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The "Happiness Trap": Pre-Departure Optimism vs. Post-Arrival Dissonance in Indian Overseas Students

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of international student mobility from India has transformed overseas education from a predominantly academic decision into a complex project involving career mobility, migration aspirations, family investment, social status and expectations of a better life. For many prospective Indian students, the period before departure is characterised by optimism concerning employment, income, independence, international exposure and long-term settlement. These expectations are shaped not only by students themselves but also by families, peers, social media, education agents and broader cultural narratives surrounding life abroad. However, the realities encountered after arrival may differ considerably from these imagined futures.

This qualitative study examines the "Happiness Trap" as a framework for understanding the discrepancy between pre-departure optimism and post-arrival lived experience among Indian international students. Building particularly on Udayanga's (2024) work on Indian student immigrants in the United Kingdom, the study investigates how migration aspirations are constructed, how expectation–reality discrepancies emerge after migration, and how financial pressure, employment mismatch, cultural adjustment, immigration bureaucracy, social isolation and family expectations influence subjective well-being.

The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and draws theoretically on Durayappah's 3P Model of Subjective Well-Being, the aspirations–capabilities approach to migration, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, and research on affective forecasting and expectation–experience discrepancies. Purposive maximum-variation sampling is proposed for recruiting Indian international students with substantial post-arrival experience. Focus group discussions followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews will explore participants' reconstructed pre-departure expectations and compare them with their post-arrival experiences. Data will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The study aims to contribute to international student migration research by examining overseas education not simply as geographical or educational mobility, but as a temporal psychological process in which imagined future happiness is compared continuously with present sacrifice and past alternatives. Particular

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attention is given to whether students remain committed to migration because future happiness is repeatedly deferred despite dissatisfaction in the present—a process conceptualised here as the "Happiness Trap."

Keywords: Indian International Students, Overseas Education, Happiness Trap, Migration Aspirations, Affective Forecasting, Subjective Well-Being, Expectation–Reality Gap, Cultural Capital, Brain Waste, Involuntary Immobility, Student Migration

1. Introduction

International education occupies an increasingly important place in the aspirations of many young Indians and their families. An overseas qualification can represent more than academic advancement: it may be associated with professional mobility, higher earnings, international exposure, independence, migration possibilities and an improved quality of life. Research on middle-class Indian educational migration also shows that these aspirations are often embedded in wider family projects of mobility and status (Cherian & Rajan, 2024).

Consequently, the decision to study overseas cannot always be understood simply as the selection of a university or academic programme. It may instead represent an investment in an imagined future.

Recent research on Indian educational migration shows that aspirations are shaped by family resources, social networks, migration recruiters and social media. Cherian and Rajan (2024), drawing on interviews and ethnographic research in Kerala and among students in Canada, describe how migration recruiters can connect overseas education with Western lifestyles, career achievement and quality of life. Their study is particularly useful here because it examines the production of aspiration on the sending side, before and during the migration decision.

Such expectations matter psychologically because decisions about migration are made before the individual has experienced the everyday realities of the destination. Prospective students must therefore imagine what their future lives will be like.

Psychological research on affective forecasting demonstrates that individuals do not always accurately predict how future events will affect their happiness. Wilson and Gilbert (2005) describe an "impact bias" whereby people may overestimate the intensity or duration of future emotional reactions. Migration decisions may be particularly susceptible to such forecasting problems because the prospective migrant is attempting to predict employment, social relationships, finances, identity and happiness within an environment they have not yet inhabited.

International student research similarly indicates that discrepancies between expectations and experiences matter for well-being. Geeraert, Demes and Ward (2021), using longitudinal data from 1,762 intercultural exchange students, found that larger expectation–experience discrepancies were associated with better well-being when experiences exceeded expectations but poorer outcomes when experiences were worse than expected. This demonstrates that the existence of a mismatch alone is insufficient; its direction matters.

Among Indian students specifically, the emerging literature presents a more complex picture. Udayanga (2024), studying Indian postgraduate student immigrants in the United Kingdom, found substantial incongruence between pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences. Participants described employment mismatch, financial costs, bureaucratic difficulties, social pressures and situations in which they felt unable to realise the well-being they had expected migration to provide.

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Most significantly for the present study, Udayanga (2024) reports that some participants described their experience as a "happiness trap": present suffering is tolerated because migrants anticipate that the sacrifices will eventually produce future happiness. Yet the anticipated point at which the sacrifice becomes worthwhile can continuously move into the future.

The present research develops this idea by placing the temporal transition from imagined life to lived life at the centre of investigation.

Rather than asking only what difficulties Indian international students experience after arrival, it asks:

- What did students believe their overseas lives would become before they left India, what actually happened after arrival, and how do they psychologically reconcile the difference?

2. Research Problem

Much international-student research examines adjustment after migration. Culture shock, academic adaptation, employment barriers, loneliness, language, discrimination, financial stress and psychological well-being have all received scholarly attention.

However, studying post-arrival difficulties in isolation provides an incomplete picture.

A difficult experience becomes psychologically meaningful partly in relation to what an individual expected beforehand.

Working an entry-level job, for example, may have a different psychological meaning for a student who expected temporary employment from the beginning than for someone who believed an international master's degree would rapidly produce professional employment. Similarly, shared accommodation may be manageable when anticipated but deeply disappointing when migration was imagined as immediate upward mobility.

The relevant unit of analysis is therefore not simply:

Post-arrival hardship

but:

Pre-departure expectation → Post-arrival experience → Interpretation of discrepancy → Adaptation/rationalisation/reassessment.

This temporal perspective is central to the present research.

3. Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to explore how Indian international students construct expectations of overseas life before departure and how they interpret discrepancies between those expectations and their lived experiences after arrival.

The study further examines whether financial investment, family expectations, cultural prestige, migration policy and aspirations for future settlement encourage students to continue pursuing an overseas future despite dissatisfaction with their present circumstances.

4. Research Objectives

The study has six objectives:

1. To examine how Indian students construct expectations about education, employment, income, lifestyle, social relationships, independence and settlement before travelling abroad.
2. To identify the major actors and information sources shaping these expectations, including family

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members, peers, social media, international students already overseas, education agents and universities.

3. To compare reconstructed pre-departure expectations with students' post-arrival academic, financial, occupational, social and emotional experiences.
4. To examine how expectation–experience discrepancies influence subjective well-being and professional identity.
5. To investigate how educational debt, family expectations, cultural prestige and immigration restrictions influence students' perceived freedom either to remain abroad or return to India.
6. To develop the "Happiness Trap" as a conceptual explanation for situations in which current hardship is repeatedly justified through expectations of future migration-related happiness.

5. Research Questions

The central research question is:

RQ1: How do Indian international students experience and interpret the discrepancy between their pre-departure expectations and post-arrival realities?

The following subsidiary questions guide the investigation:

RQ2: What social, cultural and commercial influences shape students' expectations of overseas education and life before departure?

RQ3: In which areas—academic experience, employment, finances, lifestyle, relationships, migration prospects and subjective well-being—are the greatest expectation–experience discrepancies perceived?

RQ4: How do financial investment, educational debt and family expectations affect students' perceived ability to return home when overseas experiences become unsatisfactory?

RQ5: How do students manage, rationalise or communicate disappointment after migration?

RQ6: To what extent is present hardship justified through the expectation that education, employment, permanent settlement or future financial success will eventually generate greater happiness?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Pre-Departure Optimism and Affective Forecasting

6.1.1 The imagined overseas future

Migration begins psychologically before it occurs geographically.

Prospective international students form expectations about their future universities, careers, incomes, friendships, living standards and identities before leaving India. These expectations may be based on incomplete information because students cannot directly experience the everyday conditions of the destination until migration occurs.

Research on affective forecasting provides an important psychological framework for understanding this process. Wilson and Gilbert (2005) argue that people routinely predict how future circumstances will affect their emotions, yet these predictions can contain systematic biases. One such phenomenon is impact bias: individuals may overestimate the intensity or duration of the emotional consequences of future events.

Applied to international education, students may therefore overestimate how much migration, a foreign qualification, higher income or eventual settlement will improve long-term happiness.

This does not imply that overseas education necessarily produces disappointment. Rather, it suggests that students' pre-departure predictions should themselves become objects of research.

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6.2 The "Happiness Pull" and Glamorisation of Overseas Life

The information environment surrounding international education is important in shaping migration aspirations.

Cherian and Rajan (2024) show how social media, migration recruiters and middle-class aspirations intersect in producing Indian student mobility. Their research describes how students view the lives of peers abroad through social media and how recruitment organisations can associate international education with Western lifestyles, career achievement and quality of life.

Udayanga (2024) similarly found that Indian student immigrants in the UK described misleading or incomplete impressions of employment opportunities and everyday life, sometimes received through agencies, friends and social media. Some participants recalled expecting jobs to be relatively easy to obtain and later described a marked gap between those expectations and their post-arrival experience.

Taken together, these patterns suggest what this study terms an aspirational information asymmetry: the attractive and socially visible rewards of migration are often easier to encounter than its everyday costs.

Highly visible representations of migration tend to include:

- visa approvals, airport departures, university campuses, city centres, graduation ceremonies, travel, employment announcements and material consumption.
- Less visible experiences may include:
- job rejection, financial insecurity, debt repayment, shared accommodation, academic difficulty, loneliness, immigration uncertainty, precarious work and regret.

Consequently, prospective students may make migration decisions from an information environment in which the symbolic rewards of migration are substantially more visible than its mundane costs.

6.3 Aspirational Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides another useful framework.

International qualifications can carry value beyond the knowledge or skills obtained through education. They can function symbolically by signalling cosmopolitanism, international experience, English-language competence and professional status.

Udayanga (2024) links overseas education with prestige and honour in participants' accounts, while Cherian and Rajan (2024) situate student mobility within middle-class projects of advancement and cosmopolitan identity. Bourdieu's (1986) framework helps interpret these accounts by distinguishing the economic value of education from its cultural and symbolic value.

Cherian and Rajan (2024) similarly locate international student mobility within middle-class projects of advancement and cosmopolitan identity.

The overseas degree therefore potentially possesses two forms of value:

instrumental value, through employment and economic returns;

and

symbolic value, through prestige, identity and social recognition.

This distinction becomes important when instrumental returns fail to meet expectations. A student who struggles financially may nevertheless remain committed to the migration project because returning without the anticipated outcome could threaten the symbolic value associated with studying abroad.

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6.4 Expectation–Experience Discrepancy

Expectation discrepancy is not unique to Indian migration.

Martin, Bradford and Rohrlich's (1995) longitudinal research compared students' pre-departure expectations with their post-sojourn reports. Importantly, their results were not uniformly negative: expectations were frequently met or positively exceeded.

This finding provides an important safeguard against constructing the present research around a predetermined assumption of disappointment.

More recently, Geeraert et al. (2021) investigated expectation–experience discrepancies longitudinally among 1,762 intercultural exchange students. Large discrepancies mattered differently depending on their direction: experiences substantially better than expected were associated with improved well-being, while experiences substantially worse than expected were associated with poorer well-being.

The present research therefore treats post-arrival dissonance as an empirical question rather than a predetermined outcome.

Some Indian students may report:

- negative discrepancy — reality was worse than expected;
- expectation confirmation — reality approximately matched expectations; or
- positive discrepancy — reality was better than expected.

Understanding all three trajectories will reduce confirmation bias and strengthen the credibility of the study.

7. Post-Arrival Dissonance and Systemic Realities

7.1 Academic and Cultural Transition

Post-arrival adjustment requires students to negotiate multiple transitions simultaneously.

Prasad, Terry and Mok's (2026) review of Indian international students in UK higher education identifies difficulties involving unfamiliar academic culture, academic writing, employment, language and sociocultural and psychological adjustment.

Chennamsetti's (2020) phenomenological study of Indian international students in the United States similarly identified challenges involving separation from family and friends, communication, multitasking and difficulties fitting into the new environment.

However, Indian students should not automatically be characterised as linguistically deficient or incapable of adaptation. Research involving Indian students in New Zealand, for example, found generally high confidence in English and relatively rapid adjustment, while unfamiliar academic writing, argumentation and plagiarism conventions produced more specific challenges.

The transition is therefore better understood as pedagogical and cultural friction rather than universal deficiency.

7.2 Employment Expectations and “Brain Waste”

Employment represents one of the strongest potential sites of post-arrival dissonance.

International education is frequently justified as an investment in future employability. Students may consequently evaluate the success of migration partly according to whether their qualifications translate into desirable employment. This link between education, work and migration is well established in

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research on Indian student mobility (Thomas, 2017; Udayanga, 2024).

Udayanga (2024) found evidence of brain waste among Indian student immigrants in the UK: participants' employment did not necessarily correspond with their educational qualifications. One participant with a bachelor's degree who travelled to Britain for postgraduate study reported working in elderly care, describing a clear mismatch between education and occupation.

Such occupational mismatch can have consequences beyond income.

It may produce professional identity dissonance.

A person who previously understood themselves as an engineer, manager, IT professional or graduate may temporarily become socially defined through low-skilled or unrelated employment. The psychological cost may therefore involve a loss of professional self-efficacy and status in addition to financial pressure.

This study consequently distinguishes between:

- employment status,
- Income,
- occupational–qualification match, and
- subjective professional identity.

8. Financial Precarity and Educational Debt

8.1 International Education as Family Investment

International education frequently requires financial resources beyond the student's personal savings.

Sharma and Peng's research on prospective student migration from Punjab to Canada demonstrates the importance of family savings, borrowing and educational financing. In their sample of 34 aspiring students, all but three depended on institutionalised loans, while some agricultural households discussed selling land to finance migration.

Thomas's (2017) concept of “educational debts” is useful here because indebtedness is not exclusively financial. Indian overseas students may carry obligations toward parents and families whose money, property, savings and expectations made migration possible.

The student's migration therefore becomes partially a family investment.

8.2 Debt and Reduced Freedom

Debt may alter post-arrival decision-making.

When a student experiences dissatisfaction but also carries substantial financial obligations, returning to India may become harder to imagine economically. Thomas (2017) shows how financial and moral forms of educational debt can structure the everyday lives and future decisions of Indian student migrants, while Sharma and Peng (2025) document the importance of loans and family resources among prospective Punjabi students seeking education in Canada.

Research on Punjabi international students in Canada shows how economic pressure can require students to combine study with extensive employment. Studies of Punjabi students have documented graveyard shifts, precarious work and difficulties balancing employment with academic participation. (Marom, 2023).

Therefore, financial investment may generate a paradox:

Migration initially represents increased freedom and opportunity, but the financial cost of migration can

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subsequently reduce the student's freedom to reconsider the decision.

The present study refers to this as financially constrained persistence rather than assuming that every student experiences a literal “debt trap.”

8.3 A Necessary Correction Regarding Interest Rates

A fixed claim that Indian international students generally pay education-loan interest rates “over 13%” is not sufficiently supported by the academic evidence reviewed for this paper and has therefore been removed. Loan costs vary by lender, collateral, borrower profile and market conditions. The stronger, verifiable point is that educational borrowing and family financial exposure can be substantial and can shape migration decisions (Thomas, 2017; Sharma & Peng, 2025).

Rates vary substantially according to lender, collateral, borrower profile, country, co-applicant and market conditions. More importantly, the academic literature reviewed for this paper provides stronger evidence for the existence of substantial borrowing and family financial exposure than for one universal interest-rate threshold.

Accordingly, the empirical interviews should ask participants:

- whether they borrowed;
- amount borrowed;
- source of borrowing;
- whether collateral was required;
- approximate interest rate;
- whose assets were exposed;
- repayment expectations.

This will allow the study to produce evidence rather than reproduce an unsupported generalisation.

9. Involuntary Immobility and the Honour–Shame Dimension

Carling (2002) developed the concept of involuntary immobility to describe individuals who aspire to migrate but lack the ability to do so. Subsequent aspirations–capabilities scholarship has expanded the concept of mobility to include people's freedom to choose whether to move or remain.

Udayanga (2024) applies involuntary immobility to Indian student immigrants already in the UK.

Some participants wanted to return to India but felt unable to do so because of debt, family obligations, children's adaptation to Britain or the social consequences of returning without success.

This suggests an important distinction:

Legal mobility

Can the individual physically return?

versus

Perceived social and economic mobility

Does the individual believe returning is realistically available without unacceptable financial or social consequences?

A student may therefore possess a passport, airline access and legal freedom to return while simultaneously experiencing themselves as trapped.

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9.1 Honour, Prestige and the Cost of Returning

Foreign education can become tied to family prestige.

When families publicly celebrate a child's admission, visa approval and departure, returning without the expected academic, occupational or migration outcome may be interpreted by the student as failure.

Udayanga's participants described precisely this pressure: migration to Britain was associated with prestige, while unsuccessful return could generate perceived disgrace.

The present study conceptualises this as the prestige–return paradox:

The more symbolic prestige attached to departure, the greater the potential symbolic cost of unsuccessful return.

This relationship requires empirical testing rather than assumption, particularly because attitudes toward return migration will differ considerably by family, class, region and individual.

10. Acculturative Distress and Social Isolation

Migration restructures social life.

Students leave familiar family systems, friendships, languages, routines and cultural environments while simultaneously adjusting to academic responsibilities, employment and independent living.

Chennamsetti (2020) identified separation from family and difficulty fitting in among Indian students in the United States. Research involving Indian students in Canada has similarly documented dependence on families in India for financial and emotional support, sometimes undermining students' anticipated sense of independence.

The psychological contradiction is significant.

A student may migrate partly to become independent while discovering that migration increases dependence on family.

Likewise, the individual may migrate expecting an expanded international social network but experience loneliness and reliance primarily on co-national networks.

The present study will therefore explore both objective and subjective social integration.

11. Mental Health and Help-Seeking

Psychological distress among international students must be interpreted carefully because migration does not produce identical outcomes for everyone.

Daru's qualitative doctoral research on Indian international students in the UK identified themes involving social connection, difficult academic transition, financial concerns, cultural differences, discrimination, minimisation of distress and both openness toward professional help and stigma surrounding it.

This suggests that the relationship between Indian culture and mental-health help-seeking is more complicated than simply stating that “Indian students do not seek counselling.”

The present study will therefore investigate:

- experiences of loneliness, stress and anxiety;
- informal coping through friends and family;
- religious/spiritual coping where relevant;
- awareness of university support;
- attitudes toward counselling;

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- actual help-seeking behaviour;
- perceived cultural stigma;
- practical barriers to support.

This approach avoids pathologising participants while allowing barriers to emerge from their narratives.

12. Policy Volatility and Bureaucratic Burden

International students live within immigration systems whose regulations influence their educational and professional futures.

For students who view education as a pathway toward longer-term employment or settlement, visa regulations are not merely administrative matters. They influence the perceived value of the entire migration investment.

Udayanga (2024) identified immigration bureaucracy, sponsorship requirements and visa pathways as significant burdens for Indian students in the UK.

Sharma and Peng (2025) similarly show how immigration-policy settings shape the aspirations and perceived capabilities of Punjabi students planning education in Canada. Their study also highlights how restrictive policy changes can alter the opportunity structure on which students' migration plans were based.

Policy changes can therefore alter the expected return on an educational investment after the decision has already been made.

This creates policy-induced uncertainty:

Student makes investment under Policy Environment A

↓

Policy changes

↓

Post-graduation opportunities resemble Environment B

↓

Original migration calculation may no longer hold.

This dimension is particularly important for contemporary international-student research.

13. Theoretical Framework

13.1 Constructivist–Interpretivist Position

The research adopts a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. This position is appropriate because the study is concerned with how participants make sense of migration, rather than treating their experiences as a single objective reality.

It does not assume that there is one objectively measurable "international student experience." Rather, students interpret migration through their individual histories, socioeconomic positions, family relationships, expectations and aspirations.

Two students encountering identical employment conditions may therefore interpret them differently.

The study is interested precisely in those interpretations.

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14. Durayappah's 3P Model of Subjective Well-Being

Durayappah's (2011) 3P Model conceptualises subjective well-being through three temporal states:

- Past
- Present
- Prospect/Future

The framework is particularly suitable for this study because migration is inherently temporal.

Past

- Life in India
- Academic/professional identity
- Family relationships
- Socioeconomic position
- Pre-departure expectations

Present

- Academic experience
- Employment
- Income
- Debt
- Social relationships
- Accommodation
- Cultural adjustment
- Immigration bureaucracy

Prospect

- Graduate employment
- Higher income
- Visa sponsorship
- Permanent settlement
- Family reunification
- Debt repayment
- Return to India
- Future happiness

The model allows the researcher to investigate well-being not simply according to present circumstances but according to how participants compare the present with both the past they left behind and the future they still expect to achieve. (Durayappah, 2011).

This temporal comparison is fundamental to the Happiness Trap.

15. Aspirations–Capabilities Framework

Carling and Schewel's (2018) aspirations–capabilities framework distinguishes between wanting a particular mobility outcome and possessing the practical freedom to achieve it.

Migration aspirations emerge partly from people's broader life aspirations and perceptions of geographical opportunity. Capabilities depend upon economic, social, cultural, legal and institutional resources.

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Applied to international students:

- Aspiration: “I want a professional career abroad.”
- Capability barrier: Employer sponsorship restrictions.
- Aspiration: “I want to remain permanently.”
- Capability barrier: Immigration-policy requirements.
- Aspiration: “I want to return to India.”
- Capability barrier: Debt/family obligations/perceived stigma.

The framework therefore enables the study to examine situations where students technically possess choices but experience their practical agency as constrained.

16. Bourdieu and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1986) account of capital, read alongside his broader concept of habitus, provides a complementary sociological perspective.

An overseas degree may constitute institutionalised cultural capital, while overseas experience can produce symbolic value through prestige and cosmopolitan identity.

This framework helps explain why students may continue investing in migration even when immediate economic returns are weak.

The overseas qualification may still retain symbolic value within the student's social field.

17. Proposed Conceptual Model: The Happiness Trap

Bringing the literature together produces the following conceptual pathway:

Stage 1 — Production of Aspiration

Family expectations

- peer networks
- social media
- education agents
- university marketing
- destination-country reputation
- previous migrants

↓

Stage 2 — Imagined Overseas Self

Better education

- professional employment
- higher income
- independence
- international lifestyle
- social mobility
- settlement possibilities
- greater happiness

↓

Stage 3 — Migration Investment

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Tuition

- visa expenses
- loans
- family savings
- emotional investment
- public celebration/status

↓

Stage 4 — Reality Encounter

Academic transition

- employment competition
- qualification mismatch
- living costs
- accommodation pressures
- loneliness
- cultural adjustment
- discrimination
- immigration uncertainty

↓

Stage 5 — Expectation–Experience Evaluation

Reality better than expected

OR

Reality broadly consistent with expectations

OR

Reality worse than expected

↓

Stage 6 — Psychological Response

AdaptationRecalibrationRegretRationalisationResilienceReturn intentionPrivate disappointmentPublic performance of success

↓

Stage 7 — Deferred Reward

“After graduation…”

↓

“After I get a professional job…”

↓

“After sponsorship…”

↓

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"After permanent residency…"

↓

"After I repay the loan…"

↓

"I will finally be happy."

THE HAPPINESS TRAP

Present hardship becomes tolerable because happiness is assigned to a future milestone. When one milestone is reached or fails to deliver the expected transformation, happiness may be reassigned to the next milestone.

The concept therefore does not mean that all overseas students are unhappy.

Rather, the Happiness Trap describes a particular trajectory in which:

anticipated future well-being repeatedly legitimises present dissatisfaction and reduces willingness to reconsider the migration project.

18. Research Gap

Existing research establishes several components of the proposed phenomenon.

Studies have examined international-student adjustment, culture shock, expectation violation, employment barriers, migration aspirations, financial precarity and subjective well-being.

Research specifically concerning Indian students has identified academic and sociocultural challenges, migration-recruitment influences, occupational mismatch, financial pressures and discrepancies between expected and experienced migration outcomes.

Most importantly, Udayanga (2024) directly identifies the "happiness trap" among Indian student immigrants in Britain.

The present study therefore does not claim to discover the Happiness Trap for the first time. Udayanga (2024) already uses the term in direct connection with Indian student immigrants in the UK. The contribution proposed here is narrower and more explicit: to examine how pre-departure expectations are produced, how students later compare those expectations with lived experience, and how they make sense of any resulting discrepancy.

Instead, it proposes to extend the concept in three ways.

First, it places the construction of pre-departure optimism at the centre of analysis rather than treating expectations mainly as background to post-arrival difficulties.

Second, it systematically investigates who and what produces those expectations—including social media, peers, family members, recruiters, universities and previous migrants.

Third, it investigates the psychological mechanisms through which students respond to expectation–experience discrepancy, including adaptation, recalibration, concealment, rationalisation, return intentions and deferred happiness.

Where feasible, incorporating students across more than one major destination country can further determine which experiences appear broadly associated with Indian educational migration and which are destination-specific.

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19. Methodology

19.1 Research Design

The study will employ an exploratory qualitative research design. This design fits the research questions because the aim is to understand how participants interpret expectations, disappointment, adaptation and migration decisions, rather than to estimate how common any one experience is.

Qualitative methodology is appropriate because the central objective is not to calculate the prevalence of dissatisfaction but to understand how students construct meaning around expectations, disappointment, adaptation and migration decisions.

The study will use two sequential methods:

- Phase I

  Focus Group Discussions

- Phase II

  Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

20. Population and Sampling

The target population will consist of Indian international students and recent international graduates studying or residing in major overseas education destinations.

Eligibility criteria should include:

- Indian citizenship/origin relevant to the study;
- migration primarily through an international education pathway;
- post-secondary or postgraduate international education;
- minimum approximately one year of post-arrival experience;
- adulthood;
- willingness to discuss pre-departure expectations and post-arrival experiences.

Participants should ideally vary according to:

- Gender, age, Indian region, socioeconomic background, destination country, discipline, qualification level, duration abroad, employment status, relationship status, financing method and settlement intention.
- A maximum-variation strategy will be used so that the analysis can examine both recurring patterns and meaningful differences across

21. Sample Size

Sample adequacy will not be justified by a predetermined number alone. Recruitment will be guided by the specificity of the sample, the quality of dialogue and the analytical depth required by the research questions. Malterud, Siersma and Guassora's (2016) concept of information power provides a more defensible basis for this decision than treating saturation as a purely numerical threshold.

Instead, recruitment should continue until sufficient conceptual depth is achieved.

Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016) propose information power as an alternative way of thinking about qualitative sample adequacy. The greater the information a sample provides in relation to the research question, the fewer participants may be necessary.

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As a practical starting point, the study may recruit approximately:

2–3 focus groups with 5–8 participants each

followed by approximately

20–30 individual interviews,

with final adequacy assessed through the richness, diversity and repetition of relevant themes rather than an arbitrary numerical threshold.

22. Phase I: Focus Group Discussions

The FGDs will establish broad collective narratives surrounding studying abroad.

Topics should include:

- meaning of overseas education in India;
- images associated with different destinations;
- influence of Instagram, YouTube and other platforms;
- visa-success narratives;
- education-agent promises;
- family expectations;
- assumptions about jobs and salaries;
- anticipated independence;
- perceptions of life in India versus overseas;
- common post-arrival surprises;
- attitudes toward returning home.

Focus groups are useful here because interaction between participants can reveal shared assumptions, points of disagreement and community narratives that may not emerge as clearly in individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Participants can agree, challenge and elaborate upon one another's experiences.

23. Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual interviews will explore sensitive and personal experiences that participants may be unwilling to discuss publicly.

The interview will be organised temporally.

- Section A — Life Before Migration

  “What was your life like in India before you decided to study abroad?”

- Section B — Construction of Expectations

  “What did you imagine your life abroad would look like?”

  Follow-up domains:

  education, employment, salary, accommodation, friends, relationships, lifestyle, independence, settlement and happiness.

- Section C — Sources of Expectations

  “Where did these expectations come from?”

  Prompts:

  friends, relatives, social media, YouTube, Instagram, university representatives, agents, counsellors,

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previous students and family.

- Section D — Arrival

  "What surprised you most during your first few months?"

- Section E — Expectation Versus Reality

  "For which parts of overseas life was reality better, similar to, or worse than what you expected?"

- Section F — Employment and Identity

  "Has the work you have done abroad matched your education and professional identity?"

- Section G — Financial Experience

  "How was your education financed?"

  Prompts:

  family savings, loans, collateral, interest, part-time employment, debt repayment and remittances.

- Section H — Social and Emotional Experience

  "How has living abroad affected your relationships, loneliness, stress and sense of belonging?"

- Section I — Public Versus Private Narrative

  "When you speak with friends or family in India, how accurately do you describe your life abroad?"

  This question is particularly important for investigating whether future students receive systematically optimistic information from existing migrants.

- Section J — Return

  "Have you seriously considered returning to India?"

  "If yes, what has prevented or encouraged you?"

- Section K — Future Happiness

  "What needs to happen before you would personally consider your decision to migrate successful?"

- Section L — Counterfactual Reflection

  "If you could speak to yourself one month before leaving India, what would you tell yourself now?"

This final question may produce particularly rich data concerning expectation–reality discrepancy.

24. Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups will be audio-recorded with consent, transcribed and anonymised.

Analysis will use Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. The original six-phase guidance (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be read alongside their later clarification of reflexive thematic analysis, in which themes are understood as interpretive analytic outputs rather than objective entities waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

The analysis will move recursively through the following activities rather than treating them as a rigid linear checklist:

1. familiarisation with the dataset;

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2. initial coding;
3. generation of candidate themes;
4. reviewing themes;
5. defining and naming themes;
6. constructing the analytical narrative.

Both in-vivo and theory-informed coding will be used.

In-vivo codes will preserve participants' own language—for example:

“Stuck,”

“worth it,”

“can't go back,”

“just one more year,”

“parents sacrificed,”

“not what Instagram showed,”

“after PR,”

if such language actually emerges from the data.

Theory-informed codes may include:

affective forecasting,cultural capital,expectation violation,brain waste,involuntary immobility,financial constraint,subjective well-being,deferred happiness.

Software such as MAXQDA may be used for data organisation. The software will facilitate coding and retrieval but will not itself perform the interpretive analysis.

25. Avoiding Confirmation Bias

Because the title contains the phrase “Happiness Trap,” there is a methodological danger that the researcher could unintentionally search only for evidence of disappointment.

The study must therefore actively search for negative cases.

Participants should explicitly be asked:

“What was better than you expected?”

“Which expectations were completely fulfilled?”

“Has studying abroad made you happier?”

“Would you make the same decision again?”

“What opportunities became available that would not have been available in India?”

Participants whose experiences were highly positive should not be treated as exceptions to be discarded. Their experiences may reveal which conditions prevent the Happiness Trap from developing.

Including these questions should make it less likely that the analysis simply confirms the assumption built into the title.

26. Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness will be supported through a transparent and reflexive research process, including:

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- reflexive field notes after interviews;
- documentation of analytical decisions;
- comparison of focus-group and interview narratives;
- attention to contradictory cases;
- iterative review of codes and themes;
- transparent description of sampling;
- reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher's relationship to overseas education;
- preservation of participant meaning through carefully selected quotations.

Reflexivity will be particularly important if the researcher has professional experience within international student recruitment or counselling. Such experience can provide valuable contextual understanding but may also generate assumptions about students, agents or destination countries that must be actively examined during analysis.

27. Ethics

Participation will be voluntary and based on informed consent.

Participants will be informed of:

- the research purpose;
- recording procedures;
- confidentiality arrangements;
- right to refuse questions;
- right to withdraw according to the approved protocol;
- intended use of anonymised quotations.

Personally identifying information will be removed from transcripts.

Particular care is required because interviews may involve debt, family conflict, immigration insecurity, discrimination, psychological distress or regret.

The interviewer should not pressure participants to disclose information they find uncomfortable.

Because discussions may raise emotional distress, participants should be provided with appropriate information concerning university or local support services where ethically and institutionally appropriate.

28. Expected Contribution

The proposed study can make four contributions.

Theoretical Contribution

It integrates subjective well-being, affective forecasting, cultural capital and migration aspirations into a temporal model of student migration.

Empirical Contribution

It investigates how Indian students themselves reconstruct the transition from imagined overseas life to lived overseas life.

Conceptual Contribution

It develops the Happiness Trap as:

a migration trajectory in which present hardship is repeatedly legitimised through the anticipated well-being attached to future educational, occupational or settlement milestones.

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Practical Contribution

Findings may inform universities, education counsellors, migration advisers and policymakers about the importance of realistic pre-departure preparation.

Effective counselling should communicate not merely:

"How do you obtain admission?"

but:

"What will everyday life probably look like after arrival?"

29. Proposed Discussion Framework

Once primary data have been collected, the findings should not be forced into predetermined themes.

However, the literature suggests several sensitising concepts against which emergent findings may eventually be discussed:

Theme A — Manufacturing the Overseas Dream

Social media, agents, peers, family and destination branding.

Theme B — "Nobody Told Me This"

Unexpected academic, financial and social realities.

Theme C — Degree Holder, Survival Worker

Qualification–occupation mismatch and professional identity.

Theme D — The Price of Leaving

Debt, tuition, family investment and obligation.

Theme E — "I Can't Go Back Yet"

Return stigma and constrained mobility.

Theme F — Two Lives

Private struggle versus the successful image communicated home.

Theme G — Moving the Happiness Goalpost

Graduation → job → sponsorship → residency → financial stability.

Theme H — Breaking the Trap

Recalibration, successful adaptation, return migration and positive expectation violations.

These are candidate analytical directions, not findings. The final themes must come from the actual data.

30. Conclusion

International student migration from India represents more than physical movement between countries. For many students and their families, it represents movement toward an imagined future involving education, employment, independence, prestige, settlement and happiness.

The literature demonstrates that these aspirations are shaped through interactions between individual ambition and broader social structures. Family expectations, social networks, social media, recruitment

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intermediaries, cultural capital, labour markets and immigration systems all influence how overseas education is imagined and subsequently experienced.

Existing research also demonstrates that the reality of international education can include academic adjustment, financial pressure, employment mismatch, social isolation and immigration uncertainty. Yet these difficulties do not automatically constitute failure. Their psychological significance depends partly upon what students expected beforehand and what they continue to expect from the future.

- The proposed concept of the Happiness Trap therefore focuses on time.
- The student remembers a past life.
- The student evaluates a difficult or rewarding present.
- The student imagines a better future.

When the present falls substantially below the future originally imagined, dissonance emerges. Some students adapt successfully. Some revise their expectations. Some return. Some discover opportunities greater than they imagined.

Others may continue sacrificing because happiness remains attached to the next milestone.

The central question is therefore not whether studying abroad makes Indian students happy or unhappy.

It is:

How does the promise of future happiness shape the decision to leave, the interpretation of present hardship, and the decision to remain?

Understanding this process can provide a more nuanced account of contemporary Indian educational migration—one that recognises international students not simply as consumers of higher education or future skilled migrants, but as individuals continuously negotiating between the lives they imagined, the lives they left behind, the lives they currently experience and the lives they still hope to achieve.

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