

**Exploring the Motivations and Lived Experiences of Kazakhstani Students Pursuing
a PhD Abroad with Family: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

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Ethical Approval



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Date: 24 October 2024

Dear:

Gulnara Alexandrova

This letter now confirms that your research project titled “Motivation and Experience of Pursuing a PhD Abroad with Families: A Phenomenological Study of Kazakhstani Students” has been approved by the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University.

You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely,

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Abstract

Exploring the Motivations and Lived Experiences of Kazakhstani Students Pursuing a PhD Abroad with Family: A Phenomenological Inquiry

An important indicator of the internationalization of higher education is the significant increase in international student mobility (ISM), which can significantly affect people's lives. Kazakhstan is not excluded from this tendency, with the number of Kazakhstani students participating in international exchange programs increased from 350 to 2,694 between 2011 and 2019 (Kuzhabekova, 2024). However, there are limited studies on Kazakhstani postgraduate students with families pursuing their advanced degree abroad. The purpose of this research is to investigate the motivations, experiences, ~~and~~ challenges, and strategies to cope with the challenges, of Kazakhstani PhD students with their families during their studies abroad. The study uses a descriptive qualitative methodology, findings based on 10 in-depth interviews with PhD students from Kazakhstan who traveled to the United States to complete their postgraduate degrees with their family members, and is informed by Bourdieu's theory of social capital and Push Pull Plus theory (Bourdieu, 2011; Van Hear et al., 2018). The findings identified four types of motivation that students had to leave their home country and go abroad to pursue their PhD degree: intrinsic, extrinsic, achievement value and cost of quitting. Positive experiences included personal level and external support, while the challenges were identified as being psychological, academic and financial. The strategies that students use to cope with these challenges are also presented in this paper. The study offers contributions the existing body of knowledge regarding migration and international education in Kazakhstan and to broader higher education policy and practice.

Аннотация

Исследование мотивации и жизненного опыта казахстанских студентов, обучающихся в аспирантуре за рубежом с семьей: феноменологическое исследование

Важным показателем интернационализации высшего образования является значительный рост мобильности международных студентов (ISM), который может существенно влиять на жизнь людей. Казахстан не является исключением из этой тенденции: количество казахстанских студентов, участвующих в международных программах обмена, увеличилось с 350 до 2 694 в период с 2011 по 2019 год (Кужабекова, 2024). Однако существует ограниченное число исследований, посвящённых казахстанским аспирантам с семьями, обучающимся за рубежом. Цель данного исследования — изучить мотивацию, опыт, трудности и стратегии преодоления трудностей казахстанских студентов PhD, обучающихся за границей вместе с семьями.

Исследование основано на описательной качественной методологии. Его выводы получены на основе 10 углублённых интервью с казахстанскими аспирантами, приехавшими в США для получения учёной степени вместе со своими семьями. Исследование опирается на теорию социального капитала Пьера Бурдьё и теорию Push Pull Plus (Бурдьё, 2011; Van Hear и др., 2018).

Результаты исследования выявили четыре типа мотивации, побудивших студентов покинуть свою родную страну и отправиться за границу для получения степени PhD: внутренняя мотивация, внешняя мотивация, ценность достижения и издержки отказа. Положительный опыт включал личностный рост и внешнюю

поддержку, в то время как основными трудностями были психологические, академические и финансовые аспекты. В статье также представлены стратегии, которые студенты используют для преодоления этих трудностей.

Это исследование может внести вклад в существующую базу знаний по вопросам миграции и международного образования в Казахстане, а также оказать влияние на более широкую политику и практику в сфере высшего образования.

Аннотация

Отбасымен шетелде PhD оқып жатқан қазақстандық студенттердің мотивациясы мен өмірлік тәжірибесін зерттеу: феноменологиялық талдау

Жоғары білімнің интернационалдануының маңызды көрсеткіштерінің бірі — халықаралық студенттік мобильділіктің (ISM) айтарлықтай өсуі, ол адамдардың өміріне елеулі әсер етуі мүмкін. Қазақстан да бұл үрдістен тыс қалмаған: 2011 жылдан 2019 жылға дейін халықаралық алмасу бағдарламаларына қатысқан қазақстандық студенттердің саны 350-ден 2 694-ке дейін өскен (Құжабекова, 2024). Дегенмен, отбасымен шетелде магистратурадан кейінгі білім алатын қазақстандық студенттерге қатысты зерттеулер саны шектеулі. Осы зерттеудің мақсаты – отбасымен бірге шетелде PhD дәрежесін алу барысында қазақстандық студенттердің мотивациясын, тәжірибесін, кездесетін қиындықтары мен сол қиындықтарды еңсеру стратегияларын анықтау.

Зерттеу сипаттамалық сапалық әдіснамаға негізделген. Нәтижелер АҚШ-қа отбасымен барып, PhD дәрежесін алуға ұмтылған 10 қазақстандық студентпен жүргізілген тереңдетілген сұхбаттарға сүйенеді. Зерттеу Бурдьенің әлеуметтік капитал теориясы мен Push Pull Plus теориясы аясында жүргізілді (Бурдые, 2011; Van Hear және басқалар, 2018).

Нәтижелер студенттердің өз елінен кетіп, шетелде PhD оқуына түрткі болған төрт түрлі мотивацияны анықтады: ішкі мотивация, сыртқы мотивация, жетістік құндылығы және оқудан бас тарту құны. Жағымды тәжірибелер ретінде жеке деңгейдегі және сыртқы қолдау көрсетілді, ал қиындықтар психологиялық, академиялық және қаржылық сипатта болды. Бұл мақалада студенттердің осы қиындықтарды еңсеру үшін қолданған стратегиялары да сипатталған.

Зерттеу Қазақстандағы көші-қон және халықаралық білім беру мәселелеріне қатысты білім базасын толықтырып, жоғары білім беру саясаты мен тәжірибесіне өз үлесін қоса алады.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research seeks to investigate the motivations and experiences of a group of Kazakhstani PhD students with families who are studying overseas. In this chapter, the research study is introduced. It begins by outlining the study's background. Additionally, included are the research questions, problem statement, and statement of purpose. The definitions of the key terms and the importance of the study are further explained in this chapter. The chapter concludes with the thesis's overall outline.

1.1 Background

International students' study abroad experience has become more accessible nowadays because of national programs that support and encourage freedom of mobility; such as Erasmus, Turkiye Burslari, Bolashak, and others (Naissimova et al., 2021). A report released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2021 predicts that over seven million students will engage in some form of international education experience by 2025, a substantial increase from 1.3 million in 1990. According to Hernández-Torrano et al., (2024) this significant rise in international student mobility (ISM), is considered to be a critical indicator of the internationalization of higher education and can have a considerable impact on individuals' lives. The authors highlight the growing recognition among scholars of the importance of investigating the actual experiences that occur during students' stay abroad. This tendency is referred to as International Educational Mobility (IEM), which includes all brief stays abroad in formal and informal contexts within secondary and post-secondary schooling (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2024; Waibel et al., 2017). The authors claim that students taking part in formal study abroad and placement programs, as well as children temporarily living abroad due to their parents' international migration decisions, all have firsthand contact with IEM. Hernández-Torrano et al., (2024) claim that one of the most extensively referenced definitions of ISM was articulated by Kinginger (2009), who describes it as "a temporary

sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes”. In their critique of this definition, Benson et al. (2013) highlight Kinginger’s (2009) efforts to differentiate ISM from tourism (education versus leisure) and migration (temporary versus permanent). However, they acknowledge that these distinctions can become blurred when students travel abroad. For instance, ISM may converge with migration when certain international students pursue postgraduate studies abroad without the intention of returning home after graduation. Moreover, international students may enroll in short-term programs that integrate academic study with cultural tourism (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2024).

Kazakhstan is not immune from these global trends; the number of students choosing to pursue their studies overseas has been rising every year (Bocharova, 2020; Edaily, 2019; UNESCO, 2006). According to educationfair.net (2024), the Bolashak Program has provided nearly 10,000 students with funding for study abroad since 1993. In 2023, nearly 90,000 Kazakhstan’s students were enrolled in international programs. Approximately 80% of these students studying abroad are self-funded (trade.gov., 2023). According to Kuzhabekova (2024), the number of Kazakhstani students engaged in foreign mobility increased from 350 to 2,694 years between 2011 and 2019.

Furthermore, Moors et al. (2022) highlight an increasing pattern of people taking graduate studies later in life—typically after becoming parents. This emphasizes the necessity of comprehending doctorate students’ dual identities as professionals and parents who have to juggle the responsibilities of their jobs, families, and academics. Duru and Poyrazlı (2007) noted that married international students were more likely to suffer from acculturative stress than single international students. According to Berry (1998) “acculturative stress” is the feeling of stress brought on by cultural and psychological changes. In this regard, married international students often have additional challenges when adjusting to the culture of the host country while studying abroad. According to Poyrazlı and Kavanaugh (2006), married students

must manage both immediate familial and academic issues, which might make their transition process more difficult and they adjust to their new environment differently than single students.

Buglan and Çiftçi (2017) assert that the age at which students pursue their graduate degrees frequently aligns with the stage of establishing a family unit, making it crucial to examine this demographic to understand their motivations for studying abroad and associated challenges and opportunities. These international students, especially the married doctoral ones, should find ways to balance study and family responsibilities, as work obligations are integral to graduate education and professional development, and maintaining a separation between professional and personal lives can be particularly challenging in academia (Ott, 2007). Therefore, the psychosocial adaptation that happens to married international PhD students may be influenced by the interplay of work-family life, which refers to how difficulties related to work and family influence one another. In order to better understand the psychological adaptation of married international PhD students, I examined the literature in this study with a particular emphasis on how their work and family lives interact.

1.2 Problem Statement

Postgraduate international students with families face unique challenges (Buglan & Çiftçi, 2017). Previous studies have demonstrated that a variety of obstacles, such as language barriers, financial constraints, a new educational system, involvement in class discussions, varying communication norms, dining options, housing arrangements, and friendship-making, could result in students' social exclusion (Soylemez-Karakoc et al., 2013). Married international students may face additional challenges throughout the cross-cultural adjustment process, as evidenced by Duru and Poyrazlı (2007) indicating that married international students were more likely to experience acculturative stress than single international students. According to Strong and DeVault (1993) "acculturative stress" is a type of psychological stress connected to relocation. They have problems like family responsibilities, the adjustment of

family members, lack of funding, and many others. Therefore, as members of a family, husbands, wives, and children must accommodate one another's aspirations to ensure the proper acculturation of the entire family (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

However, studies on this topic are limited. According to Calikoglu (2018), most published research on overseas students has been analyzing postgraduate and undergraduate experiences together rather than focusing on the particular academic level of the students. Therefore, international graduate students who pursue their studies abroad with their families face a unique set of motivations and experiences that are not always well understood or addressed by educational institutions and policymakers (Rumbley et al., 2012). Furthermore, Nassimova et al. (2021), claimed that the fundamental reasons why international PhD students from Kazakhstan choose to study abroad with their families are not well understood. While there is plenty of evidence to support the basic reasons for studying abroad, the particular motivations and thought processes of students who bring their families have not been fully examined. Hence, more research is needed to explore the motivation and experience of PhD students with their family members abroad.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the study abroad experiences of a group of married Kazakhstani students, underpinning their motivations for pursuing their doctoral studies abroad, the advantages of staying abroad, and the academic and non-academic challenges they confront in the host country. Motivation is a phenomenon that explains the mechanisms underlying an individual's determination and stamina (Reeve, 2009). Meanwhile, experience is a complex concept that is influenced by an individual's perception and knowledge (Jukka & Veli Matti, 2019). This empirical study aims to investigate the motivations, positive experiences, and challenges faced by international PhD students with families and identify the necessary support mechanisms to facilitate their academic success

while effectively managing their personal and family obligations. One of the intended outcomes of the paper is therefore to assist with the adjustment process for married international graduate students who intend to study abroad.

1.4 Research Questions

In the light of these considerations, the present qualitative study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What motivates Kazakhstani married PhD students to pursue their studies abroad?
2. What positive experiences and challenges do the participants have while pursuing their degrees abroad?
3. How could the conditions of international PhD students and their family members be improved?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Although there is some literature regarding mobility programs and returnee readjustment among PhD holders (e.g., Kairanova, 2019; Kuzhabekova, 2024), there is a lack of literature exploring the Kazakhstani PhD students' motivations and experiences with their families abroad. This research is important for several reasons. First, this study aims to enhance the current literature on international education and migration by examining a demographic that has not received much attention: PhD students with families from Kazakhstan who are studying overseas (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). It provides empirical data and insights specific to Kazakhstan, enriching the global understanding of student mobility and family dynamics. Although a lot of research has been done on foreign students, it frequently ignores the family situation of people who study overseas and have dependents. The majority of the existing literature is based on students in Western environments and mostly concentrates on their academic experiences. To better comprehend their lived experiences, it is helpful to take a

comprehensive and holistic approach that takes into account sociocultural, emotional, and familial factors.

The second contribution is related to higher education policy. Based on student's perceptions it investigates potential risks associated with Kazakhstan's external migration of educated people while also formulating policy suggestions for the relevant government departments. It provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers to develop policies that support the integration and well-being of international students and their families, both in the host country and in Kazakhstan. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Kazakhstani graduate students studying abroad with their families, leading to improved support systems, informed policy-making, and enhanced student and family well-being.

The third contribution relates to practice. Research findings offer to help future Kazakhstani family graduate students make more informed decisions about studying abroad, particularly in selecting universities and countries that offer the best support for their unique needs. Additionally, group workshops on work-family life and psychological adjustment could be provided by university counseling centers to married overseas students in their first year of study, as well as their spouses (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2018). In addition, the interaction between job and family life may become even more noticeable when kids are involved. Therefore, graduate programs may also assist foreign students in connecting with helpful services, such as child care centers for students who have children, based on their individual needs.

Overall, research on PhD students with families pursuing their studies abroad is significant because it highlights the unique motivations, and positive and negative experiences faced by this group. These students are often driven by the desire for academic and professional growth, better career prospects, and improved living conditions for their families (Trujillo et al., 2020). While their experiences can be enriched by cultural exchange, access to advanced

academic resources, and strengthened family bonds, they face significant challenges such as balancing family and academic responsibilities, financial strain, social isolation, and visa-related issues. Understanding these experiences can inform the development of supportive policies in higher education institutions, leading to improved academic performance, retention rates, and overall well-being for international students with families.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis includes six basic chapters. The background information and problem statement are presented first in the study's introductory section. The study's goal, research questions, and significance are then given. Additionally, key concept definitions are provided.

The literature on the research issue is thoroughly reviewed in the second chapter. A description of data collecting and analysis is given in the third chapter. This chapter begins with an explanation of the study design that leads to the sample size and target population. Also detailed are the instruments used in this study. Finally, the data analysis is presented. Information on the findings of this research is presented in the fourth chapter.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This review of the literature looks at why PhD students choose to study abroad based on different types of motivations. Four types of motivations are described and examined: intrinsic and extrinsic, achievement value, and cost of quitting. Then, positive experiences and challenges of pursuing postgraduate studies with family members are explored in the literature. Additionally, international students' strategies to cope with the challenges they face are highlighted. Finally, the motivations for pursuing a degree abroad, positive experiences, and challenges are considered in the Kazakhstani context.

2.1 Study Abroad Motivations at the PhD Level

There is a rise in international mobility worldwide (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2024). The majority of international students' study in a select few key target markets, the most prominent of which are Anglophone nations including the US, UK, Australia, and Canada. Despite enrolment growth of 1 to 2% annually between 2014 and 2019, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics projected that the mobility of international students in the United States for higher education would increase significantly faster in the coming years (Unesco, 2020). Between 2019 and 2030, 5% annual enrollment growth is anticipated.

To explore this phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the motivation of students to pursue their studies. Reeve (2009), explained motivation as a psychological phenomenon that both illustrates the mechanisms behind a person's determination and offers guidance for certain behaviors. Since in this paper, married PhD students are considered motivation may differ for married couples with and without children.

Students are motivated to study abroad for a variety of reasons, some of which are academic, professional, and personal. Basri and Talebloo (2015) claim that the academic reason for pursuing PhD abroad is to have access to advanced research possibilities, specialized programs, and higher-quality education that may not be available in their native nations. The

professional reason for pursuing PhD abroad is the possibility of career growth through studying overseas, which can improve employability by giving students specialized skills, language fluency, and a global perspective that are highly sought after by employers. Furthermore, a lot of students view studying abroad as an opportunity to push themselves, become more independent, and leave their comfort zones, this is considered as a personal reason for pursuing PhD abroad (Yue & Lu, 2022). According to McLeod & Wainwright (2009), the chance to get fully immersed in a foreign culture, gain a global perspective, and create an international network is a personal reason.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), there are two main types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. International PhD students who are motivated *intrinsically* are deeply interested in the research area that they are exploring beyond their home country. For students to succeed and make the shift from dependent to independent researchers, they must have an innate passion for research (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2008). Another type of motivation is *extrinsic value*. This motivation is in contrast to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The authors argued that people with this type of motivation are not interested in research itself, they use this approach for immigration purposes or self-realization in terms of career goals. Independent people in developing nations may find that earning a PhD in the United States is a significant route to getting permanent residency in the United States or citizenship (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

However, this study includes two more types of motivation regarding pursuing that relate to the pursuit of an advanced degree, achievement value, and cost of quitting. According to Zhou (2014), with the *achievement value* motivation people need to feel valued and show others and themselves that they are capable of having a positive feeling about their abilities. Because they have a basic need for attainment, people may look for difficult tasks and strive for excellence (such as completing a PhD degree) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yue and Lu (2022), claim

that the majority of international PhD students are motivated to accomplish an advanced degree abroad, preferably in high reputation institutions, because of their motivation to acquire social and professional status.

In Zhou's (2014) study, although various student groups were impacted by the factors mentioned above, all students were impacted, in one way or another, by the significant *emotional and social costs of quitting*. Some were afraid of failing before finishing the degree because they felt obligated to support their families. Zhou (2014) identified that a PhD program might have significant emotional and social costs associated with leaving or remaining in it. Stress may negatively affect persistence at any point in life, including applying to graduate programs, finishing required tests, becoming an independent scholar, and finding work after graduation (Gardner, 2009). Additionally, Zhou (2014) noted that all these types of motivations are not a permanent state, and they change throughout the academic path.

2.2 Positive Experiences of PhD Students with Families Pursuing their Studies Abroad

International PhD students have positive and negative experiences during their studies abroad. First, the positive experiences are discussed. According to Basri and Talebloo (2015), there are two kinds of positive experiences people get from pursuing PhD abroad with their family members. These are cultural familiarity and self-development. The authors divided these experiences into different aspects. Cultural familiarity was grouped into three categories: intercultural exchange, new friendship, and global perceptions. Self-development was categorized into four elements: independence, consciousness, acquiring academic abilities, and financial management (Barsi & Talebloo, 2015).

According to McLeod & Wainwright (2009), cultural familiarity is beneficial for the PhD students and their family members because people gain intercultural competency. As stated by Leung et al. (2014), intercultural proficiency is the ability to think and act appropriately, communicate and work together with people from different cultural backgrounds

both at home and abroad, and work well across cultural borders. The results of their study show that as a positive experience, international students mention their international friends and connections as an advantage. All of the students felt that studying abroad gave them the chance to meet wonderful people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Based on McLeod and Wainwright's (2009) research, every student expressed the belief that studying abroad allowed them to see the world from a variety of angles.

Studying abroad can also help with self-development, through improved financial management, academic skill acquisition, independence, and self-awareness (Basri & Talebloo, 2015). The authors assert that there are two further benefits that international students may experience: independence and an open mind. Furthermore, the chance to learn more about various educational systems is also perceived as a positive experience.

2.3 Challenges of PhD Students with Their Families Pursuing Their Studies Abroad.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2024), one of the definitions of the word challenge is something difficult, and it determines someone's capacity or ability to achieve. Buglan and Ciftci (2017), argued that married international PhD students experience unique difficulties juggling their professional and familial obligations because of the difference in workloads between undergraduate and graduate students. They claim that PhD students have extra employment duties in addition to their coursework and program schedules, even though both types of students complete coursework and follow schedules.

Prior research has identified that the process of international students adjusting to the new country is impacted by a number of elements, including their marital status, nationality, proficiency in the language of the host country, and the chance to engage socially with students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). Galloway and Jenkins (2005) argued that there are also many other unique obstacles that international students should overcome, such as discrimination, cultural shock, limited support, financial hardships, and

educational approaches that are not familiar to them. Beyond overcoming culture shock, students face other challenges including getting used to a new lifestyle that includes unusual foods and beverages, which could be in opposition to their normal eating habits and require making changes.

International graduate students often encounter several types of challenges while pursuing their studies abroad (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Here are three main categories: psychological, academic, and financial challenges. The *psychological challenges* are when international students may find difficulties in comprehending academic requirements, cultural norms, and daily schedules that differ from those in their home country. Additionally, several issues, such as linguistic barriers and cultural differences, may make it difficult to become friends with locals as well as the absence of established support systems (Jou & Fukada, 1997; Myer-Walls et al., 2011; Ying & Liese, 1991). When international students are married and have family members, they also have some psychological issues that must be considered.

According to Wa-Mbaleka et al. (2015), children accompany some of the married international students who travel overseas to study. The fact that these children are going away from home, school, and their familiar surroundings has an impact on their conduct, outlook, and international experiences. According to Rabe (2009), children can also endure culture shock and lose a portion of their national identity. Additionally, some children may feel isolated, which could have an impact on their futures. The term “cross-cultural kid” was coined by Pollock and Reken (1999) to describe any child who had at some point been a part of two or more different cultural environments. Because of the increased migration brought on by globalization, there is a growing phenomenon known as cross-cultural kids.

According to Hajar (2024), when studying overseas, international PhD students frequently encounter serious *academic difficulties*, especially when it comes to self-confidence and language barriers. As students may find it difficult to communicate advanced ideas as

fluently as their native peers, adjusting to academic situations where English or another foreign language is the major medium can cause feelings of insufficiency and isolation. Their self-esteem may suffer as a result, and stress over their academic achievement may also increase. Furthermore, Hajar (2024) points out that when students talk with accents, linguistic problems can occasionally result in bullying or microaggressions. These kinds of encounters can cause students to feel excluded, which lowers their self-esteem and adds to the already stressful nature of PhD programs. As a result, these difficulties can negatively impact students' ability to advance academically as well as their general well-being.

More living expenditures, extra charges for visas, and more tuition fees are common challenges faced by international students (Jou & Fukada, 1997). Moreover, Yan and Berliner (2013) claim that changes in immigration laws or problems with the bureaucracy may affect students' capacity to work and learn, as well as lack of financial resources. According to Mayers-Walls et al, (2011), PhD students with families who are studying overseas sometimes encounter severe financial difficulties, which can greatly complicate their academic path. Since many scholarships or stipends are insufficient to maintain a family, among the primary difficulties is balancing the high expense of living in a foreign country with the few financial means available to them. Child care, health insurance, and other family expenses can add up rapidly, putting pressure on students to make difficult financial decisions about how to divide their limited finances. Consequently, all things considered, the financial difficulties of raising a family while studying overseas can significantly affect both academic achievement and personal well-being (Mayers-Walls et al, 2011).

Overall, international graduate family students are a unique group of students, who can make a great impact in research and teaching, but this is also potentially the most vulnerable group of students because they have so many responsibilities and so much pressure. Moreover, their adjustment to the new environment is more challenging, because they are part of the

family and their family members face difficulties in a new social environment (Buglan & Ciftci, 2017; Mayers-Walls et al, 2011).

2.4. Strategies to Cope With Challenges

According to Luthans et al. (2015), coping strategies may be crucial for adaptation and psychological well-being because sociocultural adaptation is a complicated and sometimes difficult process. Folkman et al. (1986) described coping as a cognitive and behaviorally challenging process of controlling both internal and external factors. Some research suggests that the relationship between particular coping abilities and adaptation-related outcomes is still unclear, despite the fact that many findings have shown a correlation between coping skills and adaptation (Arthur, 1998). Previous qualitative and quantitative research has identified several coping strategies that international students have suggested to manage their emotions of depression. Depression and homesickness can be effectively managed by engaging in physical activity, limiting internet usage, interacting with others, and calling parents and friends in their hometown frequently (Khawaja & Duncanson, 2008). Prior research has also identified a number of issues that international students encounter, such as language barriers, low self-efficacy, a lack of support, poor social interactions, perceived discrimination, academic difficulties, loneliness, cultural stress, financial difficulties, inappropriate food, weather variations, family issues, psychological issues, and other elements like personality (Saravanan et al., 2018). Lastly, Movahed et al. (2019) state that while financial preparation and family support are more critical strategies for some students, time management is more vital for others. As a result, these solutions were split into groups in this study based on the difficulties they encountered.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The push-pull plus model, which integrates concepts of “push” factors—such as motivations driving people to leave their place of origin—and “pull” factors—such as the

attractive elements drawing them to their host country—provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex decision-making processes involved in international education (McMahon, 1992; Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The “Plus” component further accounts for additional layers of influence, including personal and familial dynamics that impact the decision to study abroad (Van Hear et al., 2018).

According to Calikoglu (2018), the push-pull model has offered a helpful foundation for comprehending the reasons behind the migration of international students from developing to developed nations. Moreover, according to previous studies, international students’ destination choices can be explained in three basic steps: (a) choosing to pursue education abroad rather than in their home country because of push factors; (b) selecting their destination country after considering pull factors; and (c) choosing their host institution after taking into account unique pull factors, such as the program’s quality and the institution’s financial situation (Calikoglu, 2018; Chen, 2008).

Nassimova et al. (2021), used the push-pull plus model in their study. After analyzing the survey results and the in-depth interviews using the push-pull plus model, they concluded that the following factors affected the migration paths of Kazakh students who were on the move: a political climate of nation-building, the likelihood of conflict; corruption, the underdevelopment of democratic institutions, low salaries, the unfavorable reputation of higher education in Kazakhstan, the language of instruction, and the prestige of degrees from abroad; the sharp rise in demand for proficiency in Kazakh and its shift to the Latin script, the chance to get foreign citizenship while pursuing an education or after graduating, pressure from relatives and parents, and prospects for grants and scholarships.

The push-pull plus theory has also been used in other studies. For instance, Altbach (2010), argued that the majority of developing countries have extremely few master’s and doctorate options, and those that do frequently fall short of international standards.

Additionally, she claimed there was an absence of professors with contemporary research skills. Moreover, Bayetova and Robertson (2019), mentioned that there are fewer opportunities for faculty members at private universities in Kazakhstan to carry out excellent research because there are not enough well-equipped labs and libraries. However, there were important reforms in Kazakhstan, such as signing the Bologna Declaration in 2010 and establishing the Bolashak program, through which its alumni were supposed to be agents in modernizing the educational system (Tampayeva, 2015; Kiselyeva, 2021; Kuzhabekova, 2014). In countries where university research is not as advanced, returning scholars generally face challenges in securing work relating to research (Gill, 2010). By applying this model, the research in this thesis aims to elucidate how PhD students navigate their academic pursuits in the context of familial responsibilities and cultural adjustments, offering deeper insights into their experiences and the interplay between motivational forces and situational challenges.

Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical framework—particularly the ideas of social, symbolic, and economic capital—provides a helpful framework for understanding the objectives and experiences of married PhD students from Kazakhstan who are studying abroad. "Social capital" is defined by Bourdieu (1986) as "the sum of the real or potential resources which are linked to maintaining a strong network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248), while symbolic capital that is thought to represent academic merit, international recognition, and high social status is a Western diploma. Meantime, economic capital is defined as a resource that is "immediately and directly convertible into money" (p. 243). The concepts of symbolic and economic capital proposed by Bourdieu (1986) can be very helpful in understanding the motivations of overseas students.

Studying abroad enables people to widen their professional and personal social networks by interacting with researchers, peers, and organizations from around the world (Mishra, 2020). Future prospects for joint research, employment, and access to international

resources might arise from these relationships. The support systems that married PhD candidates build or rely on in their first country to balance professional and family obligations—such as locating child care, social services, or assimilating into the community—are also considered to be a part of their social capital.

"The sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119) is what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define as social capital. The networks' Social capital, or that provides support, plays a vital role in their experiences. PhD students often rely on connections within host-country academic and social communities to manage challenges. At the same time, the support networks from their home country (e.g., extended family and Kazakhstani student communities) offer emotional and logistical aid. However, social capital is also stretched as family dynamics and social roles shift in the new environment.

The theoretical framework of Bourdieu fits in effectively with this study of the motivations and experiences of married PhD students from Kazakhstan who are studying overseas. He provides an in-depth understanding of the complex reasons behind their choices to pursue their studies overseas as well as the difficulties they encounter by utilizing the concepts of cultural and social capital. Using the combination of Push Pull Plus theory and Bourdieu's theory, I investigate how these students make the most of their resources, negotiate cultural and academic inequalities, and deal with the competing demands of both family life and academic success in an unfamiliar environment.

2.6 Motivation of Kazakhstani PhD Students with Families Pursuing Their Degrees Abroad

Tengri News reported that the Bureau of National Statistics stated that 12,732 individuals departed Kazakhstan in 2023. 3,785 persons left the country between January and

March of 2024. There was a 42.1% rise in the number of individuals departing Kazakhstan during the same period in 2023 (Askhat, 2024). He mentioned that particularly, education has a powerful pulling effect on Kazakhs, pulling them out of the nation. As per the most recent data provided by the UNESCO Statistical Institute, Kazakhstan has 91,200 students, ranking ninth globally in terms of the number of students studying abroad (Unesco, 2020).

Nassimove et al. (2021) explored three types of returnees whose motivation depends on their period of living in the host countries: immediate returnees, deferred returnees, and non-returnees. They argued that each group of these students has various motivations to pursue their studies. For instance, most of the “Immediate Returnees” had received scholarships under the Bolashak Program, which is supported by the Kazakh government. There is a contractual requirement for the Bolashak graduates to return to Kazakhstan and remain for a duration of two to five years. They considered studying overseas as a chance to put their knowledge and abilities to the test in a new, more difficult setting, and to gain new academic and life experience.

The next group of students is known as “Deferred Returnees” who intend to postpone their return. They are also motivated to stay overseas in foreign countries to get some professional and life experience. They considered themselves to be highly qualified experts who could find work wherever in the increasingly globalized information economy (Faist, 2000). Remarkably, there was little variation in the quantity of “Deferred Returnees” across national borders or among undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students.

The last group of the students are “Non-Returnees”. “Education for the purposes of emigration” was their migration goal (Nassimova et al. 2021). Non-returnees claim that there are no opportunities for them to grow professionally and financially in Kazakhstan. They also added that the payment for their skills and experience in Kazakhstan is low. Hence, they are

motivated to stay abroad because they cited their poor employment prospects and the low customer demand in Kazakhstan for certain qualifications as reasons for not returning.

Kazakhstani students who go to study abroad were divided into three groups according to their motivation purposes. Those who go to study abroad with the support of the Bolashak scholarship usually come back immediately after their studies. Others, decide to get lived and worked experience and delay their return. The last group of students have immigration purposes from the very beginning, so they change their visa status and do not come back to their homeland (Nassimova, 2021).

The literature on PhD students who study overseas with their families identifies a variety of motivations intrinsic, extrinsic, achievement value, and cost of quitting. In positive experience, there were identified two types: personal growth and external support. Challenges were divided into three subthemes: psychological, academic, and financial. Lastly, strategies to cope with challenges were divided into three subthemes: time management, support each other, and financial preparation. The push-pull theory and Bourdieu's idea of capital are two theoretical frameworks that aid in the explanation of motivations for studying overseas. Three student groups are identified by Nassomova et al. (2021) in the Kazakhstani context based on their motivations: immediate returnees, deferred returnees, and non-returnees.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological details. First, the research design of the qualitative study is presented. There is then an explanation of the research site's rationale and description. The chosen phenomenological approach of data collection is justified and the sampling process is described. In addition, techniques and tools for gathering data are covered. The data analysis processes are covered in this chapter as well. Lastly, a description of the ethical procedures in this investigation is given.

3.1 Research Design

A research design serves as the framework for a planned study. Akhtar (2016) argues that it serves as the “glue” holding every component of a research endeavor together. Since the study involves understanding people's experiences, a qualitative research design was used to conduct the research and address the research questions. Qualitative research is commonly used to investigate and comprehend the meaning that individuals or groups experience in a social or human context (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, it is appropriate for exploring complex personal and relational dynamics and providing rich, contextual insights into the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2015). One of the most distinctive features of qualitative research, according to Hennink et al. (2020), is that it enables the researcher to see problems from the viewpoint of the study participants and comprehend the interpretations and implications they assign to actions, occurrences, or objects. Furthermore, Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) discovered five universal traits that apply to all qualitative research. There are natural settings, subject-based communication, researcher as participant, subject intentionality, and pragmatics. Since, this study is about the complex, unique experiences of PhD students studying overseas with their families, in order to fully explore and understand—experiences that are best represented through detailed, descriptive data—a qualitative research design was selected.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argue that phenomenology is an appropriate method for researching human experiences that are subjective, emotive, and often intense. Johnson and Christensen (2019) assert that phenomenology can be used to focus on the unique aspects of a person's experience of something. As this study investigates and characterizes how Kazakhstani PhD students perceive the phenomenon of living and studying overseas with their family members, a phenomenological approach was considered to be most appropriate.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Qualitative research provides a detailed analysis of a specific occurrence, without making generalizations about a community. Thus, I purposefully selected people with the purpose of better comprehending the phenomena of motivations, positive experiences, and challenges they are facing during their studies abroad with family members (Creswell, 2015). The Kazakhstani family PhD students who are pursuing their advanced degrees with their family members were identified as a population for the research paper.

Purposive sampling is “a technique where subjects are purposefully selected to represent some explicit predefined traits or conditions” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995, p. 104). According to Creswell (2015), it may aid in gaining comprehensive knowledge that may provide insightful information and aid in understanding the phenomenon. Consequently, using a purposive sample selection technique made it possible to gain an understanding of the common challenges faced by PhD Kazakhstani students with families while studying abroad. The requirements for the sampling included some criteria, such as being enrolled in one of the universities in the United States on PhD program, having at least six months of studying and living abroad experience, and being accompanied by immediate family members (spouse and children or just spouse). Additionally, to be able to collect rich and diverse data I aimed at recruiting Kazakhstani female and male PhD students from different places studying on

different academic PhD programs. As a recruiting strategy, I used a personal network and social network to recruit the first participants at the beginning.

In addition, Snowball sampling was also used as a method of recruiting participants in this study. According to Creswell (2015), snowball sampling is “a form of purposeful sampling that typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled” (p. 208). Therefore, at the end of the interview, the participants were asked if they could suggest someone who meets the eligibility requirements for participation.

Naturally, a purposeful recruiting strategy implies that the researcher is aware of who has experienced whatever is under investigation (Creswell, 2013). The author claims that for a phenomenological study, the appropriate sample size may range from 3 to 25 individuals, depending on the topic the researcher is examining and the diversity he is trying to represent. The study included 10 participants selected through purposive sampling, as they have relevant experiences as Kazakhstani PhD students with families studying abroad (Table 1).

Table 1.

Number of participants	Age	Gender	Year of study	Number of children
Participant 1	26-30	Female	1	1
Participant 2	36-40	Female	3	3
Participant 3	36-40	Female	3	3
Participant 4	36-40	Female	4	3
Participant 5	36-40	Female	3	3
Participant 6	21-25	Male	3	1
Participant 7	40-43	Female	4	2
Participant 8	36-40	Female	4	1
Participant 9	36-40	Female	2	2
Participant 10	26-30	Female	3	1

Ten PhD students from Kazakhstan who are studying overseas with their families are shown in the participant profile table along with their academic and demographic details. Only one respondent is male, and nine out of ten participants are female. The majority of participants are between the ages of 36 and 40, suggesting a tendency for PhD study at a later stage of life, frequently with established family responsibilities. Different family configurations are shown in the range of one to four children per participant. Academic disciplines range from a focus on education-related domains such as education, education policy, education administration, and higher education to specific cases in psychology, language acquisition, communication and technology, and school leadership. Studying abroad might last anywhere from one to three years, reflecting varying phases of experience and academic integration. In the larger framework of family-accompanied international doctorate study, this table offers a basis for comprehending the participants' reasons, difficulties, and coping mechanisms.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study, with procedures acting as a guide (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Both online and in-person interviews were utilized to explore the

motivations, challenges, and experiences of Kazakhstani PhD students pursuing their studies abroad with their families. Online interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet, chosen for its ability to connect with participants across various locations worldwide. This method facilitated the inclusion of Kazakhstani students studying in different countries, offering flexibility in scheduling and eliminating the need for international travel. The online setting also enabled the use of integrated recording and transcription tools, which streamlined the process of data collection and analysis.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their personal experiences and insights in their own words (Rubin & Rubin 2005). Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, they were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. They were guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' motivations for studying abroad with their families, and the positive experiences and the challenges they had. There were three main questions framing the interview.

1. What is the main motivation for pursuing PhD degree? Trying to identify the type of motivation (intrinsic, extrinsic, achievement value, and cost of beliefs).
2. What kind of positive experiences and challenges do participants have? (Travel opportunities, career growth, personal development, adjustment process, lack of finance, homesickness).
3. How the conditions of married PhD students might be improved?

Various technological instruments were used to record the data, which was transcribed afterward and uploaded to NVivo. Prior to data collection, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed in order to obtain comprehensive information and compare various situations.

However, in order to encourage deeper investigation of each participant's story, I remained open and flexible (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

Background questions were about the participants' background (the city where they are from, their partner's professional background, if they have children, and their age).

Furthermore, there were questions regarding the motivations and reasons for their decision to apply for PhD abroad and their family members' reactions and attitudes to this decision.

Additionally, questions concerning general impressions about a new culture and the process of their and their family members' adjustment, before I focused on the three main questions above. Each section contained follow-up questions regarding the students' general experiences with each of the categories mentioned above, as well as the issues they encountered and the methods they used to get past them. The full protocol is in the appendixes D.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

A pilot case was carried out to check the rigor of the interview protocols in advance of the actual interviews (Yin, 2009). This pilot case involved one participant. The final interview protocol was modified after feedback from the pilot participant. An email invitation letter was sent to current PhD students who are pursuing their degrees overseas with their families. The letter included every necessary detail regarding the goals, protocols, their rights, potential hazards, advantages, and other details. An additional email with the informed consent form attached was issued to those who are approved to participate.

3.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative data was converted into typewritten text following the interview process (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). A computerized voice recognition program was used to transcribe each interview. Transcribing is "the process of converting audiotape recordings or field notes into text data," according to (Creswell, 2013, p. 238). To guarantee accuracy and fully convey the range of experiences of the participants, all recorded interviews were

transcribed by using transcribing tools and literally checked. The transcription included non-verbal clues (such as pauses, tone shifts, or laughter) to help put the participants' comments in context. All the transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo software for a convenient coding process.

Reading and re-reading the transcripts allowed me to become fully immersed in the data and get a basic grasp of the experiences that the participants shared (Creswell, 2013). At this point, reflective notes were produced to record first impressions, emerging themes, and possible trends throughout the interviews in NVivo software. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), the thematic analysis of collected data brings order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. Connected codes were grouped into more general themes, for example: "students background", "preparation", "adaptation", "positive experience", "challenges", and "support". According to Creswell (2013), this stage is crucial since it aids in creating thorough descriptions for various types of research topics. Another step was to divide themes into subthemes, for instance, the theme "challenges" included the subthemes such as "psychological challenges", "academic challenges", and "financial challenges" (Leavy, 2017). A more detailed version of coding examples is provided in Appendix E.

Both deductive and inductive thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze the qualitative data, following Clarke and Braun's (2013) guidelines. By letting themes arise naturally from the data without being limited by pre-existing theoretical frameworks, the inductive technique made sure that the conclusions were based on the experiences of the participants. Capturing the complex and contextualized experiences of Kazakhstani PhD students studying overseas required a bottom-up approach. In particular, the analysis was organized around three main topics: (1) motivations to pursue a PhD overseas with families, (2) obstacles faced during the academic process, and (3) coping mechanisms. By differentiating

between internal (push) and external (pull) influences on participants' decisions to study abroad, the push-pull hypothesis helped to categorize motivational elements. At the same time, participants' motivations and experiences in their host country were interpreted using Bourdieu's theory of capital, specifically social, economic, and symbolic capital.

This study optimized the nature and depth of the analysis by integrating these methods. While the deductive technique guaranteed imitation of the study's goals and the larger scholarly conversation on the experiences of overseas students, the inductive approach made it easier to uncover unexpected findings. According to Clarke and Braun (2013), a thorough comprehension of complicated qualitative data is made possible by the flexible and rigorous thematic analysis method.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of ethics in the scientific research process. Researchers have to deal with a range of ethical issues at different points in this process (Parveen & Showkat, 2017). The idea of ethics starts at the beginning of a research project and continues through to its completion and distribution (Creswell, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2016) state that ethical issues in qualitative research can occur at various stages of the investigation, including before the study is conducted, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, data analysis, data reporting, and up until the publication of the study. The data collection was initiated after obtaining the NUGSE Ethical Committee approval.

By signing an informed consent form, participants received all the general information regarding the study's purpose. Informed consent, according to Johnson and Christensen (2019), involves agreeing to participate in a study after being made aware of its goals, methods, risks, advantages, alternative procedures, and confidentiality restrictions. Furthermore, the form made it abundantly evident that participation in the study is entirely voluntary and won't place subjects in unnecessary danger (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

According to Johnson and Christensen (2019), confidentiality is the act of disclosing the participant's identity to the researcher and their staff only. Anonymity involves "keeping the participant's identity from everyone, including the researcher" (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 407). To maintain participant anonymity in this study, without disclosing their names, the participants were given fictitious titles like Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so forth. Following the recording of the interviews, the data was transcribed and subjected to additional analysis. Every respondent's anonymity was ensured.

At any time during the research study, participants could refuse to answer any question. They also had the option to remain silent in response to any questions that made them uncomfortable. Participants had the option to refuse to be recorded, even though the interviews would be recorded for later analysis. Researchers "are ethically required to protect the confidentiality of both the participants and the data," according to ethical principles (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 406).

3.7 Researcher Positionality

According to Holmes (2020), it is critical that researchers recognize that their positionality is specific to them and that it can influence every step and component of the research process. As the researcher, my understanding and interpretation of this study are shaped by my professional and personal experiences. Having a multicultural upbringing, I am a Kazakh national with a keen interest in education, social mobility, and international academic migration. Being a parent and graduate student, myself has given me a sympathetic viewpoint on the challenges of pursuing advanced degrees overseas while juggling obligations that include a family.

My educational experience, particularly my graduate studies in education and leadership, has exposed me to the difficulties faced by student-parents, especially those navigating new academic, cultural, and social institutions outside of their home country, even if

I do not currently hold a PhD. Additionally, I have had the opportunity to observe the dedication, sacrifices, and motives of people seeking higher education abroad thanks to my work with families and students in international education circumstances.

These professional and personal experiences could influence the study process's advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, they provide me with empathy and understanding when I interact with participants and examine their stories. However, I try to maintain reflexivity throughout the research and am aware of the possibility of bias in interpretation. I have consciously worked to prioritize the opinions of participants, maintain openness in my methodological choices, and be flexible to interpretations that contradict my assumptions.

Chapter 4. Findings

The study used a qualitative methodology and aimed to investigate the different motivations, positive experiences, and challenges Kazakhstani PhD students and their family members encounter when studying overseas. Additionally, the study examined the various approaches students used to adapt to their new surroundings and the strategies they adopted to overcome those obstacles. The chapter provides the findings based on semi-structured interviews with ten participants. Three key questions served as the research's compass. Five overarching themes surfaced from the examination of the qualitative interviews, namely: the participants' backgrounds, reasons for studying overseas, positive experiences, difficulties they encountered, and methods they employed to overcome those difficulties.

4.1 The Participants' Background

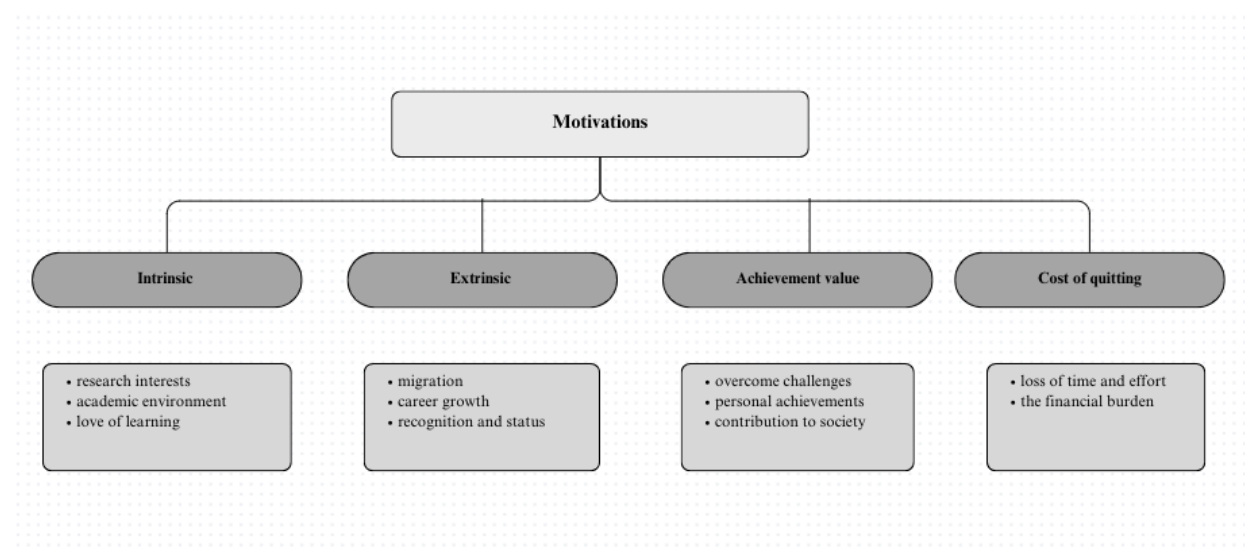
The majority of the study's participants demonstrated a solid background in research, academia, or professionally focused academic careers. A number of them were actively involved in research or held roles requiring highly specialized academic knowledge. Their backgrounds demonstrate their dedication and expanding knowledge in their respective disciplines, which is evidently aligned with academic and research-focused endeavors. Additionally, most of them had professional experience aligning with academia. For instance, Participant 1 mentioned, "Before I started my doctoral journey, my husband was the first to apply. We met at the University in a one-year post-bachelor program. A year later, we got married and started working at Schools." Another Participant revealed, "I did undergrad, then I received higher education in Russia, then the Masters abroad. I was lucky, because I traveled to different countries for my job, studied different education systems, and my brain was already bigger than Kazakhstan." (Participant 3)

4.2 Motivation to Study Overseas

Four main subthemes for Kazakhstani PhD students with families studying overseas were identified: intrinsic, extrinsic, achievement value, and cost of quitting. These subthemes are not mutually exclusive. Each of these types of motivation has aspects which are described below (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Motivation to Study Overseas Reported by Participants



The first form of motivation is *intrinsic* which includes research interests, interest in being in an academic environment, and loving the process of learning. Participants said that in their academic experience, their intrinsic motivation is related to their topic of research or academic environment. For example, Participant 1 commented, that her motivation was her deep interest in her specific topic of research and that she was reading the literature about the topic, she said, “So, when I decided, I think my initial thoughts were to pursue my graduate studies because of my interest in science and research.” Another participant shared, “I still was trying to do some research, even during my work, and I was really interested in doing more research on my specific topic” (Participant 2). The passion for being surrounded by an academic environment is also a type of intrinsic motivation, as Participant 5 mentioned “That

was something that I fell in love with my environment here like master's students and it felt like everything was kind of gently pushing me to consider a doctoral program." Participant 4 shared, "The academic environment, made me like sparkle my mind and motivate me to know even more things. And that made me pursue the degree and start looking for programs in which I was interested." Loving the process of learning is the last subtheme of intrinsic motivation, and Participant 2 mentioned how important it was for her to continue learning "I wanted to stay in academia, I wanted to do research, and, continuous learning, I like the process." Additionally, Participant 9 shared, "I always loved learning the English language, the way it was taught at school, the teachers taught it so beautifully with videotapes, materials, books, very bright, interesting."

This study also highlighted *extrinsic* motivation as a sub-theme of motivation. Participants said that extrinsic motivation is motivation beyond the academic. From the findings, three sub-themes can be identified: migration, career growth, and recognition. The migration purposes were not only the immigration for the participants themselves, but also getting the experience of living in a different country and for children to see the world and experience a different system of education. For example, Participant 4 disclosed, "My children were growing up, and since I work in education, I would, of course, like my children to try to study in another country." Career growth is another subtheme of the extrinsic type of motivation and it was the common type of motivation for all participants in many answers career growth motivation was crossed with the third type of motivation which is achievement value and subtheme contribution to society. For instance, Participant 5 said, "Now, in fact, a lot of universities make very interesting job offers, according to the working conditions. And I want to improve the quality and accessibility of education in Kazakhstan. I want to help advance our education system."

The third type of motivation is identified as *achievement value* which has three aspects: overcoming challenges, personal achievement, and contribution to society which was mentioned above. For example, Participant 4 stated, “Beyond research, it was about challenging myself, gaining new experiences, and building a global network. Studying abroad opens doors that aren’t available back home,” and Participant 2 said, “Here I am because that people think that when you overcome challenges you grow because you are doing the effort.” Additionally, this type of motivation also relates to the extrinsic subtheme. For example, Participant 3 said, “I decided to pursue a PhD because I see myself in academia in the future, specifically in research. I aspire to become a university professor, so pursuing a PhD felt like a necessary step for me to grow in this field.” The subtheme of achievement value therefore had three aspects, which were not mutually exclusive with the extrinsic subtheme.

The last type of motivation which is the *cost of quitting* was found in some of the participants answers. There were two types of costs of quitting motivation: loss of time and effort, and the financial burden. Participant 3 mentioned that PhD put a lot of effort and responsibility not only for themselves but also for their family, so it is harder for them to quit their studies after all the effort that they had put in and not meet the expectations their family members had. Participant 3 said, “When you know that you have kids that will spend five years with you and have to navigate the schools here, my daughter will graduate here. So, it’s kind of brings a lot more responsibility, I would say.” Additionally, the Bolashak scholarship agreement mandates that PhD candidates must successfully finish their degree. This requirement is included in the scholarship’s conditions to guarantee that beneficiaries meet their academic responsibilities and aid in Kazakhstan’s progress when they return. Not finishing the degree might lead to financial consequences, such as having to repay the scholarship money (International Scholarship Bolashak, n.d). Hence, PhD students have a financial burden, for example, Participant 9 mentioned, “I intentionally applied for Bolashak

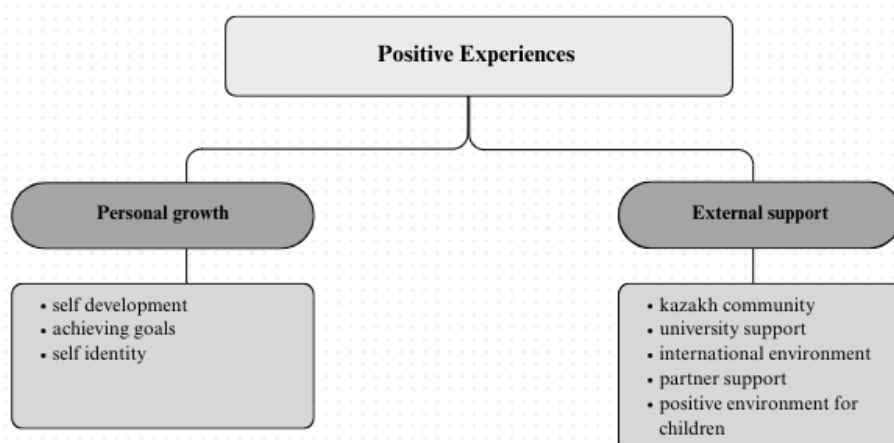
because I knew that I would come to America and my department gives work either for six months or for a year. The University doesn't give a guarantee that you will find a job next year.” This means that PhD students use Bolashak as a financial guarantee which they must pay back after graduating from their studies.

4.3 Positive Experiences

Positive experience has two different subthemes: personal level and external support. Each of them has aspects which are described below (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Positive Experiences Reported by Participants



The findings indicated that Kazakhstani PhD students who pursue their studies overseas with their families encounter various beneficial outcomes that can be classified into two main subthemes: personal level and external support. On personal growth students emphasized self-development, goals achievement, and self-identity. In relation to self-development, participants noticed how they were changed. Participant 4 said “It's not about just, like, getting a degree. It's far beyond that because it's about, widening your horizons. My values also have changed.” Participant 5 also noticed the self-development aspect, saying “Seeing and living in a different culture, completely different from Kazakhstan. Seeing people from different backgrounds, and

different cultures. Having wider horizons.” In relation to self-identity, participants shared that their PhD helped them to find their identity, for example, Participant 3 shared “I began to understand life differently, I began to understand myself. That is, PHD, I would say, is not only about the academy, it’s more about life and identity.”

On the other hand, external support significantly influenced shaping their positive experience. The existence of Kazakhstani communities overseas fostered a feeling of connection “The main holiday for us is Nauryz. We celebrate it together every year. This year, for example, we rented a lecture hall at the university, invited various professors whom we know.” (Participant 9). Universities also provided academic as well as social support “They showed the support. The best thing was that whenever I did some work for the project, they thanked me and they highlighted, that I had a child, I did it so much. I think this is a good motivation.” (Participant 1). Additionally, the international environment encourages learning about other cultures, some participants mentioned their partner’s support and the advantage for their children to have opportunities to experience different environments.

However, many answers demonstrated how their personal experience aligns with external support. For example, some students mentioned how happy they were to have the chance to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, creating a global network and how it influences their personal growth. For example, Participant 4 claimed, “I would say that the PhD experience itself is a huge journey, finding yourself, going through difficulties, it is a friendship for life.” and Participant 2 said, “Seeing and living in a different culture, completely different from Kazakhstan is shaping your identity. Therefore, many graduates from my PhD told me, it is difficult for you now, but when you look back, you will understand that these were the best years of your life.” Moreover, the interviews showed that goal achievement crosses with the partner’s support experience. For instance, Participants 7 mentioned, “I can say

that because I had my own goals and I knew what I have to do. That helped me a lot to proceed and also support my husband helped me a lot in the challenges I had.”

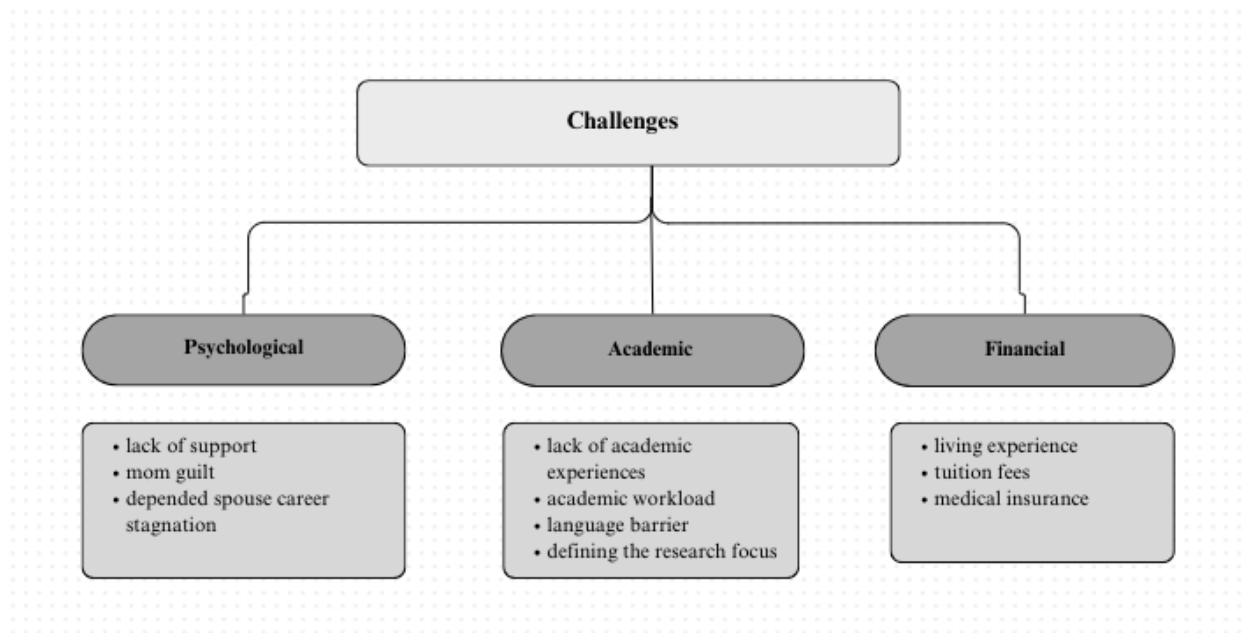
On the other hand, the participants viewed the Kazakh community overseas to be very important and had positive experiences with them. For instance, Participant 1 said, “We are, of course, very happy, because seeing Kazakhs outside their homeland is really cool. Communicating, keeping in touch.” Also, participants valued the help they received from the universities where they studied, underscoring the importance of institutional support in improving their entire experience. For example, Participant 1 mentioned, “The supporting environment of my faculty, my department, and the whole atmosphere of the academic environment, which I was planning initially to be part of, it helped me a lot not to be tired,” another Participant 6 said, “Here at MSU there is a food bank for students, there are different programs for student parents, there is coverage of kindergarten financing, there are babysitters and so on.”

4.4 Challenges

Three main subthemes of challenges were identified: psychological, academic, and financial (Figure 3). Aspects of these subthemes are illustrated below in this section.

Figure 3

Challenges Identified by Participants



First, the lack of established support networks, cultural disparities, and language barriers all increase these challenges, making it more difficult for them to make friends with peers in their new community and completely adjust to their new surroundings. For example, Participant 7 mentioned, “Psychological challenges include managing family life alongside academic demands. I’m the only married PhD student in my cohort, and most of my peers are much younger and single. They often wonder how I manage with kids and family responsibilities.” Participant 2 said, “Mom guilt is another major psychological strain. When I attend conferences or stay late at the university, I feel guilty for not being there for my kids. Balancing their needs with my academic responsibilities is tough.” Additionally, another Participant shared “In this regard, I may be too, well, I don’t know, sarcastic or pessimistic, because I think that I’m a bad student and a bad mother, because I don’t have time.” (Participant 3)

The last psychological issue was the depended spouse career stagnation. This situation underscores the challenges encountered by the partner who is not pursuing studies, as they might deal with restricted career options, insufficient opportunities for professional growth, and possible feelings of isolation or dissatisfaction due to visa limitations and the struggles of

adjusting to a different setting. For example, Participant 4 said, “This is, in fact, a very serious question that arises, probably, in 190% of cases. Especially if the wife is studying, and the husband comes as a dependent, that is, as a dependent, yes, say, on a visa, then, of course, even an independent woman or man, any person already at our age, after 30, has a question, you need to grow intellectually, in your career, earn, accordingly, money, there is some kind of social, some kind of social pressure.” Participant 9 also mentioned:

If the husband is studying, he has his own reality, he is involved in academia, he has pressure from his supervisor, he needs to take classes, he needs to publish, he needs to participate in conferences, he needs to participate in grants. And the wife has a different reality. She is isolated. For example, if there are problems with English.

Adding to psychological challenges, participants mentioned academic challenges they faced during their studies. It was found that among academic challenges PhD students suffered from a lack of academic experience, for example, Participant 4 mentioned: “If we talk about the academic challenges since my gap in my academic experience was six or seven years, and I didn’t have any study abroad experience, and education system in national universities in Kazakhstan is very different.” Adding to the lack of academic experience students faced difficulties with identifying their research focus, for instance, Participant 3 said “Academically, I’ve struggled with defining my research focus. I kept switching topics, which delayed my progress. My advisor encouraged me to explore different ideas in the first year, but now I need to settle on one.” Writing exams was also challenging without any feedback or guidance from the advisor. Moreover, the academic workload of the PhD program also was one of the academic challenges for participants, for example, Participant 3 shared,

The first three years I just worked hard and was in some kind of survival mode, just to prove that I deserved to be here, that I am no worse than other students. I and participated in conferences, made grants, did some big projects, participated actively

everywhere. But I suffered very much emotionally, so to speak, my emotional health, and physical too. I gained weight; I did not feel very well.

The last finding in this section was financial constraints, which was another significant challenge. This challenge has three subthemes: living expenses, tuition fees, and medical insurance. Participants frequently mentioned their difficulties managing living expenditures, tuition fees, and other costs related to studying abroad, with financial difficulties being the main cause for concern. For example, Participant 6 shared, “The scholarship doesn’t cover anything else. It barely stretches to cover this \$1,500 rent. Our scholarship is \$1,700, leaving around \$200 for everything else, like buying groceries,” Participant 3 said, “The health insurance is very expensive here and for example for my family with two adults and three kids, we would have to pay about like \$4,000 per semester and it’s not affordable for many international students.” Lastly, Participant 6 also said “Last year, we paid \$5,000 per semester for insurance, even if we didn’t use it. From September to January, it was \$5,000, and from January to May, another \$5,000. It’s very expensive.” Participant 5 mentioned how much money they brought, and why it was not enough for the family expenses, he said,

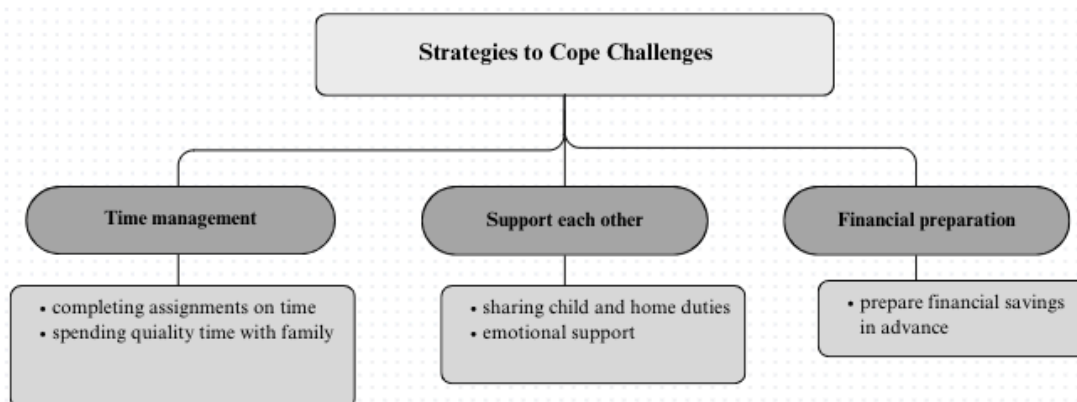
We brought about 5 million tenge with us. We didn’t spend it all at once. But when you first arrive, you have to buy everything because apartments come unfurnished. You need furniture, mattresses, dishes, blankets, pillows—everything. This was our biggest expense initially. After that, the costs are mostly monthly expenses: medical insurance, car insurance, groceries, gas, etc.

4.5 Strategies to Cope With Challenges

Three different subthemes of the strategies to cope with challenges were identified after the interviews with PhD students with family members faced during their studies (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Strategies to Cope Challenges Identified by Participants



The analysis identified three subthemes of coping strategies used by participants: time management, family support, and financial preparation. These subthemes were often cited as being crucial for assisting participants in overcoming different psychological, academic, and financial challenges they faced while studying overseas. For example, Participant 2 said, “a question of how to combine, what to do, how to do time management. It comes as if immediately with the birth of a child.” Similarly, other participants finalized their thoughts by saying that when pursuing a PhD overseas, time management is essential for juggling research, class, and family obligations. It facilitates completing assignments on time, spending quality time with family, and managing unknown challenges like stress or illness. Delegating domestic chores, establishing clear barriers between personal and professional lives, and remaining adaptable in the face of unforeseen events are essential. However, it’s crucial to make time for relaxation and spontaneity because overscheduling can result in stress.

The family support subtheme includes sharing home and childcare duties, communicating openly to set expectations, and offering emotional support during challenging circumstances. Establishing clear roles, talking about financial planning, and forming a support system with other student families are examples of practical measures. Participant 5 shared,

It's crucial to have a supportive partner. A partner with traditional views, expecting a woman to handle everything—cooking, cleaning, parenting—will make it impossible to succeed in a PhD program. A PhD comes with constant deadlines, stress, and responsibilities, and without a loving, supportive partner, it becomes unsustainable.

The other Participant (5), shared, “My partner focused on supporting our family and planning her own studies. Recently, we've been preparing her application documents for future educational opportunities.”

According to some participants one strategy to overcome financial challenges was to prepare financial savings in advance. As Participant 4 said,

It is better to prepare financially, and to have some kind of safety net at least for the first year. When a person arrives, you need to immediately pay a deposit, rent an apartment, have a lot of expenses, like buying furniture, because many probably know that in America almost all apartments are rented unfurnished. It is very, very rare when a university has housing or the owner rents it out furnished.

Participant 5 also said, “Plan meticulously—budget for initial costs, research housing, and think long-term. It's a transformative experience, but it requires teamwork and determination.”

Proper financial management is also important, Participant 2 mentioned, “My husband works 20 hours per week at the university, in addition to receiving the Bolashak stipend. It covers our needs, but without proper planning, managing finances would be extremely difficult.”

4.6 Summary

The study's main findings were summed up in the current chapter, which also identified five major themes: the students' backgrounds, motivations for studying abroad, positive experiences, difficulties they encounter, and strategies to overcome them. Participants gave comprehensive background information and discussed the family's decision-making process, which is significant because the study covers both the experiences of students and their

families. They discussed problems that helped the researcher in examining the types of problems that Kazakh family PhD students and their family members face while studying overseas. Additionally, the approaches that students use to deal with these issues were also investigated. According to the interviews' findings, students faced a variety of challenges while having generally positive study abroad experiences. These typical difficulties included difficulties with psychological adaptation, academic difficulties, and some financial obstacles. Participants also used a variety of strategies to overcome these obstacles. The study's findings are discussed in the upcoming chapter.

Chapter 5. Discussion

The semi-structured interviews uncovered various themes, which were presented in the prior chapter. This chapter's aim is to discuss these emerging themes concerning the study's research questions:

1. What motivates Kazakhstani PhD students with families to pursue their studies abroad?
2. What positive experiences and challenges do the participants have while pursuing their degrees abroad?
3. How could the conditions of international PhD students and their family members be improved?

Additionally, this chapter features a discussion of themes aligned with the pertinent literature. Five primary themes are examined, which include the Kazakhstani PhD students' background, the motivation of these students to pursue studies abroad with their family members, their positive experiences and the difficulties they face, as well as their strategies for overcoming these challenges.

5.1 Motivation for PhD Students With Families to Study Abroad

Intrinsic motivation is the first kind of motivation this study found, and it is linked to students' enthusiasm for learning, interest in research, and involvement in the academic environment. The results show that participants' decision to pursue an academic career was influenced by their interests in the research topic and their previous experiences in an academic environment. This experience encourages them to continue their career in academia. Additionally, they were motivated by their close family members as partners or older generation relatives who were academics. Other participants had prior experience working in educational institutions, which encouraged them to continue their education. These findings

align with Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which he describes as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition," (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 248,). Given this, social capital—which is ingrained in familial ties and academic networks—plays a big part in influencing students' educational decisions. These conclusions are further supported by empirical data. Gardner (2008) asserts that a student's innate enthusiasm for their chosen subject is directly related to their performance in research. The role of social capital is important in motivations to study overseas because the experiences of people who went through the process of leaving their home country with their family members to continue their education motivate others.

Extrinsic motivation is the second encouraging type that has been recognized. The study's findings indicate that a number of factors affect extrinsic motivation, including social recognition, career progress, migration, and status. Most of the participants shared that they are motivated to build their careers in academia or in international companies and an international advanced degree will help them to achieve their career goals. Deci and Ryan (2000) claim that extrinsic motivation is a more practical strategy in which students are driven mostly by external factors like career self-realization or immigration chances. In the same way, Portes and Rumbaut (2006) argue that people from developing nations frequently see a PhD as an instrument of immigration, especially to the US. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital explains why people want to study at Western universities since these degrees are seen as having more cultural value, prestige, and social recognition, which raises a person's standing both locally and internationally.

Additionally, the Push-Pull Plus theory (Van Hear et al., 2018), which was used in this investigation, sheds more light on these motives. Based on this hypothesis, possibilities outside are pull factors, whereas circumstances in one's own country are push factors. This concept is

especially pertinent to PhD candidates from Kazakhstan since the country's underdeveloped academic and research landscape tends to act as a push element, whereas the United States' established academic community tends to act as a powerful pull factor.

Achievement value is the third motivation type that has been identified. According to the results, students are motivated by a desire to succeed, advance their education, and make a positive contribution to society. The achievement value kind of motivation, which prioritizes determination, personal development, and the pursuit of significant achievements, is consistent with these features. According to Zhou (2014), people who are achievement-based motivated are encouraged when they can prove that they can manage family obligations and seek a higher degree overseas. The majority of PhD candidates, according to Yue and Lu (2022), are driven to earn their degrees from highly esteemed universities because academic status is essential to their professional goals. According to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital, people who are motivated by achievement values are more likely to overcome obstacles in order to achieve their desired goals, and a Western university degree is one of the most desired and prestigious accomplishments that can raise a person's status and recognition.

The cost of quitting is the fourth motivational factor that was identified. The results show that because of the substantial financial and contractual obligations related to their education, PhD students studying overseas were highly driven to finish their studies. Additionally, the Bolashak government scholarship program, which has certain requirements for recipients, provided funding for a significant number of participants. The money allotted for tuition and living expenses must be returned if a student drops out of the program or does not finish their PhD (Bolashak, n.d). This monetary commitment acts as a powerful motivation not to stop studying. In addition to financial obligations, participants said that adjusting to a new academic and cultural setting was difficult, which made withdrawal an unpleasant choice. The cost of quitting motivation occurs when people have spent a significant amount of time, energy,

and money on their education, claims Zhou (2014). This desire is further strengthened for PhD students who have families since they feel obligated to their family members, who offer both financial and emotional assistance. Because of this, the need to continue their education becomes a powerful motivator.

5.2 Positive Experiences

The results show that two main categories—personal development and external support networks—can be used to describe the satisfying experiences of PhD students with families who are studying overseas. Students gain personally from achieving their goals, growing as individuals, and developing their sense of self-worth. These features align with Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which highlights the role that communities and networks have in influencing people's experiences and possibilities. Students' personal development and expertise expansion are facilitated by their capacity to overcome academic and cultural obstacles. Additionally, empirical data supports this conclusion. Studying overseas promotes self-improvement and cultural familiarity, which improves students' flexibility and intercultural communication abilities (Basri & Talebloo, 2015). Students develop their professional and personal identities by immersing themselves in a new academic and cultural setting, which increases their creativity and resilience.

In addition to personal development, external support is essential in determining the favorable experiences of PhD students who have families. Academic institutions, peer networks, and community involvement are examples of support systems that offer crucial tools to assist students in navigating the challenges of studying overseas. Networking possibilities, mentorship programs, and university support services all help people feel like they belong, which is consistent with Bourdieu's idea that social capital is a tool for both professional and personal growth (Bourdieu, 1986). External support systems additionally decrease difficulties with work-life balance, cultural adjustment, and academic pressure. According to empirical

research, students who actively participate in social and institutional support networks report feeling happier and more satisfied in their academic lives. The whole experience of PhD students with families studying overseas becomes significantly improved by the combination of personal development and outside support networks, encouraging them to succeed both academically and personally. According to Sobkowiak (2019), students who were surrounded by locals and their international peers experienced other cultures, which inspired them to investigate and analyze the diversity they observed. This gave them knowledge about other cultures and made them more aware of cultural diversity.

5.3 Challenges

The findings show that while studying overseas, PhD students and their families encounter three main types of difficulties: psychological, academic, and financial. Particularly, psychological difficulties become a major concern. The findings highlight common challenges like insufficient assistance, "mom guilt" among female PhD candidates, and professional stagnation among dependent spouses. Participants discussed the challenges of juggling their family life, career obligations, and academic obligations at the same time, frequently finding it difficult to strike a balance between these conflicting demands. In particular, female PhD students expressed guilt because they struggled to balance their time between families and academic endeavors. Additionally, most female participants suggested that if the partner has the traditional patriarchal view, it would be challenging for his wife to successfully study for a PhD degree. A few people also mentioned how their hectic schedules caused conflicts with family members, which made stress even worse. The delaying of dependent spouses' careers, particularly as a result of visa limitations, was another urgent problem. This was particularly problematic for male spouses, who frequently found themselves unable to pursue further education while traveling overseas with their spouses for an extended period of time.

These findings align with research conducted by Buglan and Ciftci (2017), who claim that postgraduate students have a tough time juggling their many obligations. Furthermore, Wambaleka et al. (2015) and Myer-Walls et al. (2011) highlight the problem of social isolation within families, which is frequently made worse by language limitations. This might be related to the influence of the prevailing patriarchal Kazakhstani context (Abdikadyrova et al., 2018).

According to the findings, academic difficulty is the second most issue that PhD students are dealing with. A number of individuals mentioned having trouble coming up with a good research topic, which is an important element of PhD studies. Since developing a strong research focus is a crucial milestone for young scientists, the pressure to do so was a major source of stress. Gaps in their academic backgrounds also presented difficulties for several participants, especially for those who had taken a break between their PhD and prior education. Some students found it difficult to get used to the demanding academic environment at the start of their PhD journey because of this gap as well as differences in the standard of their previous education. Another obstacle was found to be a lack of academic language skills, namely in writing and reading scholarly publications. These results coincide with empirical evidence from Hajar (2024), which shows that language difficulties are a major problem for many overseas students, having a substantial impact on their academic performance and general well-being.

In this regard, choosing research topics and negotiating academic expectations may be easier for students with solid academic backgrounds or access to existing academic networks. However, it becomes more difficult for those who lack this type of social capital to manage the demands of PhD studies, such as students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds or those who have taken a break from academia. Furthermore, the theory of push-pull factors sheds additional light on these difficulties. Both push and pull elements—such as the accessibility of stronger academic resources elsewhere and a shortage of research opportunities in one's own country—often play a role in the choice to pursue a PhD overseas (McMahon,

1992). A push factor for many Kazakhstani students is the limitation of advanced research facilities in their homeland, which encourages them to pursue higher education outside (Kuzhabekova & Mukhamejanova, 2017). However, they face new academic challenges once they are overseas, like language limitations and unfamiliar research demands, which lead to more challenges. This illustrates how difficult it may be for international PhD students to adapt to their new learning environment even though the pull factors draw them to foreign schools, underscoring the complexity of international education experiences.

Lastly, financial difficulties are the third significant obstacle that PhD students with families must overcome. The results showed that individuals faced a number of unexpected financial challenges while they were studying. Many students were unprepared for the high cost of health insurance, for instance, and some of them made the error of getting coverage that was too expensive because they didn't comprehend the medical insurance system. Furthermore, some families found it impossible to afford an appropriate home because housing costs were much greater than expected. Childcare costs were especially high for individuals who had children. PhD students faced an unequal financial burden since some students received financial aid or institutional support for childcare, while others did not. These results are consistent with the empirical study by Mayers-Walls et al. (2011), which found that financial challenges are common among foreign students, particularly those who are moving from underdeveloped to developed nations.

Furthermore, the financial aid that PhD students normally get only pays for their personal expenses; their family members are not provided with institutional help. Even those who get the state-funded Bolashak scholarship, which covers tuition and offers a monthly stipend, suffer financially, making this difficulty especially important to PhD students in Kazakhstan. For students who are supporting a family, the \$1,500 stipend, which was set more than ten years ago, is insufficient because it has not been updated to take into account inflation.

Some participants underlined that since the stipend has not changed and the cost of living has increased, this issue requires immediate response. Bolashak's financial duties have also decreased because many PhD students eventually land assistantship jobs that pay for their tuition. But even if Bolashak's real spending has decreased, the recipients' contractual responsibilities have not changed, which has further increased their financial burden. This means that financial support is crucial for Family PhD students for their successful studies and family relationships.

In this context, PhD students from Kazakhstan who have more financial resources or institutional support suffer fewer financial difficulties, whereas those who only have personal savings or scholarships face severe financial limitations. This demonstrates the unequal distribution of financial resources and how it affects students' educational experiences. The push-pull plus theory also explains the financial difficulties faced by international PhD students (Van Hear et al., 2018). The cost of studying overseas serves as a motivator as well as a barrier to enrollment. For example, Kazakhstan's lack of funding for family support and scholarly research encourages students to pursue their studies overseas. But while students are abroad, they face additional challenges with finances including expensive living expenditures and unpredictable fees, which can make it difficult for them to concentrate fully on their studies. These difficulties highlight the complex financial realities that affect students' choices and overall educational journey.

5.4 Strategies to Cope With Challenges

According to the study, time management, family support, and financial planning are the three key ways Kazakhstani PhD students with families can overcome obstacles. Finding a balance between home obligations and academic obligations requires the first strategy, time management. The results show that students who are good at managing their time are less stressed and have more time to spend with their families. In order to preserve family peace,

some participants emphasized the value of assigning domestic duties to their partners and the necessity of mutual support. Families where traditional gender norms are still in place, however, face a serious problem. Participants observed that conflicts frequently arose in situations where spouses followed traditional norms, where wives were exclusive in their responsibilities for childcare and housekeeping. 93.3% of student mothers employed time management techniques to handle their many responsibilities, according to empirical research by Lamm and Grohman (2009).

Financial planning is the final important tactic the study found. A lot of participants stressed how crucial it is to arrange funds well in advance before going overseas with their families to pursue a PhD. The results show that the stress of studying abroad can be greatly increased by inadequate financial planning. Participants discussed how their financial stress was brought on by unplanned charges such as expensive housing bills and strange healthcare systems. These results are consistent with the empirical evidence that Movahed et al. (2019) provided, which emphasizes how important financial planning is for overseas students.

5.5. Summary

This chapter has discussed the motivations, positive experiences, challenges, and strategies to overcome these challenges presented by participants, with reference to empirical literature and two theoretical frameworks of social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and Push Pull Plus theory (Van Hear et al., 2018). In general, the findings do not appear to contradict the theories and previous empirical literature. The next chapter summarizes the main findings, identifies the strengths and limitations of the study, and sets out some recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the key conclusions, advantages and disadvantages, suggestions, and individual reflections on this research. The recommendations focus on research, policy, and practice.

6.1 Summary of the Major Findings

This section summarizes the motivations that inspire Kazakhstani students to seek advanced degrees abroad the positive experiences and challenges they have, and strategies that these students suggest to cope with these challenges.

- *Motivations that Kazakhstani PhD students have to go abroad to pursue PhD with their family members.* There are two main subthemes of motivations: intrinsic and extrinsic. According to the finding intrinsic motivations, are research interests and academic environment; and extrinsic motivations are career goals and finishing their PhD degree successfully. For Kazakhstani Bolashak holders the cost of quitting is a motivation that becomes important during their studies, mostly because of their obligations written in the contracts.
- *Positive experiences Kazakhstani PhD students and their families have during their studies overseas.* There are two types of positive experiences that were identified: personal development and external support. Both of these are important and not mutually excluded.
- *Challenges that Kazakhstani PhD students and their families face abroad.* For students themselves, there are three main challenges: psychological, academic, and financial; however, for their family members the academic challenges were not applicable. On the other hand, for the spouses of the students, the

psychological challenges (such as isolation and career limitations) were important.

- *Strategies to cope with challenges.* Three strategies were presented by participants: time management, support, and financial preparation. PhD students shared that time management skills are important to balance family responsibilities and academic workload. They also pointed out that partner's support is important in all stages of pursuing an advanced degree abroad with families. Lastly, financial preparation in advance is crucial during the study periods abroad, because there are many unexpected expenses that might lead to problems in the family dynamic.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations

This research presents empirical data from ten Kazakhstani PhD students currently pursuing their advanced degrees in the United States with their families. It provides various insights on the motivations of these students, their experiences, and challenges that not only students but their family members face. Moreover, the paper combines two theoretical perspectives. However, there are some limitations to this study. First, there is the dominance of female participants. A more balanced representation of genders could offer deeper insights into these processes, as gender is a significant factor in determining motivation and problems, particularly in a patriarchal environment like Kazakhstan (Abdikadyrova et al, 2018). Second, the academic background of the participants is another limitation; none of them were from engineering or technology, and the majority were enrolled in PhD programs linked to education. Future studies can try to include a more diversified sample in order to ensure a thorough knowledge of the difficulties and motivations faced by international PhD students with families.

6.4 Recommendations

The first recommendation is for the policy. The study emphasizes how international PhD students with families require more extensive support networks. Governments and scholarship organizations, like the Bolashak program, should think about updating financial aid plans to take into consideration expenditures associated with raising a family, such as childcare and medical bills. Furthermore, dependent spouses should be offered career and professional growth options due to more accommodating immigration laws.

For practical recommendations, the study highlights the value of proactive planning prior to starting a PhD program overseas. To balance academic and personal obligations, it is essential to have time management abilities, financial planning skills, and open lines of communication with family members. Comprehending the gendered aspect of obstacles in a patriarchal culture such as Kazakhstan can also assist students and their families in anticipating possible issues and identifying suitable coping mechanisms.

Future studies on Kazakhstani PhD students with families who are studying overseas should focus on important issues like mental health, social integration, financial difficulties, and work-life balance. Studies comparing the roles of men and women in academic and caring roles may shed light on the disparities in experiences between male and female PhD candidates. Furthermore, examining how family responsibilities affect professional outcomes and decisions about return migration might aid in the development of policies that motivate talented graduates to return to Kazakhstan. In order to strengthen scholarship programs and family-friendly academic environments, research should also examine government and institutional support systems and compare Kazakhstan's policies with best practices from around the world. Policymakers, academic institutions, and funding agencies could benefit greatly from this research' insightful findings on how to better assist Kazakhstani PhD students and their families.

This study has several implications for future research and theory, as well as contextual recommendations for enhancing institutional support for Kazakhstani PhD students with families living outside. The results indicate that although the push-pull framework does a good job of capturing motivations at the macro level, it falls short of elucidating the complex relationship between academic decision-making and familial factors. By including micro-level factors like psychological effort, and parental duties, further research could improve the push-pull model. Comparably, studying how family-accompanied migration changes forms of capital—specifically, how cultural and social capital are co-constructed or limited in transnational family contexts—could expand on Bourdieu's theory of capital. What various types of capital change during PhD study could be further investigated through longitudinal research. The role of spouses in academic migration, the adjustment of children to school, and the relationship between gender and caregiving in international academic mobility are possible future subjects. A deeper understanding of how family presence influences the doctoral experience across cultural contexts may also be obtained through comparative research comparing international PhD students studying alone and those accompanied by family. In the end, the complexity of international academic life with family might be better understood through a theoretical lens that is more relational and multicultural.

6.5 Personal reflection

Overall, the process of writing my thesis was exciting and difficult all at once. Using what I've learned throughout my two-year master's program, I've developed as a researcher. In addition, my personal abilities like responsibility, discipline, and time management have improved. In my opinion, the study's findings are useful, as globalization is probably going to increase the number of students taking part in advanced programs in the near future. I hope that writing my thesis will benefit my future ambitions and career.

Particularly considering my identity as a Kazakhstani researcher with lived experiences that involve family life and academic study, conducting this research inspired a very reflective engagement with this topic. I was able to approach participants with empathy and cultural awareness thanks to this positionality, which promoted open and honest dialogue during interviews. However, it took intentional effort to keep my biases in control and to be mindful of how my viewpoints affected how I interpreted the evidence. The approach made clear the two roles I played as an outsider in my capacity as a researcher with analytical separation and an insider in sharing cultural and language similarities with participants. My methodological expertise was significantly improved by the thesis procedure. By using a deductive thematic analysis based on Bourdieu's theory of capital and push-pull theory, I was able to meaningfully connect theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence. I gained knowledge about the importance of theory-informed category development, continuous coding, and creating a balance between unexpected insights and structured analysis. My abilities in qualitative accuracy were also strengthened by the difficulty of dealing with a small and varied group of participants, especially with regard to combining topics and providing immersion.

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Appendix A

Completed AI Declaration Form



Exploring the Motivations and Lived Experiences of Kazakhstani Students Pursuing a PhD

Abroad with Family: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

- with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or
 without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used Chat GPT [NAME of TOOL] to brain storm ideas
 [REASON]¹

I also declare that I

- am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),
 have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,
 am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,
 have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and
 acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Gulnara Alexandrova
 Date: 28.04.2025

Signature:

¹ Examples of REASON: brainstorm ideas / find or select sources on a topic / paraphrase / structure and organize the written text / edit the text for clarity and grammar / ask for tips to improve coherence / cite and reference sources

Appendix B

The Invitation Letter

Dear Participant,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Gulnara Alexandrova, and I am currently pursuing a Master's degree at Nazarbayev University. As part of my academic requirements, I am conducting a research project titled "*Motivation and Experience of Kazakhstani PhD Students with Families Pursuing Their Studies Abroad: A Phenomenological Study.*"

The purpose of this research is to explore the motivations and experiences of Kazakhstani PhD students who are studying abroad with their families. By participating in this study, you will help contribute to a better understanding of the challenges, motivations, and unique experiences that students like yourself face when balancing family life and academic pursuits in a foreign country. Your participation would involve a one-on-one interview, which is expected to last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Google Meet (or another preferred platform) at a time that is convenient for you. Your identity and any personal information shared during the interview will be kept strictly confidential, and all data will be anonymized to ensure your privacy. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time without any consequences. If you would be willing to participate or have any further questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at Gulnara.alexandrova@nu.edu.kz or +7 747 550 4001. I would be happy to provide more information and discuss any concerns you may have.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to important research on the experiences of Kazakhstani PhD students and their families abroad. Your insights and experiences are invaluable, and I greatly appreciate your time and support.

Warm regards,

Gulnara Alexandrova Nazarbayev University Leadership in Higher Education email.

Gulnara.alexandrova@nu.edu.kz

Appendix C

Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *Motivation and Experience of Pursuing a PhD Abroad with Families: A Phenomenological Study of Kazakhstani Students*.

Procedures. The purpose of this study is to examine the unique motivations and experiences of Kazakhstani international PhD students and their families who are studying overseas. Since the study involves understanding people's experiences, a qualitative research design will be used to conduct the research and successfully address the research questions. To conduct the research *the interview will be used. This interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete.* It will include open ended questions focusing on the participants motivations and experience pursuing their PhD degree abroad with their family members.

Risks. Participants may feel anxiety about the confidentiality of the personal experiences they share, particularly if those experiences involve family issues or unpleasant memories of their study abroad program. All participants will be assured that their responses will remain confidential.

Benefits. Participants will get the opportunity to add to the expanding body of research that aims to comprehend the challenges faced by PhD students with families by sharing their experiences. Their opinions may influence the creation of new laws and assistance programs, which could enhance the circumstances for other overseas students and their families.

Reflecting on their experiences during the interview process may provide participants with an opportunity to obtain personal insights into their academic and familial journeys. It could give a chance for introspection on their driving forces, difficulties, and successes. The results of this study can be used by colleges to create more specialized support networks for PhD students with families.

Compensation. No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available after the study by email

Confidentiality & Privacy. Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. All study-related documents and data will be safely kept on a password-protected computer. Even though every safety measure will be implemented to safeguard your data, revealing private and sensitive experiences may have hazards unique to this study, particularly if the information includes difficulties your family has faced. Strict protocols will be implemented to guarantee that no personal data is made available to the public.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if a participation agreement is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research-related injury be received, the researcher, *Gulnara Alexandrova*, +7 747 5504001, Gulnara.alexandrova@nu.edu.kz should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to Professor Alper Calikoglu, alper.calikoglu@nu.edu.kz, Research Ethic committee GSE,

Statement of Consent.

I, Alexandrova Gulnara,

Give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

The researchers clearly explained to me the background information and objectives of the study and what my participation in this study involves.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time and without giving any reasons withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for myself.

I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially.

Signature:  Date: 28.04.2025

Researcher:

Signed Gulnara Alexandrova _____ Date _____

Appendix D

Interview protocol

1. Tell about yourself:

Where are you from?

Tell about you academic and professional background?

Tell about you family, are you married? Do you have children? How old are them?

Tell about your spouse career and then his reaction on your decision to apply abroad?

1. What was the reason to apply on PhD program abroad?

- Follow-up/ Probe questions:
- Tell me about your motivation to apply on PhD abroad?
 - Can you describe any specific career aspirations that motivated this decision?
 - What factors influenced on the choice of the program and university? Country?
 - What role did your family play in the decision-making process?
 - What was their reaction on your decision to apply overseas?

2. What are the positive experiences have you experienced while studying abroad?

- Follow-up / Probe questions:
 - What have been the most rewarding aspects of living and studying abroad with your family? (opportunities, career growth, personal growth)
 - How has studying abroad impacted your personal and family relationships?
 - Can you share any examples of academic/personal achievements that you attribute to studying abroad?

- How have your children (if applicable) benefited from the experience of living in a new cultural environment?
- Did your family form any supportive relationships or networks abroad? Can you elaborate on that?
- In what ways has the international environment enriched your academic or personal life?

3. What are the challenges experiences have you experienced while studying abroad?

- Follow-up /Probe questions
 - What challenges have you faced while balancing family responsibilities and academic work?
 - Were there any cultural or social barriers that affected your family's experience abroad?
 - Can you provide examples of any financial difficulties you encountered?
 - How have issues related to visa or legal status impacted your experience abroad?
 - Were there instances of isolation or homesickness for you or your family members? How did you cope with them?
 - How has the workload affected your ability to spend time with your family?

4. How might the condition of PhD students and their family members be improved?

- Follow-up /Probe questions:
- What forms of support would have made your experience easier? Government, institutions, colleagues, society
 - How can universities better accommodate the needs of international PhD students with families?

- Would access to childcare services have been beneficial to your family?
- How could financial support or scholarships be improved for families studying abroad?
- What role do you think community support (both from the university and local) could play in improving the experience for families?
- How could mental health services be tailored to address the needs of international students and their families?

Appendix E

Data Analysis/Coding Examples

Themes	Sub-themes/codes	Quotations
Students Background		I worked in Astana and in an international organization, and after some time, I worked for quite a long year, well, something like 8 years, somewhere around 8 or 9 years, and at some point, probably somewhere after 6-7 years, I no longer saw such intellectual and career growth for myself, and that's why I wanted to change something.
		Before I started my doctoral journey, my husband was the first to apply
		My grandmother was a professor, and I was growing up in this academic environment
Motivation	Intrinsic motivation	So, when I decided, I think my initial thoughts were to pursue my graduate studies because of my interest in science and research.
		the academic environment, it made me like sparkle my mind and motivate me to know even more things. And this atmosphere also motivated me to be in that kind of environment, to be part of that. And that made me pursue the degree and start looking for programs in which I was interested
		Actually, I think that my initial motivation, which was like intrinsic motivation, helped me a lot in what I'm pursuing. Because the supporting environment of my faculty, my department,

		and the whole atmosphere of the academic environment, which I was planning initially to be part of, it helped me a lot not to be tired maybe.
	Extrinsic	My primary motivation was to improve the quality and accessibility of education in Kazakhstan. I want to help advance our education system so that universities outside of Nazarbayev University and KIMEP can also provide high-quality education. Additionally, I want to promote English language learning at a level that allows researchers from Kazakhstan to publish in respected international journal
		That was something that I fell in love with. I loved it. And probably some, like, my environment here also, like, mostly we had here, like, doctoral students, not that many Masters students, and it felt like everything was kind of, like, gently pushing me to consider a doctoral program.
	Achievements value	Here I am because that people think that when you overcome challenges you grow because you are doing effort. If you do not do effort, then you'll level maybe a little bit increases, but not much.
		What motivated you to pursue a PhD in the U.S.? Beyond research, it was about challenging myself, gaining new experiences, and

		building a global network. Studying abroad opens doors that aren't available back home.
	Cost of quitting	Most importantly, ensure you're pursuing a PhD for the right reasons, whether it's for personal growth, academic curiosity, or career advancement.
Positive experience	Personal growth	I began to, I don't know, understand life differently, I began to understand myself. That is, PHD, I would say, is not only about the academy, it's more about life and identity. That is, why is PHD hard to do, why do many people have such difficulties? Because we dig so deeply, PHD makes us dig so deeply, what do we live for, what will we be interested in, what are we ready to do, I don't know, 60 hours a week for free, right? That is why it's hard to find your topic, it's very hard to find a dissertation topic and there are a lot of difficulties along the way
		But having gone through this path, going through this path, I understand myself better, I understand my identity and I understand how my children have changed and what opportunities are opening up for them. That's why I would say that PHD is not about the end result. Yes, by the way, many people ask the question, what will you do next, or even in the first year people start asking what will happen after PHD.

	External support	But having gone through this path, going through this path, I understand myself better, I understand my identity and I understand how my children have changed and what opportunities are opening up for them. That's why I would say that PHD is not about the end result. Yes, by the way, many people ask the question, what will you do next, or even in the first year people start asking what will happen after PHD.
		Seeing and living in a different culture, completely different from Kazakhstan. Seeing people from different backgrounds, different cultures. Having, like, wider network
Challenges	Psychological	And the most difficult part was that we knew no one in that city. So we didn't have anyone to ask.
		Because the topic of racism is very acute in America, both for the Americans themselves, residents, and also for those who come, immigrants. Therefore, this is also an important question, because we will already be in different ways when you come to America, you will already work, communicate with everyone, and come into contact with multiple communities, spheres. Husband, me, a child at school
	Academic	Second one is the workload, like the time you spend for going to the classes, spending time on campus,

		coming back home, and you have assignments. So, the work never ends. Of course, this all affects how you communicate, how you spend time with your family members.
		Academically, I've struggled with defining my research focus. I kept switching topics, which delayed my progress. My advisor encouraged me to explore different ideas in the first year, but now I need to settle on one. Writing exams was also challenging without any feedback or guidance from the advisor.
	Financial	he scholarship doesn't cover anything else. It barely stretches to cover this \$1,500 rent. Our scholarship is \$1,700, leaving around \$200 for everything else, like buying groceries.
		Of course, I balance very poorly, because my child is now next to me, next to me all the time, but this has its advantages. Because when we came to America, he was 4 years old, we could not send him to a private kindergarten, because it cost from 1000 dollars and up.
Strategies to Cope with Challenges	Time management	Spending less time with my child was a big change for our relationships. But besides that, we do the same things, especially on the weekends. We speak, we talk, we play, we go out of the city, mostly to the big parks and spend time together.

		Spending less time with my child was a big change for our relationships. But besides that, we do the same things, especially on the weekends. We speak, we talk, we play, we go out of the city, mostly to the big parks and spend time together.
	Support Each other	during this period, I have already built myself a schedule that I can jump into classes in advance for this time, or I can schedule my meetings specifically when my son is at school, so that I can devote time to him after school. Or we have already gone to different sections with him.
		My husband and I came with a plan. He's currently helping me adapt to the new environment and manage childcare
	Preparation	we got J visa, because he, like, since the start, he said that I will not stay at home, don't expect me, you know, to stay at home with kids, I will work, and I'll try, you know, because he's not that kind of person that will stay at home and do some, you know, home stuff, so we got J1 and J2 visa, just because he wanted to work
		So maybe the planning would be the best priority for families who are planning to go.
		Planning in advance, which we didn't do. Because even if I have a stipend, my husband has a salary. Still, when we

		came, we had to put a lot of money on the first things you have to buy when you move there.
		So it's better to maybe plan, to limit yourself to some of the things you want to buy. If you don't need it right now, it's better to wait and to pay for necessary stuff.

