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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AND THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CLIMATE

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Recent years have seen heightened anti-immigration rhetoric and increasingly restrictive immigration and education policies in the United States, creating climates of uncertainty for noncitizens (Crumley-Effinger, 2024; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). While prior qualitative research has shown that policy uncertainty, visa insecurity, and politicized discourse contribute to increased stress among international students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Marbang et al., 2020), empirical quantitative research remains limited. The current study investigates how perceived sociopolitical climate threat (SCT) affects mental health outcomes among international students. Additionally, this study examines coping and psychological responses to this threat by investigating the mediating role of self-censorship in the association between SCT and mental health outcomes. The buffering effects of support systems (community, social, and institutional) were also examined. Results indicated a significant association between self-censorship and depressive symptoms, even when compared to other predictors identified in the literature (e.g., academic stress, financial stress). These findings suggest that self-censorship is a strong and underexamined stressor among international students navigating hostile political environments.

Keywords: international students, mental health, self-censorship, sociopolitical climate.

Introduction

In recent decades, international student mobility has increased substantially, with students crossing national borders in pursuit of educational opportunities, professional advancement, and long-term socioeconomic mobility (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Beyond their academic contributions, international students represent a significant economic force for host countries, particularly through tuition revenue, labor participation, and long-term contributions to innovation and research (ICEF, 2024; "ICEF Monitor Articles about Immigration Trends," 2014; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Stewart, 2025). Despite their numerical and economic significance, international students remain a comparatively understudied population within psychological research, particularly in relation to mental health, coping behaviors, and more importantly the structural stressors that shape their lived experiences (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

While these stressors are often examined independently, they are deeply interconnected and collectively shape international students' psychological experiences. A substantial body of literature documents that international students face a constellation of stressors that extend beyond those typically experienced by domestic students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). These stressors are multifaceted and often emerge from the intersection of cultural transition, academic demands, social isolation, discrimination, and structural constraints imposed by immigration and educational systems (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Collectively, these stressors contribute to elevated levels of psychological distress and place international students at a risk for adverse mental health outcomes (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Mori, 2000).

Acculturative Stress and Cultural Adjustment

One of the most widely examined stressors in the literature is acculturative stress, defined as the psychological strain resulting from adapting to a new cultural, social, and institutional environment (Berry, 2005, 2006). Research consistently shows that international students experience heightened anxiety and distress during their initial immersion into unfamiliar cultural contexts, particularly during the early stages of residence in the host country (Berry, 2006; Presbitero, 2016). Factors such as cultural distance, English language proficiency, and prior exposure to Western educational norms significantly influence the intensity of acculturative stress. Studies indicate that students with lower English fluency or lower levels of acculturation report more difficulty adjusting socially and academically (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). As a result, studies often report that Indian students reported lower levels of dissatisfaction than Asian students in the United States, a difference attributed in part to stronger English language skills and greater familiarity with Western cultural norms (Han et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Loss of Social Networks

Social isolation and loneliness represent some of the most pervasive and psychologically damaging stressors for international students. Separation from family and familiar social networks often results in profound feelings of disconnection, particularly during the initial months following arrival in the host country (Bek, 2017; Girmay & Singh, 2019; Sawir et al., 2008). Sawir et al. (2008), in a qualitative study of 200 international students, found that 130 participants reported experiencing loneliness or social isolation shortly after arrival. More importantly, loneliness among international students manifests in multiple forms. Sawir et al. (2008) identified three distinct types of loneliness that international students experience:

personal loneliness, stemming from separation from family; *social loneliness*, resulting from the loss of established social networks; and *cultural loneliness*, arising from the absence of familiar cultural and linguistic environments. Other research highlights how loneliness acts as a predictor of psychological distress and adjustment difficulties among international students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018).

Academic Stress and Educational Adjustment

Academic stress represents a central and persistent challenge in the experiences of international students and is closely tied to broader processes of educational adjustment. Differences in pedagogical styles, assessment methods, classroom expectations, and faculty–student interactions often place international students at a structural disadvantage within host academic systems (Bek, 2017; Misra et al., 2003; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Sudhesh. & Joseph, 2023; Wan et al., 1992). Students transitioning from educational systems that emphasize rote learning, memorization, and hierarchical relationships with instructors may encounter difficulty adapting to Western academic environments that prioritize critical thinking, independent learning, open discussion, and informal engagement with faculty.

These mismatches in academic expectations can generate uncertainty regarding performance standards and appropriate classroom behavior, increasing cognitive and emotional strain. For example, participation-based grading, expectations for self-directed learning, and the emphasis on argumentative writing may be unfamiliar to many international students, leading to heightened anxiety and reduced academic confidence. Language proficiency further compounds these challenges, as difficulties in comprehension, expression, and academic writing can interfere with performance and participation, even among highly capable students (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008).

Beyond classroom demands, academic stress is also shaped by structural and situational pressures. Many international students face heightened performance expectations tied to financial investment, family obligations, and visa requirements, which often mandate full-time enrollment and satisfactory academic progress. Failure to meet these requirements can carry significant consequences, including loss of legal status, financial strain, or disrupted educational trajectories. As a result, academic challenges may be perceived not only as performance-related stressors but also as threats to long-term stability and future opportunities.

Academic stress is also closely linked to broader processes of educational adjustment, including students' ability to integrate into the academic environment, develop a sense of belonging, and engage meaningfully with peers and faculty. Difficulties in adjustment may limit access to academic support systems, such as office hours, study groups, or mentorship opportunities, further exacerbating stress and isolation. Research suggests that academic stress is strongly associated with psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and burnout, and may interact with other stressors such as acculturative stress and social isolation to amplify overall strain (Misra et al., 2003; Sudhesh & Joseph, 2023).

Importantly, academic stress does not occur in isolation but is embedded within a broader sociocultural and institutional context. Experiences of discrimination, language barriers, and limited access to resources may further constrain students' academic engagement and adjustment. Conversely, supportive academic environments characterized by inclusive teaching practices, accessible faculty, and structured support programs can mitigate these challenges and facilitate adjustment. Thus, academic stress can be understood as both an individual-level experience and a reflection of broader structural conditions shaping international students' educational trajectories.

Discrimination and Racism

A growing body of literature highlights discrimination and racism as central stressors shaping international student experiences. In a longitudinal study Sun et al. (2021) demonstrated a strong relationship between perceived discrimination at base level and negative mental health symptoms 3 months later. Additionally, students from predominantly non-White regions of the world report significantly less positive university experiences than those from predominantly white regions, a phenomenon some scholars describe as *neoracism*—the rationalization of exclusion and prejudice based on cultural difference rather than biological race (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2010). International students with Muslim backgrounds, particularly those whose dress visibly signals religious identity, report heightened perceptions of prejudice and surveillance (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Gardner et al., 2014; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992).

Sociopolitical Climate

Beyond interpersonal, academic, and cultural stressors, international students are uniquely affected by the sociopolitical climate of the host country, which can be due to perceived or actual risk posed by policies that regulate their presence and future prospects. In the present study, we center on perceived sociopolitical climate threat as a key contextual factor shaping international students' psychological experiences and behavioral responses. This construct captures individuals' perceptions of uncertainty, scrutiny, and potential vulnerability within the broader sociopolitical environment. In the United States, international students' legal status is contingent upon compliance with a complex and shifting immigration regulations, including visa maintenance requirements, enrollment thresholds, employment restrictions, and travel limitations (e.g., F-1 and J-1 visa regulations; Foreign Academic Students | USCIS, 2023). In immigration

studies, it is well established that this level of legal uncertainty produces chronic stress due to policy changes beyond individuals' control (Abrego, 2011; Ángeles & Halle-Erby, 2025; Gonzales et al., 2013; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

For international students, unstable political events, policy changes, and public discourse can shape their mobility and decision-making. For example, Song and Li (2022) conducted a quantitative study using a difference-in-differences design and found a significant negative "Trump effect" on international student enrollment in the United States. Their findings showed that fewer students chose the U.S. as a destination compared to competing countries, suggesting that political climate can influence global student mobility patterns. Similarly, Yu (2025) conducted a qualitative study and found that Chinese students in the United States made study abroad decisions shaped by concerns about personal safety, financial constraints, and restrictions on international mobility. Importantly, students were not passive; they actively navigated these challenges by adapting their educational and career goals in response to changing global conditions (Yu, 2025).

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the impact of structural uncertainty on international students. Martirosyan et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study and found that the majority of international students experienced significant non-academic challenges, including financial hardship, mental health issues, travel restrictions, tuition difficulties, and food insecurity. The study also emphasized the importance of institutional support, particularly financial aid, food access, and mental health services, in supporting student success. Similarly, Park & Shimada, (2022), using 34 online semi-structured interviews, found that the contemporary political climate, particularly COVID-19–related policies, negatively affected international students' psychological adjustment and well-being. Participants reported

uncertainty regarding visa status, limited job opportunities, and lack of access to external financial support, while emphasizing the importance of institutional resources such as counseling and financial assistance (Park & Shimada, 2022). Consistent with these findings, Lynch et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative study and found that visa-related anxiety was the strongest predictor of trauma responses among international students during the pandemic.

Recent policy debates surrounding visa restrictions, work authorization limits, and international student enrollment caps have further intensified perceptions of vulnerability among international students ("Federal Policies," n.d.; *How Trump Made Life Difficult for International Students and Wisconsin - The New York Times*, n.d.). Even proposed or temporarily enacted policies can generate significant stress, as students may anticipate negative outcomes such as forced departure, disrupted academic trajectories, or diminished employment opportunities. Yan and Berliner (2013) found that visa issues, employment opportunities, and immigration concerns were among the primary stressors affecting Chinese international students under restrictive immigration policies. Similarly, Feeney et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative study using survey data from academic scientists (N = 419) and found that over one-third of respondents considered leaving the United States, with non-U.S. citizens on temporary visas more likely to do so.

Taken together, this literature suggests that policy threat and political climate function as structural stressors that shape international students' psychological well-being, future decisions, and coping strategies (Anandavalli et al., 2021).

Support and Psychological Responses to Stress

Despite the challenges noted above, international students often demonstrate resilience, with studies reporting lower rates of anxiety and depression compared to domestic students. At the same time, other findings point to important disparities, with international students reporting

higher levels of severe distress indicators such as suicide attempts and overwhelming depressive feelings (Larcombe et al., 2024; Yeung et al., 2022). These mixed findings have prompted increased attention to resilience and promotive factors that shape how students respond to stressors. In the present study, we focus on three distinct but complementary forms of support—social, community, and institutional support—as key protective factors that may promote psychological well-being and shape behavioral responses to stress. Together, these forms of support capture resources operating at multiple levels of students' environments, ranging from close interpersonal relationships to broader community networks and institutional structures.

Social Support

Social support is one of the most consistently identified predictors of psychological well-being among international students (Lee et al., 2004; Misra et al., 2003) It is commonly conceptualized as a coping resource—a social "fund" that individuals draw upon when managing stress (Thoits, 1995). This support is typically provided through close interpersonal relationships, including family members, friends, and peers, and may take multiple forms such as emotional support (e.g., empathy and care), informational support (e.g., advice and guidance), and instrumental support (e.g., tangible assistance) (House et al., 1985). Because of their distance from home, international rely on digital communication to maintain emotional connections with significant others abroad (Cemalcilar et al., 2005). Despite this distance, these relationships remain central to coping with stress, facilitating adjustment, and reducing psychological distress. Empirical evidence consistently shows that higher levels of perceived social support are associated with improved well-being and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Baghoori et al., 2024; Razgulin et al., 2023).

Community Support

While social support focuses on close interpersonal ties, community support reflects a broader network of belonging that extends beyond immediate relationships. Community is a flexible and multidimensional construct, encompassing both geographically bounded spaces and groups formed around shared identities, interests, or experiences (Crow & Allen, 1994). It includes elements such as community integration (a sense of belonging), participation (engagement in activities), and use of community organizations (accessing community-based resources) (Chai et al., 2020; Herrero & Gracia, 2007). For international students, community support often emerges through connections with co-national, ethnic, or cultural groups, as well as engagement with local or university-based communities. These broader networks provide opportunities for cultural learning and facilitate intercultural adjustment (Gresham & Clayton, 2011). Research shows that stronger community integration is associated with lower levels of depression and fewer difficulties adjusting to a new cultural environment (Chai et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2013).

Importantly, the type of community ties matters. Strong connections with co-cultural peers have been found to be particularly important for personal adjustment, while relationships with host-country members contribute independently to adjustment outcomes (Gresham & Clayton, 2011). These findings suggest that community support operates through multiple pathways, including both maintaining cultural continuity and facilitating integration into the host society. However, access to community support is not always equitable. Barriers such as cultural differences, discrimination, and socially isolating environments may limit engagement with communities (Marbang et al., 2020). As a result, international students often report lower levels of perceived support compared to domestic students (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002).

Institutional Support

In addition to interpersonal and community-based support, institutional support represents a critical yet often underexamined dimension of international student well-being. Unlike domestic students, international students are deeply embedded within institutional structures, as their legal status, financial opportunities, and ability to remain in the host country are contingent upon their enrollment (Cho & Yu, 2015). Universities play a central role in providing resources that shape students' experiences, including orientation programs, financial assistance, academic guidance, and employment opportunities. Research suggests that perceived institutional support is associated with higher school-life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological stress (Bradley, 2000; Cho & Yu, 2015). Institutional support also facilitates social integration by creating opportunities for relationship-building through structured programs such as buddy systems, student organizations, and cultural associations (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Westwood & Barker, 1990).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while social, community, and institutional support shape how individuals navigate perceived threat, they do not fully account for the behavioral strategies individuals adopt under conditions of uncertainty and potential risk. In such contexts, international students may adopt strategies aimed at managing perceived vulnerability and maintaining stability within their environment. One such response, which remains notably underexamined in the international student literature, is self-censorship.

Self-Censorship

Self-censorship refers "the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles" (Bar-Tal, 2017). As a form of internalized regulation shaped by sociopolitical and institutional environments, self-censorship represents a

behavioral response to perceived threat. In the context of international students, whose legal status and social belonging may be contingent upon institutional and governmental policies, self-censorship can emerge as a strategic means of navigating environments characterized by uncertainty, surveillance, and conditional acceptance.

From a stress regulation perspective, self-censorship may serve a protective function in the short term. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, individuals employ cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage perceived threats and maintain psychological equilibrium. In contexts where self-expression may jeopardize academic, social, or immigration-related stability, withholding opinions or limiting visibility may serve as an adaptive coping mechanism. However, coping strategies are not uniformly beneficial. Avoidance-based coping, including expressive suppression, has been linked to increased psychological distress, reduced well-being, and diminished access to social support (Deasy et al., 2014; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Thus, self-censorship may provide short-term protection while undermining long-term psychological health.

For example, Alier et al. (2024) found that journalists in South Sudan rely heavily on self-censorship as a coping strategy in response to violence, intimidation, and political repression, including avoiding sensitive topics, omitting information, and framing stories more cautiously. Similarly, (Björkenfeldt, 2025) conducted a quantitative study and found that journalists' self-censorship is primarily driven by emotional and psychological strain rather than professional norms or perceived support. Despite its effects on career decisions and societal well-being (Alier et al., 2024), research suggests that self-censorship can also be detrimental for mental health and well-being (Koç & Turan, 2025).

To further understand its psychological implications, self-censorship can be situated within the broader construct of self-silencing. Originally conceptualized by Jack and Dill (1992), self-silencing involves suppressing one's thoughts, emotions, and needs to avoid conflict, maintain relationships, or conform to perceived expectations. Extensive research demonstrates that self-silencing is associated with depression, anxiety, and diminished psychological well-being.

A key mechanism linking self-silencing to mental health outcomes is inauthenticity. Self-determination theory posits that authenticity—the capacity to behave in accordance with one's true self—is fundamental to psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). Persistent self-suppression creates discrepancies between internal experiences and outward behavior, resulting in feelings of alienation and psychological strain. Research indicates that identity incongruence and self-concept discrepancies are associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced life satisfaction (Jung et al., 2007). Similarly, concealment of personal beliefs or identities has been linked to emotional exhaustion and compromised mental health (Joormann & Stanton, 2016).

Within international student populations, self-concealment and expressive inhibition have been associated with acculturative stress and depression (Constantine et al., 2004; Jung et al., 2007). These findings suggest that the suppression of personal experiences and identities may exacerbate psychological distress, particularly in contexts characterized by cultural adjustment challenges and sociopolitical uncertainty. Accordingly, self-censorship can be conceptualized as a context-specific manifestation of self-silencing, shaped by structural and political conditions.

The present study advances this literature by positioning self-censorship as a key socio-psychological mechanism linking sociopolitical climate threat to mental health outcomes.

Consistent with this framework, self-censorship is conceptualized as a form of behavioral and expressive concealment that may reduce immediate exposure to perceived risk while simultaneously contributing to inauthenticity, emotional suppression, and social disconnection. Over time, these processes may increase vulnerability to anxiety and depression, highlighting the dual nature of self-censorship as both adaptive and potentially maladaptive.

Although much of this work has focused on overt political conflict, this framework is highly applicable to international students, whose legal status is contingent, time-limited, and subject to institutional and governmental evaluation. Immigration governance, shifting policy landscapes, and heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric may create environments in which expression appears consequential, encouraging individuals to regulate political participation, identity disclosure, or public speech (Bar-Tal, 2017; Bar-Tal, 2017). Within this context, self-censorship can be understood as both adaptive and consequential. On one hand, suppressing expression may reduce immediate exposure to perceived threats, allowing individuals to maintain stability within uncertain environments. On the other hand, sustained restriction of expression may carry psychological costs by limiting authentic engagement, constraining access to social support, and increasing cognitive and emotional burden (Alier et al., 2024; Koç & Turan, 2025). This dual nature of self-censorship—as both protective and potentially harmful—positions it as a critical mechanism linking structural political environments to mental health outcomes.

The present study situates self-censorship within Minority Stress Theory (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003). Minority Stress Theory posits that health disparities among marginalized populations arise from chronic, socially produced stressors rooted in stigma, discrimination, and structural exclusion. The theory distinguishes between distal stressors, such as discriminatory

policies or hostile sociopolitical climates, and proximal stressors, which involve internal psychological processes such as vigilance, concealment, and expectations of rejection. Within this framework, international students are conceptualized as a population experiencing structural vulnerability. Anti-immigration rhetoric and restrictive policies can be understood as distal stressors that give rise to proximal processes such as self-censorship, which in turn constrain authentic self-expression and contribute to psychological distress.

Although Minority Stress Theory was originally developed to explain mental health disparities among sexual and gender minority populations, it has increasingly been extended to groups experiencing conditional belonging and institutional precarity, including immigrants and noncitizens (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Comparably, international students' presence in host societies is as contingent upon legal compliance and institutional approval. These conditions create chronic uncertainty, which may heighten sensitivity to political climate and policy change. Similar to concealment processes documented among sexual minorities, international students may regulate expression or participation to avoid scrutiny or perceived jeopardization of their status (Jung et al., 2007; Pachankis et al., 2020). Integrating Minority Stress Theory therefore situates self-censorship within broader stress processes linking structural inequality to psychological outcomes.

Building on Minority Stress Theory, the present study conceptualizes self-censorship as a proximal stress process through which broader sociopolitical and institutional conditions influence psychological well-being among international students. Within this framework, sociopolitical climate threat reflects a distal stressor that gives rise to behavioral and psychological responses aimed at managing perceived vulnerability. Self-censorship, in turn, represents a form of behavioral regulation through which individuals navigate environments

characterized by uncertainty, surveillance, and conditional belonging. By integrating sociopolitical conditions, behavioral responses, and mental health outcomes, this approach extends existing applications of Minority Stress Theory to international student populations and highlights the role of concealment processes in shaping psychological experiences.

Aim of the Present Study

A central contribution of the present study is the conceptualization of self-censorship as a primary socio-psychological mechanism through which international students regulate their expression in response to perceived sociopolitical threat. Although prior research has examined self-censorship primarily within media, political communication, and authoritarian contexts, it has rarely been investigated as a psychological process shaping mental health among international students navigating uncertain legal and sociopolitical environments.

Rather than conceptualizing self-censorship as a coping strategy, the present framework defines it as a form of behavioral and expressive concealment, involving the intentional restriction of one's opinions, identities, and behaviors to avoid potential social, institutional, or legal consequences. This distinction is critical, as concealment processes are typically associated with psychological costs, including reduced authenticity, increased vigilance, and heightened emotional strain.

The present study examines how international students navigate the contemporary sociopolitical climate in the United States, with a particular focus on how perceived threat is associated with both mental health outcomes and self-censorship. We propose that perceived sociopolitical climate threat will be associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including increased anxiety, depression, and stress. In addition, we expect that higher levels of perceived threat will be associated with greater engagement in self-censorship behaviors.

Importantly, we test a model in which self-censorship functions as a mediating mechanism, linking sociopolitical threat to psychological distress. Specifically, heightened perceptions of threat are expected to increase concealment behaviors, which in turn undermine psychological well-being. This framework situates self-censorship alongside other concealment-related processes (e.g., identity concealment, expressive suppression) that have been shown to contribute to mental health disparities.

Finally, the study examines whether institutional, social, and community support function as protective factors, both by directly promoting well-being and by attenuating the relationship between sociopolitical threat and self-censorship. By integrating structural conditions, concealment processes, and mental health outcomes, the present study advances a more comprehensive understanding of how international students experience and respond to sociopolitical environments characterized by uncertainty, surveillance, and conditional belonging.

In this study, we test the following hypotheses to examine the proposed relationships among sociopolitical climate threat, self-censorship as a concealment mechanism, perceived support, and mental health outcomes:

H1. Higher levels of perceived sociopolitical climate threat will be associated with poorer mental health outcomes

H2. Higher levels of self-censorship will be associated with poorer mental health outcomes.

H3. Greater perceived institutional, social, and community support will be associated with better mental health outcomes.

H4. Perceived sociopolitical climate threat will be positively associated with self-censorship.

H5. Self-censorship will mediate the relationship between sociopolitical climate threat and mental health outcomes.

H6. Institutional, social, and community support will moderate the relationship between sociopolitical climate threat and self-censorship, such that higher support is associated with lower levels of self-censorship.

To test these hypotheses, we employed a cross-sectional survey design assessing perceived sociopolitical climate threat, self-censorship as a concealment process, multiple forms of perceived support, and mental health outcomes among international students in the United States.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the effects of sociopolitical climate on international students in the United States.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling methods through international student offices at a large Midwestern university. Recruitment strategies included email outreach, informal presentations by the researcher, text messages, social media flyer sharing, physical flyering on campus premises and international student spaces, and peer referrals among international students. Eligibility criteria included: (a) being at least 18 years old, (b) holding a student visa, (c) being currently enrolled at a U.S. institution of higher education.

A total of 153 individuals accessed the survey. Of these, 74 participants provided complete responses and were retained for analysis using listwise deletion. The final completion rate, despite low, is consistent with prior research on online surveys involving sensitive topics

and marginalized populations, where attrition is common due to survey fatigue, perceived risk, and emotional burden (Baruch & Holtom, 2008; Dillman et al., 2014; Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007).

Race/ethnicity was modeled after the U.S. Census Bureau, with the omission of "American". Participants identified as Black/African (21%), Latino/a/e/x/Hispanic (13.5%), Asian (32.4%), White (12.2%), and Middle Eastern/North African (13.5%); 4.1% of responses were missing. Sixty point eight percent of the sample reported their gender as female, 35.1% reported male, and 2.7% reported being genderqueer or gender nonconforming, and 1.4% reported being transgender. Participants' nationalities covered 40 different locations, with several reporting dual nationalities (e.g., Kenyan and British or Palestinian/Lebanese). Participants were coded into different regions/continents: Africa (20.3%), Latin America (17.6%), Asia (25.7%), Europe (13.5%), Southwest Asia and North Africa [SWANA] (12.2%), and unreported (10.8%). Participants also reported their locations within the United States, spanning nine states and districts. All demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Procedure

Data were collected using an anonymous online survey administered through Qualtrics. Upon accessing the survey, participants first reviewed an informed consent form describing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, potential risks, and confidentiality protections. Participants were informed that they would be asked questions regarding their experiences in the United States, including well-being and perceptions of political contexts.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the survey measures, which took approximately 18 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were presented with a debriefing page that included information about immigration-related and mental

health support resources available to international students. No monetary or course-based compensation was provided. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Measures

Participants completed a series of self-report measures administered via Qualtrics assessing psychological distress, commonly reported stressors among international students, sociopolitical climate threat, self-censorship behaviors, perceived support, and academic performance.

Previous Stressors in the Literature

Exposure to commonly documented stressors was assessed using a 4-item checklist-style frequency measure developed based on prior research on international student stressors (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Participants were asked, "How often have you experienced the following during your time in the United States?" Items assessed experiences of discrimination, academic stress, language/communication barriers, and financial stress. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) (see Appendix G).

Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress was assessed using a shortened 10-item version of the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). The items assessed stress related to cultural adjustment, including perceived discrimination, homesickness, perceived rejection, fear, stress due to change, guilt, and language and socialization concerns ($\alpha = .87$). Participants rated their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An example item is, "I feel guilty because I am living a different lifestyle here; I miss the people and country of my origin" (see Appendix H).

Perceived Sociopolitical Climate Threat

Perceived sociopolitical climate threat was assessed using a 12-item researcher-developed scale. Items captured concerns related to visa instability and disruptions due to funding or policy changes ($\alpha = .92$). Participants rated their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Example items include, "I feel anxious about the increasing scrutiny and vetting procedures for international students" and "I worry that expressing political opinions might impact my visa status or academic standing" (see Appendix I).

Self-Censorship

Self-censorship behaviors were assessed using a 14-item scale adapted from Yuen and Lee (2025), with additional items developed to reflect responses to the current U.S. sociopolitical climate. The scale assessed the extent to which participants altered their online behavior, public expression, and political engagement ($\alpha = .93$). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). An example item is, "I have avoided taking photos or videos at political events to prevent sharing them online" (see Appendix J).

Perceived Institutional Support

Perceived institutional support was measured using a 4-item researcher-developed scale assessing participants' trust in their university's support for international students. Items evaluated trust in university officials, perceived advisor competence, and awareness of campus resources related to immigration or legal support ($\alpha = .82$). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is, "I am confident that my academic advisors would provide support if immigration issues affected me personally" (see Appendix K).

Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support was assessed using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). The scale was administered in its 12-item form and assessed perceived emotional and instrumental support from family, friends, and significant others ($\alpha = .87$). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). An example item is, “There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows” (see Appendix L).

Perceived Community Support

Perceived community support was measured using the Perceived Community Support Questionnaire (PCSQ; Herrero & Gracia, 2007). This 14-item scale assessed sense of belonging, participation in community activities, and perceived availability of support within one’s community ($\alpha = .82$). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is, “I collaborate in organizations and associations in my community” (see Appendix M).

Perceived Stress

Perceived stress was assessed using the Perceived Stress Scale–4 (PSS-4; Cohen et al., 1983). This 4-item scale evaluated the extent to which participants perceived their lives as uncontrollable, overwhelming, or manageable during the past month ($\alpha = .76$). Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), with two positively worded items reverse-coded prior to analysis. An example item is, “In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?” (see Appendix N).

Anxiety Symptoms

Anxiety symptoms were measured using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder–7 scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006). This 7-item scale assessed the frequency of anxiety-related symptoms experienced during the past two weeks, including nervousness, excessive worry, and restlessness ($\alpha = .92$). Items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). An example item is, "Not being able to stop or control worrying" (see Appendix O).

Depressive Symptoms

Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Patient Health Questionnaire–9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001). This 9-item scale evaluated the frequency of depressive symptoms over the past two weeks ($\alpha = .85$). Items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). An example item is, "Little interest or pleasure in doing things" (see Appendix P).

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among all study variables are presented in Table 2. Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, higher levels of sociopolitical climate threat (SCT) were significantly associated with higher levels of anxiety ($r = .446$, $p < .001$), depression ($r = .361$, $p = .002$), and stress ($r = .503$, $p < .001$). Similarly, self-censorship (SC) was positively associated with anxiety ($r = .382$, $p < .001$), depression ($r = .440$, $p < .001$), and stress ($r = .453$, $p < .001$). SCT was also positively associated with SC ($r = .695$, $p < .001$), supporting hypothesis 4.

Contrary to Hypothesis 3, perceived support was not consistently associated with better mental outcomes. Institutional support was positively associated with anxiety ($r = .361$, $p = .002$), depression ($r = .319$, $p = .007$), and stress ($r = .461$, $p < .001$). In contrast, community support was negatively associated with anxiety ($r = -.294$, $p = .011$) and stress ($r = -.298$, $p =$

.010) but not significantly associated with depression (r = −.180, p = .133). Perceived social support (MSPSS) was not significantly correlated with mental health outcomes.

Additional exploratory analyses (not directly related to the study hypotheses) examined associations among other stressors and key study variables. Discrimination/xenophobia was significantly associated with SCT (r = .347, p = .002), SC (r = .381, p < .001), anxiety (r = .324, p = .005), and stress (r = .311, p = .007), but not significantly associated with depression (r = .215, p = .072). It was also positively associated with acculturative stress (r = .500, p < .001) and financial stress (r = .479, p < .001) and negatively associated with community support (r = −.265, p = .022). Discrimination was positively associated with institutional support (r = .507, p < .001) but not significantly associated with perceived social support.

Academic stress was significantly associated with SCT (r = .427, p < .001), SC (r = .293, p = .011), anxiety (r = .553, p < .001), stress (r = .381, p < .001), and depression (r = .404, p < .001). It was also positively associated with acculturative stress (r = .347, p = .002) and financial stress (r = .407, p < .001) but not significantly associated with language barriers.

Three simple mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) to examine test hypothesis 5. Indirect effects were tested using 5,000 bootstrap samples with 95% confidence intervals. For depressive symptoms, the overall model was significant, R^2 = .20, F(2, 68) = 8.59, p = .001. The model explained approximately 20% of the variance in depressive symptoms. The indirect effect of SCT on depressive symptoms through SC was significant (Mediated Effect [ME] = .17, SE = .08, 95% CI [.03, .33]). The direct effect of SCT on depressive symptoms was not significant (b = .09, SE = .10, 95% CI [-.12, .29], p = .411). As shown in Figure 1, results indicated that SCT was a significant predictor of self-censorship, b = .62, SE = .08, 95% CI [.45, .78], p < .001. Self-censorship was a significant predictor of

depressive symptoms, b = .28, SE = .11, 95% CI [.05, .50], p = .016. The total effect of SCT on depressive symptoms was significant, b = .26, SE = .08, 95% CI [.10, .42], p = .002.

For anxiety and perceived stress, the overall models were significant (anxiety: $R^2 = .21$, $F(2, 71) = 9.36$, $p < .001$; perceived stress: $R^2 = .28$, $F(2, 70) = 13.42$, $p < .001$). SCT was significantly associated with SC across both models (bs = .61–.62, ps < .001) and significantly predicted anxiety (b = .26, p = .020) and perceived stress (b = .26, p = .010). However, SC was not significantly associated with either anxiety (b = .12, p = .345) or perceived stress (b = .16, p = .132). The indirect effects were not significant for anxiety (ME = .07, 95% CI [-.10, .23]) or perceived stress (ME = .10, 95% CI [-.04, .25]), indicating no evidence of mediation see Appendix D for a summary of indirect effects as presented in Tables 4.1-3).

To test hypothesis 6, three moderation analyses were conducted using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) to examine whether institutional support (ISS), community support (CS), and social support (MSPSS) moderated the association between SCT and SC (see table 5). Across all models, SCT was significantly associated with higher levels of SC (ISS: b = 0.64, SE = 0.09, p < .001; CS: b = 0.63, SE = 0.08, p < .001; MSPSS: b = 0.64, SE = 0.08, p < .001). Institutional support was not significantly associated with SC, b = 0.02, SE = 0.09, p = .805, and the interaction between SCT and institutional support was not significant, b = 0.05, SE = 0.06, p = .415. Similarly, community support was not significantly associated with SC, b = 0.12, SE = 0.16, p = .460, and the interaction between SCT and community support was not significant, b = -0.02, SE = 0.13, p = .879. Social support was positively associated with SC, b = 0.23, SE = 0.08, p = .007; however, the interaction between SCT and social support was not significant, b = 0.02, SE = 0.07, p = .772. These findings indicate that institutional, community, and social support did not moderate the relationship between SCT and SC.

To examine whether SC predicts mental health outcomes beyond commonly studied stressors, a series of hierarchical linear regressions were conducted for depression, anxiety, and stress. For each outcome, previously identified predictors were included in Model 1, including discrimination, academic stress, language barriers, financial stress, and acculturative stress. Sociopolitical climate threat (SCT) was added in Model 2, and self-censorship (SC) was entered in Model 3. Across all models, collinearity diagnostics indicated no concerns with multicollinearity, with Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) ranging from 1.00 to 2.2.

For depression, after accounting for previously identified stressors and SCT, both SC and academic stress were significant predictors ($\beta = .380$, $p = .011$; $\beta = .281$, $p = .020$) (see Table 3.1). In Models 2 and 3, SCT did not significantly predict depressive symptoms ($\beta = .092$, $p = .553$; $\beta = -.174$, $p = .336$). Academic stress also emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .261$, $p = .028$), whereas discrimination, language barriers, financial stress, and acculturative stress were not significant.

For stress, SC was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .204$, $p = .121$). SCT in both Models 1 and 2 was also not significant ($\beta = .139$, $p = .296$; $\beta = -.034$, $p = .973$) (see Table 3.2). Among all stressors, financial stress ($\beta = .326$, $p = .009$) and acculturative stress ($\beta = .292$, $p = .033$) emerged as significant predictors. Similarly, SC was not a significant predictor of anxiety after accounting for all other stressors ($\beta = .144$, $p = .285$). SCT was also not significant in Model 1 ($\beta = .028$, $p = .837$) or Model 2 after including SC ($\beta = -.076$, $p = .650$) (see Table 3.2). After accounting for all stressors, only academic stress was a significant predictor of anxiety ($\beta = .390$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among sociopolitical climate threat, self-censorship (SC), and mental health outcomes among international students, while also considering the roles of institutional and social support, as well as additional stressors such as academic, financial, and acculturative stress. Overall, the findings provide partial support for the proposed hypotheses and offer important insight into how sociopolitical conditions are associated with psychological well-being and behavioral responses among international students.

Consistent with hypothesis 1, higher levels of perceived sociopolitical climate threat were associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and stress. These findings suggest that perceptions of sociopolitical threat co-occur with elevated psychological distress among international students. This finding aligns with prior literature suggesting that macro-level sociopolitical environments can function as chronic stressors, particularly for non-citizens (Abrego, 2011; Ángeles & Halle-Erby, 2025; Gonzales et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2024; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Park & Shimada, 2022). More broadly, these findings are consistent with stress proliferation frameworks, which suggest that distal structural stressors may be linked to multiple domains of psychological functioning (Pearlin et al., 2005).

Additionally, SCT was positively associated with self-censorship, supporting hypothesis 4 and suggesting that individuals who perceive greater sociopolitical threat are more likely to restrict their expression, avoid engagement in sociopolitical discourse, or limit participation in civic spaces. These findings suggest that self-censorship may function as a behavioral response associated with perceived sociopolitical risk. These findings highlight self-censorship as a key behavioral response to perceived sociopolitical risk. From a theoretical perspective, this pattern is consistent with Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), which proposes that distal stressors are

associated with proximal processes such as vigilance and concealment. In the present context, the findings suggest that self-censorship may represent a form of anticipatory regulation, whereby individuals adjust their behavior in response to perceived risk. However, given the cross-sectional design, these interpretations should be viewed as tentative.

Self-censorship was also associated with poorer mental health outcomes; however, its role varied across mental health outcomes. In the mediation analyses, self-censorship significantly mediated the relationship between SCT and depressive symptoms, but not for anxiety or stress. These findings suggest that self-censorship may be more closely linked to depressive symptoms than to other forms of distress, although causal direction cannot be established.

The differential pattern observed across mental health outcomes may help clarify the psychological processes through which self-censorship is associated with distress. Specifically, the findings suggest that self-censorship may be more closely linked to depressive symptoms than to anxiety or stress. One possible explanation is that self-censorship involves sustained suppression of thoughts, emotions, and self-expression, which may be associated with reduced authenticity, social withdrawal, and diminished opportunities for emotional disclosure. These processes have been consistently linked to depressive symptomatology, including feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and reduced agency (Beck, 1967; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

In contrast, anxiety and perceived stress may be more strongly associated with immediate, situational demands and heightened arousal in response to perceived threats. For example, academic pressures, financial concerns, and uncertainty about performance may contribute more directly to anxiety and stress experiences among international students. Thus, the findings suggest that while sociopolitical climate threat is broadly associated with multiple

forms of distress, self-censorship may be particularly relevant for understanding depressive symptoms, which are more closely tied to chronic patterns of withdrawal and internalization rather than acute reactivity.

Additionally, the findings may reflect differences in the temporal dynamics of these psychological outcomes. Self-censorship may represent a sustained behavioral pattern that accumulates over time, potentially aligning more closely with depressive experiences that develop gradually. In contrast, anxiety and stress may fluctuate more in response to immediate environmental demands, which could explain why self-censorship did not emerge as a significant mediator for these outcomes in the present study. However, given the cross-sectional nature of the data, these interpretations remain tentative, and future longitudinal research is needed to better understand the temporal relationships among these variables.

Notably in the hierarchal regression analysis, self-censorship emerged as a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, even when accounting for other well-established stressors such as academic stress. This pattern suggests that self-censorship may account for unique variance in depressive symptoms beyond commonly studied stressors. The stronger association between self-censorship and depressive symptoms, relative to anxiety or stress, may be theoretically meaningful. Depression has been linked to processes involving withdrawal, reduced expression, and diminished engagement (Beck, 1967; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Thus, the findings suggest that sustained restriction of expression may be associated with depressive experiences, although longitudinal research is needed to clarify directionality.

In contrast, self-censorship did not significantly predict anxiety once other stressors were included, with anxiety being more strongly explained by academic demands. This pattern suggests that anxiety symptoms may be more closely associated with situational or performance-

related stressors. This distinction shows the importance of differentiating between types of psychological distress, as they may be driven by different underlying mechanisms (Beuke et al., 2003).

Contrary to expectations, institutional, social, and community support did not moderate the association between sociopolitical threat and self-censorship. These findings suggest that perceived support may not be sufficient to attenuate the association between sociopolitical threat and self-censorship. In other words, individuals may continue to engage in self-censorship even when support resources are available, particularly when broader sociopolitical risks are perceived as salient. This finding is noteworthy in light of buffering models of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which suggest that support mitigates the effects of stress. In the present study, the findings suggest that when perceived risks involve structural or institutional consequences (e.g., immigration status), support may not function as a buffer in the same way it does for interpersonal stressors.

While insignificant, institutional support was positively associated with poorer mental health outcomes, a finding that appears counterintuitive. This association may reflect several possible interpretations. One possibility is that individuals experiencing greater distress may be more likely to seek out or rely on institutional resources. Alternatively, the findings may suggest that engagement with institutional systems is associated with increased awareness of structural vulnerabilities. Similar patterns have been observed in prior research (e.g., Bailey et al., 2021), where certain forms of institutional or legal engagement were associated with increased distress. It is also possible that this pattern reflects reverse associations, such that distress leads to increased reliance on institutional support, rather than the inverse. Longitudinal research would be necessary to disentangle these possibilities.

Overall, the findings of this research highlight the importance of integrating sociopolitical context into psychological models of well-being among international students. While external stressors such as academic and financial pressures remain critical, the present study highlights how self-censorship as a response to perceived threat shapes mental health. The findings suggest that self-censorship may represent a psychologically meaningful process linked to well-being, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty and perceived risk. From an applied perspective, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at supporting international students may benefit from addressing both individual-level coping and broader structural conditions. Efforts to reduce uncertainty, increase transparency around policies, and foster environments perceived as psychologically safe may be associated with reduced reliance on self-censorship, although further research is needed to evaluate these possibilities.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. First, the relatively small sample size (N = 74) limits the generalizability of the results. Due to the nature of the research and the target population, recruitment efforts were constrained, restricting the ability to obtain a larger and more diverse sample. This also limited the exploration of intersectionality. In particular, the role of dual nationality, especially combinations involving Global North and Global South passports, was not adequately captured. These forms of structural privilege and constraint may intersect with race, ethnicity, and immigration status in ways that shape both perceived threat and behavioral responses such as self-censorship. Future research should more explicitly examine these intersectional dynamics with a larger sample size.

Future research should also expand on the present findings by examining additional dimensions of intersectionality among international students. Specifically, understanding how

multiple marginalized identities interact to influence self-censorship and mental health remains an important direction. Similarly, exploring differences across academic stages. For example, comparing incoming students to those nearing graduation, may reveal meaningful variation in coping strategies and perceived threat over time. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable in capturing how these processes evolve in response to changing sociopolitical conditions.

Second, the sensitive nature of the study likely introduced self-selection bias. Participants who felt relatively safe or comfortable disclosing personal experiences may have been more likely to complete the survey, potentially resulting in an underrepresentation of individuals experiencing heightened threat or vulnerability. As such, the current findings may underestimate the extent of self-censorship and psychological distress among more vulnerable populations.

Third, the geographic scope of participants was limited due to the sampling strategy employed (i.e., snowball sampling), with representation from only nine U.S. states and districts. This restricts the ability to capture regional variation in sociopolitical climates, policy environments, and community-level support systems. Future studies should consider more geographically diverse samples to better understand how local contexts shape international students' experiences of threat, belonging, and well-being.

In addition, there are important measurement-related limitations. Some constructs, including self-censorship (SC), the Institutional Support Scale (ISS), and sociopolitical climate threat (SCT), were developed for the purposes of this study due to the novelty and specificity of the research question. While these measures were theoretically grounded, they require further validation in larger and more diverse samples; however, due to their timeliness and context dependence, this remains a limitation for future studies. Additionally, due to time constraints,

several stressors identified in prior literature were assessed using single-item measures. Although these items provided useful preliminary insight, future research should employ multi-item, validated scales to improve reliability and construct validity. Furthermore, some established measures, such as the acculturative stress scale and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, were shortened to fit within the limited timeframe and to reduce participant burden.

Finally, future work should include broader outreach to students from countries or regions affected by travel restrictions or immigration policies, such as travel bans. These populations may experience unique forms of uncertainty, immobility, and psychological distress related to restricted mobility and limited ability to return home. Incorporating these perspectives would further contextualize the psychological consequences of structural policy constraints and strengthen our understanding of how sociopolitical environments shape the lived experiences of international students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study suggests that sociopolitical climate threat may represent an important and understudied determinant of mental health among international students. Beyond its direct effects, sociopolitical threat appears to shape behavioral responses such as self-censorship, which in turn may contribute to psychological distress—particularly depression. While traditional stressors such as academic and financial strain remain significant, the findings underscore the need to account for the broader sociopolitical context in understanding student well-being.

By identifying self-censorship as a potential key mechanism and highlighting the possible limits of institutional support in mitigating its effects, this study contributes to a more

comprehensive understanding of how international students may navigate environments characterized by uncertainty and risk. Addressing these challenges may require not only individual-level interventions but also structural and institutional changes that foster both safety and genuine freedom of expression.

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Appendix A

Table 1.

Summary of Participants' Self-Identification

		Sample (N = 74)
English as a Second Language	56	75.7%
Ethnoracial Background		
Asian	24	32.4%
Black or African	21	28.4%
Latino/a/x or Hispanic	10	13.5%
Middle Eastern/North African	10	13.5%
White	9	12.2%
Other	3	4..1%
Gender Identity		
Male	26	35.1%
Female	45	60.8%
Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming	2	2.7%
Transgender	1	1.4%
Nationality by region/continent		
Asia	19	25.7%
Africa	15	20.3%
Latin America	13	17.6%
Europe	10	13.5%
Southwest Asia or North Africa	9	12.2%
Unreported	8	10.8%
Current State Residence		
Oklahoma	57	77.0%
Ohio	4	5.4%
California	2	2.7%
Illinois	2	2.7%
Maryland	2	2.7%
Texas	1	1.4%
District of Columbia	1	1.4%
Michigan	1	1.4%
Minnesota	1	1.4%
Classification		
Freshman	8	10.8%
Sophomore	9	12.2%
Junior	7	9.5%
Senior	13	17.6%
Graduate	34	45.9%
Other	3	4.1%

Appendix B

Table 2.

Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1.Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)	--												
2. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)	.650**	--											
3. Patient Health Quotient (PHQ)	.755**	.533**	--										
4. Sociopolitical Climate Threat (SCT)	.446**	.503**	.361**	--									
5. Self-Censorship	.382**	.453**	.440**	.695**	--								
6. Institutional Support	.361**	.461**	.319**	.502**	.358**	--							
7. Acculturative Stress	.460**	.520**	.381**	.628**	.445**	.876**	--						
8. Community Support	-.294*	-.298*	-.180	-.182	-.063	-.392**	-.399**	--					
9. Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support	-.186	-.146	-.232†	-.192	.088	-.164	-.231*	.521**	--				
10. Discrimination or Xenophobia	.324**	.311**	.215†	.347**	.381**	.507**	.500**	-.265*	-.133	--			
11. Stress by Academic Expectations	.553**	.381**	.404**	.427**	.293*	.352**	.347**	-.161	-.101	.214†	--		
12. Language Barriers	.110	.222†	.131	.148	.204†	.472**	.415**	-.241*	-.045	.271*	.125	--	
13. Financial Stress	.456**	.541**	.294*	.558**	.415**	.386**	.456**	-.060	-.048	.479**	.407*	.242*	--
N	74	73	71	74	74	74	74	74	74	74	74	74	74
α	.922	.764	.852	.917	.927	.820	.866	.817	.874				
M[a]	2.504	3.088	2.394	2.53	2.65	4.496	3.13	3.533	5.534				
(*SD*)	(.901)	(.799)	(.792)	(0.95)	(0.95)	(1.204)	(0.83)	(0.575)	(1.026)				

Note. 10-13 are a 1 item question.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Appendix C

Table 3.1

Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting Depression

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Acculturative Stress	.19	.10	.26†	.16	.11	.22	.19	.11	.26†
Discrimination	.01	.11	.01	.02	.11	.02	-.04	.11	-.05
Academic Stress	.23	.10	.29*	.22	.10	.28*	.22	.09	.28*
Language and Communication Barriers	-.03	.12	-.03	-.02	.12	-.02	-.06	.11	-.06
Financial Stress	.05	.10	.07	.03	.11	.04	.04	.10	.06
Sociopolitical Climate Threat				.07	.11	.09	-.12	.13	-.17
Self-Censorship							.29	.11	.38**

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3.2.
Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting Stress

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Acculturative Stress	0.25	0.09	0.34**	0.20	0.10	0.27*	0.22	0.10	0.29*
Discrimination	-0.04	0.09	-0.05	-0.03	0.09	-0.04	-0.06	0.10	-0.08
Academic Stress	0.11	0.08	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.12
Language and Communication Barriers	0.02	0.09	0.02	0.04	0.10	0.05	0.02	0.10	0.02
Financial Stress	0.28	0.09	0.36**	0.24	0.10	0.32**	0.25	0.09	0.326**
Sociopolitical Climate Threat				0.10	0.10	0.14	0.00	0.12	-0.01
Self-Censorship							0.16	0.10	0.20

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3.3
Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting Anxiety

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Acculturative Stress	0.21	0.10	0.26*	0.20	0.11	0.24†	0.21	0.11	0.26†
Discrimination	0.05	0.11	0.05	0.05	0.11	0.06	0.03	0.11	0.03
Academic Stress	0.36	0.09	0.39***	0.353	0.10	0.39***	0.35	0.10	0.39***
Language and Communication Barriers	-0.11	0.10	-0.10	-0.10	0.11	-0.10	-0.12	0.11	-0.12
Financial Stress	0.15	0.10	0.18	0.14	0.11	0.17	0.15	0.11	0.17
Sociopolitical Climate Threat				0.02	0.10	0.03	-0.06	0.13	-0.08
Self-Censorship							0.12	0.12	0.14

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Appendix D

Table 4.1

Mediation Analysis Indirect Effects Summary (Depression)

Relationship	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI	
			LL	UL
SCT → PHQ	.26	.08	.10	.42
SCT → SC	.62	.08	.45	.78
SC → PHQ	.28	.11	.05	.50
SCT → SC → PHQ	.17	.08	.03	.33

Table 4.2

Mediation Analysis Indirect Effects Summary (Anxiety)

Relationship	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI	
			LL	UL
SCT → GAD	0.34	.08	.18	.49
SCT → SC	.61	.07	.46	.76
SC → GAD	.12	.13	-.13	.37
SCT → SC → GAD	.07	.08	-.10	.23

Table 4.3

Mediation Analysis Indirect Effects Summary (Stress)

Relationship	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI	
			LL	UL
SCT → PSS	.36	.07	.21	.51
SCT → SC	.62	.08	.46	.78
SC → PSS	.16	.11	-.05	.38
SCT → SC → PSS	.10	.07	-.04	.25

Appendix E

Table 5

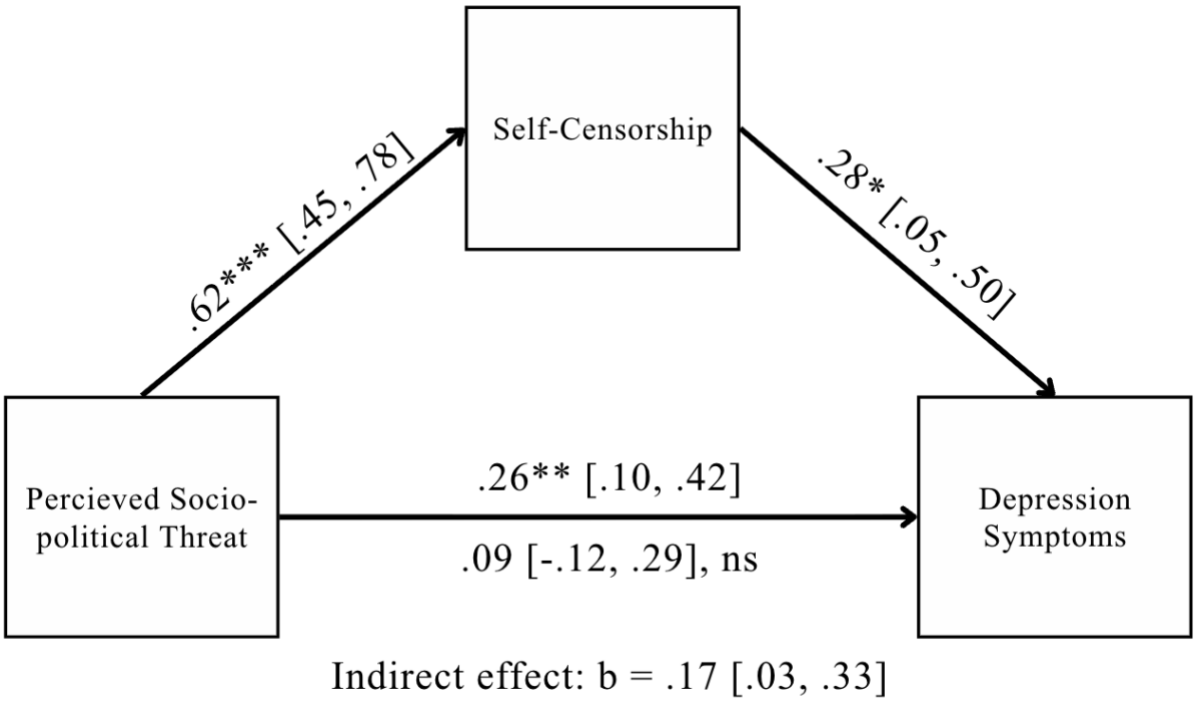
Moderated Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Censorship from Sociopolitical Climate Threat and Three Forms of Support

Predictor	Social Support (Model 1)			Community Support (Model 2)			Institutional Support (Model 3)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Sociopolitical Climate Threat (SCT)	.63	.08	.72***	.33	.08	.71***	.64	.09	.72***
Support (Moderator)	.23	.08	.23	.16	.00	.06	.02	.09	.02
SCT x Support	.02	.07	.02	-.02	.13	-.01	.05	.06	.06
R^2	.53			.49			.49		
Sociopolitical Climate Threat ΔR^2 (interaction)	.001			.000			.005		

*** $p < .001$

Appendix F

Figure 1.
Mediation Model for Depression (PHQ)



Relationship between sociopolitical climate threat and depression mediated by self-censorship. Standardized coefficients are shown with 95% confidence interval (CI) in brackets. N=71. *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $R^2 = .13$.

Appendix G

Past Stressors Scale

Participants were asked to indicate how often they experienced the following stressors during their time in the United States. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very often*).

1. Discrimination or xenophobia.
2. Stress due to academic expectations or workload.
3. Language or communication barriers.
4. Financial stress.

Response scale:

1 = Never
2 = Almost never
3 = Sometimes
4 = Fairly often
5 = Very often

Appendix H

Acculturative Stress Scale Adapted from Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994)
Participants were asked to indicate how strongly each statement applied to them using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

1. Others are biased toward me.
2. I feel that I receive unequal treatment.
3. Homesickness bothers me.
4. I miss the people and country of my origin.
5. People show hatred toward me (verbally, nonverbally, or through actions).
6. Others do not appreciate my cultural values.
7. I fear for my personal safety because of my different cultural background.
8. I generally keep a low profile due to fear.
9. Multiple pressures are placed upon me after migration.
10. I feel uncomfortable adjusting to new cultural values.
11. I feel guilty for leaving family and friends behind.
12. I feel guilty because I am living a different lifestyle here.

Response scale:
1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Somewhat disagree
4 = Neither agree nor disagree
5 = Somewhat agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly agree

Appendix I

Sociopolitical Climate Threat Scale

Participants were asked to indicate how strongly each statement applied to them using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

1. I worry that my visa status could be revoked without warning or explanation.
2. I feel anxious about increasing scrutiny and vetting procedures for international students.
3. I feel uncertain about my ability to gain work experience in the United States after graduation due to changes in the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program.
4. I have reconsidered staying in the United States long term because of changes to international student work policies.
5. Changes in research funding policies have disrupted my academic or professional plans.
6. I feel that my academic contributions are undervalued or at risk because of my immigration status.
7. I feel unsafe leaving the United States due to the risk of being denied reentry.
8. I worry that expressing political opinions might impact my visa status or academic standing.
9. I exercise caution when discussing controversial issues, including international human rights topics.
10. U.S. immigration policies cause me stress and anxiety.
11. I often feel that I am living in a state of uncertainty due to potential legal or policy changes.
12. I feel isolated or unsupported when policy changes target international students.

Response scale:

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Somewhat disagree
4 = Neither agree nor disagree
5 = Somewhat agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly agree

Appendix J

Self-Censorship Scale Adapted from Yuen and Lee (2025)
Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they engaged in the following behaviors based on their feelings regarding the current political climate. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very frequently*).

1. I have reduced the amount of politically sensitive or protest-related content I post on social media platforms.
2. I have removed or adjusted my list of friends or followers on social media for political reasons.
3. I have avoided posting comments about politics on social media.
4. I have avoided making political comments in public.
5. I have limited how often I discuss politics with friends.
6. I have deleted or edited posts to remove political content.
7. I have avoided liking or sharing political content on social media.
8. I have avoided attending political meetings, rallies, or protests to prevent drawing attention.
9. I have refrained from wearing clothing, pins, or symbols that could indicate my political views.
10. I have refrained from following or engaging with politically active accounts on social media.
11. I have uninstalled or limited my use of apps that might reveal my political activity.
12. I have avoided taking photos or videos at political events to prevent sharing them online.
13. I have changed my online search or browsing habits to avoid politically sensitive topics.
14. I have avoided joining online groups or forums that discuss political issues.

Response scale:
1 = Never
2 = Rarely
3 = Sometimes
4 = Frequently
5 = Very frequently

Appendix K

Institutional Support Scale

Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with the following statements about their experiences during the past month. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

1. I trust that officials at my university are looking out for international students.
2. I am confident that my academic advisors would provide support if immigration issues affected me personally.
3. I believe my advisors are competent and proactive in helping students navigate current policies.
4. I know where to find contact information for campus resources that can help with legal or immigration-related issues.

Response scale:

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Somewhat disagree
4 = Neither agree nor disagree
5 = Somewhat agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly agree

Appendix L

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) Adapted from Zimet et al. (1988)

Participants were asked to indicate how they felt about each statement. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Very strongly agree*).

1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.
2. There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows.
3. My family really tries to help me.
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.
6. My friends really try to help me.
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.

Response scale:

1 = Very strongly disagree
2 = Strongly disagree
3 = Mildly disagree
4 = Neutral
5 = Mildly agree
6 = Strongly agree
7 = Very strongly agree

Appendix M

Perceived Community Support Scale (Herrero & Gracia, 2007)
Participants were asked to indicate how they felt about each statement. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

1. I identify with my community.
2. My opinions are valued in my community.
3. Few people in my community know who I am.
4. I feel like my community is my own.
5. I collaborate in organizations and associations in my community.
6. I take part in social activities in my community.
7. I participate in social or civic groups in my community.
8. I respond to calls for support in my community.
9. I do not take part in socio-recreational activities in my community.
10. I could find people who would help me feel better.
11. I would find someone to listen to me when I feel down.
12. I would find a source of satisfaction for myself.
13. I would be able to cheer up and get into a better mood.
14. I would relax and easily forget my problems.

Response scale:
1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neither agree nor disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly agree

Appendix N

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4) (Cohen et al., 1983)
Participants were asked to indicate how often they experienced the following feelings and thoughts during the past month. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very often*).

1. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
4. In the last month, how often have you felt that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Response scale:
0 = Never
1 = Almost never
2 = Sometimes
3 = Fairly often
4 = Very often

Appendix O

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) (Spitzer et al., 2006)
Participants were asked to indicate how often they had been bothered by the following problems during the past two weeks. Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Nearly every day*).

1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge.
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying.
3. Worrying too much about different things.
4. Trouble relaxing.
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still.
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable.
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen.

Response scale:
0 = Not at all
1 = Several days
2 = More than half the days
3 = Nearly every day

Appendix P

Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (Kroenke et al., 2001).
Participants were asked to indicate how often they experienced the following symptoms over the past two weeks. Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Nearly every day*).

1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things.
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much.
4. Feeling tired or having little energy.
5. Poor appetite or overeating.
6. Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down.
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television.
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual.
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way.

Response scale:
0 = Not at all
1 = Several days
2 = More than half the days
3 = Nearly every day