

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND A GROWTH MINDSET: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A VIETNAMESE DOCTORAL STUDENT IN CANADA

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Abstract

This autoethnography study examines how social support and a growth mindset shape the adaptation and resilience of a Vietnamese doctoral student in Canada. Grounded in social capital theory and growth mindset theory, it explores how bonding, bridging, and maintained forms of social capital interact with agency to mitigate academic, financial, and emotional stress. Drawing on personal narratives, reflective journals, and memory work, three interconnected themes emerged: (1) family emotional support and cultural continuity, which provided psychological grounding and a sense of belonging; (2) academic networking and institutional support, which fostered esteem, professional identity, and scholarly collaboration; and (3) professional growth through a growth mindset, which transformed challenges into opportunities for development. Findings reveal that growth mindset is not merely an individual trait but also a relational process enacted through networks of emotional, informational, social companionship, and instrumental support. It operates as a mediating force that activates social capital and situates agency within supportive contexts. This research contributes to international doctoral education by offering a nuanced understanding of social capital, social support, and mindset as interdependent dimensions of adaptation. It emphasizes inclusive, relational environments that empower international students to thrive academically and personally.

Keywords: Canadian higher education, growth mindset, international doctoral students, social support, social capital, agency

Résumé

Cette étude autoethnographique examine comment le soutien social et un état d'esprit de croissance façonnent l'adaptation et la résilience d'un doctorant vietnamien au Canada. Ancrée dans la théorie du capital social et la théorie de l'état d'esprit de croissance, elle explore comment les formes de capital social de liaison, de pontage et maintenues interagissent avec l'agentivité pour atténuer le stress académique, financier et émotionnel. En s'appuyant sur des récits personnels, des journaux réflexifs et un travail de mémoire, trois thèmes interconnectés ont émergé : (1) le soutien émotionnel familial et la continuité culturelle, qui ont fourni un ancrage psychologique et un sentiment d'appartenance ; (2) le réseautage académique et le soutien institutionnel, qui ont favorisé l'estime de soi, l'identité professionnelle et la collaboration scientifique ; et (3) la croissance professionnelle

par le biais d'un état d'esprit de croissance, qui a transformé les défis en opportunités de développement. Les résultats révèlent que l'état d'esprit de croissance n'est pas simplement un trait individuel, mais aussi un processus relationnel mis en œuvre à travers des réseaux de soutien émotionnel, informationnel, de compagnie sociale et instrumental. Il fonctionne comme une force médiatrice qui active le capital social et situe l'agentivité dans des contextes favorables. Cette recherche contribue à l'éducation doctorale internationale en offrant une compréhension nuancée du capital social, du soutien social et de l'état d'esprit comme dimensions interdépendantes de l'adaptation. Elle souligne l'importance d'environnements inclusifs et relationnels qui permettent aux étudiants internationaux de s'épanouir sur les plans académique et personnel.

Mots clés : enseignement supérieur canadien, état d'esprit de croissance, doctorants internationaux, soutien social, capital social

INTRODUCTION

Canada was home to over 1,000,000 international students across all study levels by 2023 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2024). The majority of international students in 2020–21 were enrolled in bachelor's programs, followed by master's and doctoral degrees (Erudera, 2022). Despite having the lowest enrolment, international doctoral students have unique characteristics compared to undergraduates or master's students, resulting in distinctive stress (Nishioka & Akol, 2019).

Research (Gebregergis, 2018; Ye & Juni, 2018) suggests that international doctoral students experience diverse challenges due to academic demands. Unlike undergraduates, who focus on course understanding, doctoral students must contribute new information to the field. This, along with holding multiple roles and responsibilities like research and teaching (Nishioka & Akol, 2019) and the pressure of dissertation research (Qi & Li, 2021), increases stress levels. However, Su et al. (2021) argue that their advanced skills and knowledge to handle cultural and educational shifts in host countries reduce their stress level. Studies have explored challenges experienced by international doctoral students (Cena et al., 2021; Hou et al., 2025; Li et al., 2021; Qi & Li, 2021), but research is lacking on their social support and its potential in overcoming the challenges (Rahming, 2019).

Embarking on my doctoral journey in 2021, I faced numerous psychological and educational stressors. Despite the difficulties and loneliness associated with being away from home, I have developed resilience and learned to seek social support, which has been key to my academic success. This article explores my personal narratives to reflect on the potential role of social support in mitigating stress during my first three years of a doctoral program and emphasizes my growth mindset in determining how I navigate the present challenges and look forward to a promising future. Personal narratives provide individuals with a framework to understand their own identity within a cultural context and engage in deep reflections on their experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). This study explores my experience as a Vietnamese international doctoral student in Canada, addressing this research question: *How do I navigate and overcome academic, financial, and personal stress?*

The study highlights the need for a robust, inclusive support network for international doctoral students to excel in academia. These findings can guide higher education professionals in improving support programs. By doing so, universities can cultivate a culturally sensitive campus and promote cultural differences among diverse students (Johnson et al., 2018; Ra, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Support

By definition, social support refers to “the nature of the interactions occurring in social relationships, especially how these are evaluated by the person as to their supportiveness” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 249). International students garner this support from various sources like family, host compatriots, community activities, personal tutorials, religious places, and more (Cao et al., 2021; Lashari et al., 2018; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). It is also described as “the provision of assistance or comfort to others, typically in order to help them cope with a variety of biological, psychological, and social stressors” (The American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 869), provided by caring and loving individuals, creating a sense of reassurance and a reliable community during times of need (Dunn & O’Brien, 2009).

Potential Roles of Social Support

Research (e.g., Bai, 2016; Cao et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2017) suggests that social support buffers the impact of stress. In support of this, Thomas and Sumathi (2016) conclude that “social support mediates and moderates the relationship between stress and acculturation” (p. 63), thereby aiding international students in adapting to a new culture. Ma et al. (2020) also propose that social support functions in a protective role, reducing mental health issues of international students.

Lashari et al. (2018) identify seven sources of social support, which are: host social networks, academic peer groups, student support services, university support, close family and friend relationships, informal interactions with faculty, and personal tutorials. Engaging in activities with co-nationals helps maintain and reaffirm cultural identity and practices, as well as preserve home cultural traditions (Thomas & Sumathi, 2016). It also reduces homesickness and disorientation and provides protection against the negative effects of perceived discrimination on well-being (Ng et al., 2017).

Families from home countries provide financial aid, such as assistance with housing and living costs. Support from family and friends also “mitigates the effects of on-and-off campus stressors” (Rahming, 2019, p. 1068), serving as valuable sources of encouragement, collaboration, and assistance.

Researchers (Cao & Meng, 2019; Franco et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) indicate that extending relationships with friends from both home and host countries through joining student organizations and social support groups can help mitigate academic stressors. These groups offer assistance in exam preparation and learning strategies (Cao et al., 2021). Additionally, assimilating and developing social networks with domestic peers allows international students to practise language skills, thereby reducing stress in various adapting situations (Campbell, 2015).

International students’ experience with cultural and academic stress can also be alleviated through counternarratives provided by information-based support networks, such as counselling staff and professional counsellors in host countries (Rahming, 2019). Additionally, interactions with professors and instructors, who have experience teaching international students and an understanding of culture and social differences, make it easier for international students to adapt to various teaching methods (Campbell, 2015; Ra, 2016). Eventually, international students receiving positive support from these institutional ties are less likely to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, adjusting better to the cultural differences (Jackson et al., 2013).

“Stress Buffer” Lens

Through the “stress buffer” hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985), social support systems (and their usefulness) can be categorized into four types: Esteem, Informational, Instrumental, and Social Companionship. Esteem support is defined as “information that a person is esteemed and accepted,” and it involves “communicating to persons that they are valued for their own worth and experience and are accepted despite any diffi-

culties or personal faults” (p. 313). Informational support provides cognitive guidance, advice, and appraisal to international students during their stay in a foreign country. It helps them define, understand, and cope with problematic events. Instrumental support refers to tangible aid, including financial and material assistance, that resolves or reduces stressors. This can include financial support from family and friends (Rahming, 2019), social services (Ra & Trusty, 2017), and practical support such as language tutoring or career guidance (Cho, 2014). Social companionship support brings about positive affective moods by engaging in leisure and recreational activities with others. This source promotes a sense of belonging and diffuse support.

The literature suggests that social support functions are intertwined and inseparable. International students with stronger connections to various groups tend to receive more instrumental support, leading to increased esteem and social companionship support. Likewise, those with more social companionship support often have greater access to instrumental assistance and esteem. Cohen and Wills (1985) emphasize the need to develop comprehensive and specific measures that consider intercorrelations to study social support. In a critical case study on international doctoral student stress and support networks, Rahming (2019) concludes that, to fully support international doctoral students, “scholars must scrutinize the oppressive systems that envelop these students, who are already tackling demanding doctoral programs” (p. 1070). He also suggested that future studies should focus on areas such as tuition and fees, financial aid process, and feelings of insecurity.

Limitations in Current Literature

Most research measured levels of stress and social support that international doctoral students perceived (T. T. K. Le & Huyen-Nguyen, 2023) instead of exploring and interpreting thoughts and meanings derived from their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Autoethnography, a postmodern research methodology, emphasizes the importance of the researcher’s voice as valuable data. In this context, autoethnographic

researchers oppose the absence of their voice and integrate personal experiences with larger sociocultural context (Yoshida, 2024). Autoethnography provides a vital space for academics in higher education, whose emotions and intentions are often marginalized, silenced, or overlooked. This approach allows them to address their discomfort and progress toward a more reflective, ethical, and scholarly self-awareness (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021).

Autoethnographic studies are employed in Canadian internationalization higher education; for example, examining challenges like academic disconnection and emotional stress during COVID-19 (Sen et al., 2022) and the role of emotional intelligence in managing adversity (Zabin et al., 2022). Several autoethnographic studies discuss Vietnamese doctoral students abroad. V. Tran et al. (2022) explored their transnationality and mobility in Canadian international higher education, offering insights on education, equity, and inclusion. G. N. H. Le et al. (2021) studied researcher positionality, education inequity, and mindfulness in global crises from their perspectives. Phan (2022) shed light on a student mother’s emotional response to interrupted mobility due to global health issues. Lastly, E. Tran and Le (2024) analyzed systemic discrimination faced by Vietnamese doctoral students who work as English as a Foreign Language teachers in Canada.

However, these studies mainly discuss Vietnamese international doctoral students’ challenges in specific periods; for example, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and before and after their doctoral journey. An under-researched aspect, however, is a comprehensive view of their entire doctoral journey, encompassing not only emotional and psychological challenges but also academic pressure and stressors from cultural and social differences. Current literature also lacks discussion on the impact of social networks and their utilization for coping with stress. Given the importance of social support from campus organizations, academic programs, residential community, and family (Glass & Gesing, 2018), it is crucial to examine their profound role in aiding diverse stress.

This autoethnography aims to address methodological and knowledge gaps by analyzing how support systems collaboratively help to manage stress. It contributes to existing literature in several ways. It lends a unique perspective to Canadian higher education internationalization by analyzing and interpreting the personal narratives of an international doctoral student. Using an autoethnographic approach, the researcher's voice is emphasized, contextualizing her experience within a wider sociocultural context. This study also reveals the potential impact of social support on stress via social capital theory. It presents an in-depth understanding of the adaptation of international doctoral students in Canada.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs social capital (Putnam, 2001) to investigate how social support mitigates international doctoral student stress. Social capital is defined as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2001, p. 19). It involves the tangible and intangible benefits individuals gain through their social interactions (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001).

Social capital is divided into two categories: bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2001). Bridging social capital pertains to resources and values derived from weak-tie social networks, which are connections from diverse social and demographic groups such as acquaintances, colleagues, and peers from host and other international countries. These weak ties offer access to new information and job opportunities. Meanwhile, bonding social capital refers to collective resources from strong-tie networks and trusting relationships. These strong ties are typically built between individuals of the same cultural background and social class, such as co-nationals and family members. Robison and Siles (2000) distinguished between two types of “kernels of commonality”: earned and inherited, both contributing to the growth of social capital (p. 2). Bridging social capital is often acquired through earned kernels

such as membership in organizations, levels of education, or place of residence, fostering the exchange of ideas and information. In contrast, bonding social capital is usually gained through inherited kernels like gender, ethnicity, cultural heritage, and nationality, offering effective informational and emotional support. Numerous studies (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Putnam, 2001; Wang, 2020) have found that developing these diverse social ties enhances international students' coping strategies, helping them overcome cross-cultural stress. Apart from bridging and bonding capital, Ellison et al. (2007) put forward a third dimension, named “maintained social capital,” which implies social capital linked with acquaintances and friends from a formerly lived community as opposed to close networks.

In this study, I use social capital theory to explore how social support from various networks assists with different life events. This theory allows a comprehensive examination of how I leverage(d) these networks to mitigate academic pressure, financial burden, and psychological stress. By applying this framework, the study also uncovers how close interactions with both strong and weak ties help me achieve my goals. It guides my analysis and interpretation of personal stories, situating my experience within a wider sociocultural context. Specifically, I focus on my perception of the available social networks (how I feel about the relationship) and the strategies I use to approach them (how I act to seek support).

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography

This study utilizes autoethnography, a study of self or a self-study (Yazan, 2019), as a research methodology. Autoethnography relies on personal experiences and reflexivity to inform, examine, and develop cultural understanding within a broader social and cultural context (Adams et al., 2017). It is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 39). In essence, autoethnographers express

lived experiences of researchers as participants through the lens of social and cultural issues (Adams et al., 2017).

I apply autoethnography to explore my experiences, following the three reasons explained by Adams et al. (2017). Firstly, by focusing on personal narratives, I, as a researcher and autoethnographer, offer “accounts of personal experience to complement, or fill gaps in, existing research” (p. 3). These accounts represent the experiences of other international doctoral students and “may show how the desire for, and practice of, generalization in research can mask important nuances of cultural issues” (p. 3). Secondly, by connecting personal accounts to a broader social and cultural context, I “articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience” (p. 3). As an individual who directly experiences educational, psychological, cultural, and social challenges, I help to inform readers about various aspects of cross-cultural transition. Lastly, the use of personal narratives in autoethnography allows me to “describe moments of everyday experience that cannot be captured through more traditional research methods” (p. 4). By documenting my observations, thoughts, and emotions, I provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of my experiences in the most ordinary settings.

Data Collection and Analysis

A narrative style of writing (Ellis, 2004) utilizes a first-person voice to describe personal experience, creating “evocative and specific representations of the culture/cultural experience and to give audiences a sense of how being there in the experience feels” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 2). The data for this autoethnographic study were drawn from three primary sources: personal memories, diary entries, and blog posts spanning the first three years of my doctoral journey (Adams et al., 2022). These sources were selected based on their relevance to the study’s focus on stress, social support, and growth mindset. Personal memories were reconstructed through reflective journaling and recollection of significant events, while diary entries and blog posts were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes and emotional responses.

To organize the data, I created a chronological timeline of key experiences and categorized entries according to academic, financial, and personal stressors. The analysis followed a thematic approach, guided by social capital theory (Putnam, 2001) and the concept of growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Themes were identified through iterative reading and coding of the narratives, focusing on how different types of social support emerged in relation to bridging, bonding, and maintained social capital. For example, diary entries describing interactions with professors and peers were interpreted as instances of bridging capital, while blog reflections on family support were linked to bonding capital.

The interpretation of these themes was informed by existing literature and theoretical constructs, ensuring that personal narratives were situated within broader sociocultural contexts. This analytical process allowed me to connect individual experiences to collective patterns and theoretical insights, enhancing the methodological rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Validity and Trustworthiness

This research’s validity and trustworthiness are assured in three ways. First, multiple data sources and types, including personal memories of past experiences, diaries, and blogs (Adams et al., 2022; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), are used to corroborate evidence on the research theme (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Second, the data analysis and interpretation situate my experience within a broader context and previous studies, grounding the findings in existing literature (Adams et al., 2022). Lastly, a detailed account of the research process is provided, including the study focus, researcher’s role, and data sources, serving as a solid framework for comparison and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: A LOTUS FLOWER FROM THE EAST GROWING IN THE WEST

Contextualizing My Doctoral Journey

The lotus flower, Vietnam's symbolic flower, represents resilience, beauty emerging from adversity, determination, and optimism for the future (Nguyen, 2021). Known as "the flower of the dawn," it closes and sinks into the murky water at night, hiding its purity, only to rise and bloom again at sunrise. This metaphor mirrors my journey as a Vietnamese doctoral student in Canada, striving to grow amidst challenges. Raised by educator parents who instilled in me the belief that education is a pathway to freedom and self-actualization, I developed a deep commitment to learning. This cultural inheritance shaped my desire to pursue a doctoral degree in Canada, symbolizing a rebirth of purpose and identity. These inherited and earned forms of social and cultural capital formed the foundation from which my growth mindset emerged.

A growth mindset, as defined by Dweck (2006), is the belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort, learning, and persistence. However, as later research clarifies, mindset functions not in isolation but within a social and structural context that either enables or constrains one's agency (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). In this study, I conceptualize growth mindset as a relational and contextual process: the capacity to act and adapt within a network of support, resources, and opportunities. This framing bridges individual agency with structural conditions, recognizing that resilience develops not solely from personal willpower but through the interdependence of self and system.

The following sections are organized around three interrelated themes: (1) family emotional support and cultural continuity, (2) academic networking and institutional support, and (3) professional growth through a growth mindset.

Together, they illustrate how my mindset interacted with multiple layers of social capital—bonding, bridging, and maintained—to navigate my doctoral study.

Family Emotional Support and Cultural Continuity

In 2021, I left my family and a tenured academic position that had defined my professional identity for years behind in Vietnam to study in Canada. Maintaining a connection with my family and friends back home became a crucial source of my emotional and psychological stability (Lashari et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2017). While my mother and siblings could not provide academic guidance, as most of my academic problems involve professional knowledge which is beyond their expertise (Cao et al., 2021), their care and consistent encouragement alleviated feelings of loneliness and isolation (Cho, 2014) and strengthened my well-being (Bai, 2016; Pinamang et al., 2021). This mental strength made my challenges less painful, my perceptions less striking, and my emotion less intense. It played a pivotal role in shaping my positive mindset and behaviour. Regular online communication with my family helped me feel connected to Vietnam even when I was physically in Canada. I remained mentally and spiritually present in their lives, preserving a sense of belonging to Vietnam despite the geographical distance (T. T. K. Le, Tran-Mai, & Tran, 2025).

This familial bond represents bonding social capital, a strong-tie network rooted in shared culture and affection (Putnam, 2001). It provided what Cohen and Wills (1985) call emotional and social companionship support, which nurtures positive affect, resilience, and determination in pursuing educational goals amidst challenges (T. T. K. Le, 2024; Phan, 2022). My family's faith in my academic pursuit reminded me of our collective aspiration for a better future through education. Their emotional reinforcement also shaped my cognitive framing of challenges: rather than interpreting difficulties as personal failures, I learned to perceive them as temporary stages of growth. Thus, my growth

mindset was not solely self-derived but rather sustained by this emotional ecosystem that transmitted cultural continuity, familial duty, and moral perseverance.

Academic Networking and Institutional Support

My experiences in Canadian higher education echo those of other international doctoral students navigating multiple roles (Nishioka & Akol, 2019). As a research assistant, teaching assistant, journal reviewer, and conference program chair, alongside my roles as sister, daughter, wife, and mother, I operated in diverse academic spaces that expanded my bridging social capital. These opportunities allowed me to build meaningful relationships and collaborate with professors, faculty members, staff, and fellow graduate students in various research projects and teaching environments. Together, we shared ideas, undertook various tasks, and contributed to the success and productivity of research projects and community services. These involvements in campus organizations shaped my identity as a member of the university and developed my social capital, as indicated by Glass and Gesing (2018).

A professor's recognition of my ability to read, think, and write research in another language, "You did an amazing job. You should be proud of yourself," was not merely encouragement; it was validation that transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries. Similarly, praise from my dissertation committee after my comprehensive exam further boosted my confidence and self-esteem as a non-native English scholar (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Participation in institutional networks also generated opportunities. Professors from the doctoral courses later offered me research assistantship, an example of how earned kernels of social capital (Robison & Siles, 2000) transform established institutional ties into resources that assist international students in their adaptation to college (Glass & Gesing, 2018). These engagements created reciprocal trust and collaboration, strengthening my identity as a contributing member of the scholarly community.

Among fellow graduates, being humorously called "Professor Le" for my ability to clarify abstract theories symbolized a recognition of both competence and care. I was invited to share my experience and strategies for a successful comprehensive portfolio exam with new cohorts of doctoral students. For me, sharing is a way to learn, and disseminating my expertise and wisdom not only reinforced my own self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) but also fostered a sense of worth and academic confidence as an international doctoral student navigating my new educational pursuit in Canada (T. T. K. Le, 2022, 2024). These experiences collectively highlight that institutional and peer relationships in academia, when nurtured through effort and collaboration, serve as vital support for international students' adaptation and self-esteem (Cao & Meng, 2019; Franco et al., 2019).

Professional Growth Through a Growth Mindset

My growth mindset became most salient post-COVID-19 pandemic, a period of heightened loneliness, homesickness, and academic uncertainty. In an attempt to find a sense of belonging and buffer my academic pressure, I sought intellectual connection by joining the Global Education Research Lab, a virtual research collective of Vietnamese scholars worldwide. This community provided instrumental, emotional, and social companionship support (Cohen & Wills, 1985): we exchanged research strategies, writing advice, and publication experiences, while also sharing emotional encouragement (Franco et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Although these peers were technically "weak ties" (Putnam, 2001), shared cultural identity and professional goals transformed our relationships into a hybrid network that blurred the line between bonding and bridging capital. Such collaboration fostered both academic productivity and belonging (Chiu & Chow, 2015; Smith et al., 2025), promoting our professional path as scholars and researchers.

My experience resonates with international doctoral students who academically engage with their doctoral fellows. We not only develop

a sense of belonging through academic involvement based on earned sources but also rely on inherited kernels through studying with peers with shared identities and academic goals (T. T. K. Le, Tran-Mai, & Tran, 2025). This experience extends social capital theory by showing that co-national professional networks can provide dual benefits: informational exchange and emotional solidarity. Working alongside Vietnamese scholars around the world enhanced my sense of collective resilience; our success stories became mutual sources of empowerment. My mindset allowed me to view collaboration not as dependence, but as reciprocal growth, illustrating the social dimension of individual determination.

Unlike many international students for whom language is a primary barrier (Ali et al., 2020; Koo et al., 2021), my decade of teaching English in Vietnam equipped me with strong linguistic capital. Instead, financial stress was my greatest challenge (Kim & Cronley, 2020; Rai et al., 2021). Tuition fees for international students in Canada are nearly triple those of domestic students (Moosapeta, 2023). While my university scholarship eased tuition, living expenses remained a persistent source of pressure (Gebregorgis, 2018). I established a close rapport with professors and actively sought opportunities to work and learn. I worked diligently to enhance my research skills to develop professional values. I practised a proactive attitude in making things happen rather than waiting for opportunities to come to me. Securing the doctoral scholarship package and research assistantships offered much-needed instrumental support and reaffirmed the importance of proactive engagement in seeking opportunities. Despite feeling distressed, with a strong belief that talent grows and opportunities arrive through determination and resilience, as the key concepts of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) state, I was always willing to confront challenges and turn setbacks into opportunities for success. This approach illustrates that agency is not a solitary force but a relational capacity, activated by supportive mentors, institutional structures, and prior experience. My growth mindset, framed as belief in effort and adaptability (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2020), was thus enacted through and

enabled by social capital.

Through these intertwined experiences, I learned to interpret obstacles as contextual and solvable rather than personal shortcomings. My mindset, grounded in persistence and optimism, operated within a web of enabling conditions: scholarships, mentorship, family encouragement, and professional networks. This interdependence between mindset and structure reflects relational agency (Edwards, 2017): the ability to act by drawing upon the resources embedded in one's social world.

Interweaving Social Capital, Growth Mindset, and Context

Across these themes, my experience underscores that growth and adaptation emerge through the intersection of individual belief and collective support. Family connections (bonding capital) provided emotional grounding; academic and institutional networks (bridging capital) offered esteem and opportunity; and transnational scholarly communities (maintained capital) reinforced professional identity. Yet these forms of capital were not static assets; they became meaningful only when activated through a growth mindset oriented toward effort, collaboration, and optimism.

Figure 1
My Drawing of a Lotus Flower (2025)



Rather than framing resilience and growth

mindset as an individual triumph, my journey reveals them as contextual and relational. The growth mindset did not operate in isolation; it was nurtured by the cultural belief in education as moral virtue, by institutional acknowledgment, and by networks that provided both tangible aid and emotional validation. Together, these factors constituted a supportive ecology that transformed adversity into development. As a lotus flower, I grew up, personally and professionally, through this supportive ecology. This integrated understanding reframes international doctoral students' adaptation not as personal endurance, but as contextual and relational interplay between internal motivation and external resources. Emphasizing personal resilience and designing environments that sustain it allows educators and institutions to foster inclusive networks, equitable funding, and culturally attuned mentorship. It also informs the development of structural conditions under which a growth mindset can genuinely thrive.

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This autoethnographic study explored how social support and a growth mindset collectively shaped my adaptation as a Vietnamese doctoral student in Canada. Grounded in social capital theory (Putnam, 2001) and informed by growth mindset theory (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2020), the research examined how different forms of social capital—bonding, bridging, and maintained—interacted with individual agency to mitigate academic, financial, and psychological stress. Through reflective narratives, I analyzed the ways emotional, instrumental, esteem, and social companionship support from family, peers, mentors, and institutional networks sustained my well-being, fostered belonging, and enabled my academic and professional growth.

The findings revealed that growth mindset and adaptation are co-constructed processes rather than individual achievements. Family relationships, as bonding social capital, provide emotional grounding and cultural continuity. Academic and institutional networks, as bridg-

ing social capital, offered esteem, instrumental, and informational resources that validated my scholarly identity and opened professional opportunities. Transnational research communities, as maintained social capital, extended these supports globally, blending cultural familiarity with professional collaboration. Importantly, a growth mindset emerged as the mediating force that activated these resources, an interpretive lens through which challenges were reframed as opportunities for learning and development. Rather than existing as an isolated personal trait, mindset functioned as relational agency, dynamically enabled by structural and social support.

This study makes three key contributions to the literature on international doctoral education. First, it enriches current understandings of social capital and stress faced by international doctoral students by illustrating how diverse social networks, both strong and weak ties, operate synergistically to sustain academic and emotional resilience. It also extends beyond the social capital theory by showing that co-national professional networks can provide dual benefits: informational exchange and emotional solidarity. In this sense, social support through a combination of various categories of social capital not only reduces stress but also increases satisfaction, enhances self-esteem, fosters a sense of belonging, and reinforces identity and recognition. Second, it advances the theorization of growth mindset by positioning it within a sociocultural framework that recognizes it as context-dependent and relational, not solely psychological or individual. Third, it contributes methodologically by demonstrating the power of autoethnography to integrate lived experience with theoretical insight, offering an insider perspective on how personal belief systems intersect with structural conditions in higher education.

This research offers valuable insights for future international doctoral graduates: an exhaustive overview of challenges they might encounter and available support systems they may rely on (T. T. K. Le & Trinh, 2025). Several implications arise from this work. For higher education institutions, fostering inclusive environments that support both the psychological

and professional needs of international doctoral students is crucial. Universities should enhance access to mentorship and financial aid and develop a diverse range of social networks on campus organizations, not just from academic advisors, professors, and staff but also from peer research networks that nurture belonging and relational resilience. For faculty and supervisors, recognizing students' diverse cultural and linguistic capital can promote more equitable and empathetic mentoring relationships. Finally, future research might further explore how institutional structures and cultural narratives shape the ways international students enact agency, extending the dialogue between growth mindset, social capital, and systemic support.

In essence, this study highlights my growth mindset as a proactive agentic behaviour in utilizing a diverse range of social capital and support to overcome challenges and achieve my goals. It also underscores that international doctoral success is not merely a story of individual perseverance but of interdependent growth: the unfolding of determination, care, and opportunity across personal, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Like the lotus flower rising through murky waters, the journey of adaptation blossoms through the reciprocal interplay of mindset, support, and structure.

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