are people who listen to me." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"I am a very happy person because I have a beautiful university. I like the professors very much, they are very professional. For me, they are not old, they are young people. It is a very important thing, that's why we understand each other." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"The education is good. Also, we are five siblings, I had two brothers and we were all going to go to university, so my father wanted us to come here because it was a bit expensive there and actually we decided to stay here now." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"His education is very good. The teacher's education is good, he graduated from a very good university and I respect him a lot. It contributed not only to the university but also to my view of life, my view of people." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"I came here, the class, the teacher is very understanding, he understands that we don't know Turkish very much, that makes me very happy. The atmosphere of the university here is also different, for the first time I found friends who will be friends with me." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"I am a person who values education highly, and Turkey's education system is really very good..." (S17: 21, Saudi Arabia)*

Finding career opportunities and earning money in a country where students live stand out as factors that affect their happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"And another thing is that I started modelling Turkish clothing, different companies are looking for me." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I actually do something now, for example, foreigners come, I plan their vacations, I arrange them myself. I also have a dream of a school here in the future, I have a dream of combining 3 things in the school with children, culture and art, psychological health and education..." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

## 2.4. Cultural traces

International students associate living in the same country with loved ones, families, and relatives from their own culture with happiness. Students mostly find friends with similar cultures closer to them and prefer to socialise with them.

*"My family lives here. I have family, relatives, friends, of course I am a happy person here. My close friend is a Ukrainian girl." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I really feel happier with my Arab friends because, for example, I can express myself more easily, I can tell a joke right away. For example, Arabs say yes, you are a social person, but Turks say no, you are not like that. Because I don't socialise with them." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"I have mostly Kazakh friends, they have been here for 5 years, 7 years, 10 years. They have found friends for themselves in this process, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and they introduce me to them." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"I am very happy in Turkey because I came with my family and my siblings are here. The person who is with the people you know and the ones you love is happy." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"Actually, I am a social person among Arabs, but I am antisocial with Turks..." (S16: 20, Dubai)*

International students associate keeping elements of their own culture alive with their happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I think it is more about people who have not forgotten their culture, old songs, old dances, old forgotten clothes, food, highlighting them, I have seen people so happy that tears come out of their eyes." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

The fact that international students have cultural similarities with the society in which they live stands out as an effective factor in their happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I have been staying here since the 9th grade and it has become like my second country. Maybe because Turkey is a Muslim country, we did not experience anything negative." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"We call Turkey a brotherhood, our language, our culture is a bit similar, our friendliness towards people is similar. I do not feel like I am in another country." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"In the society I live in there, everyone talks about each other and I came from such a society and I saw the same thing here." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"Because Islam is the religion of Turkey, people of the same religion can come here..." (S15: 19, Saudi Arabia)*

## 2.5. Geography of the country

International students associate Turkey's geographical features with happiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I love the landscapes in Turkey, mostly the sea of course." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I like the weather in Turkey. The climate there is very bad, it is very hot, you can't leave the house." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"I like the weather in Turkey, I see all the seasons because I only see the heat there. The greenery, we can go to the mountains." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

### **The Meaning of unhappiness**

The category of the meaning of unhappiness consists of the sub-categories of "language problem," "alienation," and "feeling of imprisonment."

#### **3.1. Language problem**

International students mostly mentioned that they had difficulty understanding and speaking Turkish. Due to language problems, students are unable to understand the concepts in lessons and experience exam anxiety. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a student mentions that he loves the Turkish language beyond experiencing a language barrier.

The students' statements are as follows:

*"When I was speaking Arabic with my friends, I was always active in the lessons at school. I was even giving very good grades in the exams, for example 100, 90 s. So I was a little bit shocked here." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"Sometimes I know myself that I am a smart girl, but I don't have any intelligence in Turkish. Because sometimes I can't explain what I feel. I am afraid in the exams, I won't understand anything, I will get a low score." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"During the lesson, I have difficulties in understanding the terms in mathematics, sociology, anatomy, and sometimes I have difficulties with terms in literature. There is no problem in writing, but I have a little problem in reading comprehension." (S4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"I always tell my friends that Turkish is the language of love..." (S17: 21, Saudi Arabia)*

It is noteworthy that international students who have language problems are especially worried about not being able to express themselves due to their individual characteristics, such as shyness, shyness, insufficient self-confidence, sometimes feeling excluded in their peer group, experiencing social interaction problems, and even stigmatising themselves without realising it, which is a factor that causes their unhappiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"It would be nice to overcome my fears. Sometimes I can't express myself, so I keep quiet, so I don't have many friends. I think they will not understand me or they will get angry or they will exclude me." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"I am actually a talkative person, but I don't look like it because I can't express myself, sometimes I prefer to keep quiet because I get stuck. My Turkish is not that good, I know I can improve it, but I don't know why I don't do so, it makes me very sad. I need to improve my language socially." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"The Turks want to accept me, but I'm honestly hesitant. I'm hesitant to speak Turkish..." (S14: 22, Palestine)*

*"I can't speak Turkish very well, so I feel a bit embarrassed. Sometimes I think maybe they don't like me." (S24: 24, Syria)*

*"I feel more confident in Arabic and English. The biggest problem is the language..." (S16: 20, Dubai)*

#### **3.2. Alienation**

It is noteworthy that when international students experience attitudes, behaviours, or situations that make them feel like foreigners in the society in which they live, they associate these with unhappiness. The students' statements are as follows:

*"For example, not treating foreigners in a foreign way, treating them in a good way. I think this is acting like human beings. We are good people, we have not done anything bad, we just want to live, that's all." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"My friends were foreigners, they did not like them because they were Syrian, but they liked me because I was not Syrian." (S3: 20, Dubai)*

*"I have encountered some problems from people saying "This is a foreigner." For example, I hear "Foreigner, go to your own country, don't they have jobs in their own country, don't they have schools in their own country?" For example, they say to people coming from Africa, mostly people with black skin, why are they here." (T4: 30, Kazakhstan)*

*"Two months ago I went to a different city and I experienced something about my colour. We were in a cafe, they were sitting behind us and it was hot, the air conditioner was not working. He looked at us and said, "There is African heat here, so I felt hot". I felt a little sad because it was the first time I saw someone disrespecting my colour." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

### 3.3. Feeling of imprisonment

International students associated unhappiness with having loved ones far away and difficulties getting together for various reasons. The students' statements are as follows:

*"I feel like I am in a big prison. Because I cannot go to another city without a travel permit, and if I do, I cannot return to this city. My sister cannot come here from there either." (S1: 22, Syria)*

*"My father cannot come because it is forbidden for men to leave. My father lives in Ukraine, I call him and he tells me that the bomb did not explode today, then I am very happy because I know that he is alive today." (S2: 20, Ukraine)*

*"I was very sad the day my sister went to America. We haven't seen each other for a year, she will come but she has to wait for 2 more years." (S5: 21, Eritrea)*

*"If my sister were here, she would make me happier, but she can't come and we can't go..." (S20: 21, Syria)*

## Discussion

This study aims to examine intercultural perspectives on happiness among international female university students in Turkey. All of the study's participants are female, and they have studied in Turkey for between one and three years. The students are from Syria, Ukraine, Dubai, Kazakhstan, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Germany, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt. According to the findings of the study, three themes were constructed as a result of careful coding and analysis of the data: "Components of Happiness," "The Meaning of Being a Happy University Student in Another Country," and "The Meaning of Unhappiness." Notably, in a study where all participants were women, there was no difference in happiness based on gender. The students emphasised that happiness is an individual experience unrelated to gender. One participant stated, "Happiness is independent of gender. It varies according to people's values, regardless of whether they are male or female." Özdemir and Koruklu (2011) also found that student happiness in Turkey is related to values. The values of altruism, universalism, and hedonism, which involve enjoying and taking pleasure in life, have been identified as the strongest predictors of happiness. These findings show that individuals' levels of happiness increase as they place greater importance on the values of hedonism, altruism, and universalism (Özdemir & Koruklu, 2011).

The components of international students' happiness consist of emotional, cognitive, achievement, livability, and love components. The literature indicates that happiness is composed of emotional, cognitive, and social components (Joshanloo & Ghaedi, 2009; Mehrdadi et al., 2016; Ratzlaff et al., 2000). In this study, it can be mentioned that the social component of happiness corresponds to the love component. According to the findings, students feel happier when they socialise with their loved ones. The people they love are mostly their family, relatives, neighbours, and friends. Students mostly stated that close relationships bring happiness, while one student said that being alone makes them happy. Markus and Kitayama (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) link an individual's happiness to the fulfilment of their needs in the area of independence and emphasise that it is culturally shaped (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In this cultural approach, integration with others, valuing family ties, and commitment are mentioned as important cultural goals in Eastern societies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Accordingly, in many Eastern societies, the

path to happiness lies more in fulfilling socially defined roles, while in Western societies, it lies in achieving one's own goals and objectives and living a pleasure-oriented life. Schwartz (1992) also states in his studies, which address happiness from a cultural perspective, that characteristics related to the hedonistic structure of happiness, such as personal success, pleasure, and leading an enjoyable life, are associated with the happiness of individuals living in the West. Kwan et al., (1997) conducted studies with participants from the US and China and found that self-esteem is a strong predictor of happiness in individualistic societies such as the US, while social relationships and attachment influence happiness in traditional societies such as China (Kwan et al., 1997). In a different study, it was shown that values related to collectivism, such as social integration and consideration for others, increase the happiness levels of Chinese people, but the same effect is not observed for British people (Lu et al., 2001). The cultural environment in which an individual lives determines which values are important to them and, consequently, how these values relate to their happiness. In Turkey, which is classified as a collectivist culture, close ties between family, relatives, neighbours, and social groups are important (Hofstede, 2001; İmamoğlu et al., 1993). The study found that the majority of students studying in Turkey came from countries with an Eastern culture. This explains why students with cultural values similar to Turkey's cultural structure associate happiness with forming close relationships.

Another finding that stands out in the theme of the components of happiness is the emotional component. International students perceive positive emotions as happiness. Emotions/mood are also included in the definition of happiness in another study conducted with international students (Burgos-Watkinson, 2020). In this perspective, it can be mentioned that there are similarities between the studies. Students associated concepts such as feeling good, hope, trust, pride, and comfort with happiness. The study revealed differences among students in their descriptions of a happy person. This finding can be explained by cross-cultural differences. A student from Dubai expressed his happiness as a "smiling person," while a student from Ukraine said he was silently experiencing both happiness and sadness within himself. Since the cultural structure of Asian and African countries, which exhibit more collectivist characteristics, is different from that of European countries, which exhibit individualistic cultural characteristics, this situation may affect students' perspectives on happiness. When considering individual happiness from a cultural perspective, Schwartz (1992) states that values related to "self-direction," such as personal achievement, ambition, competence, independent thinking, and acting independently, may be associated with the happiness of individuals living in the West. It is stated that values such as "self-enhancement," which express the importance of self-esteem and self-expression for Westerners, are not very important for Eastern societies. On the other hand, it is stated that collectivist values related to protecting the well-being of family, friends, and close surroundings show a stronger relationship with the happiness of individuals living in Eastern societies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The livability index component of happiness stands out as another notable finding. It is stated that one of the four qualities of life is the livability of the environment (Veenhoven, 2000). In the study conducted, the livability of the environment is also included in the definition of happiness (Burgos-Watkinson, 2020). It is stated that a livable environment includes elements such as clean air, climate, spacious housing, equality and brotherhood, freedom, a wealthy nation, social security, and trouble-free economic development (Veenhoven, 2000). In this study, international students also associated happiness with living in a place where there is security, freedom, and peace, and where material resources are sufficient and meet their needs. The concept of freedom played an important role in the definition of happiness of a student who said that there was no freedom in the society in which he lived. A 21-year-old student from Eritrea stated that freedom brings happiness and that without freedom, there can be no happiness. In the metaphor exercise, this student compared the concept of happiness to a horse and a dolphin moving freely. These characteristics, defined as "independent self-construal" by Markus and Kitayama (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), link an individual's happiness to the fulfilment of their needs in the area of independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The reason why students who came to Turkey to study due to war or circumstances affecting their independence in their countries express their happiness in terms of independence and peace can be explained by this theory.

The other four qualities of life proposed by Veenhoven are the objective utility of life, one's ability to live, and the subjective evaluation of life (Veenhoven, 2000). Similar concepts were addressed in a study on the happiness of international students in the Netherlands (Burgos-Watkinson, 2020). The objective utility of life

includes being a good citizen, and social and societal utility (Veenhoven, 2000). In this study, students associated happiness with being useful to society and being good people. The subjective evaluation of life corresponds to the cognitive component in this study, and in this component, students' positive and optimistic outlook on life came to the fore. A person's ability to live requires physical and mental health (Veenhoven, 2000). In a study conducted with elderly immigrants, it was found that the elderly characterised the meaning of happiness as health (Phlix et al., 2024). However, in this study, health was not included in students' definitions of happiness. This difference may be related to the fact that university students have fewer health-related concerns. Since diseases increase with age, it is thought that health is valued more as age increases.

The meaning of being a happy university student in another country for international students lies in respect, a peaceful environment, career building, cultural imprints, and the geography of the country. It has been determined that international students feel happy in Turkey due to its safety, similarities to their own societies in terms of language and religious values, geopolitical location, high-quality education system, respect for their professions, and affordable education costs (Güven & Alkar, 2022). Studies conducted with international students show similarities with the findings of this study. However, living in a society without war is an important condition for students' happiness. The reason for the emphasis on a peaceful environment may stem from the fact that these students migrated to Turkey due to war. Students from countries experiencing war describe the region they are in as "paradise." A student from Ukraine identified with a tulip in a metaphor exercise. When asked what kind of plant a tulip is, they said it is a plant that closes in rainy weather and opens in sunny weather. It is thought that the student used these expressions because they feel safe in Turkey. In addition, the expression "the tulip blooming" may also mean that the student has begun to express their happiness due to adapting to life in a more collectivist society.

In terms of geography, Turkey's climate and geopolitical position also come to the fore as factors contributing to happiness. In particular, the fact that students from Dubai and Eritrea feel happy in Turkey may be due to the seasonal characteristics of the country, in contrast to the desert climate of their own countries. A study also reported that students from Saudi Arabia who have migrated to Turkey for education have a high level of life satisfaction due to the favourable climate conditions (Güven & Alkar, 2022).

One of the notable findings of this study is that international students view being respected in another country as a source of happiness. Students feel happy because they feel valued, live freely, and are treated with tolerance in the society they live in. However, no findings related to respect were observed in studies conducted with Turkish students in terms of happiness (Özdemir & Koruklu, 2011). It is thought that the prominence of respect among international students is related to self-esteem resulting from being a minority in a country.

Another notable finding that stands out is that career development plays a significant role in university students' happiness in another country. Students have mentioned that they feel happy because they receive a high-quality education in Turkey. Considering that university is an important turning point in career development, the role of receiving a quality education in career development is inevitable. In addition, receiving positive support from faculty members is of great importance for international students. The tolerant and helpful approach towards international university students in Turkey, effective counselling from faculty members, quality education, scholarships, and dormitory facilities have been found to facilitate students' adaptation to education, while language proficiency and sociocultural differences have been found to hinder adaptation (Safawi, 2025). In the study, it was determined that receiving positive attitudes and social support from faculty members is a factor that facilitates the adaptation process more for international students than for Turkish students (Altun & Murat, 2022). In this study, it can be said that the positive attitudes of faculty members and the quality of education facilitate the adaptation of international students and have an effect on their happiness.

The presence of "cultural traces" of international students in the society they live in is important for their happiness. As seen in the findings, cultural traces are expressed through students' statements about their families, relatives, friends, and cultural values. The most striking finding is that international students feel happier when they are with students who come from their own cultural background. The studies conducted support the findings of this study (Altun & Murat, 2022; Ana, 2020; Bulut et al., 2020). International students prefer to be with Turkish students when exchanging information and with friends

from their own culture when socialising. Similarly, it has been stated that international students share more emotionally with friends from their own country, while they share more information with friends from the culture they are in (Gökyer, 2017). This may be due to their fear of not being understood because of language difficulties and because they feel happier when they are with others who have similar cultural characteristics and experience common problems. The family life, customs, religious beliefs, worldviews, living standards, and social activities of foreign students that are similar to those of the society they live in affect their acculturation attitudes (Gökyer, 2017). It has been determined that close language and beliefs, similar ethnic structure, common historical ties, and sympathy for Turkish history increase the life satisfaction of international students (Güven & Alkar, 2022). In this study, it can be mentioned that similarities between international students' own culture and Turkish culture in terms of religion, language, and ethnic origin facilitate the adaptation process and increase their happiness by improving their life satisfaction. Students from collectivist societies did not experience difficulties in adapting to Turkey due to its similar societal structure and expressed happiness because of this similarity. In particular, students from Kazakhstan and Eritrea noted that the societal structure is similar, people communicate closely, and these characteristics align with their own culture, leading them to not face adaptation issues.

The concept of international students' unhappiness encompasses the sub-themes of language problems, alienation, and feeling of imprisonment. Studies with international university students in Turkey reveal language issues as a common problem (Altun & Murat, 2022; Ana, 2020; Bulut et al., 2020; Özasan et al., 2019). Receiving an education in a foreign language, language inadequacy, experiencing discrimination, and having shy personality traits have been identified as factors that make the adaptation process to university difficult (Altun & Murat, 2022). Language problems are believed to act as a barrier to adaptation and affect students' happiness. International students have difficulty understanding and speaking Turkish. This also causes them to experience exam anxiety. Language problems lead to unhappiness among students, affecting both academic success and social interaction. Similarly, Ana (2020) reports that language barriers limit participation in social activities outside of academic environments. This study found that shy international students avoid interacting with Turkish students due to their fear of not being able to express themselves. Students with shy personalities were found to be less happy, both academically and socially. Consistent with the findings of this study, extroverted students were found to be more successful and happier, both academically and socially (Van Kleef & Hejhal, 2018). Shy students were particularly found to come from collectivist societies, such as Syria, Dubai, and Palestine. The cultural structure of individuals living in collectivist countries is such that introversion and shyness are noticeable (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1997). In Eastern societies, such as Japan, where tradition is important, values such as self-criticism, self-effacement, and concealment are considered important (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In collectivist Turkish society, not expressing one's desires and remaining silent are also valued. For this reason, these students remain reserved and behave more restrictively in communication. Students from Kazakhstan, despite coming from a culturally collectivist society, have not behaved more timidly than Syrian students. There may be several possible reasons for this. Firstly, while preconceptions that may exist in society towards Syrian students reinforce their shyness, the absence of the same approach towards Kazakh students may allow Kazakh students to express themselves more comfortably. Secondly, Kazakh students may be perceived as closer and more similar by society due to their Turkish origins, which may have facilitated their social integration. This result shows that, despite sharing a similar cultural structure, different social perceptions and historical ties can influence students' experiences.

The "alienation" of international students by society refers to the discrimination they experience because they are foreign. International students generally report that they have not experienced discrimination or stigmatisation in Turkey, but rather that Turks are tolerant, warm, helpful, and respectful. However, they also report some negative experiences that they or their friends have had. Some negative experiences related to racial, linguistic, and ethnic differences have played a significant role in their unhappiness. Another study conducted with international students supports the findings of this study (Bulut et al., 2020). It was found that foreign students in Turkey sometimes feel lonely and excluded during the cultural adaptation process and that they seek social support from their families and engage in social activities and religious practices as coping methods (Uzun & Aslan, 2023). The study found that foreign students use adaptation strategies rather than avoidance strategies to cope with cultural adaptation stress, and that the areas in which they show the most adaptation are food, language, and communication (Borazanoğlu &

Varişoğlu, 2023). “Feeling of imprisonment” refers to the feelings of loneliness and longing experienced by international students due to the distance from their loved ones. The most important support sources for international students are their close relatives. Therefore, being separated from them in any way has caused them to be unhappy. Similarly, it has been reported that being away from family and friends causes feelings of loneliness, sadness, depression, stress, and lack of courage (Ana, 2020).

### ***Limitations and strengths***

Quantitative studies examining international university students' perceptions of happiness and adaptation processes can be detected in the literature. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it is the first study to examine international university students' perspectives on happiness using qualitative methods national literature. The research results examine the perspectives of international female students studying in Turkey on happiness, along with cultural aspects. The use of in-depth interviews as a data collection method in the research has enabled a better understanding of the participants' perspectives on happiness. In the data analysis process, content analysis was performed by triangulating the views of three experts experienced in qualitative research. In addition, the authors' qualitative research experience and academic backgrounds ensured that the interview, data analysis, and reporting processes were carried out effectively. These elements are believed to increase the validity and reliability of the research findings.

This study also has some limitations. The first limitation is that this study was conducted only with female students. The reason for this is that the number of female students enrolled at the university where the research was conducted is approximately three times higher than the number of male students. In addition, female students participate more in university courses and other activities than male students, making it easier to reach female students at the university. On the other hand, women are more functional than men in recognising and expressing their emotions, which is why only female students were included in the research for these reasons. It is recommended that male students be included in future studies.

The second limitation is that the study was conducted at a private university in a large city in Turkey. Private universities in Turkey are higher education institutions where students pay a certain tuition for education. In public universities, no tuition is paid for higher education. For this reason, it is anticipated that students attending the university where the research was conducted come from a high socioeconomic background. In addition, the number of students attending classes at private universities is considerably lower than at public universities. This allows students at private universities to interact more with faculty members and other experts working at the university. Due to the large number of students at public universities, this is not possible to the same extent at private universities. For these reasons, it is recommended that the study also include international students studying at public universities. One of the criteria for inclusion in the study is that international students must have lived in Turkey for at least two years, as cultural shock is considered to affect happiness. In future studies, it is recommended to examine the perception of happiness among students who have recently arrived in the country and to compare the results.

### ***Implications***

Happiness is an important factor in increasing the acculturation attitudes, psychosocial and academic adjustment of international university students. It is believed that recognising the meaning that these students attribute to happiness from a cross-cultural perspective will contribute to the literature and mental health practices in preventing lack of adaptability, culture shock and psychological negative outcomes that they may experience while living in a foreign country. Therapeutic practices aimed at protecting and increasing students' happiness by taking cultural characteristics into account can contribute to increasing students' resilience, helping them cope better with culture stress, and facilitating the adaptation process.

Happiness among international female university students differs according to collectivist and individualistic social characteristics rather than gender. Students establish social interaction mostly with friends from their own society. Students from collectivist cultures tend to be more shy, which can lead to unhappiness. Mental health professionals and other specialists working in this field at universities can develop culturally sensitive mental health programmes and peer support systems to support the wellbeing of international students, taking into account identified risk factors. Collaboration between mental health professionals and university administrations can help to implement stress management interventions. Furthermore, policymakers can integrate strategies aimed at improving mental health into higher education policies for international students.

## Conclusion

This study found that international university students define happiness as emotional, cognitive, success, livability, and love components. It was found that students saw unhappiness as a language problem, alienation, and feelings of imprisonment. Students stated that they were happy to become university students in Turkey. They attributed this happiness to feeling respected, living in an environment of peace, finding an educational environment and job opportunities where they could build their careers, cultural traces, and the geography of the country.

Since international students have more social interactions with students who have a cultural structure are similar to their ethnic background, organising sociocultural activities where students can increase their social sharing and introduce their own culture can contribute to their happiness. Projects can be carried out for the integration of Turkish and international students, and peer training can be planned to increase information-sharing among Turkish students. Psychoeducation on topics such as assertiveness and communication skills can help international students increase their academic and social happiness. In particular, since individuals coming from abroad are in the risk category, mental health professionals should plan therapeutic interventions to increase their psychological resilience, considering these prominent characteristics of students.

## Author contributions

Conceptualisation: Author 1; Formal analysis: Author 1,2; Investigation: Author 1,2; Methodology: Author 1; Supervision: Author 1; Writing: Author 1,2; Review&editing: Author 1,2.

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