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Language, Culture, and Care: Navigating Nursing Education as an International Student

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE INFO
International nursing students in non-English-speaking countries face significant challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and limited institutional support, particularly in clinical settings. Research on these issues in Türkiye remains scarce. This study explores how language barriers, cultural adaptation, and institutional support impact the academic and clinical experiences of international nursing students in Türkiye. It also examines their coping strategies for managing stress and adapting to new environments. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with 30 international nursing students from Istanbul-based universities. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's framework, guided by Acculturation Theory and Social Support Theory. Seven themes emerged from the analysis: language barriers, cultural adaptation challenges, mental health struggles, lack of orientation programs, peer support, resilience, and inadequate institutional support. Language barriers were particularly problematic in clinical communication, intensifying stress levels. Participants highlighted the absence of tailored institutional programs, especially for mental health, as a major concern, while peer networks were identified as an essential coping mechanism. The findings underscore the need for Turkish universities to implement tailored support systems, including language training, orientation programs, and mental health resources. Strengthening peer support networks and providing culturally sensitive interventions can significantly enhance the academic and clinical experiences of international nursing students.	
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Dil, Kültür ve Bakım: Uluslararası Bir Öğrenci Olarak Hemşirelik Eğitiminde Yol Alma

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ÖZET	MAKALE BİLGİSİ
İngilizce konuşulmayan ülkelerdeki uluslararası hemşirelik öğrencileri, özellikle dil engelleri, kültürel farklılıklar ve sınırlı kurumsal destek nedeniyle önemli zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır. Bu konularla ilgili Türkiye'deki araştırmalar sınırlıdır. Bu çalışma, dil engellerinin, kültürel adaptasyonun ve kurumsal desteğin Türkiye'deki uluslararası hemşirelik öğrencilerinin akademik ve klinik deneyimlerini nasıl etkilediğini incelemekte ve öğrencilerin stresle başa çıkma ve yeni ortamlara uyum sağlama stratejilerini araştırmaktadır. Çalışma kapsamında, İstanbul'daki üniversitelerde okuyan 30 uluslararası hemşirelik öğrencisiyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Veriler, Braun ve Clarke'ın çerçevesi kullanılarak tematik olarak analiz edilmiştir ve analiz sürecinde Akulturasyon Teorisi ile Sosyal Destek Teorisi rehber olarak kullanılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda yedi tema ortaya çıkmıştır: dil engelleri, kültürel adaptasyon zorlukları, ruh sağlığı sorunları, oryantasyon programlarının eksikliği, akran desteği, dayanıklılık ve yetersiz kurumsal destek. Dil engellerinin özellikle klinik iletişimde ciddi sorunlara yol açtığı ve stres düzeylerini artırdığı belirlenmiştir. Katılımcılar, özellikle ruh sağlığına yönelik kapsamlı programların eksikliğini vurgulamış, buna karşılık akran destek ağlarının etkili bir başa çıkma mekanizması olduğunu ifade etmiştir. Sonuçlar, Türkiye'deki üniversitelerde dil eğitimi, oryantasyon programları ve ruh sağlığı kaynaklarını içeren destek sistemlerinin oluşturulmasının gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Akran destek ağlarının güçlendirilmesi ve kültürel hassasiyetle tasarlanmış müdahalelerin sağlanması, uluslararası hemşirelik öğrencilerinin akademik ve klinik deneyimlerini önemli ölçüde iyileştirebilir. **Anahtar Kelimeler:** Başa çıkma mekanizmaları, Kültürel engeller, Uluslararası Hemşirelik Öğrencileri, Dil engelleri, Destek sistemleri.	

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Introduction / Giriş

The increasing internationalization of higher education has led to a significant rise in the number of students pursuing academic degrees in countries where the primary language of instruction is not English. This shift has brought with it numerous challenges for international students, particularly those studying in fields like nursing, which demands not only academic proficiency but also effective clinical communication and cultural sensitivity. While much of the existing research has focused on international students in English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Agostinelli, 2021; Isabelli-García et al., 2018), comparatively fewer studies have explored the experiences of students in non-English-speaking contexts. This gap is especially pertinent in Türkiye, which has seen a significant rise in international students, from 43,251 in 2013 to over 301,000 in 2023 (Education, 2023). Nursing students in Türkiye face the additional challenge of navigating clinical environments where language proficiency and cultural understanding are critical for success (Gong et al., 2020).

Nursing education demands high levels of communication proficiency and cultural adaptability, and these requirements are often magnified for international students who are unfamiliar with the language and healthcare practices of the host country (Young & Guo, 2016; Ashipala & Matundu, 2023). For international nursing students in Türkiye, the need to quickly develop fluency in both the language of instruction and the clinical terminology adds a layer of complexity that can significantly impact their academic performance and mental well-being. Research has shown that language barriers, particularly in clinical settings, are directly tied to lower levels of confidence and higher levels of anxiety among international nursing students (Abdullateef, 2022; McCloughen et al., 2020). These barriers can hinder effective communication with patients, supervisors, and colleagues, thereby increasing the risk of clinical errors and negatively affecting students' academic outcomes.

Cultural adaptation is another major hurdle for international students, especially in fields like nursing, where cultural competence is vital. According to Acculturation Theory (Berry, 2005), individuals adapting to a new cultural environment must balance their own cultural identity with the norms and values of the host culture. This process can be particularly challenging for international nursing students, who must navigate not only academic and clinical settings but also the broader healthcare system of a foreign country. For these students, cultural adaptation involves more than just learning the language—it requires understanding and adapting to new cultural norms in patient care and communication (Tekkas et al., 2020).

Institutional support plays a crucial role in helping international students manage the challenges of language learning, cultural adaptation, and academic performance. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of comprehensive orientation programs, language support services, and mental health resources in easing the transition for international students (Gong et al., 2020; Tian & Liu, 2021). However, in Türkiye, the support systems available to international nursing students are often inadequate, leaving many students feeling isolated and overwhelmed by the demands of their studies (Kol et al., 2021). The lack of formal

institutional support can exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety, particularly for students who are already struggling with language barriers and cultural differences.

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1994) provides a useful framework for understanding the mental strain experienced by international students who must simultaneously manage language learning, academic performance, and clinical competence. According to this theory, the cognitive load increases when students are required to process new information in a foreign language while also applying that knowledge in high-pressure environments like clinical placements. This cognitive overload can lead to feelings of inadequacy and frustration, further complicating students' ability to succeed in their studies.

In contrast to the often insufficient institutional support, peer networks have been identified as a key source of emotional and academic support for international students. Social Support Theory (Cullen, 1994) emphasizes the importance of peer relationships in helping students cope with stress and adapt to new environments. For international nursing students in Türkiye, peer networks provide critical support, helping them navigate academic challenges, overcome language barriers, and adapt to the cultural and clinical demands of their education. These peer relationships foster a sense of belonging, which is essential for students' overall mental health and academic success (Wan et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on international students, there is still a significant gap in the literature regarding the experiences of nursing students in non-English-speaking countries, particularly Türkiye. While previous studies have explored the impact of language barriers, cultural adaptation, and institutional support on international students more broadly, few have focused specifically on nursing students, whose education requires a unique combination of academic learning and clinical practice. This study aims to address this gap by examining the experiences of international nursing students in Turkish universities. Given the unique challenges they face, particularly in relation to language barriers, cultural adaptation, and the lack of institutional support, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do language barriers impact the academic and clinical experiences of international nursing students in Türkiye?
2. What are the key challenges related to cultural adaptation that these students face, and how do they cope?
3. How do institutional support systems, or the lack thereof, influence their experiences?
4. What mental health issues arise, and how do they affect students' well-being and performance?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of international nursing students in Türkiye as they navigate language barriers and cultural adaptation. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, with a focus on identifying key themes related to language proficiency, cultural challenges, and institutional support.

Sample and Participants

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit 30 international nursing students from universities in Istanbul, comprising both undergraduate and postgraduate students with a mean age of 24.1 years. The sample included 19 females (63.3%) and 11 males (36.7%), with the mean age of males being 24.91 years and females 23.16 years. Participants came from different countries and were at different stages of their nursing education, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants

No	Name	Age	Gender	Country
1	P1	18	Female	Syria
2	P2	22	Female	Iraq
3	P3	23	Female	Iraq
4	P4	19	Female	Egypt
5	P5	23	Male	Syria
6	P6	25	Female	Syria
7	P7	22	Female	Rwanda
8	P8	23	Female	Malavi
9	P9	22	Female	Somalia
10	P10	27	Female	Morocco
11	P11	28	Female	Bangladesh
12	P12	27	Female	Uganda
13	P13	30	Male	Sudan
14	P14	26	Male	Egypt
15	P15	27	Female	Yemen
16	P16	27	Female	Iran
17	P17	21	Female	Burkina Faso
18	P18	23	Female	Afghanistan
19	P19	22	Male	Somalia
20	P20	30	Male	Iran
21	P21	28	Male	Syria
22	P22	28	Male	Somalia
23	P23	29	Female	Palestine
24	P24	24	Female	Afghanistan
25	P25	24	Female	Pakistan
26	P26	23	Male	Yemen
27	P27	22	Male	Palestine
28	P28	20	Male	Syria
29	P29	23	Female	Pakistan
30	P30	22	Male	Syria

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ibn Haldun University Ethical Committee (Approval No: E-71395021-050.04-40366). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. The researcher leading this study is a university faculty member specializing in research methodology, with extensive experience in both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Data Collection

No prior relationship was established between the researcher and the participants before the study. During the data collection phase, efforts were made to build rapport through an initial briefing that explained the purpose of the study, ensuring participants felt comfortable and informed. This was essential to promote open and honest communication during the interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted in Turkish or English, depending on the participant's language preference. A sample of open-ended interview questions is provided to illustrate the initial areas of inquiry below.

1.   What challenges have you faced in communicating in Turkish during your studies?
2.   How has adapting to Turkish culture impacted your learning experience?
3.   What challenges do you face as an international nursing student?
4.   Where do you get support?
5.   How have you managed the stress of learning a new language and culture?

Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participant's permission. Field notes were also taken during and after the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. The interview guide included questions about the students' experiences with language learning, cultural adaptation, academic challenges, and mental health.

Analysis

Thematic analysis, based on Braun & Clarke's (2021) framework, was used to analyze the interview data systematically. This method involved a thorough process of familiarizing with the data, followed by coding and theme identification. The transcriptions of the interviews were read multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of the content, allowing the researchers to gain an initial sense of the student's experiences. Once familiar with the data, open coding was employed to manually label segments of the transcripts according to recurring concepts and ideas. These codes were then examined and grouped into potential sub-themes based on their similarities and patterns. As the analysis progressed, the initial themes were reviewed and refined, resulting in the categorization of significant themes that captured the core aspects of the students' experiences. Each theme was then clearly defined, and relevant quotes from participants were selected to support and illustrate the identified themes. To ensure reliability, two independent researchers conducted the coding, and any

discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Data saturation was achieved after 30 interviews, at which point no new themes emerged. An additional five interviews were conducted to confirm that saturation had been reached, and no further themes were identified. Table 2 below shows the coding and theme-generated process.

Table 2. Shows the Coding and Theme-Generation Process

Key Coding Elements	Sub-Themes	Major Themes
Difficulty in understanding Turkish	Language barrier	Language Barrier and Communication Challenges
Struggling in clinical placements	Clinical challenges	Academic and Clinical Barriers
Feeling isolated in a new culture	Social isolation	Cultural Adaptation and acculturation
Lack of support from teachers	Inadequate academic support	Institutional Support
Difficulty managing stress and anxiety	Mental health struggles	Mental Health and Well-being
Lack of orientation or preparatory programs	Lack of orientation	Orientation Programs Inadequacy
Peer support helps with adaptation	Peer relationships	Social and Peer Support
Overcoming challenges through persistence	Resilience	Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Results

The thematic analysis revealed seven key themes, which were grouped under broader categories based on similarities.

Language Barriers and Communication Challenges

Language difficulties were a predominant issue, affecting both academic performance and clinical practice. Many participants expressed frustration with their inability to communicate effectively in Turkish, particularly in clinical settings. One participant shared, "*I can understand the lectures, but when it comes to speaking with patients, I struggle. I feel lost because I can't explain things properly.*" (P8). Another participant added, "*Sometimes the medical terms are too difficult, and I get anxious when I can't keep up.*" (P15). A third participant expressed similar frustrations, noting, "*In the hospital, I often feel like I'm missing important details because I can't follow the conversations fully. It makes me nervous that I might make mistakes because of it.*" (P5).

These language challenges created significant obstacles in both classroom learning and clinical practice, leading to heightened stress among students.

Cultural Adaptation and Acculturation

Cultural differences also posed significant challenges. Participants often felt isolated due to the lack of shared cultural understanding with Turkish students and faculty. One participant mentioned, "*It's hard to make friends because I don't always understand their jokes or the way they interact.*" (P19). Another participant noted, "*In my home country, learning is more interactive. Here, it's mostly lectures, and I feel like I don't fit in.*" (P25). A third participant

added, "*Sometimes I feel like I'm observing from the outside, not truly part of the group. The way we communicate and socialize is so different from what I'm used to.*" (P11).

These challenges exacerbated feelings of social isolation and further impacted their academic engagement.

Academic and Clinical Barriers

Many participant reported difficulties not only in the academic setting but particularly in clinical placements. For some, the language barrier was compounded by the complexities of clinical tasks, leading to feelings of inadequacy. One participant stated, "*In the hospital, I often struggle to understand instructions from the staff, and that makes me anxious. I'm always worried about making a mistake.*" (P11). Another student expressed, "*Clinical placements are where the pressure is highest. We're expected to communicate fluently, but that's the hardest part for me.*" (P16). A third participant added, "*Sometimes I avoid speaking up because I'm afraid I'll misunderstand something important. It affects my confidence in handling patients.*" (P22).

These clinical challenges, particularly related to language, hindered students' confidence and ability to perform effectively in real-world medical environments.

Mental Health and Well-being

Mental health issues, including anxiety and stress, were frequently reported. Many students described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of language learning, cultural adaptation, and clinical placements. One participant remarked, "*I'm constantly worried about failing. I feel like I can't keep up, and it affects my mental health.*" (P23). Another participant shared, "*The isolation makes it worse. I feel like I don't belong here, and that stress affects my studies.*" (P14). A third participant explained, "*The pressure is always there. It's hard to balance everything, and sometimes I just feel mentally exhausted.*" (P18).

The combined pressure of academic and clinical demands, compounded by feelings of isolation, significantly impacted students' mental well-being.

Orientation Programs Inadequacy

Students reported that they were not adequately prepared for the academic and clinical challenges they faced. Many felt that a comprehensive orientation program could have helped ease their transition. One participant reflected, "*There wasn't enough guidance when we started. I wish there were a program to help us adjust to the language and culture before we started classes.*" (P30). Another participant echoed this sentiment, "*We didn't know what to expect in the clinical placements. It would have been helpful to have more training beforehand.*" (P10). A third participant added, "*I felt completely lost during the first few weeks. An orientation would have given us some direction on how to manage everything.*" (P12).

These gaps in preparatory programs left students feeling underprepared and more anxious about their academic and clinical performance.

Lack of Institutional Support

While peer networks provided some emotional and academic support, many students felt that the institutional resources available to them were inadequate. One participant stated, "*There's not enough help from the university. We have to rely on each other because the support*

system isn't strong." (P18). Another participant mentioned, "*It would be better if the school offered more counseling services or language support.*" (P20). A third participant added, "*I sometimes feel like the university doesn't really understand what we need. More tailored support would make a huge difference.*" (P14).

This lack of institutional support, particularly in providing adequate language training and mental health services, left many students feeling unsupported by their universities.

Social and Peer Support

Despite the lack of formal institutional support, many students relied heavily on their peers to navigate the academic and cultural challenges they encountered. One participant explained, "*I don't know what I would have done without my classmates. We support each other because we are all going through the same struggles.*" (P12). Another participant shared, "*My friends here have become my main support. We share with studies and also when we're feeling stressed or homesick, as it seems we either sail together or sink together. It feels like we're either going to sail together or sink together.*" (P9).

Peer relationships provided a crucial source of emotional support and shared understanding, which helped students cope with the demands of language learning and cultural adaptation.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

In addition to peer support, many students demonstrated resilience by developing their coping mechanisms to overcome challenges. One participant commented, "*I just keep pushing myself because I know I can get through it. It's hard, but I am determined to succeed.*" (P5).

Another participant noted, "*You learn to adapt. Over time, you figure out how to manage the stress and handle things better, but there are still moments when it feels really tough*" (P9).

This resilience allowed students to persist despite the numerous challenges they faced, whether related to language, culture, or clinical practice.

Discussion

The present study sheds light on the experiences of international nursing students in Türkiye, emphasizing the unique challenges they face, including language barriers, cultural adaptation, clinical placements, mental health struggles, and a lack of institutional support. These findings resonate with existing research, offering insights into the difficulties of studying in a non-native language and adjusting to a foreign culture.

One of the most significant findings from the study is the overwhelming impact of language barriers, which affected both academic performance and clinical practice. The participants expressed frustration over their inability to communicate effectively in Turkish, particularly during clinical placements. This finding aligns with research by Masai et al. (2021), who noted that language barriers hinder the ability of international nursing students to engage fully in academic settings, a challenge exacerbated in clinical environments where clear communication is crucial for patient care. Kol (2020) similarly found that international nursing students face heightened anxiety due to difficulties in understanding medical terminology and conveying complex medical information during clinical tasks. The fear of making mistakes due to language misunderstandings was a recurring theme among

participants, reflecting the broader issue of cognitive overload when students are simultaneously navigating language learning and clinical responsibilities, as highlighted by Sweller's (1994) Cognitive Load Theory.

Cultural adaptation further complicated the experiences of these students, with many reporting feelings of social isolation due to differences in communication styles and cultural expectations. Berry's (2005) Acculturation Theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals struggle to integrate into new cultural environments, often experiencing marginalization when they are unable to engage with the host culture fully. The participants' sense of alienation was particularly acute in social settings, where making friends with Turkish students proved challenging, and in academic environments, where learning styles differed significantly from those they were familiar with in their home countries. Holliday (2021) similarly found that international students often struggle with the shift from interactive, dialogic learning in their home countries to more lecture-based, hierarchical educational systems, which can contribute to feelings of being disconnected or out of place.

In addition to language and cultural challenges, many students reported difficulties during their clinical placements, where the pressure to perform well in a foreign language environment compounded their stress. These experiences are consistent with findings by McManus (2019), who noted that clinical environments present heightened challenges for international students due to the need for precise and fluent communication. The fear of making clinical errors, combined with the stress of working in a high-stakes environment, left students feeling inadequate and uncertain about their abilities. Kang & Pacheco (2020) also identified similar challenges among international nursing students, highlighting the need for better preparation and support to help students navigate these demanding situations.

The mental health of international nursing students was another critical issue that emerged from the study. The participants frequently spoke about feelings of anxiety and stress, which were exacerbated by the academic and clinical pressures they faced, compounded by the sense of social isolation. These findings are consistent with the broader body of research on the mental health challenges of international students, particularly in non-English-speaking contexts (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Abdullateef (2022) similarly noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, international students experienced heightened levels of anxiety and depression due to the combined pressures of academic demands, cultural adaptation, and social isolation. The mental health struggles reported by the participants in this study highlight the importance of providing adequate psychological and emotional support to international students, particularly those who face additional challenges related to language and culture.

Compounding these difficulties, the participants reported a lack of comprehensive orientation programs, which left them unprepared for both the academic and clinical challenges they encountered. Several studies have emphasized the importance of such programs in easing the transition for international students. Tian & Liu (2021), for example, found that orientation programs are essential in helping international students adapt to new academic systems, social norms, and cultural environments. Without these programs, students in this study were left

feeling underprepared and unsupported, particularly during their clinical placements, where they felt a more substantial need for guidance and training.

Despite these challenges, the participants found solace in their peer networks, which provided emotional and academic support in the absence of sufficient institutional resources. Peer support played a crucial role in helping students navigate the difficulties of language learning, clinical placements, and social adaptation. Tam (2013) and Ng et al. (2017) both emphasize the importance of peer networks in reducing the adverse effects of cultural adaptation, providing a buffer against feelings of isolation and stress. The peer relationships described by the participants in this study not only helped them manage the demands of their nursing program but also provided a sense of belonging, which was otherwise lacking in their interactions with the broader university community. This finding echoes the Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1994), which suggests that peer collaboration can help reduce cognitive overload by sharing the burden of navigating complex tasks.

However, the lack of formal institutional support, particularly in terms of language training and mental health services, left many students feeling abandoned by their universities. The participants' reliance on peer networks highlights a gap in the institutional support structures that should be in place to assist international students. Cullen's (1994) Social Support Theory underscores the importance of both peer and institutional support in helping students manage stress and adapt to new environments. In this study, the absence of sufficient institutional resources, particularly in terms of counseling services and tailored language support, left many students feeling that their universities were not adequately addressing their needs. Studies by Henderson et al. (2016) and Newton et al. (2018) have similarly found that universities often overlook the specific needs of international nursing students, particularly in non-English-speaking contexts, where language and cultural challenges are especially pronounced.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for professional nursing care, particularly in ensuring that international nursing students can provide safe and effective care while overcoming language and cultural barriers. Effective communication is a fundamental aspect of nursing practice, as it directly impacts patient safety, accurate diagnosis, and appropriate treatment. Language barriers may lead to misinterpretation of patient symptoms, medication errors, and a breakdown in patient-provider trust, ultimately compromising the quality of care. Addressing these challenges through structured language support programs, cultural competence training, and institutional support can help international nursing students develop the necessary skills to communicate clearly and confidently in clinical settings.

Furthermore, overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers aligns with the ethical principle of primum non nocere (first, do no harm), which is central to nursing practice. Miscommunication in healthcare settings can have serious consequences, and nurses must be equipped with the skills to navigate these complexities to provide culturally sensitive, patient-centered care. By highlighting these challenges, this study underscores the need for healthcare institutions to implement targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, bilingual support services, and inclusive training environments, to enhance international nursing students' preparedness. Ultimately, investing in these measures will not only improve student

experiences but also contribute to a more inclusive and competent nursing workforce, ensuring high standards of patient care in diverse clinical settings.

Conclusion

This study highlights the major challenges international nursing students face in Türkiye, particularly regarding language barriers, cultural adaptation, and inadequate institutional support. Language proficiency was found to be a critical issue, significantly affecting both academic performance and clinical practice. Cultural differences further contributed to social isolation, amplifying students' stress and anxiety. Mental health emerged as a key concern, with peer support offering some relief in the absence of strong institutional resources. The findings underscore the urgent need for universities to provide comprehensive orientation programs, language training, and mental health services to better support international students and improve their overall academic and clinical experiences.

Limitations

The study is limited by its focus on a small sample of students from Istanbul, which may not be representative of all international nursing students in Türkiye. Future research could expand the sample size and include students from other regions. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these challenges.

The author uses Grammarly to check for grammatical errors and Mendeley to manage and organize references.

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